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CHAPTER 3

**Doctoral Networks and  
Networking in Finland:  
A Brief History**

*Pauline von Bonsdorff*

In 1994, the Finnish Ministry for Education decided to establish a new funding instrument for doctoral degrees: doctoral schools managed by the Academy of Finland. This system ran from 1995 to 2015; the last funding decisions were made in 2011. The funding prompted the disciplines to cooperate across universities, and contributed decisively to professionalizing postgraduate education in Finnish universities. During the same period, starting in the 1970s and extending into the 1990s, many other things happened around education and research in the arts. The institutions that today provide education in the arts on a university level were given an academic status, first as institutions of higher education and then as universities. They also developed postgraduate education.

In this article, I first provide the background for the changes in doctoral education in Finland, and show how they were based on more general concerns and ideologies that affected science policy. I focus on the Academy of Finland that, since 1970, has been the central national research funding agency, and its funding of postgraduate studies that culminated in the doctoral schools. It is important to remember that the Academy is dependent on the Ministry of Education and Culture<sup>1</sup> for its funding; ultimately on government budgetary decisions. These broader policies, often driven by economic and employment concerns directly influence research funding schemes. The doctoral schools never replaced other ways of pursuing and funding postgraduate studies, which continued to exist alongside the schools, and still do. The schools, nonetheless, had an overall positive effect on the organization and funding of postgraduate education. Second, I examine how research in the arts and artistic research were accommodated in the general research system in Finland, including, but not limited to, doctoral education. I conclude that while the Academy of Finland no longer offers a specific funding instrument for postgraduate education, artistic research has fared better, for it is today included in funding decisions made on equal terms with other research methodologies.

1 Earlier the Ministry of Education.

My perspective derives from my own academic background in Finland. I majored in Aesthetics at the University of Helsinki, where I began my academic career as a trainee at the department in the mid-1980s. I started my postgraduate research on a research project then continued with individual funding from a private foundation. Finally, I worked as a university assistant and wrote my dissertation while teaching and pursuing other academic activities. Roughly three years after the defense I was appointed Professor of Art Education at the University of Jyväskylä. From 2009 to 2015, I served as a member of the Research Council for Culture and Society at the Academy of Finland, where I also took part in the evaluation of the last round of applications for graduate schools. For this chapter, I have consulted the history of the Academy of Finland<sup>1</sup> as well as other relevant reports from the Academy and the Ministry of Education and culture.

### *Postgraduate Education and University Policy from the 1980s to the Present*

A new law for the Finnish universities came into effect in 1986<sup>2</sup> introducing performance-based funding, among other things. This inserted market-based principles into university policy and funding in Finland: In providing money, the state wanted clearly defined products—degrees—in return. It was an obvious change to the policy from the 1960s and 1970s, when the Finnish university system grew to cover all parts of the country, driven by the ideal of equality and the belief that providing higher education to all, regardless of economic and geographical position, would bring greater well-being to the country.<sup>3</sup> The 1986 law incentivized universities to make education more efficient and support students in finishing their degrees. While

1 Heikkilä 2007, especially 401–437.

2 In Finnish *Korkeakoulujen kehittämislaki*.

3 During that period all Finnish universities became state universities, the last being Åbo Akademi in 1981. It is also noteworthy that until 1998 the president of Finland appointed all professors.

many students were motivated to acquire a Master's degree in order to access the job market, dropouts were not uncommon, especially in areas where there were no clearly defined professional requirements. This could be worrisome for the individual, but for the departments' budgets, it had no direct consequences. Moreover, for an artist, critic, or someone working in an organization, "having studied" at a particular school could be mentioned without implying that this was worth less than a degree. This was, to some extent, also the case outside the cultural sector.

In the 1980s and 1990s, supervision was far less intense than today. The students who were considered promising were recruited as assistants, a temporary position intended for postgraduate students. An assistant was expected to teach some courses each semester, write a dissertation, and help with the department's administration. There were no postgraduate courses except the research seminar where participants got feedback from professors and peers. In addition, they presented their work at symposiums, some even at international conferences. Some received funding for their research from a private foundation, while others wrote their dissertations without research funding.

The professionalization of researcher education became a critical concern for the decision-makers in the late 1980s. In 1986 the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) pointed out the need to make Finnish research education more efficient. This would serve the needs of the academic community through securing the next generation of researchers, as well as improving the quality of research, since at the time research groups often included a number of researchers without a doctoral degree. Moreover, Finnish postgraduate students were twelve years older on completion of their work than students in many other countries. The authorities also saw the need for highly qualified personnel in industry and the private sector. From a research and development perspective, the need for doctoral degrees was most pressing in the applied natural and technical sciences, as well as business. However, the need for more doctors in the social sciences and humanities was recognized as well.

Various means to increase the number of doctoral degrees were proposed and implemented by the universities and by the Academy of Finland. The Academy's research councils funded courses for doctoral students, provided they met high scientific standards and were attended by students from different universities in Finland or abroad. The Academy continued to support research education through offering positions for junior researchers and research assistants. Hiring junior researchers for research projects was encouraged, and at the end of the 1980s there were more junior researchers completing their doctorates in projects than positions for research assistants. The universities increased the number of assistants, enabling them to focus on their theses, and established new positions for postgraduate students.

In the early 1990s, the Finnish government had plans to increase university funding and allocate a large part of it to postgraduate education. However, the economic recession that hit Finland resulted in university funding cuts. At the same time, the discussion about the quality of postgraduate education continued. According to the critics, it was still too much part-time and inefficient, and not well connected to ongoing research programs and centers of excellence. All this culminated in May 1994, when the government decided to direct 48,000,000 finnmars (equaling 11,260,000 € in 2017) as employment money to the universities for postgraduate education. The Ministry delegated the application procedure to the Academy of Finland, who asked the universities for proposals for graduate schools. Two hundred and six proposals were received, and the board of the Academy decided to fund 67 graduate schools, with a total of 720 students. The first graduate schools commenced their work on January 1st, 1995.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of the postgraduate schools was to provide full funding over four years for talented students, elected by the schools' boards, or selected by their universities. The number of postgraduates in one school was ten or more. The schools were either disciplinary

1 After the first round, adjustments were made in the application and decision-making procedures, and guidelines and criteria were developed continuously.

or thematic; often the participants came from universities offering doctoral studies in that discipline. The schools held regular meetings, organized tailor-made courses, and invited lecturers from outside Finland. They formed pools of competence, offered more specific and broader feedback to the students, and increased the interaction between senior researchers in the participating institutions' fields. In addition to those students who were paid by the school, there were so called "status members" who had secured other types of funding from their universities, private foundations, or companies.

In order to ensure the scientific quality of the schools, the Academy handled the evaluation procedure and made the funding decisions, although the Ministry paid the postgraduates' salaries directly to the universities. Funding for courses and coordination costs could be applied from the Academy. Cooperation and division of work between the units, and the interaction with existing research groups and centers of excellence were emphasized, as well as international recruitment.<sup>2</sup> When applying for extensions, existing schools were evaluated on the basis of criteria of performance, including how many of the students had completed their degree.

In many ways the schools changed the culture of postgraduate education in Finland, and increased the number of completed degrees significantly. The total number of doctoral theses in 1990 was 488. Twenty years later it was roughly 1,600. In 1998, there were almost 4,000 postgraduates working in the schools: the Ministry of Education funded 1,300, the Academy funded 500, and 2,000 were funded by universities and private foundations. The postgraduate schools also contributed to research careers, as postdocs were engaged in co-supervision.

If the important educational reform was hastily implemented, it also ended hastily. The new university law of 2010, promoted as offering more autonomy to the universities, included the requirement that universities carry responsibility for postgraduate education. Thus, the last funding decisions for postgraduate schools were made in 2011. Funding national postgraduate networks was an option for

<sup>2</sup> Twenty percent of the students were from abroad.

the universities, but it was hard to find the money. One might add that the professional handling procedure provided by the Academy, including international evaluation, was no longer on offer.

### *Doctoral Training in Arts Research*

How did the arts fare in the competition for doctoral schools? Established fields of arts research based in the humanities, such as literature studies, art history, and music, received funding for doctoral schools that functioned regularly and for a long time. They had an important basis in the learned societies, many of them with a long history of providing forums for scholarly discussion and publication. In this context, however, it is more interesting to look at those fields of arts and design that had more recently started postgraduate education and research in general.

The 1986 university law, with its principle of performance-based funding which generously rewarded doctoral degrees, was one incentive for the art universities to start postgraduate education, but was by no means the only one. The University of Art and Design Helsinki (UIAH) had already implemented postgraduate education in 1981, and the Sibelius-Academy followed in 1982.<sup>1</sup> The Theatre Academy started its doctoral program in 1988, while the Academy of Fine Arts, which is the smallest of these, started much later in 1997. The Faculty of Arts at the University of Lapland has had a doctoral program since its inception in 1990.

The other important impetus certainly came from the international discussions of practice-based and artistic research, which is discussed from a Finnish perspective elsewhere in this book (see Chapter Two). Looking at the funding of postgraduate schools, it seems that design-oriented fields paved the way for the arts. From 1999 to 2013, the UIAH coordinated five doctoral schools: the Graduate School

<sup>1</sup> In 2010, the University of Art and Design Helsinki merged with a technical and a business university to become Aalto ARTS. The Sibelius-Academy, the Theatre Academy and the Fine Arts Academy merged in 2013 to become the University of Art Helsinki.

of Industrial and Product Design (1995–1999), the Future Home Graduate School (1999–2002), the Graduate School of Multicultural Art Education, (1999–2002), Design Connections (2007–2012), and the Doctoral Program of Audiovisual Media (2010–2013). Finally, in the last round of applications, artistic research made a breakthrough in the system of graduate schools, as the Doctoral Program in Artistic Research received funding for 2012–2015. It was coordinated by the Theatre Academy, with participation from all the art universities.

Implementing postgraduate education was also important for the art universities because prior to its development professors had been appointed primarily on artistic merits while academic merits were considered irrelevant.<sup>2</sup> Thus, professors were in some fields among the first to complete a doctoral degree in the arts. Yet the lack of research experience among the professors complicated supervision. The situation was challenging, as there was no consensus on the methodologies of artistic research. Engaging supervisors from traditional academia was only a partial solution as they were no more enlightened on artistic research principles than anyone else. However, a lively discussion ensued.

In 2008, the Academy of Finland decided to do an evaluation of research in the art universities in Finland and in the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland. Although the title is art research, the report is an assessment of both practice-led and artistic research.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the general tone is very positive and encouraging. After the assessment, there were discussions about the possible need for a research program that would be funded jointly by the Academy and the Arts council; two similar calls had been launched previously. A follow-up seminar to the report on artistic research was arranged on the Academy's premises in the fall of 2011. The message to the artists and researchers was that the Academy treats project proposals using artistic methods as any other projects: by recruiting an expert with the relevant competence

2 The situation was similar in architecture, where practice and experience were more important than research merits.

3 *Research in art and design in Finnish universities*, 2009.

for the evaluation panel.<sup>1</sup> At that point, individual postdoctoral projects using artistic research had already been funded within the Academy's normal funding scheme, and more since then, including funding for a research group. From this perspective, one can say that artistic research is now established as a multifaceted methodological approach.

### *Conclusions: Where Are We Now?*

This chapter has sketched an outline of the science and university policy in Finland that led to establishing a new funding instrument, *i.e.*, the graduate school, and the changes that led to its end. The problem was not with the schools themselves, which according to numerous texts by participants had many beneficial effects on the improvement of postgraduate education, the careers of junior researchers, and the internationalization of research, and so on. The Academy of Finland also saw the benefits of the schools. The Ministry of Education decided to end the funding scheme because of a new university policy, where the responsibility for doctoral education was placed with the universities. This also influenced the recommendations for hiring doctoral students in Academy-funded research projects, which was discouraged at that time. Today, there are no strong signals against hiring postgraduates in these projects.

What is the science policy at the moment? Where are we going in Finland, especially in postgraduate education? Today most universities have organized postgraduate education formally into programs and schools, and offer more tuition and courses than before. The dominant trend in science policy is to encourage profiling and specialization: the same subjects should not be taught and studied in different universities, at least not with similar emphases. Profiling, however, is of limited value as new ideas in research and in the arts are born mostly in unexpected places, from unexpected combinations. Many disciplines would benefit from consistent and organized

1 I was chairing the seminar.

cooperation with other institutions. In fact, the learned societies' role in connecting researchers from different universities, and following a strictly bottom-up agenda, may again become more central. Moreover, there are clear benefits in letting different institutions create a different emphasis within a discipline. The next generation will define the agenda differently than those whose ideas are dominant today. New disciplines and new ways of art making will arise. To believe that one can obtain excellence by having more of the same in one place is an outdated idea. While the Finnish government still seems to be concerned with the employability of doctors—which is a legitimate concern—there are many reasons to pursue doctoral research. Some candidates may end up in academia, or perhaps teaching in art schools, and hopefully all will be able to make an impact on culture and society through their research in other ways. But in research, as in the arts, many are driven by other than utilitarian concerns—for example by curiosity, passion, or personal development. These are legitimate and important drivers, too.

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