

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

Author(s): Ranta, Mette

Title: PhD Experiences in Finland

Year: 2016

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Ranta, M. (2016). PhD Experiences in Finland. International Psychology Bulletin, 20(3), 49-50. <https://div52.org/publications/newsletter/>

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

Section Editors:

Selda Celen-Demirtas

University of Massachusetts Boston

selda.celen@umb.edu

Melanie Cadet

University of Massachusetts Boston

Melanie.Cadet001@umb.edu

PhD Experiences in Finland

Mette Ranta, PhD, Post-Doctoral Researcher

*Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä,
Finland*

*Department of Teacher Education, University of Hel-
sinki, Finland*

mette.ranta@jyu.fi

Having completed my doctoral studies along with the doctoral dissertation and defense in the summer of 2015, I was eager to take the opportunity to reflect back on my experiences over the last five years or so. I completed my doctorate at the Department of Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland and have worked on a remote basis for my degree at the University of Helsinki. After having graduated with a Master's degree in Social Sciences in Sociology at the University of Jyväskylä in 2008, I continued on to doctoral studies at the Department of Psychology at the same university. Keen interest in research work and finding university life to be inspiring and exciting, as well as profound support from the research project I am working on, encouraged me to continue with doctoral studies in the first place. In this article, I will introduce some key aspects of the Finnish doctoral education system and my personal reflections on the process of gaining a doctoral degree and related experiences.

Doctoral studies in Finland are offered in the country's 17 universities in a wide range of disciplines. The requirement for doctoral studies is a Master's degree. The main part of the doctoral program is the doctoral dissertation which is eventually defended in public. The doctoral program also includes completion of courses, and including the doctoral dissertation, is composed of usually 240 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). The amount of required credits varies according to the subject, and it is also widely decreasing across various disciplines as the pressure for the completion of a doctoral degree at an increasingly fast pace is growing. I would not say that the courses are the essential part of the degree, as independent research resulting in an extensive doctoral dissertation is at its core. Furthermore, the courses are often chosen and completed independently and academic activities, such as conference presentations, teaching experience, and other achievements and responsibilities can also be accounted for as doctoral studies. Doctoral students working

within a university department are usually required to offer 5% of their working time into university teaching. While the doctoral dissertation, depending on discipline traditions, consists of either a scientific monograph or of several empirical studies, the doctoral dissertation in psychology is composed of approximately 2-4 empirical substudies published as peer-reviewed research articles in international scientific journals and a final summary of the substudies which is then reviewed by two external reviewers. The public defense afterwards on the dissertation is held with an opponent, often an international leading scholar in the field who opposes and challenges aspects of the dissertation.

Universities in Finland enjoy extensive autonomy and the operations of universities are built on the freedom of education and research. Education is publicly provided and there are no tuition fees for students at any levels. I have had the opportunity to engage and to have gained valuable work experience in two Finnish universities during the past years; at my *alma mater*, University of Jyväskylä, and at my hometown university, University of Helsinki. The University of Jyväskylä, located in the "Lakeland" heart of central Finland, originated from the first teacher training college and was founded in 1863. The university has approximately 15,000 students in seven faculties and is still considered the leading university for teacher-training and education programs. The University of Helsinki is Finland's oldest university, established in 1640. The University of Helsinki is the highest-ranked and largest higher education institution in Finland, with more than 36,500 students, 11 faculties and 11 research institutes.

My path towards a doctoral degree, at least hypothetically, began already ten years ago, when I became involved with the *Finnish Educational Transitions (FinEdu) Studies* project I am currently working on, with the opportunity given by Professor Katariina Salmela-Aro to work as a research assistant on her project. From there, I progressed with the work on my Master's thesis and eventually carried out my doctoral work. It has been a great experience to be part of the research project and its rich national and international academic network. Bridging between two universities emphasizes the importance of the research project, the supervision and support given by the guiding professors and the peer-support given by work colleagues. The advice I have gained from the numerous insightful discussions we have had together has been invaluable. Sharing the ups and downs of academic life and practical and emotional support, as well as great company on conference trips and in everyday work is very important. I have also found that having international collaborations and building international connections is very important. As the academia in such a small country as Finland is restricted, it is important to profit from your supervisor's networks but also to make those of your own and to participate in many activities to come across new possibilities. Also, as in all work of independent character, asking for support and guidance is a must: statisticians, the administration, and colleagues are all there to help out if needed. Colleagues and

especially mentors, such as more senior scholars as “academic big sisters” have been important and the importance of supervisors goes without saying. I had the opportunity to have three extremely successful and supportive supervisors, from different universities and representing the multidisciplinary angle of my dissertation.

As it comes to the doctoral studies, I would say that in Finland its main characteristics resemble that of being a junior scholar or researcher, than that of a student. Research work, collecting, handling and analyzing data, learning new methodology and publishing results in research articles all account for establishing a research career. In addition, being active in research-related activities, such as participating in scientific communities, organizations and journal editorial boards, for example, is also beneficial, also in terms of the networking possibilities. Several grants allocated for traveling enabled participation in conferences world-wide and the possibility to present my work and to receive feedback on my doctoral research. I was also able to familiarize myself with international scientific societies and associations, a few of which I am actively participating in (e.g., EARA, EADP). I also had the great opportunity to take part in a few international summer schools and courses over my doctoral studies (offered by EARA, EADP, SRA, ESF), which offered high-level training and getting to know young international colleagues, many of which I keep in contact with still today.

Over the years, and within my doctoral studies period, the situation concerning doctoral research and especially funding possibilities has changed considerably, along with the major structural changes taking place at Finnish universities with increasing financial demands. When I began, there were national doctoral programs which received funding from the Academy of Finland and these programs were able to offer funded positions for some doctoral students. Today, universities have formed their own doctoral programs and the competition for acceptance is tough. On the other hand, these doctoral programs offer full-time financial support in the form of an employment contract and since the requirement is the completion of the degree within four years, special emphasis is being given on support systems, guidance and adequate supervision. Since doctoral program acceptance rates are low due to increased competition, personal funding can be applied for from both independent and private as well as state-owned foundations, or granted from project funding allocated to the university departments. Competition for funding is tough, but Finland has, despite its small size, quite a large variety of different funding institutions. Often, the doctoral degree period includes several sources of funding which complement each other. Work contracts are often short and part-time, in my case being from half a year to two years. I have often thought that the work of a researcher could be compared to that of a private entrepreneur: combined freedom and independence with the risks and responsibilities. For myself, the five years of funding that I had for my research work included project funding from the Academy of Finland when I was employed as a doctoral student by the university, doctoral student funding from the National Doctoral Programme of

Psychology (DOPSY) and the University of Jyväskylä Graduate School for Doctoral Studies, doctoral student funding of the department and own personal funding grants from four different foundations. I also worked as a research assistant at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki and began working as a private entrepreneur, enabling me to gain additional work experience in research work.

The number of graduated doctorates in Finland has been increasing yearly, with a record amount of 1800 completed doctoral degrees in 2015. The amount has become a public concern, with the yearly aim being at 1600 and doctorate unemployment rates and lengths increasing. Another major concern is the fact that less than a third of graduated doctorates may proceed with a career in academia. Hence, other opportunities for employment need to be supported and the capabilities and profit offered by doctoral degree graduates should be acknowledged in the labor market widely. The employment possibilities and work-life relevance of the doctoral degree is a critical issue and should be emphasized more.

In conclusion, before my doctoral studies, I would have never believed that my career as a researcher would progress along the path that has led to where I am today, with its many ups and downs and surprising turns. While research work has been very challenging and demanding, it is also rewarding to have the doctoral dissertation completed. In terms of my personal life, I also spent approximately a year on parental leave with my daughter during my doctoral studies, which emphasizes the uniqueness of this period in my life. The balance between work and personal life is a critical issue but the support given by the family is the key to keeping things in perspective amidst an often hectic working life. The doctoral degree time was intense, but I look back at it with positive feelings and a sense of accomplishment; the day of the doctoral defense with the presence of my closest colleagues was one of the highlights of my life so far. Now, being in the transition phase from the comfort of being a doctoral “student” to working as an early-career researcher, I continue to enjoy the academic independence and planning new research ideas in themes I find inspiring and relevant.

Doctoral dissertation

Ranta, M. (2015) *Pathways to adulthood: Developmental tasks, financial resources and agency*. Jyväskylä Studies in Education, Psychology and Social Research, 527, Jyväskylä. Online: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-6227-2>