This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Ennser-Kananen, Johanna; Saarinen, Taina

Title: Can you imagine? : An imaginary of Finland's higher education as anti-oppressive, intersectional practice

Year: 2023

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Please cite the original version:

Ennser-Kananen, J., & Saarinen, T. (2023). Can you imagine? : An imaginary of Finland's higher education as anti-oppressive, intersectional practice. In M. Sommier, A. Roiha, & M. Lahti (Eds.), Interculturality in Higher Education : Putting Critical Approaches into Practice (pp. 11-26). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003322702-2

Can you imagine? An imaginary of Finland's higher education as anti-oppressive, intersectional practice

Johanna Ennser-Kananen & Taina Saarinen

Abstract

This chapter presents an imagined future scenario following a tweet by Minister of Interior Maria Ohisalo in June 2020 on Finland's Government Action Plan for Gender Equality. In our counterfactual imaginary, the government resigns and new elections result in a victory of the Left and Green parties, which were leading the polls at the time. We examine how Finnish Higher Education could develop in response to calls for intersectional and anti-oppressive practice on the basis of existing research, the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality (2020), and the Higher Education Accessibility plan (Kosunen, 2021).

Our counterfactual framework critically examines historical processes and possible futures emerging from them. This approach calls for an unlearning (Azoulay, 2019) of oppressive histories and thus challenges historical determinism (Rodwell, 2013), offers plausible alternate readings of historical and political events (Lebow, 2007), and evaluates taken-for-granted assumptions by making historical and political contingencies visible (Ennser-Kananen & Saarinen, 2021).

We identify fruitful directions for International Education (IE) in Finland that emerge as a result of our counterfactual imaginary and close with recommendations for those overseeing, working, and studying at Finnish universities, for a concerted effort to move IE and Finnish higher education in general towards intersectional anti-oppressive practice.

Keywords

Intercultural education, higher education, anti-oppressive education, counterfactual, imaginary

Introduction: A plan, a tweet, and a storm

In June 2020, the *Government Action Plan for Gender Equality* (in Finnish *Hallituksen tasa-arvo-ohjelma* without reference to gender), designed to promote equality in the Finnish society in the years 2020-2023, was published. The action plan utilised the concept of intersectionality in framing its goals, stating that 'in addition to gender, the grounds for discrimination can include age, religion, origin, language and disability'. While, remarkably, this relatively courageous framework did not receive much attention, a blog post from the Green Minister of Interior Affairs at the time, Maria Ohisalo (2020), in which she extended the intersectionality approach to intersectional feminism, triggered a political storm. The immediate reaction by populist politicians on social media platforms was to fiercely reject the legitimacy and significance of any intersectional approaches to equality.

Rossi (2021) analysed this event from the point of view of an academic concept - in this case intersectionality - suddenly becoming a popular topic in (social) media discourse. She discusses the possibility that intersectionality would not have made the same headlines, had Ohisalo's tweet not included the word *feminism*. Whatever the exact causes of the counterfactual scenario we describe below may have been, what is important for our analysis is the media attention that amplified growing tensions within the government, particularly between the Centre party and the Left-Green fraction of the government, thus ultimately making our counterfactual scenario possible.

For us, the release of the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality, accompanied by the media storm created by Ohisalo's tweet created an opportunity for writing an alternative to

the story of equity[1] in Finnish higher education. It led us to envision how Finnish equality policies might have developed from this point onwards in a counterfactual scenario, where equity in Finnish society, and particularly in the context of higher education, would come in the focus of political efforts. We take higher education as our empirical context, although any policy sector could be envisioned as the political context for this alternate imaginary.

Starting from our counterfactual anchor point (see below), we examine the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality (2020) and the Higher Education Accessibility plan (Kosunen, 2021) based on existing research and discuss how IE could develop in Finnish Higher Education in response to calls for intersectional and anti-oppressive practice. Our chapter offers a counterfactual analysis with the goal of understanding the events of this time and place more deeply and identifying recommendations for those overseeing, working, and studying at Finnish universities. Ultimately, we hope to contribute to a concerted effort of moving Finnish higher education towards intersectional, anti-oppressive practice. Our main question is: What possible new directions for International Education (IE) in Finland emerge as a result of the counterfactual imaginary?

Systemic Oppression in IE and Finnish HE: Essentialism, Evasiveness, and Empire

Is Intercultural Education oppressive? Is Finnish higher education? While these questions can only be answered in nuanced ways, we argue that systems of othering and discrimination permeate both contexts that cannot be dismissed. We focus on three of them here: *essentialism*, *evasiveness*, and *Empire*.

Our terms

Our use of the term anti-oppressive aligns with Clifford's definition, who explained that an anti-oppressive stance 'looks at the use and abuse of power not only in relation to individual or

organisational behaviour, which may be overtly, covertly or indirectly racist, classist, sexist and so on, but also in relation to broader social structures' (Clifford, 1995, p. 65). In the context of this chapter, this means that our attention to oppressive practices and policies goes beyond the confines of disciplines and universities as individual organisations, and extends to universities as societal institutions (Välimaa, 2019). Given that oppression operates overtly as well as covertly (Kumashiro, 2000), and, within the space of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) in Northern Europe, is oftentimes normalised and thus unrecognisable to us as white European academics, we acknowledge our own complicity in it and see it as a call to engage in continuous processes of learning, unlearning, and taking action.

A plethora of terms exist to refer to central goals of so-called 'Intercultural Education' (IE), including intercultural competence (e.g., Byram, 1997), intercultural communication, intercultural dialogue, and intercultural understanding (see Deardorff, 2004, also Hoskins & Sallah, 2011, p. 115 and Dervin, 2010, p. 157). Part of our argument in this chapter is that neither the multitude of terms nor a narrow understanding of IE as promoting exchange and dialogue between 'different' 'cultures' is typically conducive to anti-oppressive education and organisational practices. Intercultural Education has been criticised for perpetuating inequities, for its essentialism and relativism, and for its lack of attention to power issues (see Mikander et al., 2018 particularly on the Nordic situation). We further suggest that there is a gap between what International Education in Finland and elsewhere is doing and the intersectional approach to equity that the Finnish government proposed. In our chapter, 'intersectional' refers to approaches that highlight how socially constructed categories and identities, such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, faith, and ability, intertwine and create complex systems of inequity (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus we are indebted to the rich body of literature of Critical Race Theory (CRT), specifically Delgado and Stefancic (2017) who outline as its main tenets the pervasive and endemic presence of racism in our societies, the understanding that racial

hierarchies serve the purpose of keeping the power in the hands of white individuals and communities, the lack of any biological foundations of the concept of 'race', and the value and centrality of experiences of members of minoritised groups, like BIPOC[2].

Essentialism

In Finland and many other national contexts, Intercultural Education, the very subject that is supposed to foster positive relations between people from different backgrounds, has consistently been complicit in doing the opposite. For instance, as Holliday (2011) has pointed out, Intercultural Communication (IC), often used synonymously with IE, has a history of following an essentialist paradigm that ties people to stereotypes ascribed to a particular 'culture' (p. 4), through which similarities and differences are constructed, which are then made into the object of educational efforts with the goal of improving such 'intercultural' connections. Similarly, Dervin and Layne (2013) note for the Finnish context:

> In Finland, intercultural education is often viewed from the perspective of otherness, rarely from 'within' (Dervin et al., 2012), and is very much related to the problematic idea of tolerance, and only those who are tolerated need to be educated towards intercultural competence. (p. 4)

In an effort to challenge such essentialism, Holliday pushes for an approach to IC that conceptualises 'culture' as dynamic and discursively constructed and offers concepts such as 'small culture' (1999), i.e. 'any cohesive social grouping' (p. 237) and, more recently, a 'grammar of culture' (2011), which he defines as a 'loose, negotiated relationship' (p. 4) between the individual and the national to support such a paradigm shift. What is important for us about Holliday's (proposed) shift towards a non-essentialist paradigm is its potential for intersectional anti-oppressive work in higher education contexts. Recognising processes of

categorising members of higher education (e.g., 'diversity hires', 'international students', students with 'comprehensible' language skills versus 'incomprehensible accents', etc.) as politically and ideologically informed (and discursively constructed) enables and drives the work of dismantling them and is thus an important foundation for anti-oppressive work.

Evasiveness

What we call something matters. Based on their analysis of European Education and Culture policy texts, Hoskins and Sallah (2011) describe a discourse shift in the early 2000s from 'anti-racism' to 'culture' with highly problematic implications. As they explain,

> (t)his simplistic focus on culture hides unequal power relations, including poverty, violence, structural inequalities such as racism and the possibilities of multiple identities … (Hoskins & Sallah, 2011, p. 114).

Along with this power-evasiveness goes an ethnocentric understanding of culture, which, as the authors point out, 'at a European level has referred predominantly to the cultural heritage of countries and to the common cultural heritage of Europe' (p. 116). What the authors notice in the context of youth work, rings true for the wider field of higher education, and indeed all of education, in Finland. Here, evasiveness vis-à-vis sociopolitical issues paired with a sense of innocence that feeds off the idea that Finland is somehow 'different' and not affected by larger processes and systems of oppression, has been termed Nordic or Finnish 'exceptionalism' (Rastas, 2016). Hoskins and Sallah (2011) connect the plurality of terms that exists to describe different aspects of IE to this evasiveness:

> The whole range of terminologies used to define the area ranging from intercultural competence to intercultural dialogue portrays a propensity to a soft-core approach

underlying and underpinning the conceptual framework from an apolitical perspective (p. 120).

Elaborating on this assessment of the situation, Hoskins and Sallah (2011) show that existing concepts of intercultural competence (e.g. by Deardorff, 2006) shy away from addressing (let alone challenging) existing power imbalances and are not equipped to dismantle systems of oppression, but instead give a false sense of 'togetherness' (Jones, 1999). In this chapter, we counter such apolitical (and thus ultimately racist/oppressive) approaches (see also Sallah, 2009) with an imaginary that is explicitly political in terminology, methodology, and content.

Empire

When Holliday (2011) describes IC as rooted in a 'Centre, Western, chauvinistic ideology of superiority' (p. ix), he hints at the idea that colonial structures are still very much alive and well in education, and specifically higher education. In a similar vein, Gorski (2008) offers examples of how, to this day, colonial and imperial efforts are theoretically justified through an application of deficit theory that others, pathologises, and criminalises members of marginalised (e.g., BIPOC) communities under the veil of Intercultural Education. He describes processes within education that intertwine corporate interest with racio-cultural superiority and calls on IE to break with those systems of power and adopt a critical approach instead. Gorski's description resembles the one by Motha (2014) who, in reference to Hardt and Negri (2000), has termed the intertwinedness of imperial and neoliberal ideologies that operates to maintain the status quo, Empire. As processes of Empire are typically invisible to their beneficiaries, making them visible becomes an important task of IE. Some efforts to do this have been undertaken in the larger context of Finnish HE, for instance:

1. In an article titled 'So that university would not be a club for white people', Kisnanen (2021) describes the workings of structural racism through the experience of an Afro-Finnish student and her mentor, a doctoral researcher with roots in Singapore, in the Equality as Preparation course at the University of Helsinki. As part of preparation for university studies and life, it is crucial, for instance, to become aware of dynamics that position white students as legitimate academic knowers and racialised students as less academically skilled or capable. Mentoring programmes can be a way to counter such epistemic injustice (see also Fricker, 2007 and Ennser-Kananen, 2019).

2. At least two major efforts are currently underway to facilitate access to university or support university trajectories of migrant students who are Finnish learners: INTEGRA (https://movi.jyu.fi/en/development/integra) for students at the University of Jyväskylä, and AKVA for prospective students and applicants (https://hyplus.helsinki.fi/hankkeet/akva-on-koulutus-maahanmuuttajille-jotka-haluavat-opiskella-yliopistossa-tai-ammattikorkeakoulussa/) at the University of Helsinki. Although students with migration background are not necessarily from racialised or marginalised groups, there is considerable overlap of these populations in Finland. Building programmes to attract and support these students is imperative. Importantly, these efforts need to go hand in hand with anti-oppressive education for receiving institutions.

3. The recent accessibility work initiated by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kosunen, 2021) provides a more structural-level example that applies an intersectional framework but, as a result of institutional autonomy, may be implemented superficially.

4. In his keynote for the Language Education and Social Justice conference (Riuttanen et al., 2021), Aminkeng Alemanji (2021) reported on the initiative he started together with his master's students to overturn the language policies that create systemic

disadvantages for students/applicants from African countries and geographical areas from the Global South by not recognising their English language proficiencies (see also Saarinen & Nikula, 2013). Alemanji's initiative is an example of anti-oppressive education in action in Finnish HE.

We mention these examples here because they illustrate what IE in Finland should be and do. It should make visible how Empire, essentialism, and evasiveness are at work in Finnish HE (and beyond), and develop concrete measures for change towards intersectional anti-oppressive pedagogies and institutional practises. As such, we call for IE to transcend its disciplinary confines and understand the whole university landscape as its field of impact and responsibility. In the end, an effort to dismantle Empire, evasiveness, and essentialism cannot stop at disciplinary borders (which themselves are a product of Empire) but has to extend its work to universities and higher education at large. In this spirit, we argue, from here on out, not just for IE but also for universities to become spaces of anti-oppressive practice. Although these valuable initiatives mentioned above do not change the fact that a systematic effort for anti-oppressive/anti-colonial practice in Finnish HE is only in its infancy, a counterfactual perspective can help us recognise ways forward.

Theoretical and methodological framework: counterfactual histories and imagined futures

In social sciences, *future* has traditionally been discussed in terms of 'path dependency' or 'unintended consequences'; i.e. either as assumed linear development or a rupture in that linear expectation. Stråth and Wodak (2009) discuss the construction of crises as emerging from experiencing societal complexities on one hand and the uncertainty of the future on the other. This understanding of future as an outcome of crisis assumes a normal that the imagined future

interrupts as well as a linear understanding of time that splits into past, present, and future, rather than forming a contingent and fluid whole. In discussing risk, Ulrich Beck (2006) has in a similar vein discussed awareness of the past as an anticipation of the future, the irony being that our imagination of the past brings about an understanding of a future that we think we can control. In other words, imagining a future inevitably implies imagining history that breaks form our learned and internalised historical understandings.

In this chapter, we aim to unlearn the historical perspectives we have been socialised into, most importantly the notion of oppressive social structures and processes in higher education as inevitable and natural. One way to achieve this is to take a counterfactual histories approach that allows us a research-based counter-perspective to historical determinism (Rodwell, 2013), while resisting any naïveté about our sociopolitical context. With counterfactuals, we can open up our understanding of history as several possibilities rather than an inevitable linear development, as history often is made to appear in retrospect.

We will next move on to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of imagining a future and outlining our analysis of it. The chapter concludes with setting the scene for our counterfactual imaginary.

Theorising alternative pasts and futures

In this chapter, we imagine futures not from a crisis or risk perspective but from a place of refusing to accept taken-for-granted understandings of historical wrongs leading to future wrongs. We question assumptions of future by making historical and political contingencies visible (Ennser-Kananen & Saarinen, 2021), and by imagining an alternative of what lies ahead. Thus, this chapter is one step in a process of unlearning internalised understandings of history and challenging our assumptions about crisis and normal as well as our linear thinking about time.

As Oomen et al. (2021) show in their review of social theories of future, it is also 'a materially and discursively enacted part of the present' (p. 6); in other words, 'enacted in and through material structures' (p. 5). Oomen et al. (2021) discuss politics of future as the 'social processes and practises that allow particular imagined futures to become socially performative' (p. 1), suggesting that current conceptualisations of environmental and social crises, such as social inequality, make future a topical concept both academically and politically. Thus, we need to find ways of disengaging from the more traditional ways of collecting (historical and present-day) data, and challenge our methodological norms (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019) in ways that allow for re-imagining both the past, the present and the future.

We aim to unlearn the historical perspectives we have been socialised into, most importantly the notion of oppressive social structures and processes in higher education as inevitable and natural. A counterfactual-histories framing works, for instance, through the informed posing of what-if questions, plausible alternate readings of historical and political events (Lebow, 2007), critical evaluations of taken-for-granted assumptions, and the making visible of sociopolitical contingencies (Ennser-Kananen & Saarinen, 2021).

Our counterfactual scenario

Counterfactual histories should not, however, be taken as a simplistic or entertaining thought experiment, but as a possibility to challenge the institutionalised and naturalised understanding of historical violence and its persistence. In this sense, we aim to re-examine not merely the historical moments and processes themselves, but also the way in which we read them into the future and determine what is yet to come (Azoulay, 2019). Azoulay's (2019) '*potential history*' adds a critical element to counterfactuals (ch. 4, 1st paragraph) as 'an onto-epistemic refusal to recognize as irreversible its [systemic violence] outcome and the categories, statuses, and forms under which it materializes'. Thus, merely taking one counterfactual point in time from where

we imagine another future is not enough, as it would still build on the oppressive and violent understanding of the past. When we imagine the counterfactual anchor point, our imaginary has to reach beyond that time.

Imagining a counterfactual future is not random. We need to identify a plausible starting point for the imaginary to be able to make a feasible reading of it. This counterfactual starting point is, in itself, part of the scenario, as it is the first disruption of the assumed historical causality.

In the summer of 2020, the Centre Party left the Finnish government after ideological tensions had built up over months within the coalition of the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Greens, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party. This break of the coalition caused the government to resign and new parliamentary elections were held in Finland in the fall of 2020. A landslide victory for the Left and Green parties was followed by a relatively quick forming of a Left-Green coalition government, which now leads the country's politics with a slight majority of 51 to 49 percent. As one of their first initiatives, the new government released an equity policy that was developed based on Marin's first government's gender equality programme. The new policy includes the adoption of intersectional feminism as a framework for higher education pedagogies and is to be implemented in all universities and universities of applied science across the country.

What potential histories would make this possible, and what consequences would this have for Finnish higher education? In our analysis, we ask these questions to overcome traditional paths of historical thought and to 'zoom out, refocus and contemplate a fresh perspective' (Wenzlhuemer, 2009. p. 30), or create a *Spielraum* (Wenzlhuemer, 2009, p. 35) where it is possible to analyse the alternate possibilities in ways that allow us to refuse the inequitable history of Finnish higher education. Analytically, we will manipulate the imagined history and future of equity in Finnish higher education by identifying a potential alternative

scenario; in this chapter, the new elections leading to an alternate political scenery which draws from a different history (see Wenzlhuemer, 2009). We will next move on to analyse the circumstances under which this imagined future could take place.

Unlearning ideals of societal equality in Finnish higher education

The Finnish understanding of societal equality has historically focused on gender equality, which is also reflected in higher education equality programmes (Tanhua, 2020). The gender equality debates and developments in the 1960s originated from changes in production (from agrarian to industrial and later service) and labour market structures (Valkonen, 1985).

The expansion of the higher education system in the 1960s took place mostly with the goal of regional coverage, the thinking being that higher education needed to be more accessible also outside of the largest urban centres. This geographical argument is in essence also a socioeconomic one: In Finland, students from small towns and rural areas are more likely to be disenfranchised from higher education and thus socioeconomic upward mobility. In addition, the more highly educated population is concentrated in southern and western Finland. The differences between educational sectors remain large; most fields, with the exception of technology, have become more female dominated, and the humanities, where earnings have declined more than in other fields, have remained female-dominated.

With the expansion of higher education, the opportunities for individuals to participate in higher education in Finland have increased in absolute terms (cf. Kivinen et al., 2012). It seems, however, that while participation in higher education has clearly increased since the 1960s, the role of the parents' educational background has not changed considerably in the last twenty years (Karhunen & Uusitalo, 2017). Additionally, placement in different (high vs low prestige) degree programmes and universities is skewed socioeconomically and by gender (e.g., Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2018; Kivinen et al., 2012). The population with migrant

background is educationally polarised: more people who have only completed primary school, fewer people who have completed secondary education and about the same number of people who have completed higher education (Nieminen et al., 2015). The recent years have seen a slight increase in research on access to higher education, particularly with a focus on minoritised populations (e.g., Roma, see Johansson & Laurila, 2018) and language (e.g., Shumilova et al., 2012).

As the above examples from research show, access to higher education has been recognised as a problem in the Finnish higher education system. However, it is impossible to identify one reason of inequitable access, meaning that access cannot be improved by continuing to focus on individual social factors such as gender or socioeconomic background. Instead, an intersectional approach is needed.

Based on the programme by Prime Minister Marin's Government *Inclusive and competent Finland – a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable society*, report on *more accessible higher education and higher education institutions* (Kosunen, 2021) was published in 2021. The accessibility plan sets up national goals to promote and increase access to higher education. As with the Government Equality Plan, also the accessibility plan has an intersectional starting point; instead of focusing on individual underrepresented groups, it sees accessibility as a fundamental starting point of higher education. As Finnish universities in particular have a history and tradition of autonomy over their teaching, research and internal administration (Välimaa, 2019), this may present a challenge to higher education institutions in Finland from the point of view of their equity work. It may give them the necessary space to make the changes that are needed, but, according to Dervin (2010), this tradition may also have 'slowed down the expansion of a critical and reflexive conception of interculturality and the development of intercultural competence in higher education' (p. 155), as higher education institutions have protected their interests over state intervention (see Jalava, 2012). The

potential problem from the point of view of equity policies, then, is that the strong tradition of university autonomy (originally set up as protection against the state) may either mean that equity related initiatives are not picked up because of the administrative inertia that protects the status quo, or that measures that increase equity are implemented because the alternative would be an increased state intervention (Jalava, 2012).

An imagined future: Has this happened before? Could this happen again?

A consideration of alternate futures calls for an unlearning (Azoulay, 2019) of the Finnish oppressive histories that are overfocused on welfare state ideals of gender and pay equality. As we have seen above, neither *equality* as a colour-evasive structure and practise, nor approaches to *intercultural education* that other already minoritised communities in higher education (see section 2 above) can serve as a basis of imagining an alternate future - they would merely reproduce and replicate that history. Thus, imagining an anti-oppressive future is not just about imagining a feasible 'counterfactual turning point', but about learning a new history. In Azoulay's words (2019, p. 63):

> [p]otential history is not the account of radical thinking, or explicit ideological structures against imperialism, but a rejection of imperialism's conceptual apparatus altogether. The imperial apparatus presumes that such struggles exist only in the past, only as dusty records in the archive.

Following this, Azoulay (p. 43) calls for 'rehearsing disengagement' and although we are only beginning to understand IE and higher education as serving Empire, we disengage from the celebratory Finnish discourse of equality and IE and actively look for opportunities to move towards anti-oppressive, intersectional practice. Part of this disengagement is to look to situations in which higher education has undergone change in a similar societal situation. This,

in turn, paves way for a renewed understanding of Finnish higher education, helping us break from its ostensibly self-evident and assumed history.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Finnish higher education expanded strongly, both in the numbers of organisations and the numbers of students. This coincided with the so-called 'baby boom' generations entering higher education and relatively strong urbanisation (caused by changes in economic production), and changed the social stratification of the student body and, gradually also the staff (Välimaa, 2019). The university degree reform of the 1970s as a 'Social Utopia' (Jalava, 2012, p. 79) and the ensuing administrative changes serve as an example of bottom up change towards more equity in Finnish higher education.

While the original, relatively radical demand of 'one man one vote' did not get fulfilled in the administrative reform, the old 'collegial' (i.e., professor driven) system was changed into a tripartite (professors - other staff - students) structure that was in place until the 2010 university reform and the introduction of university external members in boards. This is an example of a political situation where a favourable political atmosphere (general radicalisation of the society in the 1960s and 1970s combined with changes in production structures and the post war baby boom generations coming of age) coincided with university-internal needs for restructuring the administration. To change the institutional structure of higher education, we acknowledge these developments as creating a trajectory that opens up the possibility for an alternative history.

The future is anti-oppressive …?

What, then, needs to happen for Finnish higher education to become anti-oppressive? What could happen if we imagined a possible future like the one described earlier? We get back to our counterfactual futures starting point of a political situation where the Government Action Plan for Gender Equality and the Higher Education accessibility plan have been accepted and

are being implemented in a political context where the Left-Green coalition had won a general election that was called after a government crisis that had culminated in Minister Ohisalo's intersectional feminism tweet.

First, as the accessibility plan suggests, in Finland many university reforms hinge on the decisions of individual higher education institutions as they have a relative autonomy over their activities. Current higher education administration and power structures are still strongly influenced by the ideal of the 'collegial' (i.e., all professors being equal) that reproduce old hierarchical structures which exclude a large part of university communities (which, in turn, exclude a large part of the population). However, strategic negotiations with the Ministry of Education and Culture and in particular the funding formula that steers universities' activities relatively strongly (Seuri & Vartiainen, 2018) have proven to effectively impact higher education institutions. It seems that in order for reforms towards equity to take place, some degree of re-regulation and re-centralisation (i.e., decreasing autonomy of higher education) is needed, for instance in the form of amending higher education legislation and/or sanctioning lack of anti-oppressive measures in the funding system.

Second, as we learn from the historical cases, change needs to come from many directions, including from within the university. A central part of any serious anti-oppressive mission thus has to be the recruitment and retention of staff from underrepresented minorities, including particularly staff of colour and Indigenous staff. This is oftentimes preceded by the realisation that 'open' invitations or calls for applications are not equally open or inviting to everyone. Instead, it takes a targeted effort to reach out to participants from minoritised groups and motivate them to apply. Committing to a safer campus climate, putting in place mentoring structures, working towards epistemic justice in teaching and research, and using anti-oppressive pedagogies throughout all areas and disciplines will be part of any effort to recruit and retain staff of colour.

Related to this is our third point that diversifying universities needs to begin with diversifying the student body and thus engaging in a comprehensive intake reform. This cannot be merely a policy measure but needs to be accompanied by personal, departmental, and institutional reorientations around questions such as 'Who are we (not)?' and 'Who do we (not) serve?' In our counterfactual future, a combination of a societal and a university-internal push for reform, under the leadership of members of minoritised groups, particularly BIPOC, as well as centralised political incentives, steer concrete political measures in this reorientation (decolonisation) process.

Fourth, as our counterfactual analysis showed, university reforms do not occur in a societal vacuum. University work that is rooted in community work can positively impact the desire for change in both contexts. Thus, we argue that community-based research and teaching that support initiatives at the intersections of, for instance, race-gender, race-class, race-ability, or race-language need to be put at the centre of our work. Relatedly, university staff need to be trained, supported, funded, and promoted to engage in such work together with community members. In order to put academic work radically in the service of marginalised (particularly BIPOC) communities, we need different ways to measure societal impact than numerical ones that capture, validate, and encourage community engagement in qualitative ways.

Fifth, as prior research has shown (e.g., Kulik & Roberson, 2008), diversity trainings, as they are popular right now, commonly fail to meet the unrealistic expectations of their providers. Diversity trainings may remain superficial and do little but instigate a sense of 'being OK' in their participants, thus leading to complacency rather than continuous engagement. However, if provided with support and spaces to learn, those who hold power can develop a consciousness of themselves as bound up in an oppressive system, challenge their socialisation, learn to do less harm, and build growing cells of resistance. While mandating one-time trainings would do little to support an anti-oppressive university climate, opportunities to learn could be

built into academic workloads and daily routines in ways that sustain common learning, encourage self-criticality, and normalise an anti-oppressive perspective on university policies and practices.

Key take-away points

- International Education (IE) in and beyond Finland has been complicit in 'abyssal thinking' (Garcia et al., 2021) and doing, i.e. the perpetuation of ideologies and hierarchies that hark back to colonial times.

- A more systematic effort to implement anti-oppressive pedagogies, policies and administrative practices in Finnish higher education is needed.

- Counterfactual history approaches are a useful tool for challenging and questioning current and past events, encouraging anti-oppressive practices, and countering historical determinism.

- Although antiracist or, more generally anti-oppressive work is often approached as a voluntary task or personal choice, it is important to note that especially in educational contexts, equity work can be undermined by institutional autonomy (opt-out), and incentives or sanctions may be needed for systemic change to take place.

References

Alemanji, A. (2021). Spiral trajectories of racism and possible antiracist interventions in Finnish education. *Keynote lecture at Language Education for Social Justice Conference*, June 1-3 2021, Jyväskylä

Azoulay, A. A. (2019). *Potential history. Unlearning imperialism.* Verso.

Beck, U. (2006). Living in the world risk society: A Hobhouse memorial public lecture given on Wednesday 15 February 2006 at the London School of Economics. *Economy and Society*, *35*(3), 329–345.

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence.* Multilingual Matters.

Clifford, D. J. (1995). Methods in oral history and social work. *Journal of the Oral History Society*, *23*(2), 65.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139–167.

Deardorff, D. K. (2004). In search of intercultural competence. *International Educator*, *13*(2), 13.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory*. New York University Press.

Deardorff, D. K. (2006): The identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student oucome of internationalization at institutions of higher education in the United States. Journal of Studies in International Education, 10(3) 241-266.Dervin, F. (2010). Assessing intercultural competence in language learning and teaching: A critical review of current efforts. *New Approaches to Assessment in Higher Education*, *5*, 155–172.

Dervin, F., & Layne, H. (2013). A guide to interculturality for international and exchange students: An example of Hospitality?. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 8*(1), 1–19.

Ennser-Kananen, J. (2019). Knowledge is power is knowledge: Can we break the cycle of epistemic and epistemological injustice?. *Tiedepolitiikka*, *44*(4).

Ennser-Kananen, J., & Saarinen, T. (2021). Challenging constitutional bilingualism with "What if...": Counterfactual histories and at-risk minorities in Finland. In C. Cunningham

& C. J. Hall (Eds.), *Vulnerabilities, challenges and risks in applied linguistics* (pp. 81–96). Multilingual Matters.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.

García, O., Flores, N., Seltzer, K., Wei, L., Otheguy, R., & Rosa, J. (2021). Rejecting abyssal thinking in the language and education of racialized bilinguals: A manifesto. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 1–26.

Ghaziani, A., & Brim, M. (2019). Queer methods. In A. Ghaziani & M. Brim (Eds.), *Imagining queer methods* (pp. 3–27). New York University Press.

Gorski, P. C. (2008). Good intentions are not enough: A decolonizing intercultural education. *Intercultural Education, 19*(6), 515–525.

Government Action Plan for Gender Equality. (2020). Valtioneuvosto.

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Harvard University Press.

Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, *20*(2), 237–264.

Holliday, A. (2011). *Intercultural communication & ideology.* SAGE.

Hoskins, B., & Sallah, M. (2011). Developing intercultural competence in Europe: The challenges. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *11*(2), 113–125.

Isopahkala-Bouret, U., Börjesson, M., Beach, D., Haltia, N., Jónasson, J., Jauhiainen, A., Jauhiainen, A., Kosunen, S., Nori, H., & Vabø, A. (2018). Access and stratification in Nordic higher education. A review of cross-cutting research themes and issues. *Education Inquiry*, *9*(1), 142–154.

Jalava, M. (2012) *The university in the making of the welfare state: The 1970s degree reform in Finland.* Peter Lang.

Johansson, E., & Laurila, H. (2018). Tavoitteena korkeakouluopinnot – tukipajat hakuvaiheen apuna. In N. Mäenpää, K. Perho & M. Ärling (Eds.), *Uskalla! It's possible: Romanien*

sujuvat koulutus ja työllisyyspolut: Tšetanes naal - ja Nevo tiija -hankkeiden loppujulkaisu (pp. 133–145). Diakonia-ammattikorkeakoulu. Available at: https://www.theseus.fi/handle/10024/153380

Jones, A. (1999). The limits of cross-cultural dialogue: Pedagogy, desire, and absolution in the classroom. *Educational Theory, 49*(3), 299–316.

Karhunen, H., & Uusitalo, R. (2017). 50 vuotta koulutusmahdollisuuksien tasa-arvoa. *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka*, *82*(3), 296–303.

Kisnanen, N. (2021). So that university would not be a club for white people. Finnish National Agency for Education News 24 March, 2021. Available at: https://www.oph.fi/en/news/2021/so-university-would-not-be-club-white-people

Kivinen, O., Hedman, J., & Kaipainen, P. (2012). Koulutusmahdollisuuksien yhdenvertaisuus Suomessa. Eriarvoisuuden uudet ja vanhat muodot. *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka, 77*(5), 559–566.

Kosunen, S., Ahtiainen, H., & Töyrylä, M. (2018). Preparatory course market and access to higher education in Finland: pocketful or pockets-full-of money needed? In A. Tarabini, & N. Ingram (Eds.), *Educational choices, transitions and aspirations in Europe: Systemic, institutional and subjective challenges* (pp. 167–184). Routledge.

Kosunen, T. (2021.) *Kohti saavutettavampaa korkeakoulutusta ja korkeakoulua*. Ministry of Education and Culture.

Kulik, C. T., & Roberson, L. (2008). Diversity initiative effectiveness: What organizations can (and cannot) expect from diversity recruitment, diversity training, and formal mentoring programs. In A. P. Brief (Ed.), *Diversity at work* (pp. 265–317). Cambridge University Press.

Kumashiro, K. K. (2000). Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education. *Review of Educational research*, *70*(1), 25–53.

Lebow, R. N. (2007). Counterfactual thought experiments: A necessary teaching tool. *The History Teacher*, *40*(2), 153–176.

Mikander, P., Zilliacus, H., & Holm, G. (2018). Intercultural education in transition: Nordic perspectives. *Education Inquiry*, *9*(1), 40–56.

Motha, S. (2014). *Race, empire, and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice*. Teachers College Press.

Nieminen T., Sutela, H., & Hannula, U. (2015). *Ulkomaista syntyperää olevien työ ja hyvinvointi Suomessa 2014*. Tilastokeskus. Available at: https://www.stat.fi/tup/julkaisut/tiedostot/julkaisuluettelo/yyti_uso_201500_2015_16163_net.pdf

Ohisalo, M. (2020). [@MariaOhisalo] 25 June, 2020. *Hallituksessa päätettiin uudesta tasa-arvo-ohjelmasta. Kunnianhimon taso nousee aiempiin hallituksiin verrattuna ja kantavana näkökulmana on nyt eri syrjinnän muodot tunnistava intersektionaalinen #feminismi Aika nostaa Suomi tasa-arvon kärkimaaksi!* [Tweet]. Twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/MariaOhisalo/status/1276159301124579328

Oomen, J., Hoffman, J., & Hajer, M. A. (2021). Techniques of futuring: On how imagined futures become socially performative. *European Journal of Social Theory*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431020988826.

Rastas, A. (2016). Reading history through Finnish exceptionalism. In K. Loftsdóttir & L. Jensen (Eds.). *Whiteness and postcolonialism in the Nordic Region* (pp. 101–116). Routledge.

Riuttanen, S., Ennser-Kananen, J., Pöyhönen, S., & Ikonen, P. (2021). Creating a hopeful and diverse conference – report from LESJ2021. *Kielikampusblogi 18 August, 2021*. Available at: https://kielikampus.jyu.fi/fi/blog/blogikirjoitukset-vuosittain/2021/creating-a-hopeful-and-diverse-conference-report-from-lesj2021

Rodwell, G. (2013). *Whose history? Engaging history students through historical fiction.* University of Adelaide Press.

Rossi, L. M. (2021). Intersektionaalisuus –kun sukupuoli ei riitä. *Niin & näin: filosofinen aikakauslehti, 21*(1), 74–75.

Saarinen, T., & Nikula, T. (2013). Implicit policy, invisible language: Policies and practices of international degree programmes in Finnish higher education. In A. Doiz, D. Lasagabaster, & J. M. Sierra (Eds.), *English-medium instruction at universities: Global challenges* (pp. 131–150). Multilingual Matters.

Sallah, M. (2009). Dawn of a new Europe: Addressing otherness. In C. Howson & M. Sallah (Eds.), *Europe's established and emerging immigrant communities: Assimilation, multiculturalism or integration* (pp. 110). Trentham.

Seuri, A., & Vartiainen, H. (2018). Yliopistojen rahoitus, kannustimet ja rakennekehitys. *Kansantaloudellinen aikakauskirja*, *1*(18), 100–131.

Shumilova, Y., Cai, Y., & Pekkola, E. (2012). *Employability of international graduates educated in Finnish higher education institutions.* University of Helsinki. Available at: http://www.helsinki.fi/urapalvelut/valoasurvey/pubData/source/VALOA09.pdf

Stråth, B., & Wodak, R. (2009). Europe—Discourse—Politics—Media—History: Constructing 'crises'? In A. Triandafyllidou, R. Wodak, M. Krzyżanowski (Eds.), *The European public sphere and the media* (pp. 15–33). Palgrave Macmillan.

Tanhua, I. (2020). *Selvitys korkeakoulujen tasa-arvon ja yhdenvertaisuuden edistämisestä.* Valtioneuvosto.

Valkonen, T. (1985). Alueelliset erot. In T. Valkonen, R. Alapuro, M. Alestalo, R. Jallinoja & T. Sandlund (Eds.), *Suomalaiset. Yhteiskunnan rakenne teollistumisen aikana*. [Finns. Societal structure during the age of industrialisation] (pp. 201–241). WSOY.

Välimaa, J. (2019). *A history of Finnish higher education from the middle ages to the 21st century*. Springer.

Wenzlhuemer, R. (2009). Counterfactual thinking as a scientific method. *Historical Social Research*, *34*(2), 27–54.

Endnotes

---

[1] While we prefer the term equity in our work, we use 'equality' in reference to policy documents and debates where this term appears. What may seem like inconsistency in terminology is a realistic representation of existing terms and their use in the Finnish context.

[2] Black, Indigenous, People of Colour. Although this term has its drawbacks, for instance its failure to recognise heterogeneity within the large group of 'people of colour', the highlighting of Black and Indigenous communities seems important to us, particularly in the Finnish context, where these groups and identities are rarely named.