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# Working Papers on University Reform

Working Paper 37:

## **The Role of European Universities in an Age of Pandemic**

Edited by Amélia Veiga and Tim Seidenschnur

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES – CRITICAL  
FUTURES

CENTRE FOR  
HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
FUTURES

Danish School of Education, Aarhus University

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## **Working Papers on University Reform**

### **Series Editor: Susan Wright**

This working papers series is published by the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. The series brings together work in progress in Denmark and among an international network of scholars involved in research on universities and higher education.

The current paper arises from a project, 'European Universities – Critical Futures', funded by the Danish Research Council. The project addressed the question: *What are the future roles of universities in creating social and regional integration in Europe, in a shifting global context?* To do this, eight working groups formed with members from across Europe, each fostering a learning community between early stage and more senior researchers, with the aims of generating new research agendas and highlighting their policy implications. These working groups covered Gender and Precarity in Academia, Alternative Conditions for Knowledge Creation, Trust Beyond Metrics, Higher Education Access for Underrepresented Groups, Changing Dynamics Between Administrators and Academics in European Universities, Refugee Access to Higher Education, and Alternative Internationalisms. In addition, research teams in eight countries formed to research the effects of the Covid19 pandemic on the future of higher education, the results of which are reported in this working paper. This pandemic study was coordinated by Amélia Veiga, University of Porto, Portugal and Tim Seidenschnur, Kassel University, Germany. Statistical information on the eight countries' higher education sectors was compiled by Krystian Szadkowski, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland.

Other papers in this working paper series are derived from previous projects and activities:

- 'Practicing Integrity', funded by the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science.
- 'Universities in the Knowledge Economy' (UNIKE) an EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITN project, with 6 European partners and 30 associated partners in the Asia-Pacific Rim.
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**The Role of European Universities  
in an Age of Pandemic**

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## **Chapter 4 Finland**

Melina Aarnikoivu and Taina Saarinen<sup>26</sup>

In this chapter, we present the results of the Finnish pandemic study. Compared to many other countries included in this report, the Finnish higher education system is small: In 2021, there were approximately 310,000 undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate students<sup>27</sup> studying in Finnish higher education institutions (Vipunen, 2022). Furthermore, the system is quite homogenous in a sense that it is mainly publicly funded. However, the dual system has different kinds of institutions: universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS), which have different missions, as well as their own legislation. In the report, we refer to the first set of institutions as universities and the latter as UAS.

At the start of 2022, there are 14 universities and 24 UAS in Finland. Of the universities, 13 operate under the Ministry of Education and Culture, and one under the Ministry of Defence. Of the UAS, 22 operate under the Ministry of Education and Culture; one under the Ministry of the Interior, and one is maintained by the regional government of the Åland Islands. The universities and UAS may operate under different legal basis — universities either as corporations under public law or as foundations, and the UAS as public limited companies, both receiving their public core funding with nationally set criteria. The difference between the two sectors in funding reflects their different roles in education, research, and societal tasks. The UAS grant Bachelor's and Master's degrees; the universities do the same but they also grant doctoral degrees. Some mergers have taken place within recent years across the university and UAS sectors; additionally, the UASs have increased their R&I activities, further blurring the divide between the two sectors. Of the universities' core funding, 42 per cent is based on their education outputs, 34 per cent on research outputs, and 24 per cent on strategic tasks and specific national duties. The UAS, in turn, receive most (76 %) of their core funding based on their education outputs, 19 % on the basis of research and development, and 5 % on the basis of strategic tasks. In comparison with other European countries, the Finnish higher education funding system is exceptionally heavily based on competitive and productivity-

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<sup>27</sup> In this number, both students who were registered as "present" and "absent" in semester of Autumn 2021 are included.

based indicators (Seuri & Vartiainen 2018). In addition to core budget funding, both universities and UAS receive external (competitive) funding from various public and private sources.

To generate the data for our study, we interviewed 12 higher education actors. Ten of them came from two different institutions—one university and one university of applied sciences. Two remaining interviewees were national, system-wide actors. All interviews were conducted in November and December 2021. We tailored the interview questions for each interviewee individually, choosing them from questions provided by the coordinators of this report. All interviews were recorded and analysed deductively based on the three wider themes of this report. During the course of the study, we followed the research ethical guidelines of the University of Jyväskylä. Additionally, we used some newspaper articles and opinion pieces to provide some examples of the initiatives and insights regarding research and the pandemic that have taken place in Finland within the recent years.

The chapter is organised as follows: In section 1 we introduce the participants as well as the basic country facts and the timeline of the pandemic in Finland specifically. In section 2 we present the results of our analysis, and finally in section 3 conclude our findings.

## **4.1 Overview of research conducted**

### **4.1.1 List of interviewees**

National system-wide actors	Participant 1: A union representative Participant 2: A representative from the Ministry of Education and Culture	
	<b>Case 1</b>	<b>Case 2</b>
Type of institution	A public, mid-sized multidisciplinary university	A public, large multidisciplinary university of applied sciences
Number of interviews	5	5
Top leadership	Participant 3: Top leadership	Participant 4: Top leadership
Middle leadership	Participant 5: Director position	Participant 6: Director position

Administrative staff	Participant 7: Head position	Participant 8: Head position
Academics	Participant 9: Lecturer	Participant 10: Lecturer
Students	Participant 11: Doctoral researcher	Participant 12: Bachelor student
Other data	Selected pieces of news and other media texts were used in some parts of the report to complement the interviewees' views and to provide examples of the ongoing research and pandemic-related discussion in Finland.	

## 4.2 Country profile

### 4.2.1 Basic facts about Finland

Population (2021)	5,549,599 (Statistics Finland)
Unemployment (2021)	7,7% (statistics Finland)
GDP per capita in PPS (2020)	115 (Eurostat)
COVID-19 caused GDP drop in Q2 2020	-4,5%
Gini (2020)	27,3 (World Bank)
Human Development Index (2019)	0,938 (11) (undp.org)
Government form	Unitary parliamentary republic
Political orientation of the current government	Coalition government: Prime Minister's party Social Democratic Party; with Centre Party, Green League, Left Alliance and Swedish People's Party

### 4.2.2 Characteristics of the Finnish higher education system

Population of students (2021)	312,834 (the Vipunen database)
Tertiary education attainment (2020)	44,7% (OECD; age group: 25-34)
Student-academic staff ratio in tertiary education (2018)	15,3 (Eurostat)
Number of higher education institutions (2022)	38
Public spending on tertiary education as % of GDP (2017)	1,6552% (World Bank)
Fees	See Eurydice Report 2020/2021 (p. 78)
International students (% of total) (2018)	8,1% (OECD)
Main international student origin countries	Russia, Vietnam, China, Nepal, India (degree students; National Board of Education)
Number of Institutions in ARWU 2020 Top500	3



### **4.2.3 The Pandemic in Finland – overview and timeline**

In Finland, COVID-19 cases began spreading rapidly in early March 2020, which began the 1st wave of the pandemic in Finland. The second wave happened around September–November 2020, the third wave in February–April, 2021, and the fourth wave at the turn of 2021 and 2022.

The strictest measures against spreading cases were enacted in Spring 2020, when the Emergency Powers Act was introduced from March 17th 2020 to June 15th, 2020. All large gatherings were forbidden, all schools were in distance mode, and there were extensive travel restrictions. Since then, there has been no renewal of the Emergency Powers Act, but different localised measures were in place, depending on the number of cases. These measures included different types of quarantines and isolation, closing down restaurants, pubs, and other public places, travel restrictions, recommendations regarding social distancing, masks, and hygiene, as well as economic support to businesses. After the first national lockdown in spring 2020, regional authorities have been responsible for setting restrictions. There was also a strong emphasis on testing and tracking, especially at the start of the pandemic.

Regarding universities specifically, most universities have remained in distance mode until the beginning of March 2022, although there has been some in-person teaching as well, especially with the first-year students and in more practical fields, such as health care.

As of February 2022, there were around 582,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and approximately 2,200 COVID-19 deaths in Finland. 86% of the population had received at least two doses of COVID-19 vaccine.

## **4.3 Sustainability of higher education systems**

### **4.3.1 Policy and funding priorities**

The interviewees did not address funding issues to a great extent. This may be due to the Finnish higher education funding system which is heavily based on public funding rather than private income in the form of, for instance, student fees. There was mainly discussion on research and innovation funding, which was considered more important in the pandemic conditions than ever before, considering, for example, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which have been adopted in Finnish higher education institutions. One of the interviewees considered the dual funding model especially problematic, as universities of applied sciences receive significantly less funding than universities, as they are not focused on research.

Even though funding was not discussed as extensively as some other topics, it was pointed out that many of the problems that exist in current academic and teaching work can, in fact, be traced back to the higher education institution funding cuts made in Finland within the past decade (see e.g. Seuri & Vartiainen, 2018). As the pandemic has continued, teaching staff has been stretched very thin because there simply is not enough staff to do all the work. When teachers had to make major adjustments to their teaching, there were no extra resources to accommodate those additional efforts. Teachers had to use their own time, which meant abnormally long working hours for many, for a long period of time:

*One thing which has now clarified, is the lack of funding which has been going on ever since 2008 when educational funding cuts started. There is less and less time for everything because job tasks that used to have someone to do them have now been distributed to different individuals. This kind of a system is very vulnerable, because in a special situation like this people are required to be unreasonably flexible. [...] And the lack of resources affects everything. For example, our UAS has great faculty training opportunities, but no one has time for them. (Participant 10, UAS lecturer, translated from Finnish).*

The union interviewee commented that this highlights the need to rethink teaching load definitions in the future collective agreements. Decreasing resources were also seen

problematic in terms of increasing intake of students by individual institutions, which in turn, means less research as scarce resources have to be directed to teaching.

Only one interviewee mentioned additional COVID-19-related funding for higher education. There is emerging evidence that, in the short term, the financial situation of Finnish higher education institutions has not deteriorated and has, in some cases, actually improved because of extra funding. Several policy measures have increased funding on the short term either in form of additional COVID-19-related funding, or by redirecting existing funding. Examples of these are an extra intake of students and fast-tracked research funding for COVID-19-related research. In addition, the planned austerity measures have been postponed to post-COVID-19 era (Kivistö & Kohtamäki, 2022).

### **4.3.2 Internationalisation**

Already before the pandemic, internationalisation was widely discussed within Finnish higher education, as it has been considered important in terms of competitiveness as well as attracting highly-skilled (general) workforce to the country. Early-career mobility especially has been encouraged: research visits abroad, presenting at international conferences, and attracting international students to study in Finland have all been on the agenda for years. One top-level university interviewee also approached internationalisation from the perspective of competitiveness, finding the lockdowns detrimental to the visibility of Finnish research and recruitment of international (early-career) staff. Another interviewee, on the other hand, considered the Talent Boost programme (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland. n.d) discourse problematic, as well as the fact that while international student integration has typically been seen as solely universities' responsibility, research points to the role of the labour market and the family situations in integration (see Mathies & Karhunen, 2021).

As a result of the pandemic, internationalisation, in its traditional sense of physical mobility stopped almost entirely, which is of course not unique to Finland. In-person conferences switched to online conferences, and research visits abroad were cancelled or postponed. However, some institutions kept sending their students abroad to do exchanges despite the pandemic. In Finland, the situation of international students was considered difficult, as they were forced to stay home and study online, like elsewhere in

the world. According to one interviewee, internationalisation was also left out of political focus for a while. Also new challenges emerged: how to, for example, design degree programmes that need to be launched fully online due to students being abroad? Additionally, the question of prioritising emerged:

*If we think about student mobility, of course we can now think about the possibilities that digitalisation brings to it – how can we implement virtual mobility in a more planned way and what could we do in terms of sustainability that we didn't do before, such as the “green Erasmus”. And of course, the questions of immigration are big, which the pandemic has modified – who should Finland and Finnish higher education prioritise if we only have a specific number of people who can enter during the pandemic. Should it be exchange students and other short-term mobility, degree students, or researchers coming to Finland? In the end, it's a question of what kind of mobility the higher education institutions value the most. (P7, Head position, translated from Finnish).*

Despite many negative effects and challenges, there were also positive effects to ‘everyone going online’. Interviewees also thought that in the future ‘mobility’ might increasingly mean mobility online, both in terms of research visits and conferences. It was argued that mobility requirements (for example in funding applications) should be changed, so that they would also take online mobility into account; this was also presented as an equity goal. It was also brought up that flying around the world to attend a single conference can no longer be ‘the default’, as it is not sustainable.

*I think that during the pandemic we've realised how you can create connections and initiative collaboration without having to travel anywhere. I went to conferences for the first time in 2019 so that there were about 4-5 flights in total. I felt anxious and disgusted – that I had a feeling that I “have to go there” so that I can get that one magical experience, to meet that one person with whom there's a connection. [...] Overall, the idea that we are flying around the world and look for these very rare chances that lead to something, I really want to question that. (P11, Doctoral Researcher, translated from Finnish)*

On the other hand, interviewees agreed that online environments are not as good in terms of networking as offline interactions. Physical mobility was also considered to be particularly important for students doing exchanges—otherwise it would be difficult to get the full experience of doing one.

Regarding international scholars in Finland more generally, there has been vibrant discussion on how to make international students stay after they have obtained their degree. As Mathies and Karhunen (2021) have shown, retention is dependent not only on measures addressed to the students themselves, but also their families and the labour market. Furthermore, if Finnish universities keep becoming more diverse, rethinking needs to be done in terms of work culture and collaboration, as well as universities' language policies:

*And something I've also been interested in [already before the pandemic] is the role of internationalisation in terms of local languages and “Finnish-ness”, and what internationalisation does to our understanding of national languages, their vitality and future, which is not a minor question at all. (P6, Director, translated from Finnish)*

Overall, there has been quite a bit of public media discussion on the language of publishing in Finland, usually including concerns that Finnish is declining as a ‘language of science’, even though there is little research-based evidence that this would be the case (for a critical discussion, see Saarinen 2020). However, increasing use of English in international publishing may be marginalizing the second national language of Finland, Swedish, as well as other languages (on ‘epistemic monolingualism’, see Kuteeva, 2020). Finally, it should be noted that there are also some interesting projects to support multilingual publishing, such as the Helsinki Initiative on Multilingualism in Scholarly Communication set up in 2019.

### **4.3.3 Differences and (in)equalities within the sector**

Looking at the Finnish higher education system as a whole, no differences within system emerged from the interviews, except for the critique towards the dual system from one UAS interviewee and the resulting, unequal funding model, which has not changed as a

result of the pandemic. It was also pointed out that very practical fields (which are typically found in the universities of applied sciences), such as health care and cultural industries, had a more challenging time switching from offline to online teaching, and some of the teaching remained offline altogether. In terms of (in)equalities, there were no general tendencies to be found in the interviews either. However, different groups were mentioned by different individuals: early-career researchers (ECRs), female scholars, older teachers, students, as well as administrators (called ‘other staff’ as opposed to ‘teaching and research staff’).

First, the situation of ECRs and female scholars was considered particularly tricky. For example, ECRs normally have some mobility requirements when applying for funding in Finland<sup>28</sup>, and these requirements might have been difficult or impossible to fulfil during the pandemic. Also, caregiver duties were mentioned as a possible problem for women especially. Another group that was mentioned were teachers at the end of their careers, who might have been teaching offline for perhaps even decades, which is why the sudden transition to online teaching might have been particularly tough on them:

*We have one person in our team who’s about to retire soon, and they said at the start that they feel quite anxious about all this, that they were already quite overwhelmed with work before. But I think they’ve managed to do very well in the end after they first got some help.* (Participant 10, UAS lecturer, translated from Finnish).

Interviewees did report some positive surprises here as well, however. Regarding students, one of the interviewed lecturers argued that switching to online teaching did not *cause* some students struggle and others to thrive but instead *exacerbated* existing differences between students. They also noted that some students who had done poorly with offline presentations before were now doing better online, and vice versa. The challenges of international students were also brought up, as it might have been particularly difficult for them to stay at home without being able to create friendships in a strange country.

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<sup>28</sup> In February 2022, Academy of Finland announced it is planning to change early-career funding models and to remove the mobility requirement altogether. The change is planned to be implemented from autumn 2022.

Finally, the university actors brought up the problems between the two categories of staff in Finnish universities, ‘research and teaching staff’ and ‘other staff’. These groups have different salary systems and working hours, so for example research and teaching staff can work without having to clock in in the morning and when leaving the office, whereas ‘other staff’ has to report their work hours more rigidly. In other words, there has been no similar trust towards these groups in the past. During the pandemic, however, it has become clear that any knowledge worker, whether an administrator or a researcher, can work from home and that people do their work as well as (or better than) they would while sitting in an office from nine to five:

*This has already been the case for academics before, but now also for the rest of the university staff: the trust has increased. Trust towards the fact that people do their job, and they do it well, even though they weren't constantly monitored through an access control system. In fact, usually people do their job better, more efficiently, and with more commitment [when not restricted]. This doesn't just apply to universities. But if I think about the university services, at the beginning [of the pandemic] it was ridiculous when they had to somehow report where they are, what they do, and when. Luckily, this practice was abolished quickly. So, there should be trust towards people doing their work properly. When we give people agency and autonomy, usually it only produces good results. (Participant 10, University Lecturer, translated from Finnish).*

## **4.4 The purposes of higher education institutions in society**

### **4.4.1 Science**

Among the interviewees, universities were considered ‘irreplaceable’ as institutions of knowledge production and innovation and in terms of the competitiveness of the Finnish society in general, even though there was pessimism in relation to current resources. Similarly, the UAS were seen important in their research and development work. The aim

of Finnish higher education institutions was considered to be utilising and producing research knowledge that is needed to develop society, combining pieces of research to be used for development, and connecting research to teaching.

*Its [higher education institutions'] importance is huge. Finnish success can only be based on know-how, it cannot be overestimated, it is completely fundamental for Finnish competitiveness, but whether those goals of share of higher educated population are realistic in this situation, I'm afraid it's another question*  
(Participant 3, University top leadership, translated from Finnish)

Looking at the role of students and early-career researchers specifically, their role was considered to be important in terms of building the research community. As one of the lecturers put it, 'today's students will be my colleagues one day'. ECRs were also considered to have a particularly important role within departments: to provide some new thoughts and questions and question the existing structure and ways of thinking.

However, as two interviewees pointed out, the pandemic might be detrimental to the Finnish research community in the long run when creative chance meetings and connections are hampered by not being physically present at campus as much as pre-pandemic.

*... In 2020 all universities' publishing activities really picked up from the earlier, but if this continues, at least based on what I have talked about with researchers, this will paralyze creativity as there are no contacts [between researchers]*  
(Participant 3, university top leadership, translated from Finnish)

Looking at the media, critical discussions have taken place during the pandemic about the societal role and 'usability' or 'usefulness' of research. While it is difficult to say whether these are COVID-19 related or part of a larger societal debate about the role of research and research knowledge, they still occupied media space for some months in spring 2021. This was at least partly due to the year 2021 having been designated as 'the Year of Research-Based Knowledge'<sup>29</sup> by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Academy

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<sup>29</sup> In Finnish: "Tutkitun tiedon teemavuosi" (Tieto, Tutkittu 2021)



of Finland, and the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies (Tutkitun tiedon teemavuosi 2021). During 2021, the role of research in society was thus present in many public events and activities.

#### **4.4.2 Education**

In addition to their essential role as knowledge producers, the purpose of higher education institutions was also connected to the development of teaching. University teachers were considered as enablers of building knowledge, developers of expertise, educators of highly qualified experts in one's fields, and 'student guides'. Here, it should be pointed out that in Finland, the teaching profession is highly respected (see Sahlberg, 2011 and, for critical discussion, Punakallio & Dervin, 2015), and usually one of the most popular degree programmes for university applicants.

On the one hand, the pandemic was seen as a possibility to finalise the 'digital leap' that had been planned and prepared for some time already before the pandemic. On the other hand, some interviewees stated that the digital leap also made problems with digital pedagogies more visible and accentuated the need to rethink pedagogies, and the related collective agreements on teaching. The union interviewee, for example, mentioned the immediate workload of transitioning to digital teaching, as well as the discrepancies between the old collective agreements' definitions and the new pedagogical demands of what counts as 'teaching hours'.

*I hope we have moved on from the discussions whether teaching is only seen as lecturing in front of a group towards a more multimodal understanding. So, I hope this [situation] has finally woken up the last conservative actors in the field ... so that if we talk about teaching where someone \*gives\* someone something, then maybe we should talk more about learning process, supervision, support. [...]*  
(Participant 1, Union representative, translated from Finnish)

In the spring of 2020, university and UAS entrance exams<sup>30</sup> were arranged in pandemic lockdown conditions on campus, which is why the number of applicants allowed

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<sup>30</sup> In Finland, university and UAS students are selected based on their matriculation examination scores or an entrance exam. See more at: <https://www.studyinfinland.fi/admissions>

physically in the exams needed to be cut in order to avoid physical contact. Consequently, entrance requirements were changed in the middle of the process, as scores given based on the Finnish matriculation examination<sup>31</sup> were given more weight at the expense of the entrance exam scores. This resulted in several complaints to the Parliament Ombudsman, who ruled that the sudden procedure was legal in the exceptional circumstances (EOAK/2628/20020). It should also be noted that such a change towards giving more weight for the matriculation examination over a separate entrance exam had already been discussed before the pandemic.

#### **4.4.3 Labour market**

Considering the issue of labour market and skill needs of the future, the interviewees brought up a variety of issues from the perspective of their own field or position. The interviewees who worked at a university of applied sciences, for example, had noticed an interesting phenomenon which did not exist before the pandemic. There were requests from different businesses regarding whether their employees could participate in different kinds of interdisciplinary projects that were ongoing at the university. Overall, the emphasis on wellbeing was thought to have increased, and questions of how to combine wellbeing and work have been widely discussed in the UAS case institution. The UAS lecturer also contemplated that mastering different online tools will be increasingly important, as well as having different kinds of meta skills, such as dealing with stress and managing one's time.

Looking at the universities and early-career researchers specifically, the doctoral researcher interviewee pointed out that there is still quite a wide-spread image in Finnish society of doctorate holders being highly theoretically oriented and 'not knowing anything about practice' – researchers being people who sit alone in their offices thinking about grand theories. Indeed, there has been some evidence that having a doctoral degree is at least *perceived* to be a hindrance in job searches (see Rantala, 2010), especially for those graduated from STEM fields. However, there is no recent research-based evidence on how the situation is today.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.ylioppilastutkinto.fi/en/>

#### **4.4.4 Relations with society**

Higher education institutions were considered to have a strong societal relevance by the interviewees, the argument being that because they are funded by taxes, the larger society has right to expect relevant activities. However, especially for the university of applied sciences, their main purpose was questioned due to them being public limited companies by one of the interviewees: is it to make profit or is the social responsibility more important? The first was considered problematic in terms of higher education's civic role. In a wider perspective, the potential polarization of the society as a consequence of the pandemic and other crises was seen as a potential threat, and the role of cooperative activities between higher education institutions and the larger society important:

*The ethos of collaborative development fits well the profile of a UAS, as we don't do basic research like, I mean we do also have researchers, but not like at universities, so I think it is important that we can do things together [with other actors in the society] [...] and of course it is scary that if the society starts to close up more, and people start envisioning more threats, that this polarization, the existence of extreme phenomena in society strengthens... (participant 4, UAS top leadership, translated from Finnish)*

Looking at public discussion of research, in recent months there were some social media attacks directed towards researchers, based on the publicised funding decisions by the Academy of Finland. Picking on individual titles of projects (in particular on controversial or highly theoretical topics on humanities and social sciences), some publicly argued that a specific kind of research is 'useless' and 'not worth funding'. This, in turn, raised a counter movement #MinaTutkin (#IDoResearch) on Twitter, where Finnish researchers shared their research topics publicly (see Thornton, 2021). However, as one interviewee phrased:

*It probably depends who you ask, but I'd still like to think that despite of these somewhat colourful conversations which have been going on in the public within recent years, despite of them, high quality education and high education level which is based on research is still appreciated. Yes, we've had funding cuts, but I think the entire idea of Finland, or some kind of a "country brand" that most*

*people on the street would probably confirm is the fact that Finland is known to have a good education system. However, I do acknowledge that there are those who disagree, and their voices are probably louder now thanks to social media.*  
(P7, Head position, translated from Finnish).

Another example of a heightened awareness of the research/society relationship are the Council of State COVID-19 reviews<sup>32</sup>. The Prime Minister's Office provides reviews and meta-analyses of COVID-19 related research every three months for the use of decision makers.

## **4.5 The workings of higher education institutions**

### **4.5.1 Distance and online education**

In Finland, there was a rather rapid switch to online education. The 'digital leap', which was also mentioned earlier in the report, had been discussed for a long time. There was a lot of expertise and interest in digital learning, but in March 2020 the entire higher education sector was forced to take this leap. The skill level with online education and appropriate tools varied extensively between teachers: some had existing experience with online teaching, Zoom, or Teams, whereas others had none. In some fields, the switch to online teaching was also a lot more challenging than in others (e.g. medicine and health care).

Despite these differences, it was agreed by the participants that the transition to online teaching was somewhat smooth, and teachers and administrators worked hard to make everything work.

There were several issues which contributed to the smooth transition: existing infrastructure (the internet connections being good almost in the entire country); the positive attitudes of Finnish teachers (and students) towards digitalisation in general. One interviewee suspected that the 'Nokia heritage' might have something to do with such attitudes:

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<sup>32</sup> <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/tietoa-koronaviruksesta/tutkimuskatsaukset>

*Well, if we think about this from a wider perspective, I think what we can see here is the high educational level of the Finnish society, independent of the field. Even though there is inequality – maybe more now than before – everyone has access to higher education, especially if you compare to other countries. Then, if you think about the Finnish industry and what is exported, I wonder what the significance of technology industries is, maybe it plays a role. For example, my generation entered work life during a time when Nokia was strong, when the Internet came, when email came, so I wonder if all that has played a role, compared to societies where this kind of level of education and acquisition of skills is not available for everyone. (P9, University lecturer, translated from Finnish).*

Another reason that some interviewees suspected to be behind the ‘smoothness’ were – perhaps quite stereotypical – characteristics that are usually attached to Finns: them being introverts more often than extroverts (which makes staying at home quite nice); the Finnish *sisu* (persistence, grit) and the ‘Winter war’ mentality (referring to the 1939-1940 war between Finland and the Soviet Union), meaning that people will manage whatever difficult situation as long as they stick together and work hard towards the end goal. This, however, was not considered only a positive issue:

*What the pandemic has shown about Finnish higher education, or about Finnish work life in general, perhaps also in a bad way, is the Finnish persistence, that things will get done no matter what. On the one hand, Finns can be proud of that. On the other hand, this led to completely inhumane workdays which probably wouldn't have happened if we had kept working offline. So, if you have meetings one after the other, there are no breaks and you just stare at a screen all day, and everyone is saying that this makes no sense, but no one did anything about it. It just kept going. I personally connect this to Finnish work ethics, that “let's be the working heroes”, “I will manage even though my neck hurts and I cannot even see anything anymore, I can still do the final meeting”. [...] And this is a collective illusion that we somehow created together. (P6, Director, translated from Finnish).*

Examining the early months of COVID-19, the first spring of the pandemic was considered quite difficult but successful, considering the circumstances. The interviewed lecturers and students reported that almost no classes were cancelled in the case institutions in the end, for example. In fact, distance work, learning, and teaching were considered as an acceptable alternative to offline work, except for people who had children who stayed at home during the first spring of the pandemic. Generally, the case higher education institutions have offered quite a bit of support for IT challenges, even though IT services have also been stretched thin in terms of resources. Teachers also relied on peer support, and eventually they managed to make things work through trial and error.

There was also quite a lot of discussion on different online teaching tools in the case study higher education institutions, and in most places, they ended up being either Zoom or Teams. Also asynchronous tools, such as Moodle and university Intranet were used, as they had been used before the pandemic as well. Questions of data protection were also widely discussed in both case study institutions:

*There was a lot of shared discussion on what online platforms there are available, so it was mapped out, what do we know about them, how people's experiences on them are. Zoom was a potential option from the very beginning, so it was decided quite soon, and it also was then recommended by the university, also because it was considered to be safe from the data protection viewpoint. And then Teams came as a 2<sup>nd</sup> option later. Then there was also discussion what these platforms mean for research: How can one store data in a safe way, who has the right to access different things, when should we use the university network and so on. And there was discussion happening on all levels: departmental, faculty, and university-level. (P9, University Lecturer, translated from Finnish)*

Based on the interviews of the students and lecturers, for some undergraduate students online learning seemed to work even better than offline learning. Some challenges also emerged, however. Especially in degree programmes where group work played a big role, online work was sometimes difficult to carry out:

*Well, our programme is very group work heavy, and for that I don't think online mode is the best, because you do need this kind of contact and support by your peers, and that's more difficult to do online. During spring 2020 there was some kind of group work in every course. If there were days with lectures only, then online was ok but with group work it didn't work as well. (P12, Bachelor student, translate from Finnish).*

For postgraduate students, in turn, everyone being online created more equality, as online participation options were quite limited before the pandemic. Generally, the interviewees hoped that in the future it would be possible to organise meetings, webinars, and other small events online, rather than offline. Hybrid options were also viewed positively, though it was acknowledged that they cause extra work for the teacher, as well as extra IT resources.

Regarding the future, there were some questions raised regarding the online/offline distinction: lecturers hoped that the lessons that have been learned from the online experiences would make people question in the future whether 'offline is always better', because it might not be. Therefore, teachers should carefully consider the format of teaching, and collective agreements should allow for a versatile understanding of teaching.

#### **4.5.2 Work of academics and support staff**

Prolonged distance work was suspected to have an effect on research creativity in unexpected ways. For example, one interviewee was asking what is going to happen with data collection, research ideas, and brainstorming, if researchers keep working from home. It was also asked what kind of skills 'distance leaders' (heads of departments, deans, rectors, etc.) will need in the future. Furthermore, more cooperation between universities was suggested.

Overall, many interviewees stated that the way they were now working was not sustainable in the long run: having several zoom meetings per day without breaks was perceived as too much for them, even though many also said that they enjoyed the fact that they could now flexibly choose when and where to work:

*I've been commuting for years now and have many commuter friends, so we've been discussing that employers seem to have a very different approach to distance work. I've never even thought I have to apply for a special permission to do distance work because it's been going smoothly for so many years. My former supervisor told me that they don't care where I do my work as long as the work gets done. Rather than working less from home, I'd say that there's actually a risk of working too much. I work better when there's no distraction. We no longer have our own offices at campus, just large open spaces. I enjoy going to campus every now and then, to meet colleagues and students, but it depends on the individual. So I hope that individual needs and preferences would be taken into account when thinking about knowledge work. (Participant 10, UAS lecturer, translated from Finnish).*

The previously unequal access to distance work was also a topic in some interviews. Academic (teaching and research) staff has had more flexibility in choosing to work from home or outside the university premises than support staff, and this has also been interpreted as a question of trust, as was pointed out in Section 2.1.3 as well. Now, more equal practises exist for this.

### **4.5.3 Duty of care**

While many other interview themes and questions produced a variety of responses among the interviewees, one concern was shared by everyone: the prolonged pandemic has taken its toll on academics everywhere in terms of wellbeing and mental health, even though some had coped better than others, and even published more than pre-pandemic (for global figures, see Else, 2020).

Case higher education institutions and individual academics responded to wellbeing challenges in various ways. Institutions sent surveys to their students and staff, asking about wellbeing related issues. The institutions also organised different kinds of virtual events and, in the case university, remembered their staff with a Christmas meal that was home-delivered, for example. In the case UAS, all students were contacted either by phone, SMS, or email – a gesture appreciated widely by the students. Generally, it was



thought that the institutions did ‘the best they could’ given the challenging circumstances, but there was also a feeling that, in retrospect, total lockdowns may have been detrimental to the wellbeing of students and staff:

*The idea [of gathering information about pandemic experiences] probably was that if something similar takes place again, and we think about student wellbeing, which correlates with their study outputs and study success, what could we learn from this? Was a total lockdown a reasonable solution in the end? (Participant 4, UAS top leadership, translated from Finnish).*

What had helped many participants were different venues of peer support – sharing good practices with colleagues, going on ‘socially-distanced walks’, and making sure everyone was doing fine. One lecturer also pointed out that small degree programmes with fewer students were a blessing, as the teachers were already quite close with the students and were able to make sure everyone was doing well and not getting lost, even though they did not meet on campus regularly anymore. In a sense, focusing on wellbeing was also not necessarily a new type of thinking, as some higher education institutions had already adopted wellbeing as part of their strategy before the pandemic. However, during the pandemic it got a new, strengthened meaning.

Regarding doctoral supervision, the doctoral researcher interviewee thought that it would be good if supervision also included an affective aspect instead of supervision focusing solely on thesis writing and work-related matters. Community-building at the early stages of one’s doctoral journey was considered important as well, as no one automatically knows how to do a PhD or what it entails when they enter a PhD programme (see also Aarnikoivu, 2020). Furthermore, different kinds of communities might prove invaluable during crises like COVID-19 (Brankovic & Aarnikoivu, 2021).

#### **4.5.4 Governance and decision making**

Generally, the interviewees seemed satisfied with the governance and decision-making related to higher education during the pandemic, although some said that in retrospect,

the need for halting all physical campus activities in spring 2020 might have been exaggerated.

However, decisions were made quickly: Universities, the UASs, and their national umbrella associations Unifi (Unifi, n.d.) and Arene (Arene, n.d.) quickly set up working groups, working on different pandemic scenarios and the required activities for different scenarios.

*Nationally, I think that the state actors, the government have succeeded relatively well [...] looking at higher education institutions, we've had close dialogue with the Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, this strategic level corona crisis management in higher education has worked pretty well, there have been Unifi and Arene involved as well [...] And this corona scenario group, set up at Unifi, has meant that all universities have together prepared pandemic scenarios, how it develops and what its effects on universities, and also coordinated and made policies about restrictions. And locally we have also worked in close cooperation with [local UAS and vocational institute] (participant 5, university director position, translated from Finnish).*

The interviewees agreed that organisational communication during COVID-19 has been sufficient and as good as it could have been:

*Well, considering that no one really knew much anything at the start, as there was not a lot of research that had been done, I understand that citizens or teachers were quite nervous because there were no clear instructions. And then when summer and early fall 2020 started looking fine but then the situation got worse, I understand that people became a bit impatient. But I think [the decision-makers] have tried to stay on top of things the entire time and react accordingly. The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare also started to have areas of expertise in their communication, so there was someone specialising in higher education institutions, for example. I would definitely assess the overall performance of decision-makers good, no special criticism. (P6, Director, translated from Finnish).*

One interviewee did, however, criticise the siloed structure of decision-making, whereas another one commended the authorities for quickly setting up a network of information and ‘situation rooms’.

Overall, Finnish higher education institutions developed more local solutions to handling the pandemic. It seems, however, that most of the responses for the pandemic were ad hoc, as there were no pre-existing systems to respond to a crisis such as this. It seems that, ideally, these practises will form the basis for future scenarios; one interviewee who had been involved on national level crisis management was confident of this.

## **4.6 Conclusion and suggestions for future practice**

Above we have presented the results of our analysis of twelve interviews by actors in or related to Finnish higher education institutions. The results were divided into three distinct themes: Sustainability of higher education systems; The purposes of higher education institutions in society; and the workings of higher education institutions.

Looking at all themes together, it could be summarised that from a technological as well as decision-making viewpoint, Finnish higher education institutions managed to tackle the pandemic fairly well. The existing infrastructure and the ‘digitally-oriented’ mindset of Finnish higher education institution actors ensured that the rapid transition to almost 100% online teaching and research went as smoothly as it could have gone in the challenging circumstances. The digital leap, which had been prepared already before the pandemic, also opened up new possibilities for collaboration, both within Finland and internationally.

However, the smooth transition also came with a price: despite the support by institutions, colleagues, and peers, there were not enough financial resources to accommodate all the new needs that the changed situation required. As a result, this lack of resources meant that higher education actors had to work longer days and generally be more flexible and innovative than ever before. Although some interviewees pointed out that working from home suits them very well, they also acknowledged that sitting in one place the entire

day, having zoom meetings one after the other without proper breaks is not something one can do for a very long period of time.

As to the crisis management and institutional activities, the interviewees estimated that the practices and networks created during the first 1–2 years of the pandemic would build way for structures for crisis management in similar future situations. Unexpectedly, the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022 activated new crisis management activities in both universities and UAS, starting with the termination of institutional co-operation with Russia. In our case university, for instance, the group responsible for COVID-19 continued as the steering group for exceptional situations, continuing its work not only on the pandemic but also war and conflict related measures.

Based on the results, we recommend Finnish higher education institutions to keep exploring different types of opportunities for research and teaching either fully online or in a hybrid mode. We would also like to encourage all higher education actors and research funders to critically examine what ‘internationalisation of higher education’ can mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – does it have to be people physically moving from one place to another, or could it be also something else? Finally, we would like all higher education institutions to keep developing initiatives around staff and student mental health and wellbeing.

The limitations of the study include the small number of interviews, as well as the inclusion of only one university and one university of applied sciences. Furthermore, the pre-set interview questions as well as the deductive nature of our qualitative analysis might have left out some interesting insights.

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