

SUMMARY

Arto Nevala

GROWTH, FRAGMENTATION AND INEQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN FINLAND

Research task

Finnish higher education has in the decades since the Second World War undergone the greatest changes in its history. The number of university students was in the mid-1990s over ten times greater than it was in the late 1940s and the number of new students has more than quadrupled. In addition, higher education has expanded regionally to cover the entire country and the number of institutions of higher learning is today 20.

The basic features of the changes which have occurred in Finnish higher education during the post-war decades can be described in terms of two concepts: growth and specialization. I examine the growth and specialization of higher education from four perspectives. The **first** of these is an explanation of the type of higher education policy employed in Finland since the war; how higher education policy has been transformed from a situation dominated by a single concentrated center, the University of Helsinki, into an internally differentiated balanced entity. The **second** perspective is an analysis of the streams of students. I clarify how student streams into higher education have changed by volume, language and gender distribution as well as in respect to the size of institutions and faculties. The **third** perspective describes the way in which the regional and socio-economic background of the entrants to higher education and their numbers have changed. The **fourth** perspective is comprised of an analysis of the different higher education practices of various regions and a clarification of the backgrounds of different faculties and university students. Finally, I briefly describe the main aspects of change which have occurred in the post-war decades.

The principal source material is comprised of background information concerning university students collected at five-year intervals. This concerns individuals who began their studies from 1945 until 1995 and includes data such as their institution, faculty, gender, place of birth and socio-economic status of their parents. Furthermore, published university statistics, census information, parliamentary records, university development plans, the press and literature have been used as sources for the study.

Lines of development of higher education policy

Finnish higher education was from the 17th through the beginning of the 20th century an autonomous and introverted institution which was in no way affected by changes in society. The crumbling of the estate society in the latter half of the 19th century, however, altered society and the operational conditions of the university in such a way that even the highest form of education began - though extremely slowly - to change. The development of Finnish higher education in this century is based on strong distinctive national features, but, on the other hand, many of the same winds of change that blow in other Western countries are evident here as well.

The basic character of higher education at the turn of this century could be described as stiff and clannish; higher education set its own goals independently on "academic" grounds. Its social connections or its responsibility for the development of society were still at that time minimal. Still, higher education was given significant social weight. Above all, this led to the conspicuous role of many university professors in Finnish political life, rather than the social influence of higher education itself.

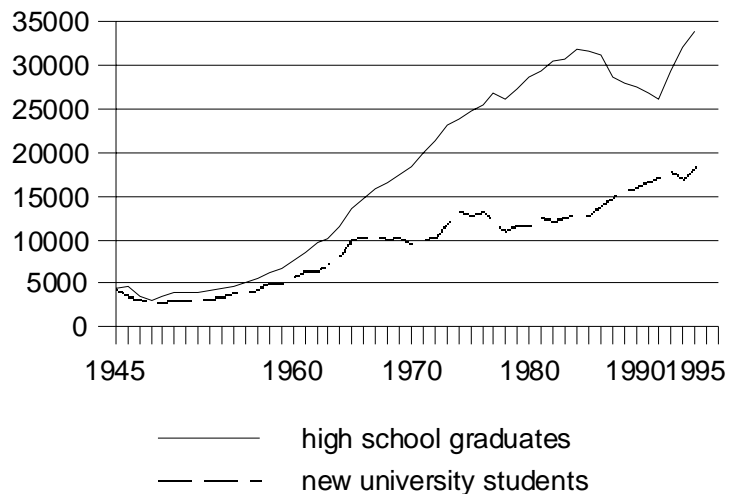
After the Second World War, as was the case in many Western European countries, Finland was forced to adapt to the arrival of the baby-boomers in the educational markets. This resulted in the quantitative and regional expansion of higher education as well as the creation of a modern, state-directed and legislated policy governing higher education. Higher education then became a significant factor in the establishment and solidification of the welfare state. Higher education achieved even greater importance in the development of society. On the other hand, as a result of a strong belief in education and educational reform - the possibility of the educational sector to participate in setting the goals of social policy was greater than had previously been the case.

A new content has been given to higher education policy since the late 1980s through the emphasis placed, for example, on the goals of internationalization, cost efficiency and specialization. Higher education is bound even more clearly to the expansion of economic growth and the achievement of the socio-political objectives related to it. The influence of the educational sector itself on the setting of goals in society has in fact been reduced with the increased power of economic policy. Finland shifted into this latest phase - let us call it the period of rapid rhythmic cost efficiency - in the early 1990s, later than most Western European countries. Characteristic of this period is the subjection of higher education to the objectives of economic and social policy. The decision-making power of higher education and along with it the entire educational sector has been reduced and its operations have had to be redefined within the contracting framework of the public economy.

Student streams

The streams of students into higher education have changed thoroughly since the Second World War. The change can be categorized briefly in three important ways. First, student streams into higher education have multiplied in the course of five decades. Second, the number of university students has increased dramatically in the decades since the war. Finally, the growth of persons qualified, that is high school graduates, to enter higher education has been even more rapid, as is evident in Figure 1.

Figure 1. New high school graduates and new university students in Finland, 1945–1995.



In comparison to the population the number of university students in Finland in the 1990s was almost eight times as great as it was in the mid-1940s. As a result of the increase in student admissions the accessibility of higher education increased. The number of formally qualified, that is high school graduates, increased at a still more rapid pace. In consequence, since the early 1970s there has been a glut of high school graduates and their chances of being admitted to institutions of higher learning have diminished. It has not been possible to resolve the problem completely since the percentage of high school graduates in the age cohort has only increased. In any case, the glut of high school graduates clearly reflects the two most important changes in education: the massive rise in the level of basic education typical to the age cohort and the inflation of diplomas, particularly high school diplomas.

A second dominating feature has been the equalization of the language and gender distribution of students. At the beginning of this century higher education was still clearly the preserve of men and the Swedish-speaking population. The situation began to change before Finnish independence (1918), but the changes have only stabilized since the Second World War. Swedish native-speakers are still over-represented among university students in respect to their share of the population. They are also very strongly represented in such socially high status fields as business administration. Women became the majority of university students in the 1950s and in later years have only strengthened their position. Female students compose the majority in almost all academic disciplines; in the field of technology, however, the proportion of women students is less than one-fifth.

The third visible change in the student streams has been the equalization and stabilization of different institutions and faculties. After the Second World War, in the 1950s, the overwhelmingly largest stream of students still flowed to the University of Helsinki and other institutions in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Following the regional expansion of higher education the streams of students were redirected to cover all of Finland. The surrounding regions served as important recruitment areas for each university, and a large segment of their student bodies came from these areas. Subsequently, in the 1990s, the significance of the universities in the Helsinki metropolitan area again grew, but the largest percentage of students from each province still apply to the nearest university.

The differences between disciplines in respect to student numbers have not varied greatly since the mid-1960s. At that time the modern higher education policy that was implemented was specifically directed towards the regulation and direction of student streams, and the intake of students into academic disciplines and institutions of higher learning could thus be controlled. The most important change in the relative strengths of various disciplines was the introduction of training for class teachers (primary schools) at universities in the 1970s, which led to the expansion of the pedagogical sciences. The popularity of this discipline specifically reduced the number of applicants to humanistic fields since for the most part both were offered at the same universities and they recruited their students largely from the same socio-economic groups.

Student background and participation in higher education

Disparities in the regional background of university students in Finland have almost disappeared over the course of the entire post-war period. Educational equality has thus been enhanced. The conditions for this development can be found in the dramatic and simultaneous expansion of secondary and higher education. The regional expansion of higher education in particular served the peripheral areas of the nation, where there had previously been fewer applicants to universities. Consequently, in the 1980s, most of the new university students

(proportionally) came from the regions of eastern and northern Finland. These areas subsequently lost ground and the proportion of new university students from the Helsinki metropolitan area rose.

Despite the equalization of regional educational differences, the most conspicuous university recruitment areas are still the (former) provinces of Uusimaa, Turku and Pori and Häme. Over half of the students admitted to universities in 1995 came from these areas. In respect to the population, most of those admitted in 1995 were from Uusimaa, although the differences between provinces were small. The reduction of regional educational disparities has been affected by migration, and as a result the number of young people in eastern and northern Finland, in particular, has drastically decreased since the 1960s.

New students whose parents are supervisory office personnel and entrepreneurs have continuously been over-represented in respect to their share of the population. Their over-representation has, however, decreased, as the table below indicates. A figure greater than 1 in the table shows an over-representation of the socio-economic group in regard to the parents of the new students; a figure less than 1 represents an under-representation.

TABLE 1. Participation of children from different socio-economic groups in higher education in Finland, 1960–1995.

	1960	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
supervisory office personnel and entrepreneurs	3.20	2.20	2.45	2.52	2.31	1.86	1.93
lower-level office workers	1.51	1.52	0.96	0.85	0.78	0.63	0.56
working class	0.51	0.51	0.57	0.55	0.51	0.50	0.53
agricultural	0.51	0.80	0.87	0.92	0.85	0.87	0.96
other (pensioners, unemployed, etc.)	0.00	1.29	0.83	0.83	1.00	1.30	1.06

Although the differences between different groups in their participation in higher education have been reduced in Finland following the Second World War, but they have by no means disappeared. In the 1990s the children of supervisory office personnel and entrepreneurs still enter higher education at a rate about four times as great as those of the working class. The participation of children of supervisory office personnel and entrepreneurs has, however, diminished throughout the entire period. The most rapid reduction has occurred since the end of the 1980s. This can largely be explained by the change in the demographic structure: in the 1990s there were more than twice as many people in the office personnel-entrepreneur class as compared to the population in the early 1970s. Despite the reduced participation of the supervisory office personnel and entrepreneur group, it is still impossible to conclude that social inequality has

substantially decreased. For example, the children of the working class were enrolled at universities in about the same numbers as in the 1970s. The group comprised of children of pensioners, the unemployed and the like has increased its share of university enrollments. In part this is also explicable in terms of the change in the demographic structure, since the number of pensioners has grown dramatically. The regional expansion and quantitative growth of higher education together with the increased percentage of office personnel in the population has therefore reduced the disparities in enrollment between social groups though social background is still, however, a significant factor in selection to higher education.

A comparison of educational equality between Finland and other countries is made difficult by classifications and differences in educational systems. Yet, a comparison between lines of development indicates that socio-economic equality has been realized to a higher degree in Finnish higher education than the Western average. The degree of socio-economic equality in education is for the most part the same in Finland as in Sweden. Sweden, in turn, is seen to be in the vanguard of those countries which have brought about equality in education. It must, however, be remembered that educational equality in Finland has not - any more than in other countries - been realized, but the upper social groups are proportionately over-represented at all stages of education. This over-representation is, however, in Finland lower than in most other countries.

Regionally specialized higher education

As a result of the quantitative and regional expansion of higher education, the various parts of Finland have developed differently from one another. They differ from each other chiefly in respect to higher educational supply. On the whole, this has of course evened out and diversified since the war. The supply cannot be considered to be in balance since in the mid-1990s approximately one-third of all university places were still in the Helsinki metropolitan area, although only about one-fourth of people of university age lived in the region. In addition, it is significant that in the socially most esteemed disciplines - for instance, medicine, business administration, law, and technology - the largest number of university places are found in the southern and southwestern parts of the country. Training in the pedagogic and humanistic fields, in turn, is for the most part concentrated in central and northern Finland.

Secondly, the placement of students in academic disciplines varies in different sections of the country. In part these differences can be explained by the previously-noted supply of higher education places, as the nearest university is the most important recruiter in almost every province. In any case, students coming from the Helsinki metropolitan area, southwestern Finland and Häme are placed in the most respected "elite" fields such as technology, law and business administration than those from other parts of Finland. An exceptional number of students from eastern and northern Finland, in turn, begin their studies in

humanistic fields or in pedagogy.

Thirdly, students from different parts of the country admitted to the universities differ from one another in socio-economic background. The over-representation of those from the supervisory office personnel and entrepreneur group is greatest in Uusimaa and also pronounced in the provinces of Turku and Pori, Oulu and Central Finland. Correspondingly, in Mikkeli, North Karelia, Kuopio, Vaasa and Lapland the children of pensioners, the unemployed and the like appear in great numbers in comparison with the national level. In the latter provinces, too, the children of supervisory office personnel and entrepreneurs occupy the most seats at universities, but their over-representation is not as great as it is elsewhere. Educational equality has been realized most in the nation's peripheral areas and least in its south and southwestern parts.

The socio-economic background of new university students generally follows the socio-economic structure of the nation as a whole; the children of supervisory office personnel and entrepreneurs are in fact over-represented in regard to their share of the population. The increase in the proportion of this group is in part a result of the change in the demographic structure. The number of people belonging to this group in the 1990s is simply many times what it was in the 1960s. Quantitatively, the supervisory office personnel and entrepreneur class, which has doubled in size, has in the end benefitted most from the increase in available university places.

Internally specialized higher educational system

Throughout the entire post-Second World War period, but in particular since the early 1980s, the Finnish system of higher education has specialized internally. As a result of this development the universities and faculties recruited in the 1990s students from regionally and socio-economically diverse backgrounds. In respect to regional recruitment the change occurring during this period took place in two stages. The "old" universities established prior to the war initially recruited their students evenly from among the different parts of the country. Following the regional expansion of higher education the recruitment area of the "old" institutions narrowed and concentrated even more on the region they were situated in. The "new" universities established after the Second World War, in turn, have constantly recruited their students evenly from all over Finland. The percentage of students from the areas surrounding these institutions was not as great as at the "old" universities. It must, however, be remembered that the "old" universities are situated in the areas with the largest population, especially the Helsinki metropolitan area.

The social background of students at different universities differs primarily in the fact those specialized institutions representing a single academic discipline recruit their students from a narrower area and more among the children of supervisory office personnel and entrepreneurs than the multidisciplinary general universities. On the other hand, the institutions in the Helsinki

metropolitan area reflect the socio-economic structure of the surrounding region with particular clarity, since the children of supervisory office personnel and entrepreneurs are very strongly represented.

Examined by faculty, students in the socially esteemed elite fields – medicine, business administration, law and technology – are plainly more often products of supervisory office personnel and entrepreneur families. Students of pedagogy, in turn, epitomize the other extreme: their regional background is broad and their parents are relatively evenly distributed among diverse socio-economic groups. For example, in 1995 more than one-third of students of pedagogy came from the group of pensioners and the unemployed and only 29% from supervisory office personnel and entrepreneur families; this latter group, however, produced half of the new students admitted to study business administration. The “elite university” has thus hidden itself inside the Finnish higher education system.

From the armpit of the welfare state to differentiated higher education

The development and expansion of Finnish higher education in the post-Second World War era was strongly related to the establishment of the welfare state. Broadly examined, the boom in higher education and the “good years” paralleled the 1960s and 1970s, the decades in which the Finnish welfare state was established and developed. The distinctive features in the establishment of the welfare state are also evident in the changes in higher education. Higher education was founded on a “large system” involving the masses, and Finland at that time shifted into a period of so-called mass higher education. According to Martin Trow’s well-known definition, mass higher education exists when more than 15% of the age cohort enters higher education. In Finland this level was achieved in the early 1970s.

Educational optimism, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s, expressed an ardent belief in the power of education to change society. In many respects this led to disillusionment in Finland: educational equality progressed more slowly than anticipated, improved educational opportunity chiefly benefitted the children of the well-to-do and inequality was deeply imbedded in the social structures, beyond the reach of educational policy. However, the growth of higher education and the major reforms had positive consequences: higher education was brought to new locations, the size of the educated population increased in the nation’s peripheral areas, and the growth of regional centers spurred by the universities accelerated. Measured internationally, the regional and social equality of university students is also based on the “great leap” of higher education. Higher education at that time was in the vanguard of societal renewal.

The importance of higher education as a pioneer of social policy declined, however, in the 1980s. In the following decade higher education has had to accept a complete turn-around based on the new conditions of society: the main policy decisions in higher education were carried out under the constraints of

economic policy and the focal points of development were set to support economic growth and Finland's competitive position internationally. As a result, no ambitious politician is interested in promoting the idea of equality in higher education.