

# AUDIT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

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## 1.1 The planning of education

### - HEI's self-assessment

#### Strategic guidelines steer the planning of education

The education offered by the University of Helsinki (UH) is based on national and university-level strategic guidelines.

The structure, content and organisation of education are based on the Universities Act, the Government Decree on University Degrees and Professional Specialisation Programmes, and other national regulations. The scope of studies at the UH adheres to the ECTS credit system. The UH has defined shared guidelines for the content, structure and organisation of education. These guidelines are based on the 'Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules (FiNQF)', according to which bachelor's (first-cycle) degrees correspond with FiNQF level 6, master's (second-cycle) degrees with FiNQF level 7 and doctoral (third-cycle) degrees with FiNQF level 8.

Education leading to first-, second- and third-cycle degrees is provided in degree programmes. The rector decides on the establishment and termination of degree programmes. Degree programmes are established in the research fields represented at the UH, and the education they provide is based on research. The UH adheres to the principle that all teachers engage in research and all researchers engage in teaching.

#### Management of education and concern for the sufficiency of resources

The UH has defined a clear division of responsibilities in the management and leadership, decision-making, and quality management of education.

To manage degree programme operations, each bachelor's, master's and doctoral programme has a director and a steering group, which includes, in addition to the director, representatives of students and the teaching and research staff. The degree programme steering groups make proposals on the curricula, student intake, admission criteria and degree targets, and decide on the teaching programme. Degree programme directors are in charge of the programme operations, curriculum preparation and pedagogical planning of teaching.

At the faculty level, the framework of degree programmes is coordinated by the vice-dean, while resources are the remit of the dean. Decisions of central importance to education are made by the faculty council.

Each doctoral programme belongs to one of the four University of Helsinki [doctoral schools](#), which coordinate the resources, activities and development of the programmes. Each doctoral school has a director and a steering group. The UH is aware of the need to simplify the structure of the doctoral education system and has launched preparations to this end.

The rector, vice-rectors and the University Board make education-related decisions at the university level. The Academic Affairs Council and the steering group for doctoral education are responsible for preparing, implementing and monitoring university-level strategic guidelines.

Operating under the vice-rector for academic affairs, the Academic Affairs Council includes the vice-deans for academic affairs, student representatives, the director of the [Centre for University Teaching and Learning](#), the director of the [Language Centre](#), the director of the Teaching and Learning Services sector and the university's chief digitalisation officer. The Academic Affairs Council and the steering group for doctoral education are together responsible for guidelines concerning doctoral education. Operating under the vice-rector for research, the steering group for doctoral education is composed of the directors of doctoral schools and representatives of doctoral students.

Teaching is a collaborative effort among the teaching staff: the work of each teacher is connected to the work of other teachers and to the entity constituted by the degree programme. Each teacher drafts an annual work plan that is agreed with their supervisor; however, the related practices vary from faculty to faculty and from unit to unit. The use of work plans in the planning of programme-specific teaching resources must be enhanced.

While the directors and steering groups carry much responsibility for the operations of degree programmes, their opportunities to influence the distribution of duties among the teaching staff and to recruit new teaching staff must be increased. The degree programme directors are especially concerned about the adequacy of teaching resources.

## Learning outcomes highlighted in curriculum design

The degree programmes draft their curricula according to shared principles, structures and timetables. The three-year degree programme curricula are devised in accordance with instructions based on the ESG standards.

Curricula define learning outcomes as well as methods of assessment and completion and describe the skills and expert identity of graduates from the degree programmes. The descriptions of learning outcomes draw on a skills map confirmed by the Academic Affairs Council.

Curriculum design focuses on the learning outcomes and their constructive alignment with pedagogical principles as well as the monitoring of their successful achievement. Learning assessment methods play a crucial role in the monitoring of the achievement of learning outcomes. In the planning of curricula, attention is paid to study paths, workloads and the smooth progress of students to ensure that they will be able to graduate within the target duration of studies. Moreover, consideration is given to the development of career skills, including generic skills, the professional relevance of studies, competence demands set by the labour market and the need for continuous learning.

At the curriculum design stage, the degree programmes agree on teaching resources with the relevant faculty. In joint programmes, teaching resources are agreed with the partner faculties.

In preparing their curricula, degree programmes take into account development needs identified in annual follow-up and make use of feedback obtained from students and employers as well as feedback collected on teaching. Faculties may have field-specific stakeholders who provide feedback to be used in curriculum design and who are informed about significant changes to the curriculum.

The degree programme steering groups decide on the implementation of the programme-specific teaching programmes, which are drafted for one or several years at a time. The teaching programmes list the teaching period, the methods of teaching and completion, and the teacher of each course. The teaching programme is supplemented by the teaching timetable, which provides the dates, times and places of teaching.

Despite university-wide guidelines, there are differences in the curriculum structures and descriptions between faculties and degree programmes. There is a need for a digital tool for curriculum design, and the UH has launched preparations to acquire such a tool. The aim is that the curricula will be described and published digitally on the [Instructions for Students](#) and [Instructions for Teaching](#) websites. As the curricula are currently not sufficiently accessible, efforts must be made to improve the situation.

Previously, continuous learning needs have featured in the curricula of degree programmes to a varying degree. The UH is currently enhancing practices related to continuous learning and, in the future, different forms of continuous learning will have an increasingly strong presence in the programme-specific curricula. Besides organising traditional [Open University](#) courses, the UH offers introductory courses in various fields to general upper secondary school students, multidisciplinary theme modules to professionals in a number of fields as well as massive open online courses (MOOCs).

## **Strengths**

## **Enhancement areas**

Uniform structure of education and university-wide guidelines for degree programmes and curriculum design	Programme-specific teaching resources on the basis of the work plans of teaching and research staff to be planned; the needs of teaching in the recruitment of teaching and research staff to be considered
Management of degree programmes and activities of steering groups	Instruction offered in Swedish and Swedish-language degrees to be planned, resources to be ensured for these
Increasingly multidisciplinary degree programmes on all degree levels	Visibility and accessibility of learning outcomes and curricula; assessment of their successful achievement. Development of a digital tool and support for curriculum design
Establishment of digital solutions in degree programmes with the help of the strategic digital leap project and as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic	Establishment of curriculum design in all doctoral programmes

## 1.1 The planning of education

### - Assessment of the audit team

#### The educational provision is linked to the strategy

The University of Helsinki's educational provision is linked to and developed based on the university's strategic priority areas. One concrete example of this is the large degree education reform, when all bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree programmes were reformed, and several cross-faculty multidisciplinary degree programmes were created in line with the strategic objectives. The current university strategy (2021–2030) has several priorities and targets that relate to education, such as 'Knowledge and learning are for everyone', 'Our University is the best place to study and work' and 'Our University is a leader in responsibility and sustainability'.

The targets are ambitious, but when implemented they have the potential to transform the education and study experiences at the university. It is currently the early stages of implementation of the new strategy, but many planned initiatives and actions will soon be concretely visible in the provision of education. Based on documentation available on Flamma, the university's intranet, the strategic choices for the next curricula design period 2023–2026 have already been defined, further underlining the strong link to the provision. For example, sustainable development is recommended to be integrated in all degree programmes at the university. Another example is that in 2022, most degree programmes and research groups or projects should create low threshold practices to support students to become involved in research.

The university has also defined a philosophy of teaching and ethical principles for teaching and learning, with a linked online course. These build on the strategic core values of the university in

a formidable way and clearly state the direction in which the university is going. The implementation process in place as part of the annual operations planning does guarantee a systematic link between the educational provision and its development in line with the strategic objectives of the university (see also discussions in Chapters 2 and 3).

The process of renewing all degrees to enhance the multidisciplinary nature of education has played an important role in engaging academics in scrutinising the content of courses. It has enabled dialogue and negotiation across as well as within faculties. The bottom-up processes and initiatives, such as the process for the creation of the international master's degree programmes, are generally appreciated and considered a very good way of working by staff. The drawback is that the outcome is sometimes patchy and not so streamlined, as for example in terms of the portfolio of international programmes (see also Chapter 4).

## Curriculum development is well-structured and supported

The university's philosophy of teaching published on its website underline that 1) teaching is based on research, 2) universities are high-level learning communities and environments, and 3) teaching aims at learning. The instructions for teachers also clearly state that teaching should be based on constructive alignment as it is also mentioned in the self-assessment report (SAR). In other words, the contents, materials, activities, learning tasks and assessment methods should all be aligned and support achievement of the stated learning objectives. All these principles for curriculum and course development put the emphasis on student learning and its support. As noted on the university's website, teaching is being developed in an increasingly open, inclusive and student-oriented direction. All in all, there is a clear ambition for student-centred learning and teaching at the university.

The university has systematically developed more professionally- and pedagogically-managed degree programmes. There are clear responsibilities assigned to the programme steering groups and degree programme directors as described in the SAR. The preparatory work within the programme steering groups is mainly working well, within which the representation of students is secured. However, it was also expressed by students in audit discussions that all steering groups are not working in an optimal way from a student perspective, e.g., in relation to how students' views mattered.

There are clear planning cycles in which curricula are revised in three-year intervals and teaching programme decided annually. The systems and responsibilities for the approval of new programmes and curricula are established and transparent. The rector decides on the establishment and termination of programmes and the faculty councils decide on the curricula. The structures are also supported with good teacher instructions on Introduction for teachers and Flamma sites, training and individual support for pedagogical and technical solutions, among others (see also Section 3.2). The university also has good committee structures with monitoring responsibilities and forums for creating shared understanding and support for the implementation of teaching and learning across the university. Altogether the curricula development process is comprehensive, transparent, well-managed and supported.

As stated above, the intention and guidance are in place to ensure learning outcomes and an alignment with learning outcomes, content and assessment of the educational provision. Most of the sample curricula reviewed had clearly stated learning outcomes. As the university has also identified in its SAR, there are currently variations in how curricula are described, and measures are taken to improve this. Some teachers and students met by the audit team found some of the learning outcomes, particularly generic skills such as collaborative skills, ethical principles and critical thinking, vague and hard to define and assess. This points towards the need to continuously engage teaching staff and students in a dialogue regarding their meaning and interpretation as well as the development of assessments in relation to these learning outcomes. It was also acknowledged by staff that although learning outcomes would be clear, students have varying needs, which create different challenges across faculties. The existing programme steering groups provide an important arena for purposeful dialogues regarding learning outcomes and assessments.

## Relevance to working life to be more strongly integrated in the planning of education

Working-life skills should be developed throughout studies. The involvement of outside partners is therefore an important part of the university's quality work. From discussions with stakeholder representatives, it is clear that the university has an increasing interaction with society through collaborations with different organisations, an alumni network, and so on. These relationships also help teachers to see better what is required for graduates. However, as pointed out by some stakeholders and students, generic skills needed in professional life are not always defined in the curricula but affect teaching in the background. There are metalevel goals that have not been put into words.

There are several examples of how external stakeholders are involved in the planning of education. Examples include, to name a few, the involvement of the City of Helsinki in the establishment of the Urban Academy, courses offered in collaboration with the industry, and working life experts being interviewed by educational leaders on how their programme is preparing students for working life. The audit team recommends that the university continues its engagement with working life representatives and alumni members and develops relationships where alumni and the world of work are not represented, to more effectively progress ideas on the requirements and competencies needed. This is important both at the bachelor's and master's levels.

Internationalisation is embedded well in the university's strategy and it is also to be considered during the design of programmes. In the next curriculum planning phase, all degree programmes need to include internationalisation expertise for all students in course designs. The educational provision of the university and the different options provided in degree education, Open University and HY+, and the university's MOOCs course provide various opportunities for continuous learning. In addition, many faculties at the university may also grant the right to applicants to pursue non-degree studies.

## University education is impacted by research in several ways

The University of Helsinki is a strongly research-oriented university, and research is at the heart of teaching as a stated precondition for quality. The general philosophy is that all teachers research and all researchers teach. Another principle is that as part of their studies all students should adopt a research-based approach and participate in research activities throughout their studies. In the current curriculum design guidelines, research-based teaching and learning is one of the strategic focus areas.

Currently, education seems to be impacted by research in two main ways at the university. Firstly, through teachers' academic work in terms of being active researchers and hence having the opportunity to include knowledge from their area of expertise and research interest into their teaching. There are possibilities to deepen the link between educational provision and research, and the university is already heading in this direction.

Secondly, as pointed out by faculty members, the engagement in higher education research through courses at the Centre for University Teaching and Learning (HYPE), and through the availability of data from research-based surveys such as HowULearn enable teachers to build their teaching practice in terms of higher education research. Another good example of the university's pedagogical research-based ambition is the Teachers' Academy. The academy serves as an excellent mechanism for both acknowledging the pursuit of high-quality teaching and learning as well as channelling initiatives towards further improvement. The mere existence of this network or group is a sign of appreciation of teaching and learning. At the same time, the university should intensively maintain its effort towards high-quality teaching across faculties and units.