

AUDIT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Authors **Bernard Coulie, Klara Bolander Laksov, Petri Heinonen, Petri Suomala, Signe Tolstrup Mathiasen, Mirella Nordblad & Niina Nurkka. Self-assessment of the University of Helsinki Päivi Aronen, Johanna Kolhinen & Anne Lepistö (eds.)**

Year of publication **2022**, FINEEC publications **1:2022**

Language **English**

ISBN **978-952-206-721-0 pdf**

4.1 The concept of international master's programmes

- HEI's self-assessment

The University of Helsinki (UH) has selected the concept of its international master's programmes and their functionality as an area on which it would like to receive external feedback. During the strategy period 2021–2030, “We will continue to actively and openly recruit international students and staff, while also keeping in mind our responsibility for the national languages of Finland as the languages of research and edification” ([Strategic Plan](#) of the UH 2021–2030). This self-assessment excludes the four international joint master's programmes that the UH is involved in.

A bilingual university – International degree programmes

As a bilingual university, the UH is obligated to provide teaching in the two national languages of Finland, Finnish and Swedish. Students also have the statutory right to receive instruction and complete their degrees in these two languages. The relevant legislation also provides the UH with the right to offer instruction in languages other than Finnish or Swedish (in practice, in English). Students may complete studies in English, and they also may complete their entire degree in English, provided that they have demonstrated the necessary language proficiency at the application stage.

According to a general principle at the UH, teaching and education with the same content is provided in only one language, either in one of the national languages or in English. While

students have the right to complete studies and their degree in the national languages, the language of scholarship and research in many fields is English, and the UH wants to attract international students to such fields; thus it has developed the concept of multilingual degree programmes. In multilingual programmes, teaching is offered in English only, but students may complete their studies and degrees in one of the national languages, i.e., in Finnish or Swedish.

When new international programmes are established, faculties must present justifications for not offering the programmes in the national languages and provide evidence of the resources available for providing an international learning environment. The UH has not set any targets for the number of international programmes, nor does it expect programmes to be of a certain language. The degree programmes and faculties must specify the language of the programmes, and consequently, the degree of their internationality.

According to the Universities Act, the right to complete a degree is granted, as a rule, for both the bachelor's and master's degree in student admissions. Having completed a bachelor's degree, students may continue to a master's programme defined as an option for graduates of the bachelor's programme in question. A significant number of such master's programme options are multilingual programmes, which explains the high number of Finnish students in them.

Of the UH's 63 master's programmes, 35 are international programmes. Of these, 26 are multilingual and nine are English-language programmes. A total of 57% of students in multilingual programmes complete their degree in Finnish or Swedish and 36% in English (the language is unknown for 7%). The majority (62%) of students in multilingual master's programmes have completed their bachelor's degree at the UH. The above percentages clearly demonstrate that in many fields at the UH, all master's level education takes place in multilingual degree programmes. In one of the largest faculties of the UH, all master's programmes except for one are multilingual, which means that the bulk of the Faculty's students are pursuing their degrees in a multilingual programme. A total of 21% of the students in the English-language master's programmes have completed their bachelor's degree at the UH. Finnish citizens account for 78% of all students in the international master's programmes.

Judging by the number of applicants, the UH's international master's programmes are popular. In 2021, the number of applications rose to 7,400, showing an increase of 58% from the previous year. The three most popular programmes were multilingual. Statistics on the student admissions are available on the UH's [website](#). Students are admitted to the English-language master's programmes only through a separate admissions procedure. Students are admitted to the multilingual programmes through both a separate admissions procedure and from the UH's own bachelor's programmes.

Despite the large number of applicants, not all international programmes are able to fill all their student places. The number of open student places in the English-language programmes is between 30 and 40. Student numbers in the multilingual programmes are significantly greater due to the number of students continuing on from the UH's bachelor's programmes.

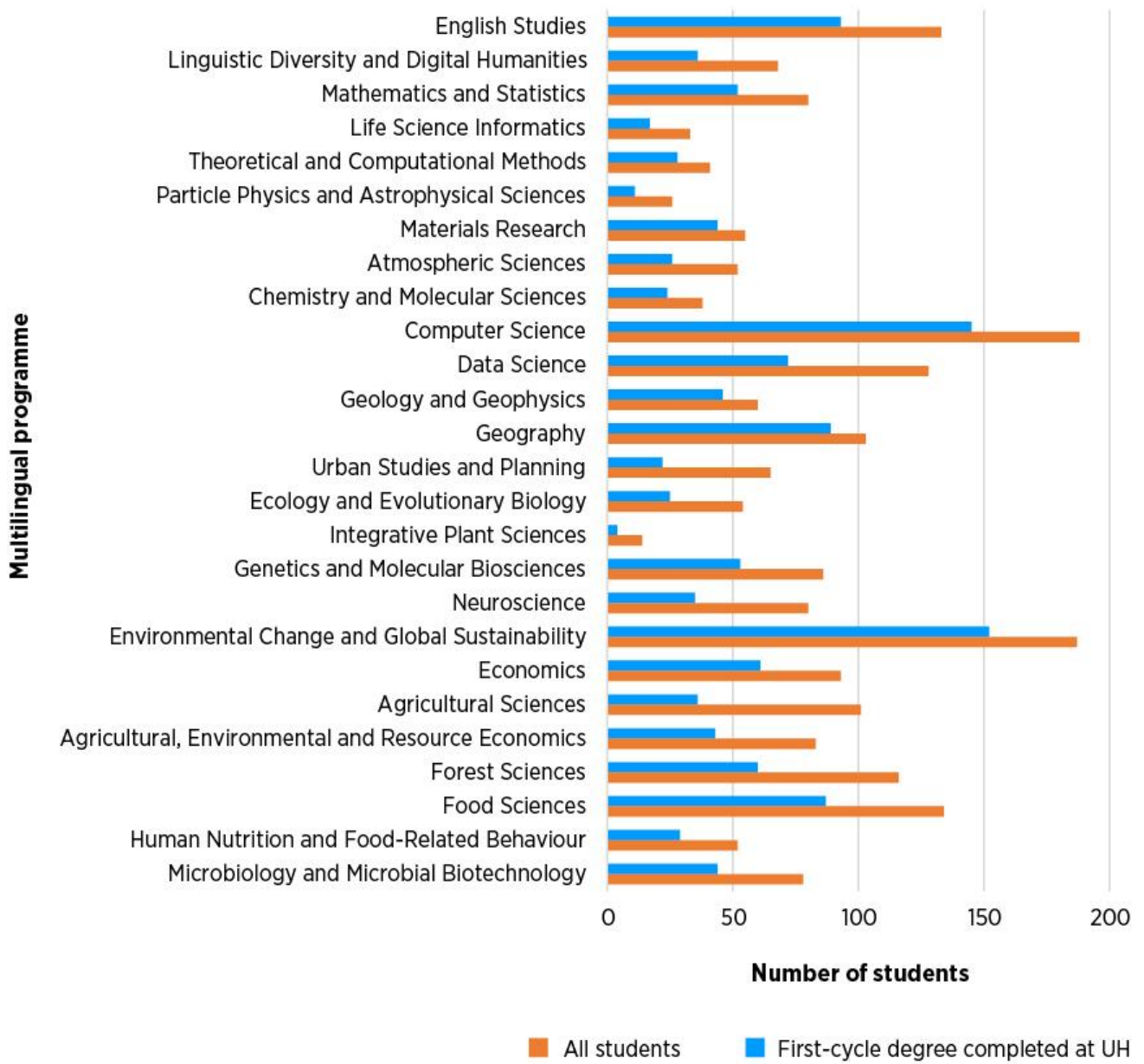


Figure 19. Multilingual programmes: students with a first-cycle degree completed at the UH, autumn 2020

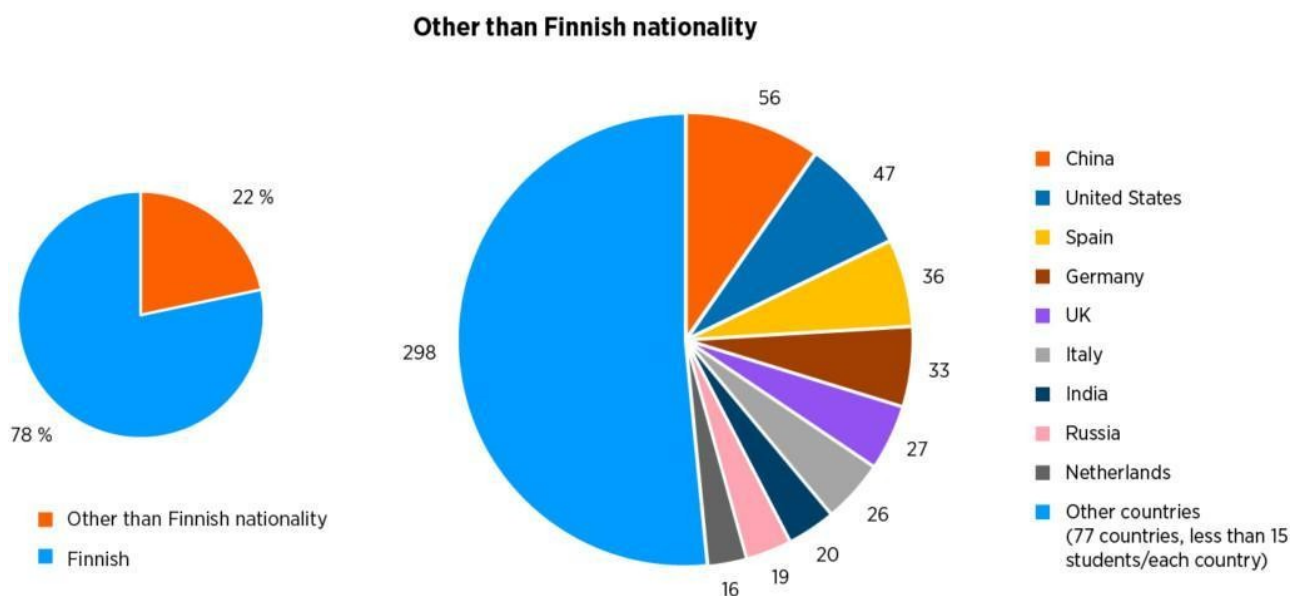


Figure 20. UH International master's programmes: students' nationality, autumn 2020

Universities have been obliged to collect tuition fees from students from outside the EU/EEA since 2017. Universities were also obliged to establish scholarship systems to aid students liable to pay tuition fees. The UH compared the fees and scholarship systems of universities abroad to determine the level of the tuition fee to be charged. At the UH, the annual fee charged by international programmes since 2017 has been €13,000, €15,000 or €18,000. The income from the tuition fees is distributed as follows: 60% is allocated to the programmes for development and operations, 25% to the scholarship scheme and 15% to marketing and other services designed for the programmes.

So far, the number of students liable to pay tuition fees has been modest. In 2020 they numbered 108, of whom 41 received a grant or scholarship from the UH. Up to the present, most of the income from the tuition fees has been allocated to the scholarship system. Students subject to tuition fees normally complete their studies within the target duration of two years.

The annual monitoring of degree programmes also yields information on the status of international master's programmes. The review of degree programmes coming up in 2022 will include the international programmes. The UH will start collecting feedback from international students also through the HowULearn student survey. The UH has participated in the International Student Barometer five times between 2010 and 2020. The survey is taken by both international exchange students and degree students.

Strengths

Smooth student progress, well-functioning academic supervision, guidance and advice

Enhancement areas

The international attraction of degree programmes to be increased

An international learning environment	The reality of an international learning environment in multilingual and English-language programmes, when the majority of the students have a Finnish background
Internationalisation at home for Finnish students	Estimation of the number of students continuing from bachelor's programmes to master's programmes

4.1 The concept of international master's programmes

- Assessment of the audit team

The University of Helsinki selected the concept of international master's programmes and its functionality as an evaluation area of the audit. In addition to the functionality of the concept, the university was interested in getting feedback on the quality management mechanisms and the promotion of cross-cultural learning and integration in its international programmes. The topic is well linked to the strategy of the university (2021–2030). The University of Helsinki strives to strengthen its status as an international university and increasingly attract international students and staff. The university also aims to be the best place to study, to be an example of genuine multilingualism, and support the integration of its students into the university community and Finnish society.

The concept of multilingual programmes is unclear

The degree programme reform has been the largest educational reform at the university in recent years. International master's programmes were also renewed as part of the reform. As noted in the self-assessment report (SAR) and other audit material, the international master's programmes at the university include two separate categories of master's programmes: English-language and multilingual. The main distinction between these two programme categories is that in the multilingual programmes the students have the possibility to complete their assignments and examination in Finnish, Swedish or English. In the English-language programmes, the students do not have this option. The other distinction is that the biggest intake to the multilingual programmes is from the university's bachelor's programmes and include Finnish students who continue their studies to master's level. As indicated in the SAR, many of these students then opt, at least officially, to complete their degree in one of the national languages.

When looking at the degree programme information for prospective students on the university's website and the [Studyinfo](#) national website, the two separate categories of international programmes do not really exist, and the 'multilingual' aspect is not openly advertised. Many views were expressed during the audit visit that the concept of multilingual programmes is not

that clear. It seems that 'multilingual' as a term is a bit confusing for both academic staff and students. In many multilingual programmes, English is the teaching language and the multilingual aspect only relates to the students' statutory right to write their assignments and exams in Finnish or Swedish. It was also pointed out that utilising this possibility is quite rare, although some students were said to be very aware of their rights in terms of language. In many programmes in practice, students write their thesis in English and all the exams are in English.

The university's bilingual profile and its national duties in providing teaching and experts in Finnish and Swedish came across strongly during the audit interviews. The two separate categories of international master's programmes have clearly been developed for the university to fulfil its legislative duties. Rationales mentioned also relate to effectiveness and finances. According to the audit material, when the content of a course or programme in Finnish or Swedish overlaps with an international one, a merger of the two is considered. The leadership of the university underlined that there is a delicate balance in seeking to develop teaching and learning opportunities both in national languages and in English.

The university could have more explicit goals for internationalisation and international programmes

Based on the audit interviews, the internationalisation of the degree programme portfolio has taken place quite organically at the university without explicit targets or a development strategy. The developments and introductions of international programmes have been based on faculty- and programme-level initiatives. For many faculties, the international development of education has been quite natural and a part of the organic development of the discipline. It relates to the international nature of the discipline and in arranging all teaching in English to be able to use research staff widely in teaching, as there is a lot of international researchers and professors in some faculties. Although this has resulted in several high-quality programmes with natural connections to discipline-specific needs and research contexts, some of the potential aspects of educational impact remain somewhat unexploited. These include systematic connections to working life for ensuring smooth transition after graduation, and financial potential of international education.

The fact that most of the students in international programmes come from Finland suggests that the concept of international programmes could be reconsidered. The audit team recommends that instead of framing some of the programmes as international, and a subset of them multilingual, the university could 1) explicate its strategic goals for internationalisation of education, 2) reflect on and define the roles of different programmes in this strategy, 3) categorise the programmes based on the language of operations, including students' rights in relation to language, and 4) make sure that continuous development for advancing points 1-3 takes place.

The issues of language challenge equal opportunities of staff

The fact that the university is trying to ensure the statutory rights of the Finnish students to complete parts of their degrees in their mother tongue (Finnish, Swedish) in its international programmes (multilingual) is to be commended. Based on the audit interviews, the 'multilingual' aspect does, however, bring with it some complexity from the staff perspective. What teaching in a multilingual programme entails, has not always been clear from the start for all academic staff teaching in the programmes. In addition, with a lot of international staff, it can sometimes be hard to find qualified academic members to mark assignments or exams. Some of the academic staff noted that there should be a better oversight in recruitments in terms of what the needs are in the degree programmes.

It was also pointed out by academic staff that the multilingual aspect is seen as creating a separation between teaching staff and inequity concerning who teaches at the bachelor's or master's level. Finnish- or Swedish-speaking teachers were said to be allocated to teach at the bachelor's level taught in Finnish or Swedish, and international teachers to master's level taught in English. Finnish- and Swedish-speaking teachers may also be more burdened with administrative duties than the international staff. These issues were also mentioned in some of the annual reports of programme steering groups. Overall, these developments could create tension in the long term and inequality in the opportunities provided to staff.

The balancing between different languages also relates to the administrative language of the university. From the international staff point of view, their opportunities to participate fully at the university are to some extent hindered by the administrative language being mainly Finnish. Based on discussions with staff, not all systems and data are available in English, making it hard for international staff to access some information. The ambitions of the university in terms of multilingualism are commendable and there is no doubt a lot of potential in this at the university. However, the university should make sure that the structures in place promote the equal opportunities of its staff.

International students' needs to be better considered in academic and service support

From the students' point of view there are both good practices and issues that merit further development in international master's programmes. The experiences of students in the international master's programmes vary. At best, the university's teachers are enthusiastic, some even exceptional. Generally, the teachers were considered to be receptive to students' questions and invested in building a collaborative academic community. In many cases there is good interaction at the level of individual teachers. The students appreciated being able to customise their studies and bring their own interests into the programme. Flexibility in general was highlighted as a strength, which especially related to study choices, deadlines and teachers understanding the students' other commitments in life. In some international programmes there

are plenty of courses available in English. Career courses and receiving information on working life opportunities were also appreciated, although working life opportunities were said to overwhelmingly require Finnish language skills.

As discussed in Section 1.2, the services at the university are predominantly organised in a way that international students are treated as any other students. While this might be justified from the equality point of view at the surface level, the approach somewhat lacks the sensitivity in understanding the different situations of international students when they arrive at master's level education. As noted by international students, many of their peers have already studied three years at the university and consequently are much more integrated into the system.

Based on the student discussions, the university would need to make additional efforts to better identify the needs of international students and to make sure that both academic and service support reaches international students. Some of the improvement measures suggested by students include:

- Better welcoming services covering immigration, integration and generally settling in.
- Orientation and introduction courses should support students to be informed about the basics of the programme as students come from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. There should be more orientation courses for university in general, including the IT systems.
- University contacts are unclear. Student concerns are often referred from one department to another. A physical helpdesk for international education and students' services is needed.
- Guidance offered to international students needs to incorporate international student perspectives.
- The quality of academic guidance to support students' navigation in flexible programmes: selecting courses and modules, particularly optional ones. The guidance should be available already to incoming students.
- Career services could employ advisers who have similar background/experiences as the international students.
- Better channels for alumni networking would support the international students.

Based on student discussions, even more attention could be given to academic community building. Integration of international students and cross-cultural learning seemed to be well built into the design of some of the university's international master's programmes and courses. As was noted by staff, the integration of students and support for cross-cultural learning should be facilitated from the start. Programmes with a clear profile were also considered to better support the creation of a programme community.

In addition to support and guidance, challenges and improvement areas identified by the students related to language issues.

- More optional courses in English are needed in some programmes.

- The administrative language for international English programmes advertised in English should be English.
- Language skills of staff teaching in international programmes is sometimes an issue affecting study experience.
- Many of the research/work/networking opportunities still require Finnish language skills. More English-language internship opportunities for international students are needed together with formal structures for helping students find these opportunities.
- Student support services should be covered completely and comprehensively in English.

The audit team recommends that the university engages in initiatives providing better support for international students with the aim of providing equal student experiences for all.

The university could further develop the follow-up of its graduates

Based on discussions with staff, there is good support, guidance and guidelines available for international programmes. Overall, the staff seemed pleased with the systems and data available for programme monitoring and development. They also recognised that improvements had been made in this respect at the university. An area where more data is needed is data on student satisfaction and employment issues. For instance, data on how many of those who graduate stay and start their careers in Finland would be needed.

The audit team notes that the university has a growing potential in making a societal impact through international education. In addition to measures related to programme attractiveness, fluency of studies and student services, leveraging this potential call for intensive interaction with different stakeholders in the society. Fluent transition to working life could be an explicit target from student recruitment and throughout the student path. The results, e.g., employment figures, qualitative employment, and the actions or drivers of those developments should be actively monitored for keeping up the positive development. Tuition-based earnings could also be systematically focused on.

International students could be more engaged at the university

Based on the discussions with students, one concern is that international students do not seem to be very familiar with their rights within the university. As suggested by students, the university should ensure that the students are better informed about their rights, university operations and student engagement in general. The audit team notes that there is good and well-structured information for students available on Introduction to Studies site, but there is a clear need to communicate the information through various channels.

The issue of student feedback was also raised in discussions with students from international programmes (see Section 3.3). It is not always clear to international students where to provide feedback. In some cases, students do not trust that their feedback is considered, leading students to taking other means of communicating their concerns such as social media.

Decentralised feedback systems do not necessarily take international student experiences into account in an effective way at the university. Students also noted that not all steering groups are working in the optimal way from a student point of view. Student involvement in programme planning is not always systematic and, as mentioned above, in some programmes English is not used as a language.

Many of the challenges concerning international programmes and students are the same across faculties and different disciplines. Best practices could be more extensively shared between programmes and faculties. The meetings for programme directors and for international programmes are good, existing forums in which such practices can be shared and discussed.

Overall, as growing internationalisation leads to diversity, the process of building an inclusive culture at the university should be as proactive as possible. The university should invest in proactive equality, diversity and integration (EDI) work and the integration of international students both in the university community and in Finnish society.