

Publisher

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)

Name of publication

The evaluation of higher education in social sciences

Authors

Ullamaija Seppälä, Jussi Kivistö, Marko Joas, Viivi Kaikkonen, Teemu Rantanen, Terhi Rantanen, Teija Tiilikainen & Mirella Nordblad

The evaluation of higher education in social sciences was carried out in 2019. The evaluation concerned the development and profiling of the educational provision in the field of social sciences. Particular attention was paid to the competence base and labour market relevance of the degrees. The evaluation questions were the following:

1. What is the current state of the educational provision in the field of social sciences?
2. What knowledge base underpins the development of the educational provision?
3. What processes and networks for developing the educational provision exist in the field of social sciences?

A wide range of data was used in the evaluation: feedback surveys (Bachelor's graduate survey, Master's degree career monitoring survey), statistical data from Statistics Finland, a field-specific and degree-level self-assessment survey, focus group interviews, and case studies. The seminar on the development of higher education in social sciences discussed the preliminary conclusions of the evaluation and brainstormed how to respond to the development challenges. The results of the seminar also served as evaluation material.

Based on the evaluation, the key **strengths** of higher education in social sciences are the following:

- **Higher education in social sciences is comprehensive both in terms of its content and regional coverage.** The education is provided at eight universities. A wide range of subjects is included in the degree programmes in social sciences and the discipline-specific profile is multidimensional. In spite of some overlapping, diversity in the regional offerings and content of studies is a particular strength of the field of social sciences.
- **The labour market relevance of bachelor's and master's programmes in the field of social sciences is at a good level.** The general abilities provided by the studies, such as wide-ranging competence, analytical and problem-solving skills and critical thinking, are well in line with the employers' wishes in the field and the competence needs of the changing working life.

- **The degree programmes in social sciences are well linked to the universities' strategies and profiles.** Social sciences are either included as a focus area or contribute to the implementation of the cross-cutting themes of the universities' strategies.
- **The link between research and the provision of education offers opportunities to benefit from the two-tier degree structure.** The introduction of broader bachelor's degrees combined with the more focused master's degrees that correspond to the research profile opens up new opportunities for universities also in the field of social sciences. Specialised master's programmes based on the latest research counterbalance the broad bachelor's programmes.

The key **development recommendations** for higher education in the field of social sciences are the following:

- **The coordination of degree programmes and the cooperation between universities should be increased and developed** with regard to student admissions, curricula and degree structures. More attention should also be paid to making cross-institutional studies and cooperation between minor subjects more flexible. As regards curricula development, this means that the content of the degrees must be made easy for students to compare.
- **Profiling of degree programmes and subjects should be promoted based on their strengths and key research themes.** The profiles of degree programmes must be made visible to applicants and students. The profiling of research and the profiling of education are based on different principles. The regional and national tasks are emphasised in the profiling of education, while the aim of research is primarily to reach or keep up with high international standards. These differences must be taken into account when the profiling measures are discussed.
- **Students find it challenging to see the labour market relevance of the degrees and to identify their own competences, especially in generic fields of social sciences.** Paradoxically, the labour market relevance of degrees in social sciences seems to be high due to their generic nature, but at the same time students find the lack of practical orientation in the studies problematic. As regards the degree programmes, it is necessary to clarify the competences provided by the degree programme and the desired skills and clearly describe them in the learning outcomes of the degree programme. The students' ability to identify their competences should be better supported.
- **The organisation of continuous learning and the anticipation of competence needs is fragmented.** The degree education and continuous learning should be dealt with as one entity when it concerns the anticipation of education needs. This integration would make it easier to develop the division of roles and responsibilities between degree education and continuous learning in a more comprehensive manner. This also applies to the modes of implementation. Citizens' equal access to continuous learning must play a key role when decisions are made on the availability of the education offered and the charging of fees.

Keywords: competence-based approach, continuous learning, educational provision, evaluation, field of social sciences, higher education, higher education institutions, internationalisation, labour market relevance, profiling, steering of higher education, universities.