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## PÄÄKIRJOITUS

### Turning points in the history of Nordic higher education

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From the 1980s, the historiography of higher education was widened in three respects: chronologically, thematically and geographically. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries replaced the Middle Ages as the main period of interest. Research questions were no longer limited to institutional issues and more attention was paid to the university in relation with the surrounding society. Finally, historical overviews of an indigenous institution were supplemented by comparative studies of the institution in a national or even international context. Also Nordic historians of higher education are following this trend of a chronological, thematical and especially geographical widening, and increasingly often the local and national boundaries are crossed. What certainly contributes to this approach is the current European-wide debate resulting from the reforms connected with the Bologna process, which gives an extra relevance to the study of their historical backgrounds.

In the beginning of 2007, the "Research network on the history of university and higher education in Finland" was established at the workshop "Yliopistohistoriallinen tutkijataapaaminen", in the Helsinki University Museum Arppeanum, among other reasons, to encourage this new research agenda and to stimulate increasing cooperation between Finnish scholars mutually, and with their colleagues in other Nordic countries. During the meeting, several participants realised that it would be very useful to continue these kinds of contacts on a more regular basis. Therefore, a small working group was established, consisting of Laura Kolbe of the University of Helsinki, Jussi Välimaa of the University of Jyväskylä, Panu Nykänen of the Helsinki University of Technology, Michaela Bränn and Pieter Dhondt, both of the University of Helsinki. The aim of the working group and of the network in general, is to create a "university history forum" for Finnish (and foreign) researchers on the history of universities and higher education, to encourage future collaborative workshops, projects and publications.

One of the first achievements of the network was setting up a website and an e-mail list, operative from the summer of 2007, of interest to university historians in Finland and other Nordic countries: <http://www.helsinki.fi/historia/ylhist>. On the website as well as on the e-mail list, national and international conferences and meetings are announced (supplemented by an archive of previous events), together with information with regard to current research. The website offers the possibility for all individual researchers and research groups, working on the history of universities and higher education in Finland, to present their own project, announce new publications and the like.

A second important realisation of the network was the organisation of several following-up meetings: at the Helsinki University of Technology in Otaniemi in April 2008, at the University of Joensuu in May 2009 (of which a selection of the papers is published in this special issue), and at the University of Helsinki in February 2010. That these conferences – and thus also the network – succeeded to realise one of their main

objectives, viz. to encourage the contacts between different scholars in the field, is also shown by the organisation of a number of other conferences with regard to Nordic university history by individual members of the network: in Helsinki in March 2009 on "Nineteenth-century university jubilees as the driving forces of increasing Nordic cooperation", in Copenhagen in January 2010 on "University jubilees and university history at the beginning of the 21st century" and in Berlin in November 2010 on "Elitist institutions in egalitarian societies? – Visions and realities of Nordic Universities".

Thirdly, since June 2008, the website of the network gives access to a continuing bibliographical database of publications on the history of higher education in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden from 1977 up to the present day, in collaboration with the international journal *History of Universities*. The ambition of the journal is to collect a continuing bibliography on the history of higher education throughout the world, starting in 1977. In this bibliography the Northern European countries have always been covered together, taken care of by many different scholars of different countries in the previous years. However, most often the researcher in charge focussed on references from his/her own country, what caused an imbalance between the different Nordic countries in the contributions in subsequent volumes.

In consultation with many collaborators from all the Nordic countries, the network aims to collect the bibliography in a more systematic way, covering Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish publications in an equal balance. To this end, the editor of the bibliography can make an appeal to an extensive network of some 150 scholars in all these Nordic countries. In addition to the publication in the database on the internet, newly added references will still be published twice a year in *History of Universities*. The advantages of the database in comparison with other existing (library) catalogues are threefold. Firstly, books as well as articles in books and journals are included. Secondly, it offers more and/or other search possibilities. Thirdly, the database offers the possibility of adding an abstract to the references, what makes the system certainly more attractive to the user.

The easier search for and accessibility of publications of colleagues, the enlarged contacts through the meetings of the network and other conferences organised in its wake, and the increased communication by the e-mail list, should stimulate future collaborative and especially comparative research, not only between Finnish scholars mutually, but also with colleagues at other Northern European universities and institutions. All this, should enable us to take up the historiographic challenges traditionally connected with university history: to commemorate "the own glorious past" in a critical way and without losing out of sight the relationships with other institutions of higher education at home and abroad; and so to attain new insights and perspectives in the history of universities, student life, scientific and technological developments, nation-building, the formation of elites and other related themes. In this way, the connection to international tendencies in current university history will be completed.

For more information on the research network, its e-mail list and the bibliography, please visit [www.helsinki.fi/history/ylhist](http://www.helsinki.fi/history/ylhist).

Also at the third university history conference in Joensuu in May 2009 organised by the "Suomen yliopisto- ja korkeakouluhistorian tutkimuksen verkosto", it became clear to what extent historical and current developments at Northern European universities were and are interconnected (a more detailed account of the content of the conference can be found in Ikonen 2009). Among other speakers Risto Rinne (University of Turku) and Matti Salo (University of Oulu) discussed in their presentations the specificity of the Nordic higher

education system. The article of Toni Saarivirta, Davide Consoli and Pieter Dhondt in this special issue on "Turning points in the history of Nordic higher education" – named after the theme of the Joensuu conference – is closely connected to this. Although the authors focus on the Finnish hospital system, at several points they show the communities and differences with developments in other Nordic countries. Jukka Kortti's contribution deals with a Finnish phenomenon as well – the language struggle at the University of Helsinki and the role which the students' paper *Ylioppilaslehti* played in it –, but with regard to this topic, references to the relationships with Sweden are equally self-evident.

At their turn Jukka Rantala, Jari Salminen, Janne Säänti and Petteri Hansen prove in their article that Finnish and other Northern European universities are increasingly becoming part of an international system of university education and therefore they are all facing the same challenges, such as the threat of an imbalance between education and research in university policy in general and, for instance, in the evaluation of individual scholars more particularly. Somewhat in contrast to this, it appears from Laura Kolbes speech on the occasion of the publication of the 40-years history of the University of Joensuu that the history of a university institution never can be separated from its local context. The 40th anniversary of the University of Joensuu and the foundation of the new University of Eastern Finland were at the same time one of the reasons to organise the third university history conference there and as such, the strong tradition of university history as jubilee history is confirmed. Fortunately, in Arto Nevala's *Uudisraivaaja - Joensuun yliopiston 40-vuotishistoria* as well as at the conference it became clear that the time of a celebrating, uncritical university historiography is over.

## **References**

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