

# **University Reform in Finland**

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Greetings all. We'd like to give a brief talk on the university reform in Finland, in order to shed light on the common struggle we are facing and to collect themes and strategies we've learned through this and create starting points of further discussion for us all. We begin with the larger, worldwide context of university reforms, and then move to the Finnish experience we've had.

University reforms are a common theme to universities around the world. As we gather to analyze and act on creating more participatory, equal and social forms of education and human society, we wish to bring a summary of our experiences from Finland, which has painfully endured reforms in step with infamous Bologna-process that has brought the managerial, corporate system to universities around Europe.

Overall, the last few decades have been harsh for the Universities everywhere. Different, profit oriented unification processes, WTO and IMF controlled standardization and lack of continuity in communities, in part through the developments described, are all parts of a wider restructuring of society.

These developments are threatening to consolidate the power and status of the neo-liberal, anti-democratic ideology, institutionally centered around corporations, the mode of institution that has become prevalent in our current society.

Universities as well, despite the efforts of students and other popular movements, are being forced more and more to this new corporate model of human communities.

#### **Finland - A Social Democracy**

These changes have been felt in Nordic countries as well, even though our societies have had respectable success in creating more equitable market economies, with strong emphasis on public, state- or municipality driven services. Examples include wide public library network, public schooling, strong welfare system and universal health care.

The incongruity between the Nordic state welfare model and the profit-driven, neo-liberal model of education factories is profound. This creates challenges, but also ample opportunities for resistance. Decades of excellent experiences with state- and municipality controlled institutions among the Finnish people make flat-out open programs of privatization and exclusions in education harder to pass.

Finnish universities have had a system of parliamentary decision making through equal representation in the decision making bodies between students, mid-level teachers and professors. This was result of a decade long campaign for changes in authoritarian decision making in the university, which finally achieved some of its goals in the early 1990's, when students and mid-level teachers each got third of the vote in all decision making bodies in the university.

We believe this should have been only the first step in democratizing the decision making towards a more participatory model, but unfortunately the movement towards this dried up pretty soon after first concrete achievements. The trust on parliamentary decision making soon stifled the popular movement, and as Finland suffered through a painful recession in the early 90's people placed their trust on their newly elected representatives in Student Unions and Faculty Boards.

### **Powerlessness and gullible trust**

In the Finnish society in general people suffer from powerlessness and lack of confidence in their own possibilities to have effect on processes of change. Instead, power and change are viewed as something hidden elsewhere, with decisions made beforehand.

One grim example of this is a statement by prime minister Matti Vanhanen, saying that people shouldn't meddle in official's decision making process beforehand, and then he stated elsewhere that after parliamentary decisions are voted on, people shouldn't complain about them and focus instead on their daily affairs.

With culture like this, active participation is problematic to organize. It is characterized by lack of confidence, general feeling of powerlessness and highly bureaucratic system that is distant for people. The political sphere of life is considered something that is separate from ordinary life, with politicians and experts making the "enlightened", "complex" decisions and setting the pace for the direction of the society. People have relatively strong trust on the public institutions and on officials to strive for the common good in the actions. The concrete, sometimes disastrous results of the officials neo-liberal policies in Finland are rarely discussed, with critical voices marginalized and even ridiculed in prime time discussion and editorials.

The Finnish university community, meanwhile, had idealized the model of "passive", "objective" intellectual, one which abstains from involvement in any political affairs.

### **The Privatization Reform of 2009**

The privatization reform of 2009 was about restructuring the Finnish university system into a managerial, profit-oriented system, in order to compete more effectively on the neo-liberal marketplace of human capital. This meant opening universities for private investors and thus allowing the market driven principles to determine more strongly the kind of knowledge that is being produced through capitalist market mechanisms.

This has already caused deterioration of teachers, researchers and employees rights, worsening of study conditions and heavy focus and financing on certain study areas that are beneficial to investors. In Finland, this financing is heavily focused on just some key areas such as technical and biological (for example, pharmaceuticals) research. Thus, any small research field and smaller universities is now in real danger of "bankruptcy" as the university administration has labeled the situation.

This systemic overhaul of Finland universities originates from planning papers by University principals and officials in the ministry of education. It was a logical extension of the much opposed payment reforms from the beginning of the decade, and ideas for the very broad restructuring were visible already then.

Even though official comments were requested from the parliamentary councils, it was to no avail - the opposition visible in these comments could easily be bypassed as this parliamentary process received almost no public attention, thanks largely to the huge amount of red tape and meaningless bureaucratic decisions that the parliamentary boards were buried in.

One particular theme in the Finnish university reform was the role of the administration and the seemingly concentrated and well-planned nature of the reform. From what we've gathered from comments from within the Finnish parliament, the administration of the universities was very active in promoting and lobbying members of the parliament to support the law in the June vote. The lobbying by the administration apparently intensified with the public protests and proclamations during the spring, which shows considerable disdain from the administration towards democracy and the opinion of the scientific community in Finland.

After all the official papers were given and the university administration brought the issue openly into discussion as the "common project of the University", the struggle really began; hoping to change the legislation at the last moment with proclamations, demonstrations and pleas for at least changes in different wordings of the legislation draft, the university community came at least loosely together in resistance.

The general belief amongst the university community was that this was to be just one among many reforms. All the universities in Finland were bombarded with different reforms through the 1990's and early 2000. This is reminiscent of many other countries. The apathy felt as all these reforms passed one by one was greatly contributing to the lack of response early on to this "biggest reform for centuries", as the minister of education applauded it.

Unfortunately, the popular resistance that finally organized to oppose the privatization reform was quite effectively countered by what writer and journalist Naomi Klein describes as the shock doctrine - a very quick, massive transformation that gives very little time for the public, let alone public institutions, to respond. The creation of Aalto University, and the university reform law of 2009 overall, can be seen as prime examples of this strategy. It's important to notice that this process was also speeded with bad briefing and even misinformation and lies. The ruthlessness of all this speaks of the determination of the Finnish administration to push these reforms through.

The popular struggle against this reform started to pick up speed at a rather late point of the official plans of passing the required legislation in Finland for privatizing universities. This is not to say there wasn't effort to get the issue more in the general awareness since early on, but rather that those efforts failed, for various reasons - for example the general public discourse on decision making I described earlier.

This is, of course, a very "responsive" and late way of organizing resistance, and one the Finnish university principals and administration was probably somewhat prepared for.

## **What we've learned**

Vision. A credible utopia, clearly articulated and well argued, more just and free, peaceful alternative social order. We don't wish to suggest any sort of blueprint or "system" for any new order, but the recognition and empowered articulation of the ideals and aims we strive for. A vision is just that - a horizon towards which we strive, and which we can

proudly proclaim is closer with every occupation, every new discussion group and resistance to power anywhere.

Daily empowerment. We need everyone's support and participation, and to attain this we should strive for actions and activities that provide equal space and respect for all participants. For this, we should look for daily, continuous and empowering, positive modes of social activity that encourage and cherish the ideals we hope to attain more widely. Gender equality, income equality, empowered participation and just distribution of work are all something we should create through our daily efforts.

Internationality. We wish to create networks of resistance with people from other universities, and to join in the global discussion for an alternate, sustainable new society and social organization, clear articulation of which is not only a project for a better, more equitable and participatory society, but more and more paramount for human survival. To quote a great american song: universally we will stand, and divided we will fall. It would help us all immensely if we put some of our effort into creating stronger networks all throughout the world, to know what people in similar situations elsewhere are going through and to strenghten solidarity and true, strategic co-operation everywhere.

We strongly believe that with dedication and by working connectedly and in sync we can overturn these reforms, begin the historical process of creating a truly ambitious global university that is open for all and in the end, achieve truly anything. Love conquers all. Peace out, Minneapolis.