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(eds.)

Doctoral Experiences in Finland

PL ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Preface

This book presents experiences by international PhDs who have completed their doctorates at universities in Finland. This essay collection has been contributed to by many researchers active within the research community in Finland. Thus, we are looking upon a wide range of experiences from the early 21st Century. To our understanding, universities, in Finland as well as in general, apply changes of any kind very slowly. Therefore, the PhD researchers' situations in Finland may have changed to some degree up to now. Clearly, however, there is no empirical evidence for this, and the individual situation of some present or future researcher employed in Finland may differ substantially from any of the cases described in this volume.

All contributing researchers have completed their doctoral degrees (in one case the intermediary degree of *licenciate*, which is explained in detail in the relevant essay) within the auspices of the Finnish university system. This was a requirement to be eligible to contribute an essay to this volume. There seem to be many scholars who, for diverse reasons, did not finish their doctoral dissertation within the Finnish system and/or relocated their research environments to a different country. Eventually, it seems to be a matter of circumstances, partly also of luck, pragmatic approach, and cleverness, how to deal with the completion of the PhD thesis in Finland within the individually imposed time and funding frame.

While reading the different essays in this present volume, the question of why researchers would proceed towards doctoral degrees in a Finnish university in the first place might occur to the reader. There is no clear-cut answer to it. It seems, judging on the basis of opinions presented within this book, that the researchers were 'drifting' into Finnish universities. In many cases, this seems not to have been a strategic and swift, thoroughly thought-out career decision. The researchers who have contributed to this book continued successfully within the science community after the completion of their degrees and today are part of the globalization of science. Finland as a point of embarking on an academic career seems to be a rather exotic place in many research fields. This thus brings with it advantages and disadvantages for an international career in research and science. A deeply rooted involvement in the Finnish national research community seemed to be rather difficult for most of the researchers mentioned. That may be the reason why many researchers who have contributed to this book are now working in other countries, including Germany, Switzerland, Estonia and China. We may find an indication that researchers who complete a doctoral degree at a Finnish university may have difficulties to find a continuing career path in Finland.

What about the Finnish universities? This book offers only a mosaic snapshot of the situation in the early years of the 21st Century. Overall, it seems that the tradition of publically funded education and science as a source of knowledge is valued very highly in Finland. This affects the research community and provides doctoral researchers with a framework which is generally as well as in this volume described as positive. As far as the administration in Finnish universities is concerned, there are different experiences. It seems the political, decision-making administration pushed forward the internationalization of the universities. However, on the faculty and departmental level there seems to be a very heterogeneous picture, with some departments following the globalization path, while others seem to be (too) strongly rooted in the national and local environments.

This volume does not serve the purpose of providing a scientific or empirical analysis of the international doctoral research situation in Finland. It should rather endow the reader with a collection of essays from diverse researchers who document some of their differing experiences during the processes of obtaining their PhDs in different fields and universities within Finland. Thus, different insights become visible and part of the discussion on university education in Finland.

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Jukka M. Krisp Michael Szurawitzki
Augsburg and Munich, in February 2014

The Finnish Licentiate Degree in Germanic Philology

Agnieszka Bitner

Introduction

The situation of young researchers in Finland can vary strongly and depends on several factors like the research field and the subject of the thesis. Important factors which guarantee success (or failure) are also the university where the research is conducted, the supervisor and his/her standing within the university environment. Finally, the success depends on one's own work, dedication and involvement. In my contribution I will try to show the situation of Finnish researchers and doctoral students of Germanic philology. I will also talk about my personal experiences during my master and licentiate studies in Finland.

At the outset, I would like to explain the term *licentiate* and its meaning in the Finnish and European context to avoid misunderstandings. In Finland (and the Nordic countries), a licentiate thesis is a noncompulsory degree between the MA and the PhD. Licentiate degree holders are officially eligible for independent academic research at Universities (like the right to supervise master's degree theses). It has to be also emphasized that this degree raises one's standing in the Finnish society and is considered a prestigious matter. However, for the continental European (e.g. the German) context, it is generally regarded as less valuable, and often seen as 'only' a master's degree or even a mere bachelor. This is the case since before the Bologna process had started, the term licentiate referred to different degrees in different countries, and partially does so to the present day, which entails confusion. In Catholic and Protestant institutions of higher education (Theological Seminaries or Faculties of Theology), for instance, a licentiate degree can be compared to the Finnish licentiate degree – it is a noncompulsory step between the MA and the PhD. At the same time, it is a minimum qualification for teachers at seminaries. In Belgium, the licentiate was corresponding to the German master, and it was a compulsory requirement for the enrolment to any doctoral program. In Poland, a licentiate degree still refers to a bachelor's degree, which is a prerequisite to pursue a master's degree. For researchers who did their licentiate in Finland this can mean that their research work can be misperceived abroad as 'degree studies' in contrast to postgraduate studies more advanced than the master's, and their scientific performance can be therefore underestimated. 2011, when I was registering as a doctoral student at the University of Mainz, an

employee of the Students' Office, who was responsible for the acknowledgement of my Finnish diplomas, gave me a document which stated that my Finnish licentiate corresponded to the German master. Thus my Finnish master corresponded to the German bachelor. Of course, this was a major mistake, but this example illustrates how incomprehensible the notion of a Finnish licentiate degree can be in other European countries.

My Studies and Research Studies in Finland

After graduating in Germanic Philology from the Swedish language Åbo Akademi University in December 2007, I embarked in the spring of 2008 on a further-reaching academic research project with the aim to result in a licentiate thesis. The licentiate degree entails the writing of a thesis of about 100 pages in length (for philological subjects and the Arts) and the completion of research education coursework. The exact number and field of the courses depend on the subject of the thesis: those courses comprising at least 60 ECTS credits should be the preparation for the project and/or help to gain experience in the specific field. At the same time the courses do not have to be completed at the department at which the thesis is written. Academic activities, like articles or lectures, which are linked to the licentiate thesis, can also be acknowledged as part of the research education. The number of credits applies both for students who struggle for licentiate and doctoral degree. Also other compulsory courses are the same for licentiate and doctoral students. Therefore, for students who do firstly a licentiate degree this achievements are acknowledged for their doctoral studies and do not have to be repeated. During my time there were only two courses which were compulsory for all doctoral students at the Faculty of Philosophy of Åbo Akademi University, namely "The Philosophy of the Human Science" and "Thesis Composition". Unfortunately, these courses were seen by many doctoral students as a genuine *waste of time*, since for many of them it was hard to see benefits from these courses for following through with the own project. The licentiate thesis is subsequently assessed by two experts. A thesis written at the German Department of Åbo Akademi University is assessed by at least one external expert (mostly from Germany). There are only two grades of the thesis: *pass* or *very good*. It is not compulsory (in practice even seldom) to publish the thesis, and there is neither a final examination nor a public defense like in case of the doctoral thesis. I submitted my thesis in April 2010 (exactly two years after starting my project), and in November 2010 I got my licentiate diploma.

The German Department of Åbo Akademi University used to willingly accept new doctoral students. During my studies, there were about twelve doctoral

students at the German Department. This is quite a lot for such a small institute with only one supervisor (i.e. full professor). It is also quite a lot if you consider the fact that since 2005 only three doctoral students (!) managed to complete their doctoral theses and got their PhDs, and two more have completed their licentiate theses by now (early 2013). I will come back to this *phenomenon* in the further parts of my contribution once again. Most of the doctoral students at the German Department were external one, thus coming to Åbo once or twice a year for presenting their research during doctoral colloquiums. Some of them have two supervisors, one at Åbo and one at another Finnish university or sometimes abroad (Germany or Switzerland for the most part). For those doctoral students it was often the one and only possibility to discuss their research with the supervisor and the other doctoral students. In comparison, internal doctoral students had an opportunity to get feedback from the supervisor almost every time they needed help.

2008, when I started my research, it was very easy for me to get the doctoral position: the supervisor knew me already very well, the faculty administration in terms of enrolment procedures was uncomplicated, and the faculty secretary helpful whilst processing my application. It took me, in comparison, five months to get a doctoral position at Mainz University in 2011, although for my supervisor the case was clear – some employees from the Students' Office had problems in understanding my Finnish diploma. This happened although the diploma comes with an English language supplement, which explains in detail the Finnish educational system and presents the degree in context of the different European tertiary education standards and even converts all grades into the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.

Research Situation

The term *research situation* means for me in the context of this contribution 1) the access to crucial and central secondary literature as well as 2) the possibility of finding of a suitable supervisor as well as other researchers, whose feedback can help in the development of the project and, finally, 3) the financial possibilities of carrying out the project. In the following section I will discuss all these problems.

The situation of the doctoral students of Germanic Philology varies strong and depends on the subject of the thesis and on the university they pursue their research at as well. Unfortunately, and this is questionable, very often the situation does not depend on the level of the research itself and the motivation and work of the student, but rather on other factors the doctoral student sometimes cannot influence at all.

I am going to first focus on the access to necessary primary and secondary literature. Finnish university libraries are mostly rather well-stocked when it comes to the areas of linguistics and translation studies. These library collections do, quite naturally, not solely comprise Germanic Studies, but also serve studies in other languages as well. Thus, doctoral students, who do their research in Germanic linguistics or translation can find lots of relevant, also some of the most recent, publications for their projects. More and more books can be read as e-books. Also the borrowing of books from the others Finnish university libraries works mainly well, therefore the visiting of university libraries in Germany is not necessary for most of the doctoral students. However, there are also doctoral students who do their research in (from the Finnish point of view) unique subjects, and they have to handle the necessity of visiting of German university libraries or – for some very special subjects – German archives. Nevertheless, at the time I was working on my licentiate thesis at Åbo Akademi University, it was possible to get financial assistance (from the university or from the department) for such research stays.

The second point I will discuss now is the finding of a proper supervisor. This depends mainly on the subject of the research. Finnish departments of Germanic studies are mostly small (in comparison to German Departments in Germany) and, with the exception of the University of Helsinki and the University of Vaasa, there is only one full professor at each department of German. Moreover, Germanic studies within Finland is orientated mainly towards linguistics and translation studies (two or three decades ago, the situation used to be different and there were also internationally well-known Finnish Germanists, who did research on literature or medieval German studies). Literary studies seem to be unappealing to the Finnish context by now. For the present Finnish doctoral students, this potentially entails very good possibilities of finding a supervisor in the field of linguistics or translation studies. However, as soon as the research focuses on literary studies, or connects linguistics with literary studies, it can be difficult to find a supervisor, who can supervise theses with such broad thematic approaches. Only very few of the Finnish professors of German language have such qualifications and thus are able (and willing) to supervise theses which go (way) beyond linguistics.

The last (and for many readers probably the most interesting) point of the *research situation* I will talk about, financial possibilities, is strongly connected with the situation of Finnish Germanic Philology in general. Since a few years it can be observed that the position of German studies in Finland changes constantly. Unfortunately, these changes are rather negative and it is hard to say now where this situation will lead to. For many decades, Germany used to be an important partner and example for Finland in many different fields (for instance economy, science, or culture). Therefore, the interest for German language and culture was

relatively big. Lately, Finland is more and more orientated towards a globalized, almost exclusively English-speaking world. Because of this, less and less pupils choose German as a second foreign language (instead of for example English, Russian or Spanish) at school (the first foreign language is Swedish, for Finnish-speaking students). Also, less and less students choose German as their study subject at the university level. In this situation thus less teachers of German at schools and universities are needed. For this reason universities *produce* a smaller number of degrees in Germanic studies and get less money for this field. For the German departments, this means strong financial cuts, reduction of posts (or that is to say that vacancies will not be filled anymore), smaller expenses for new literature, research stays etc. About this it has to be said that strong financial cuts concern not only Germanic studies but also other subjects of philosophical faculties. Or, in other words, because of economic measures at philosophical faculties all *unprofitable* subjects (and Germanic philology is definitely seen from the economic point of view as unprofitable) have to live with strong financial cuts. As *profitable* are seen those subjects which educate qualified employees for the industry, for instance in the natural or technical sciences. Such institutes and departments get state money, similarly to institutes in the Arts, from the Finnish government. In addition, they get money from the industrial sector and in this way they are able to provide substantial grants for doctoral students. Doctoral students do their research (sometimes) in turn on very particular subjects, which companies wish to get examined. All that influences the financial situation of doctoral students immensely. In general, doctoral students in Germanic studies have mainly three possibilities of financing of their research. I will subsequently elaborate on all these possibilities.

Firstly, it is (still) possible to be employed for a few years as assistant. During that time, the doctoral student works on his or her thesis and has also official duties, like teaching or organizational and administrative tasks at the department. This position can be compared to the German *Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter* at pre-doctoral level. Unfortunately it occurs sometimes that assistants need ten or more years (!) to get their doctoral thesis submitted. In other European countries, it not allowed for an assistant to work on the thesis for such a long time. In Germany, for example, the *Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter* at pre-doctoral level is obliged to finish his doctoral project (including the defence) within a maximum of six years, in Poland within the maximum of eight years. This restriction often motivates doctoral students to work in a disciplined manner to be able to comply with the temporal requirements of their particular university. On the contrary it happens quite often that doctoral students without a compulsory deadline for their projects and thus work on their theses for too long periods of time. Because of that it is almost certain that the results of such theses can be not interesting anymore – from

the academic point of view they tend to be outdated. During such a long period of time other academics can publish their research on very similar subjects and thus go beyond what takes too long to be published. In such a case, the results of a *long-term* doctoral project, can, in a worst case scenario, not be relevant anymore. Anyway, only very few doctoral students can get an assistant post. This financial possibility is, after all, rare.

The other financial possibility for doctoral students in Germanic philology was getting a position in a Finnish Graduate School in Language Studies – *Langnet*[1]. However, this was an option only for research projects in linguistics or translation science. It has meanwhile been decided that there will be no further funding for Langnet, which means this source of funding will soon disappear. Research projects on literary studies are not supported by *Langnet* at all, there is a small graduate school of literary studies (unfortunately not including German literature). Submitting of an application was easy and worked online during the time of my research studies. After about two to three months every applicant received a detailed evaluation of his/her application with grades for each part of the application. This was a helpful measure for reworking the application and, possibly, the whole research project. It was also possible to compare anonymized online grades of other applicants (this is no longer common practice). At this point I would like to emphasize that I have never seen a similar transparency in evaluation of applications and the rewarding of applicants in any other Finnish Foundation (the Finnish foundation and granting culture is a very complicated network (see below) that lacks transparency and has led to criminal convictions concerning foundations granting money for political purposes; so far the university sector has not been the focus of criminal investigations). However, this does not mean that I completely agree with the distribution of the grants and that its manner is clear to me. It is for me namely not clear why some subjects or languages within the area of linguistics or translation studies are being supported and others are not. Some doctoral students submit really very good applications for interesting linguistic projects and these applications get bad grades only because they do not fit into the momentary stream of the graduate school.

However, for those whose applications which were evaluated as very good it was possible to get a full-time position for up to four years. During that time the researcher could entirely concentrate on his/her project. Still, it is for me unclear how the development of doctoral students will be checked. Also here it can namely

1 For more information on Langnet see http://www.joensuu.fi/fld/langnet/english/ [12.03.2013] and the essay of Michael Szurawitzki in this volume.

occur that a doctoral student gets a long-term position and does not use this time for finishing of his/her project. Personally I know a doctoral student who had a four-year position within *Langnet* and did not manage to finish her thesis during that time (it took her over 10 years – completely financed by grants and doctoral full-time positions – to write a doctoral thesis of 60 (!) pages – furthermore, the *thesis* consists of only four articles. For the humanities this is a very small amount of text; normally you would expect a monograph of some 200 pages). However, for doctoral students of Germanic philology, it was very hard to get a Langnet position. This graduate school financed some 40 doctoral students in total – from nine Finnish universities and from different language areas. As I pointed out, this funding perspective will soon be one from the past and cannot be used any longer.

The last and most common financial possibility for doctoral students of Germanic studies in Finland is getting grants from private and stately research funding organizations. The preparation of an application is almost similar for every foundation and can be mainly submitted online. In Finland there is a great number of such foundations (if you consider the dimension of the country). Those foundations give scholarships for concrete subjects, for instance only for medicine research or only for the Arts, or for some special purposes as some target groups or minorities as well[2]. Åbo Akademi University has its own foundation, which provides research grants for doctoral students from Åbo. The Emil Öhmann Foundation[3], which belongs to the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, gives grants (one month up to a year) especially for doctoral students of Germanic philology and for scientists from other fields, who do their research on Germany, its politics, history or arts. However, this foundation does not give grants for book publications. The number of grants given by the Emil Öhmann Foundation varies from year to year. Grants are seen by Finnish researchers not only as a financial support but also as an honour. The diplomas, for the Öhmann Foundation's grants, are handed out during a highly official ceremony in the building of the Finnish House of the Estates (Säätytalo)[4]. Finnish cabinet ministers or former Finnish presidents are often guests during those ceremonies. Doctoral students can receive grants for their project from the Emil Öhmann Foundation only once. Grants for preparation of scientific conferences can be given theoretically every year.

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2 For more information on Finnish foundations see: http://www.saatiopalvelu.fi/en/links-to-finnish-foundations/ [15.04.2013].

3 For further information on Emil Öhmann Foundation see: http://www.acadsci.fi/scholarships.htm [15.04.2013].

4 For more information on the Finnish House of the Estate see: http://vnk.fi/ministerio/toimitilat/saatytalo/fi.jsp [18.04.2013].

Most of the Finnish foundations award one-year-grants. Contrary to the Emil Öhmann Foundation, most of the foundations offer a possibility of applying for further grants also for doctoral students whom they have supported already. In this case it is (theoretically) possible that the whole research project is financially supported by one foundation. Doctoral students of Germanic studies have therefore a possibility of applying for grants from other foundations as well. Some of them for instance use grants for research stays in Germany which are founded by DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service)[5]. The last three months of the research on the doctoral thesis can be founded by money directly provided by the rector of the respective university. In addition every 'Finnish' doctoral student (Finnish citizen or foreigner married to a Finnish citizen) is eligible for 15 months of small financial support (some 298 € by now and up to 201 € rental support) from KELA, the Finnish social security agency[6]. This is in addition to up to 55 months of non-refundable student support.

The amount of grants given by Finnish foundations is in average between 1400–1700 € per month. PhDs can get for their research post-doctoral projects some 100 up to 200 € more per month. Those grants are not to be taxed at all, but since 2009 researchers who receive a scholarship for at least four months in a year have to pay a compulsory pension scheme. The Finnish state guarantees the mandatory social insurance for every legal inhabitant of Finland by the social insurance institution KELA. Doctoral students who finance their research by grants (and this is a very big group of doctoral students) do not have to worry about their health insurance. Unless, pension scheme contributions for this period time are not taken on KELA. It can also happen that someone who has been working during his whole working life for many years as a researcher by founding his projects by grants will get a small pension because all those research years are not calculated towards it. To avoid such situations, the Finnish government decided to establish a compulsory insurance for researchers receiving grants by a pension insurance of the Finnish Forest Research Institute, MELA[7]. Every year MELA informs its clients about the amount of the contributions made. Thus it is easy to follow the development of the amount of the saved pension scheme. Some Finnish foundations (like for instance the Foundation of Åbo Akademi University) used to give their scholarship holders the possibility of paying a non-compulsory pension scheme contribution to a private fixed-income fund already before 2009. This

5 For more information on DAAD see: https://www.daad.de/en/ [15.04.2013].

6 For further information on KELA see: http://www.kela.fi/web/en [18.04.2013].

7 For more information on MELA see: http://www.mela.fi/fi/ajankohtaista/melas-web-pages-english [15.04.2013].

applied to a very small percentage of all researchers, and the new law guarantees a pension scheme for every scholarship holder.

As already pointed out, grants are generally not to be taxed in Finland. They are also not counted as an income for the calculation of the daycare fee - this is another *gift* from the Finnish state to its doctoral students. Some parents have their income on form of grants and do not have to pay for daycare at all while other parents with a comparable income (but gained by regular jobs) have to pay the fees. Here it is to be emphasized that fees for Finnish daycare are considerable smaller than for instance in Germany. The maximum daycare fee in Finland is 264 € per month now for whole-day care (6.30 am to 5.00 pm); for parents who receive grants the daycare can be totally fee-free. In addition, with the exception of very few densely populated areas like Helsinki or Espoo, it is easy to get a place for the child in daycare because this service is guaranteed for every family by the Finnish state. Because of that young parents can easily concentrate on their work.

My Personal Experiences

As I already said: Before starting my doctoral research, I finished my MA studies in Germanic philology in Finland. This is why I had gained a decent overview of the situation within Germanic studies in Finland. Moreover, I noticed the accelerating change of Germanic studies away from a stable to an increasingly unstable situation: the financial support of the departments grew more and more uncertain; at the same time the perspectives for securing funding and employment at universities became worse. In spite of this, I did not get distracted and managed to follow through with my research project, bringing it to a successful conclusion.

Although at times during my licentiate project I felt unhappy with both the situations of Germanic studies and doctoral students in Finland, I feel I have to say concerning the circumstances, I have to consider myself most fortunate: My supervisor supported my research project and provided invaluable help with letters of support as part of my funding applications, as well as providing me with a room at the department. This room became especially important in the initial phase of the project, since my newly born daughter could be there with me at all times during my writing process. In addition to this it must be said that the level of tolerance for young parents (at least at my department) was quite high indeed. I was not the only young female licentiate student *and* mother who combined academic work with bringing up young children. The female professor (i.e. the head of department) took the special needs that come with this situation into account and enabled all of these doctoral (and degree) students an ideal research environment by individually taking into consideration what was needed in the respective individual situations. This is