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# Rural Studies network of Finland – a national approach to networking rural expertise

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**Abstract:** *Rural Studies is a network initiative between ten Finnish universities. This paper discusses Rural Studies as an innovative approach for pulling together the limited national resources of academic rural expertise. There are many background factors for the establishment of Rural Studies network, of which two may be mentioned here. First, Finland is regarded to be the most rural country in the European Union, mostly due to its remote position in Northern Europe and very sparse settlement structure. This “rurality” has led to a long tradition of rural research in several disciplines. Second, Finland’s EU membership in 1995 consolidated rural policy programming. Networks of rural researchers and planners have been in a key position when rural policy programmes were prepared. The system of higher education in Finland is under the spotlight of many changes, and in this discussion small research areas such as rural studies are not very competitive if they are unable to find new ideas and ways of doing things together. In the future post-graduate education, wider cooperation and creation of rural research programmes, and networking with international rural education and research networks will be focal points in Rural Studies.*

**Keywords:** *Finland, rural studies, social capital*

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## Introduction

Networks and networking are key issues in rural development on all regional levels both in Finland and in the European Union (see e.g. Green 2007). Programme-based rural development has brought along an increasing need for cooperation between different rural actors when national and regional rural policies are formulated. Networks are not working properly if the actors are not involved in cooperation and if they are unable to see wider profits in doing things together instead of only defending their own interests. In this process social capital and trust are central concepts.

This paper introduces a Finnish example of rural networking on the basis of common interests and voluntary involvement. *Rural Studies* (<http://www.ruralstudies.fi/>) is a network initiative between ten Finnish univer-

sities aiming to combine the limited national resources of academic rural expertise (*Rural Studies* is in *Italics* in this article when it means this network).

The paper is divided into five sections. First, the role of expertise in Finnish rural policy is presented briefly. Then the establishment and organization of the network is described. Thirdly, in the empirical part of the paper opinions of actors (board members, teachers, contact persons in universities and students) of the network are analyzed on the basis of a web questionnaire made by the *Rural Studies* coordination unit in 2006. This mostly unpublished data was available for this study, as was the written internal material of the network (e.g. annual reports, proceedings of the board, strategies). The author has been involved as an active actor (board member and teacher) in the network since its origins and so participatory observations were also utilized. Finally, some concluding remarks are made especially on the future challenges of the network.

## The role of expertise in Finnish rural policy

Finland is often regarded as the most rural country in the European Union, mostly due to its remote position in Northern Europe and very sparse settlement structure (see e.g. Neubauer et al. 2007). This “rurality” has also led to a long tradition of rural research in several disciplines, of which human geography should be mentioned as one of the most important. The society of rural researchers has, however, always been quite scattered and few in numbers, which has pitched the researchers to seek partners outside their own disciplines and research units.

Social sciences have had an important role in the development of the Nordic welfare model and in the modernization process. This has also been the case when the present regional and rural policy systems in Finland have been developed. The significance of academic expertise for rural development is emphasized both in national and regional rural programmes and it is recognized to become even more central in the future. The idea of know-how networks is also widely accepted as a means to organize research and education. Finland’s EU membership in 1995 consolidated rural policy programming. Networks of rural researchers and planners have been in a key position when national rural policy programmes were prepared.

The system of rural policy in Finland is advanced and centrally coordinated by the Ministry of Agriculture. The present programme *Viable Countryside – Our Joint Responsibility* is for 2005–2008. In the programme, raising the level of know-how in rural areas is one of the four key policy themes. The other three are reinforcing the operative structures of the rural areas, reorganization of industries and work and maintenance and construction of basic services (<http://www.maaseutupolitiikka.fi/>; Maaseutupolitiikan yhteistyöryhmä 2004; Rural Policy Committee 2004; Muilu and Onkalo 2006).

Within the programme a total of 134 detailed or general measures were agreed to the development of rural areas. In the know-how section one of the measures was to establish a multidisciplinary Masters degree programme in rural studies. There were also many other measures for improving expertise in rural areas, such as the establishment of five fixed-term rural professorships in Finnish universities (the outcome was nine posts), which emphasizes the common view of the role of education in the development of rural areas. So *Rural Studies* network is based on the official national rural programme, but it did not give guidelines on how this network should take actions.

### **Networking rural expertise – origins of Rural Studies network**

Despite the long tradition of rural research and education in Finland, this research has been somewhat scattered and weak, since most of the university departments and other research units are rather small and in some cases there have been only very few researchers involved in rural research (Katajamäki 2006). In human geography, for example, some new and trendier branches of research, such as urban and tourism geography and GIS weakened the position of rural research.

The origins of the network are many but maybe the most important single happening was the foundation of *Maaseudun Uusi Aika – yhdistys* (*New Rural Policy Society*, see <http://www.mua.fi/>, in Finnish only) in the beginning of the 1990s. It collected many interested academics that started discussions on how to put the limited resources of rural education together. Katajamäki (2007), Siiskonen (2007) and Muilu (2007) have described and analyzed the stages and problems of the creation of the network. Hyyryläinen (2007) has described how *Rural Studies* was constructed as a social innovation. The most important resource of the network is the personal know-how capital of the actors and the ability of the network to act interactively, which both gives foundations and creates social capital.

*Rural Studies* network actually started already in 2002 as an unofficial consortium between seven universities. Its aim was to *establish a multidisciplinary rural education programme for the Masters level students of partner universities*, as later stated also in the rural policy programme. In 2007 there were a total of ten universities involved by official agreements in the network: the universities of Helsinki, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Kuopio, Lappeenranta, Oulu, Tampere, Turku, Vaasa and Åbo Akademi (Rural Studies 2007a).

### **Organization and operation of Rural Studies network**

*Rural Studies* has a network-based managerial and administration model which is coordinated by the Ruralia Institute of the University of Helsinki, located in the city of Mikkeli. The **coordination unit** employs three persons, who are responsible for e.g. student guidance and strategic planning.

The **board** consists of 12 members and their deputies from each of the ten partner universities (three members from the coordination unit). The board formulates and accepts the strategy and action programme for each year and also accepts new students. Face-to-face meetings are mostly held twice a year, besides which also e-mail, web and telephone meetings are held if there are important issues to be decided. To ensure the right of decision, deputies are also invited to meetings but if both the member and deputy from the same university are present, only the member has the right to vote (which almost never happens). Most of the members are full professors. In each university there are also one or more **contact persons** who are intermediaries between the coordination unit and students (<http://www.ruralstudies.fi/>). **Teaching** is given both in web-learning environments as distance education and as intensive courses.

The financial resources of the network are limited and so a great deal of the action is based on the voluntary willingness of the teachers and researchers involved. At present the Ministry of Education and the University of Helsinki financed the network.

## Experiences of Rural Studies network

Networks are acting properly only if the actors are involved in cooperation and can see the advantages of exploiting social capital instead of “bowling alone” (Putnam 2000). In order to determine what the situation of *Rural Studies* is, the coordination unit made a web questionnaire for the actors of the network in spring 2006.

Four groups of actors were enquired separately: the board, teachers, contact persons in universities and students of the network. The questionnaire was based on five-level Likert scale statements (1 = strongly disagree/fully dissatisfied... 5 = strongly agree/fully satisfied) and open replies. It should be mentioned that some of members of the first three groups were the same people, i.e. some board members were also teaching and were contact persons. However, they were asked to reply to each questionnaire in different roles and also the questions were slightly different. In this chapter the opinions of each group are analyzed.

### Board of the network

The board is the most important actor of *Rural Studies* since it makes the strategic decisions which the coordination unit puts into action. A total of 9 board members replied to the questionnaire. They were very satisfied with the operation of the network, since most of the replies to the questions were in the categories “fairly or fully satisfied”. For example, 7 members were more or less satisfied with their influence in the development of the network and also in the strategic approach, even though some criticism was also presented:

*Discussions in the board have been active and the different opinions have been taken into account pretty well. Sometimes we face the problem between*

*idealism versus realism: I doubt that Rural Studies will ever become a very wide phenomenon, no matter that we dream about that in our own gang.*

*The action of the network and coordination unit has been systematic, even though there should be more space to comb through new ideas of development. For example, we should be better involved in the idea of sustainable development and find cooperation in that field.*

It became obvious from the replies that the board members are strongly involved in the development of academic rural education and willing to spend their time on it, even though all the members are participating in many other duties as university professors and teachers. Some complained slightly about the amount of work required especially in the starting stage, but at the same time they emphasized the important and innovative role of the network.

*At the beginning the network was a lot of work, but actually it did not matter: it was interesting to take part in planning a process in which I had personal interest. Now when we have fewer meetings I sometimes wonder whether we are already too businesslike.*

*I would like to take part in the action more than at present, but lack of time is a constraint...*

The board members also presented some development ideas, even though they were quite satisfied with the present situation. Besides practical proposals, there were concerns about the hardening of competition between different new and more fashionable fields of academic education and doubts on whether rural issues will be interesting enough when we “fight for the souls of students”.

*Now our unit cooperates with some of the departments in other universities in the network. We should comb through the outside departments’ interests. For example, in the University of Helsinki there is a strong network of urban research and they might be a good partner for us. Also, in the coordination unit there is a lot of expertise in the field of ecological sustainable development, which could be integrated into our network.*

*Marketing of the Rural Studies network will become increasingly difficult since the supply in all fields of academic education is increasing and the competition is hardening. Students are very interested in the grass-roots level experiences of previous Rural Studies students: should we use them as “itinerant preachers” in different departments? Of course only if they are willing to do that and maybe with some financial compensation.*

## Teachers

Every year around 20 teachers from partner universities teach in the *Rural Studies* network. In the 2006–2007 term a total of 15 study modules were offered. A total of 14 of the teachers replied to the questionnaire in 2006.

As told earlier, some of the teachers were also board members, but for the rest of the group the flow of information inside the network is a critical factor. During recent years the general amount of information has rapidly increased, especially due to the internet, and most of the actors in the network are in a situation where it is almost impossible to follow up on all the possible pieces of notices.

However, most of the teachers were quite satisfied with the information situation in *Rural Studies*, since only one of the informants was less than at least fairly satisfied with the amount and quality of the notices from the coordination unit. They were also satisfied with the practical arrangements of study modules, which is by no means an easy task in courses where there may be students from 10 different universities and also teachers from several disciplines and universities. The general satisfaction did not mean that teachers would not present any criticism or development ideas:

*Could it be possible to send us e.g. 3–4 times annually an information package or review of the present situation in the network?*

*Maybe a more active flow of information between the teachers would be desirable in some cases, although no doubt this is up to ourselves...*

Teachers were not quite as satisfied with their possibilities to take part in the development of the network. This is of course understandable in the sense that they are not as strongly involved in the network as are the board members. However, most of the teachers were fairly or totally satisfied with their influence, but 4 out of 14 were either dissatisfied or were not aware of their possibilities to take part in the development. The same informants were also unaware of the strategies of the network.

A great majority of the teachers was satisfied with the student administration (e.g. study register) of the coordination unit, but they criticized problems in consolidating teaching and registers between the partner universities.

*It is a bit problematic to consolidate the needs of study registers in many universities. Is it really impossible to create a common national study register? There are also some problems with students' registration for examinations in their home departments, they should be coordinated centrally through the coordination unit which should also be made clear to the students. Now they are e-mailing their registrations hither and thither.*

## Contact persons

Contact persons act as intermediaries between students and the administration of the network. They have a dual role as student advisers (up-down) and contact persons (bottom-up) and so they are central persons e.g. in the marketing of the network to students. Especially important are contact persons in those departments who have no representatives on the board or among teachers.

In 2006–2007 there were 16 contact persons in the different departments of the 10 universities of the network. Only five of them replied to the questionnaire. This could be seen as a sign of passiveness towards *Rural Studies*, but the truth is not that gloomy, since many of the contact persons had already replied either as board members or teachers.

Due to the small amount of answers no general conclusions can be made of the opinions. A majority (3) of the replicants were fairly satisfied with the level of information they have received from the coordination unit and with their possibilities to influence the development of the network. Some single thoughts and proposals were presented in open replies:

*Rural Studies is presented in each study guide of basic education (in our university). RS is also introduced to new students in their introduction meetings. Links to Rural Studies web-site are available from the web-site of our university and written material is available in study and faculty offices.*

*The web-site of the network could be updated in real-time and it should be translated into English.*

*Could you arrange a separate meeting for contact persons, so that we would meet each other at least once? I understand that this may be an issue of finance...*

## Students

Students are more and more treated as “paying customers” in Finnish universities since the present model of finance of universities is mostly based on the degrees (MSc, PhD) earned by students. Also the future of networks like *Rural Studies* is heavily dependent on whether we are able to recruit enough new and motivated students.

In the 2006–2007 term there were a total of 120 students in the network, of which 20 were post-graduate (doctoral) students. Uusitalo (2007) has analyzed the motives of students who have applied to the network. Most of the students are born in rural areas or have other contacts to or experiences from rural areas, such as their families’ summer cottages or grand-parents still living in villages. Many have a strong, even ideological motivation to educate themselves as rural experts: *my ultimate motive in rural development is to assure that my children will have a realistic chance to choose the countryside as a place to live and stay.* They were also interested in new forms of teaching, such as web-based e-learning and intensive courses.

A total of 28 students from 9 universities replied to the questionnaire (no replies came from the University of Lapland, which became a member only in 2006). According to their opinions the advertising of the network has been a success since only one of the respondents was fairly dissatisfied with the level of information and 19 were very satisfied. The comments were minor and practical:



*Sometimes the details of the courses are unclear until quite late.*

*There should be even more courses, which could be taken as a distance education, i.e. which would not require presence. Course material could be available on the web and you could make an essay, home examination or a distance examination in your own university.*

*Registration of the courses in home university's register should be easier, so that the student would not need to take care of the matter by him/herself.*

The students also presented some criticism of the update of web-site, especially on the dates and details of courses. Even though they were satisfied with the amount of information on the network they had received, some of the students still told that they heard about *Rural Studies* more or less by accident or from previous students.

*Could the previous students from different universities be exploited in the marketing? If one would see familiar faces in some Rural Studies occasions it might promote applications from new students.*

Students did not regard their chances to influence the development of *Rural Studies* as very good, but this may be seen as a general situation in university courses. However, almost all the respondents told that student feedback should be collected after each study module, which is one important form of interaction between teachers and students in the development of teaching. This should actually already be in trust, since the coordination unit makes feedback questionnaire to each student after each course and sends summaries to teachers. However, many of the students proposed ways how to voice their opinions better.

*It would be good to take feedback from students on e.g. the courses being planned. We could tell which of them are interesting.*

*A "wish-box" of new courses (for the web-site). It would be good to have pre-registration to study modules in spring/autumn.*

*I have doubts about whether we actually can influence, but it seems that in some courses the same matters are dealt with. So there is some overlapping, although most of the matters are new. Of course I understand this since there are many universities, departments and teachers in the network.*

To conclude, many of the comments of students are practical, concerning e.g. problems in study registers, course schedules and other details. Many of the problems are treatable, but some of them seem impossible to solve due to the bureaucracy, like the problems in study registers criticized by all actors.

## **Conclusions and future challenges of Rural Studies**

*Rural Studies* is an example of a rural expertise network which really exploits social capital as a fuel of action. Teaching and everyday planning of the network

is mostly based on personal involvement and relations of the board members and teachers, since only the work in the coordination unit is based on paid work. Most of the teachers, however, are paid for their teaching, but the amount of finance for this is limited. For the board members only their travel expenses for the meeting are compensated.

In the period of 2007–2009 a major strategic goal of the network is ensuring the finance for coordination, teaching and development. Also post-graduate education (doctoral school) and international contacts are central issues (Rural Studies 2007b). For example, the English web-site will be made in 2007.

To conclude, three major future challenges may be identified for *Rural Studies*. First, it seems that the competition between universities and teaching networks for talented and motivated students will harden in Finland in the next 5–10 years. This is both due to the (excessively?) wide supply of choices for university students and diminishing number of young people in Finland, especially in rural areas.

Secondly, as connected to the previous, the amount of public finance for the network will not at least increase in the near future. There are more and more recipients of education funds and the present doctrine in Finnish education policy is that actually the share of public finance is going down and it should be compensated by private (company) money, in which *Rural Studies* may not be very competitive. This is somewhat paradoxical when networks in general are concerned, since one “wretched” idea in networking is to save taxpayer’s money. The state and public officials strongly agree that there are a lot of overlapping actions in rural policy and planning (as in other sectors of society) and if the actors are more aware on each other’s functions and goals through networks, they can avoid doing the same things in the same areas.

Finally, *Rural Studies* is challenged by the need to be better connected to international rural education and research cooperation. This has also been set as one of the goals in the strategy for 2007–2009. At present most of the teaching in the network is given in Finnish and also the material (and web-site) is mostly in Finnish and so this goal requires a lot of effort from the teachers. However, more and more of the teaching in Finnish universities is already given in English and so there is a readiness also among teachers of *Rural Studies* to become more international also in teaching, as is already the case in research.

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