

# Deusto Estudios Cooperativos

Revista del Instituto de Estudios Cooperativos  
de la Facultad de Derecho de la Universidad de Deusto

**N.º 23** (2023)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.18543/dec232023>

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## **Institutionalizing Co-operative Education in Universities - the Case of the Co-op Network Studies Program in Finland**

La institucionalización de la Educación Cooperativa en las Universidades —El caso del programa de estudios de redes cooperativas en Finlandia—

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.18543/dec.2885>

Submission date: 28 April 2023 • Approval date: 02 October 2023 • E-published: January 2024

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# Institutionalizing Co-operative Education in Universities - the Case of the Co-op Network Studies Program in Finland

La institucionalización de la Educación Cooperativa en las Universidades - El caso del programa de estudios de redes cooperativas en Finlandia

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.18543/dec.2885>

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ulum, teaching, and coordination. 2.4. The students in the CNS. 2.5. Students' motivation to complete courses in the CNS.—3. Discussion and conclusions.—References.

**Contenidos:** 1. Introducción.—2. Estudios de redes cooperativas. 2.1. Historia temprana de educación universitaria cooperativa en Finlandia. 2.2. La financiación de y el número de universidades involucradas en el CNS. 2.3. El plan de estudios, la docencia y la coordinación del curso. 2.4. Los estudiantes del CNS. 2.5. Motivación de los estudiantes para completar cursos en el CNS.—3. Discusión y conclusiones.—Referencias.

**Abstract:** In this article we study the understudied topic of the institutionalization of co-operative education with an illustrative case study of Co-op network studies (CNS) program – a Finnish university network providing a curriculum on co-operative studies. We cover the network's history, curriculum, structure, funding, and factors motivating student participation and finally discuss how CNS has succeeded in its mission: to establish co-operative education in the curricula of different Finnish universities. The results are two-fold. On the one hand, the network has successfully operated for almost 20 years, provided 16.000 credit points, and worked as an important mutual learning hub for scholars providing teaching on co-operatives. On the other hand, CNS has not managed to institutionalize co-operative education in university curriculum outside of the studies provided in the network as has been its goal, and thus, the continuity of the network is vital. We deduce that the low level of institutionalization can probably be attributed to poor coverage of co-operatives in university level education in general and in university structures that does not favor network studies.

**Keywords:** co-operatives, co-operative education, network studies.

**Resumen:** En este artículo estudiamos el tema poco estudiado de la institucionalización de la educación cooperativa con un estudio de caso ilustrativo del programa de estudios en red cooperativa (CNS), una red universitaria finlandesa que ofrece un plan de estudios sobre estudios cooperativos. Cubrimos la historia, el plan de estudios, la estructura, la financiación y los factores que motivan la participación de los estudiantes de la red y finalmente discutimos cómo CNS ha tenido éxito en su misión: establecer la educación cooperativa en los planes de estudio de diferentes universidades finlandesas. Los resultados son dobles. Por un lado, la red ha funcionado con éxito durante casi 20 años, ha proporcionado 16.000 puntos de crédito y ha funcionado como un importante centro de aprendizaje mutuo para académicos que imparten enseñanza sobre cooperativas. Por otro lado, la CNS no ha logrado institucionalizar la educación cooperativa en el currículo universitario fuera de los estudios impartidos en la red como ha sido su objetivo, por lo que la continuidad de la red es vital. Deducimos que el bajo nivel de institucionalización probablemente puede atribuirse a una pobre cobertura de las cooperativas en la educación universitaria en general y en estructuras universitarias que no favorecen los estudios en red.

**Palabras clave:** cooperativas, educación cooperativa, estudios de redes.

## 1. Introduction

Co-operative education is an important part of ensuring the continuity and success of co-operative businesses. Education is focal in ensuring that new entrepreneurs consider co-operatives as an organizational form for their business and that existing co-operatives get competent labor that know how their organizational form works (Shaw, 2013; Whyte, 1995). However, the importance of co-operative education goes beyond having appropriate skills to work in co-operatives. It also allows people to develop a co-operator identity, based on, for example, valuing communality instead of individuality and organizational democracy instead of hierarchy (MacPherson, 2013). Thus, it is no wonder that the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers who are considered by many to have started the modern co-operative movement, had the principle of directing 2,5% of the economic surplus to education (Shaw, 2013).

Co-operative education bloomed in early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the wake of growing co-operative organizations, multiple educational institutions were founded to teach people how co-operatives work and the values and principles that guided the activities (Shaw, 2013). However, in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century co-operatives started to fare less well with tightening competition and with the state assuming some roles formerly provided by co-operatives, which also led to the waning of co-operative education (Woodin, 2014). Since the turn of the millennium, the number of institutions offering co-operative education has again been on the rise in many countries (Shaw, 2013; Woodin & Gristy, 2022). However, the status of co-operative education is nowhere near where it was during its golden years in the former half of 19-hundreds (Shaw, 2013).

Co-operative education is particularly absent in university education and is usually only mentioned in relation to agriculture (Shaw, 2013). Perhaps because of the dearth of co-operative university education, literature on it is scarce. We aim to contribute to this research gap by observing the case of the Co-op Network Studies program (henceforth CNS), a Finnish university network founded in 2005, which provides basic and intermediary level university studies on co-operatives. In our study, we take the viewpoint of institutionalizing co-operative education in Finnish universities, i.e., we take stock of, how well the CNS has been able to establish education on co-operatives in the Finnish university landscape. Finnish university networks are a very little researched topic. These networks were funded strongly by the Finnish Ministry of Education during the turn of the millennium, and thus, they

make excellent candidates on examining how these kinds of networks can work.

Considering the context of our case, observing institutionalization of co-operative education is a particularly suitable viewpoint for two reasons. Firstly, it has been a publicly stated goal of the network. CNS was meant as a transitory structure; the goal was not to provide co-operative education permanently through the network. Instead, it was meant to work as a basis for universities to establish teaching on co-operatives in their own curricula. Second, Finland ranks in the top six in terms of cooperative membership and employees per capita or cooperative turnover per GDP (Grace, 2014). Thus, Finland can be considered a prime candidate succeeding to institutionalize co-operative university education.

## 2. Co-op Network Studies

### 2.1. *Early history of co-operative university education in Finland*

The birth of the Finnish co-operative company model dates to the 1890s. Many consider that the founders of Finnish co-operation are Doctor Hannes Gebhard with his wife Hedvig, who were Finnish academic intellectuals. Gebhard perceived that co-operatives could provide a middle-road between economic liberalism and socialism. He started university level co-operative education and lectured on the topic at the University of Helsinki during the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Seppelin 2000). During the 1920s the co-operative teaching moved to the University of Tampere<sup>4</sup> which aimed to educate the residents of the young independent Finland to become citizens, and this education also included cooperative education (Köppä, Troberg & Hytinkoski 2008).

After the Second World War, the center of co-operative education moved back to the University of Helsinki with the founding of the Co-operative Research Foundation in 1956 and the Helsinki University Co-operative Institute<sup>5</sup> in 1957. There was a need for cooperative education for agronomists and, to some extent, political scientists who were preparing for administrative positions in cooperative central stores and organizations. The University of Helsinki got a donation from co-op-

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<sup>4</sup> To be precise, the University of Tampere was originally founded as a civic college under the University of Helsinki in 1925. Only later it became an independent university.

<sup>5</sup> In Finnish: Osuustoimintainstituutti

erative companies to start a professorship of social policy, with emphasis on cooperative theory in 1967. Later also a position of university lecturer was founded funded by donations by co-operatives, which was, however ended during the economic recession in Finland in the 1990s. (Köppä, Troberg & Hytinkoski, 2008) During the year 1991, the new Cooperative Institute was established as a multidisciplinary research and development unit. After a few years the University of Helsinki was planning to end the operations of this institute, but it was saved through a merger with the University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute campus in Mikkeli<sup>6</sup>, which conducted research on rural studies (Kalmi 2003).

During the turn of the millennium, the Finnish government planned and executed information society programs and strongly invested in the developing of e-learning at different education levels. The director of the Cooperative Institute, Tapani Köppä, was interested in developing co-operative e-learning through the network model also at the university level. These ideas were also highly affected by Professor Ian McPherson's work in Saskatchewan in Canada, where co-operative university e-learning was tested and executed using a network model. The Cooperative Institute piloted e-learning with EU/ESR-funding during the years 2003 – 2005 and at the end of this period the University of Helsinki, the University of Kuopio, the Helsinki Business School, and the University of Lappeenranta formed the CNS.

## 2.2. *The funding of and the number of universities involved in the CNS*

During the years 2006-2009, the CNS was funded as a Ministry of Education's virtual project. During these years, there were plans of creating a virtual University of Finland, to whose curriculum all Finnish universities would contribute but these plans were later canceled. The staff of the CNS network had already previously trained online teaching, and thus, it got the financing from the Ministry of Education.

During the years 2010 to 2014, CNS was funded by the Finnish co-operatives and mutual companies. In this decision, these organizations were represented by the Co-operative Council Board, which aims to promote Finnish co-operative education. The purpose of the Co-operative Council Board is to act as a cooperation body for Finn-

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<sup>6</sup> University of Helsinki Ruralia Institute campuses are located in Mikkeli and in Seinäjoki.

ish co-operative organizations and companies. This same funding was later extended by another four years. Financial backing of the co-operatives and the strong support and complementary funding by the Ruralia Institute of the University of Helsinki ensured the CNS's continuity through the 2010s. The Co-operative Council Board funding was intended to provide a start for university level co-operative education. Thus, from 2020 the funding responsibility has moved to the universities. During the years 2020-2023, each participating university has paid a participation fee. The courses are provided by many of the participating universities. Taking part in the education is encouraged by giving a discount on the yearly fee for the universities providing courses to the network.

The number of universities that have taken part in CNS in different times is presented in Figure 1. During the first year of its operation, four universities participated in the CNS. The number rose to eight the following year, where it stabilized for a long time. The interest of other universities attracted other universities as well. At the same time, doctoral theses related to co-operative themes were completed almost in a yearly basis. From the academic year 2016-2017, two more universities were added to the network. During this time participation in the CNS was at its peak; it included all the ten largest Finnish universities. However, the ending of Co-operative Council Board funding caused three universities to withdraw from the network starting from the academic year 2020-2021. As said above the funding was transferred from the co-operatives to the universities and some of them were not able to pay the participation fee.

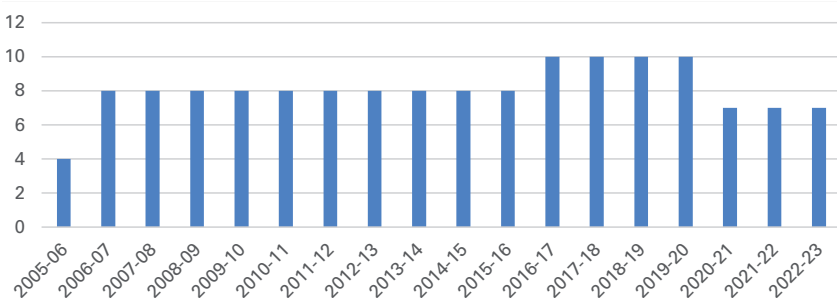


Figure 1

### The amount of universities in the CNS network

### 2.3 *The course curriculum, teaching, and coordination*

Since its inception, the CNS has provided its curriculum exclusively as online courses. From 2010 onward the CNS has provided ten courses divided into two different sections: basic courses and intermediate studies (see Table 1). These studies are recognized as a voluntary minor subject module for the students at the universities participating in the CNS network.

Table 1

#### **Titles of the CNS modules during academic year 2022-2023**

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CNS-P1 Co-operative values and principles
CNS-P2 Co-operative law I
CNS-P3b Entrepreneurship education and co-operation
CNS-P4 Co-operative business and management
CNS-P5b Cooperatives and Sustainable Development
CNS-A1b Co-operative idea and the co-operative as a form of enterprise
CNS-A2 Co-operative law II
CNS-A3 Sustainable business practices
CNS-A4 The development of the competitive advantage of co-operatives
CNS-A5 Co-operatives as institutions of exchange

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Both the students and the teachers of the CNS come from different disciplines, which aligns with the goals of the network aiming for multi-disciplinarity from its inception. The focus of the teaching has evolved somewhat over the years and has been influenced by the people who have taught in the network. In the early years of the CNS, during 2005-2010, there was a strong emphasis on the co-operator identity, values, and principles, which were aligned with the sociological background of CNS's academic head Tapani Köppä and professor Juhani Laurinkari who taught in the network. Later, during Hagen Henry's tenure as academic head, co-operative law was emphasized more which was in line with his legal background. Besides sociology and law, also business studies have been strongly represented in the CNS. However, there have been courses taking other disciplinary viewpoints, and thus, the teaching has been truly multidisciplinary.

The fact that students come from different academic backgrounds affects how the courses are designed-especially the basic courses must



be planned for audiences with little prior knowledge on co-operatives. Allowing this kind of diversity in student backgrounds has its perks and its vices. On the one hand, it results in very interesting discussions during the courses. On the other hand, none of the basic courses can go very deep in their subject matter because they must teach the students the basics of cooperation.

The CNS team has three members: an academic head, a coordinator, and a planner. During the last years, the coordination team has itself been involved in organizing two or three courses of the CNS. The primary planning and teaching responsibility of the other courses has lied with the universities participating in the network. The coordinator and the planner of the CNS has been involved in many of these courses as well in building the virtual learning environment and in everyday tutoring of the students. This ensures that the primary teachers can focus on lecturing and holding tutorials.

## 2.4 *The students in the CNS*

The number of students and the credit points completed within the CNS are presented in Figure 2. During the years 2005-2012, the number of credit points increased steadily. This rise can probably be attributed to three things. First, the CNS benefitted from the strong rise of e-learning. Second, in the beginning of the new millennium, the big Finnish co-operatives flourished, which drew positive attention also to co-operative education. Third, the CNS was also positively affected by the rise of the new doctoral and post-doctoral researchers studying co-operative themes, which provided competent teachers for the network.

During the years 2012-2016 there was a notable reduction in the number of students. The main reason for this was several personnel changes in the administration of the CNS coordination unit, which hampered, among other things, the marketing of the courses and thus significantly reduced the number of students who participated in the courses. Starting from the academic year 2016-2017, the basic level courses were organized twice each year, so 15 CNS-courses were now offered during the entire academic year. In addition, two new universities joined the CNS teaching network at that time, which led to an increase in the number of students. Marketing of the courses to students and universities was also significantly enhanced. All this led to a significant increase in the completed credit points.

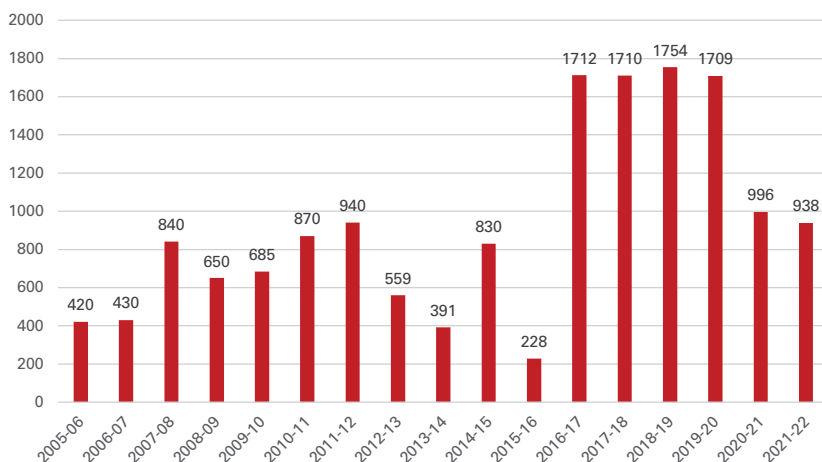


Figure 2

### The number of credit points completed within the CNS per academic year

In the academic year 2020-2021, the number of credits points dropped again sharply because of two reasons. First, the number of universities dropped from ten to seven. For this reason, the completed credit points were reduced by about one third. Second, because of the covid pandemic almost all university teaching was suddenly organized online, and thus, the CNS lost its competitive edge as a flexible online teaching option. It was also visible that many university students were exhausted and anxious with psychological isolation because of covid, and thus, focused on the compulsory studies. In the spring 2020, the effect of the pandemic was not yet visible but during in the fall there was a steep decrease in the number of completed credit points. Third, the amount of students declined also because of the mandatory early warnings of the possible ending of the CNS-studies during the academic year 2019-2020. The CNS was obliged to provide these kinds of warnings because the funding for the network had to be negotiated for each term individually, and thus, the continuation of the studies could not be ensured.

Figure 3 presents how many courses within CNS network has each student completed. During the last five academic years there has been 157 individual students to at least one CNS-course. 279

individual courses have been completed during this period. A total of 370 individual courses were completed in the last two academic years (2020-2022). They accumulated 1934 credits. The maximum number of completed courses during these two academic years was 7 courses.

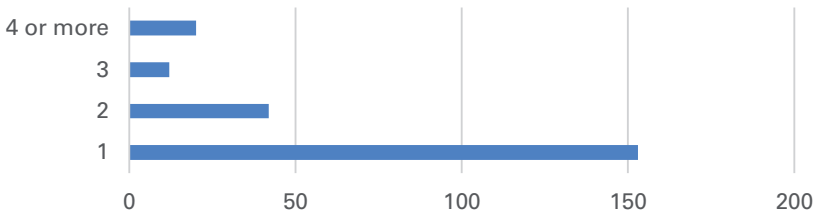


Figure 3

### The number of courses completed by students in the CNS during 2020-2022

The following Figure 4 presents the relative proportion of credit points completed divided by the disciplinary background of the students. As can be seen in the figure, these backgrounds are highly diverse and range from marketing to theology. However, half of the credit points have been completed by business school and law students and another quarter by students from humanistic disciplines and the faculty of agriculture and forestry. Notably absent are the students from technical universities, who have completed only a couple of courses. The biggest shares of students can be explained by the courses that are offered and probably by the institutional position of the educators within the program. The big proportion of business school students can be largely explained by the one compulsory course mentioned above in one of the universities within the CNS network. The proportion of the law students can be explained by the fact that two out of the ten courses within the CNS deal with co-operative law. High supply of legal education can be explained by two educators with a background in law: adjunct professor Hagen Henry, who was the academic head of the CNS during years 2011-2020 and Jukka Mähönen, who holds the professorship of co-operative law at the University of Helsinki.

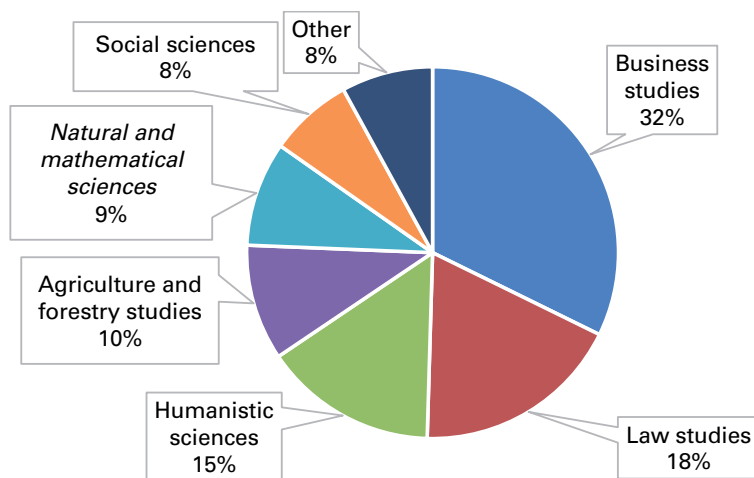


Figure 4

The relative proportion of credit points completed by students with different disciplinary backgrounds during academic years 2020-2022

### 2.5. Students' motivation to complete courses in the CNS

Within most courses of the CNS, the students have been asked about their motivation to participate. Some students have mentioned that they consider co-operatives to be important economic actors. Interestingly, this awareness of the role of co-operatives in society has grown in the beginning of the 2020s. Especially business and law students who have learned about co-operatives and co-operation during their studies are interested in deepening their understanding of the subject in the CNS courses.

There are also students that have little or no prior knowledge of co-operatives but are interested in learning about them. Many of them seem to have a positive preconceived notion of the co-operative organizational form, which is a notable change from the beginning of the 2000s, when many students saw co-operatives in a critical light. During recent years, the students have perceived that co-operatives offer a good alternative to profit maximizing corporations. Students especially appreciate the community spirit and the values of the co-operatives. Additionally, they want to find out the possibilities that co-operatives provide in the promotion of sustainable development.

Some students find their way to the CNS courses through their own experience. They either work as employees or are members in one or several co-operatives and mutuals, and therefore, want more information about this form of business. Additionally, some students are interested in founding their own co-operative, and thus, come to the CNS courses. Also, peer recommendation has led to people finding the CNS curriculum.

### 3. Discussion and conclusions

The CNS studies have been running now successfully over 17 years and during that time almost two thousand university students have received co-operative education in it completing more than 16 000 credit points. Thus, the network has succeeded in increasing many university students' knowledge on co-operatives. It is also one of the oldest university networks in Finland, and thus, it has managed to provide continuity to co-operative education. Furthermore, CNS has provided an academic forum for academics involved in the research and teaching on co-operatives. This forum is valuable because cooperation is in many universities a fringe research topic, and therefore, people might lack peers in their own universities.

Regarding the students of the CNS, it is interesting to observe that many of the students come from business schools. Often co-operatives are poorly covered in business studies (Kalmi, 2007; Shaw, 2013), which is curious for two reasons. First, co-operatives are major players in the world economy. More than 12% of the world's population are members of one of the world's three million co-operatives and these organizations employ 10% of the world's working population (International Cooperative Alliance, 2021). Thus, limited coverage of cooperatives in business studies cannot be explained by the unimportance of the organizational form. Second, co-operatives represent a radically different way of organizing business compared to corporations, which are usually strongly covered in business school curriculum (Rankin & Piwko, 2022). Co-operatives are based on member democracy and self-help and, as they grow, they need to balance the needs of the member community with efficiency and commercial pressures (Bauwens *et al.*, 2022). Considering that much of the business school curriculum is based on how business is organized and how people behave in organizations, not observing co-operatives seems like a major empirical oversight. Because of the CNS, many Finnish business school students have been acquainted with the peculiarities of the co-operative organizational form.

The overall highly multidisciplinary nature of CNS's students can probably be explained by the fact that of them do not find the courses through their teachers or study councilors, but they come to the courses motivated by various personal reasons. Membership, employment, or parents' background in a co-operative probably correlates little with students' choice of discipline or study program, and thus, it is to be expected that the CNS attracts a highly multidisciplinary crowd. The absence of technical university students in the courses is quite logical as co-operatives are not a common organizational form in the technology sectors.

Regarding the institutionalization of co-operative studies to Finnish university education, the achievements of the CNS are mixed. Some clear successes can be mentioned. The long continuity of the network and the fact that universities have been prepared to finance it demonstrate that the value of the co-operative education is widely recognized. Additionally, the network has allowed co-operative researchers to develop capabilities and material to convey their knowledge to students. Finally, a mandatory course in one of the network's universities shows that CNS has aided in creating more permanent structures for co-operative teaching in Finnish universities.

However, only a couple of universities and disciplines are offering courses on co-operatives outside of CNS. Thus, the network has not managed to make itself redundant over the years because if it would cease to exist, co-operative teaching in Finland would suffer a serious blow. Additionally, ideally, the co-operative teaching should not only be based on courses on the topic, but it should be included in teaching materials discussing organizational forms and different ways of organizing the economy. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. It is highly challenging to get co-operatives recognized in university teaching in this way because the organizational form has not been perceived important for the economy. Prominent economists and business researchers have considered co-operatives as an ineffective organization (Hansmann, 1996; Williamson, 1980, 1985) and they are not often even mentioned in university textbooks that discuss different ways of starting a business (Rankin & Piwko, 2022). Thus, it is very hard to overcome this level of structural resistance for a single teaching network in a single country.

One further factor that has probably hindered the institutionalization of university level co-operative education is the way teaching is organized in universities. With few exceptions the master's and bachelor's programs in Finland are still offered by disciplines within individual universities. Thus, the plans during the first decade of the

2000s of having a Finland-wide virtual university never became a reality. Therefore, the CNS that offers a multidisciplinary and online only curriculum is discrepant with current university structures. Universities usually want to organize their mandatory courses using their own staff, and thus, the CNS is being put to the category of voluntary studies in the students' degrees. The students have a limited capacity for such courses. This was especially clear during corona, when students focused almost exclusively on mandatory courses.

Because of the low institutionalization level of university-level co-operative education, it is likely that the CNS will keep operating during the 2020s. The universities participating in the network are unanimous of the necessity of co-operative education in Finland and at the moment the CNS is the best way to ensure its continuity. However, the format probably needs to be redesigned to better align with the university structures, which are finding their form in the post-corona world.

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