Universities in Northern Finland

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Northern Finland

Northern Finland lies on the northern periphery of Europe, where the northernmost border of the European Union meets the northwestern edge of the Russian Federation. It is also the region where Finland shares a border with Norway and Sweden. Northern Finland comprises the country’s two northernmost provinces of Lapland and Oulu, with a total area accounting for half of the entire country.

Characteristics of the region are its sparse population, long distances and natural conditions which are harsher than those found in the southern parts of the country. Thanks to the Gulf Stream, however, virtually the entire region supports agriculture. The population density is clearly lower than that in the rest of the country, and the population of 645,000 accounts for only 12.8 per cent of the national total.

Due to its considerable size, northern Finland itself is far from uniform in character. Vast in extent (100,000 square kilometres), but with a sparse population (two inhabitants per square kilometre), the province is on the periphery of a region that is itself peripheral. Similarly Kainuu, in the eastern part of the province of Oulu, is a peripheral area that is characterised by a sparsely populated area that is heavily dependent upon traditional forms of livelihood (agriculture, forestry and reindeer husbandry). Most of the large-scale industry in northern Finland is concentrated along the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia, in Oulu and the Kemi-Tornio district. Together with its Swedish counterpart, the Finnish coast forms what is called the Bothnian Crescent, a region that features the bulk of the industry to be found in the northern parts of the countries.

Northern Finland’s diversity can be seen in the region’s many robust local cultures. The most distinctive such culture in Lapland is that of
Saami people, who also live in the northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Russia. The Saami in Finland number some 4,000–5,000. The Saami populations in Norway and Sweden are appreciably greater, while that of Russia is somewhat smaller.

Until the Second World War, northern Finland was an isolated region. The degree of economic integration was low and the area functioned largely as a source of raw material for the forest industry; the wood processing there was low. The livelihoods supported were principally based on the natural economy (agriculture and reindeer husbandry) and the bulk of the population lived in rural areas; urbanisation was low. The population of northern Finland grew steadily, but, with few jobs in industry, the region was unable to support everyone; the result was a wave of emigration to industrialised communities in southern Finland or, far more frequently, to the United States and Canada. Nearly 50,000 people emigrated to North America between 1870 and 1914 (Kero, 1974: 230–2).

During the Second World War, the situation in Lapland changed as some 200,000 German troops (transit troops) moved into the region for three years. While the war brought with it an internationalisation of sorts and stemmed emigration, the number of lives lost in the conflict was every bit as great as the earlier decline in population due to emigration. Compounding this loss was the destruction in 1944 by the retreating German troops of virtually all the buildings, transportation and communications in the region. For example, 90 per cent of the city of Rovaniemi and some 50 per cent of the province of Lapland was destroyed (Ursin, 1980: 383).

The period following the war brought sweeping changes to northern Finland with the rebuilding of Lapland and the increase in economic integration. Previously, little more than a store of raw materials for the forest industry, the north became an important national source of energy. Its large reserves of hydroelectric power were needed to rebuild industry lost in the war and to turn out the products required as part of the war reparations to the Soviet Union.

In fact, vigorous industrialisation began immediately after the war, a development that encompassed the construction not only of hydroelectric power stations but wood-processing, metallurgical and fertiliser plants. Transportation, communications and other regional infrastructure were improved at the same time. All in all, there was plenty of work to offer those returning to the region from the war. This intense development, coupled with a baby boom, led to rapid growth of the population of northern Finland, this increase being some 30 per cent of the entire region between 1945 and 1960 and even greater (35 per cent) in Lapland.