

## **1. Mission of the unit**

### *Efficient science unit*

Since its founding in 1959, the Department of Geography has evolved into a high-quality teaching and research unit. In the first international research assessment exercise, conducted in 2007, the Department's excellent result (6/7) placed it among the top units. Its high status within the scientific community is supported by the achievements inside the University: Geography is one of the most popular fields of study, and the intake-graduation ratio has remained among the highest in the University. Since 1999, the Department has been elected the University's internal centre of excellence in education almost every year.

Strong basic and applied research, probing into the University's focus areas of northern and environmental issues, forms the cornerstone of education. Teaching is based on teachers' own research, and all researchers and postgraduates take part in teaching. The quality of education is further enhanced by active international relations and diverse networking.

The activities of the Department are designed and guided with continuous self-assessment. A study monitoring system keeps track of the progression of studies at both the student and class level, the duration of studentship, and the graduates' labour market placement. In regard to finances, the Department has developed a detailed monthly monitoring system to complement the University's system.

This application for a centre of excellence comprises information gathered from faculty questionnaires and in-depth interviews of the working group for the development of teaching. The working group for the development of teaching, founded in 1997, includes both teachers and students, with the Head of Department acting as the chairperson. Representatives of the Board of Atlas, the guild of the geography students, have also contributed to the drawing up of the application.

### *Comprehensive working life skills and options for specialization*

The unit educates academic experts to meet the needs of research, school and business sectors, regional administration and information technology. The students are provided with sound and versatile theoretical, methodological and practical abilities to succeed in the labour market. It is central that those graduating from the Department can make use of their education and capabilities in many kinds of national and international work assignments.

The programme offers three tracks: subject teacher training, geography, and applied geography and regional planning. Geography is further divided into the following fields of specialization: physical geography, human geography, tourism geography and geoinformatics. The new system of degrees and curricula has resulted in vastly greater optionality, and the students can increasingly focus on the areas they find the most interesting. Specialization is supported by a flexible minor subject system, which comprises tens of subjects in various faculties and universities.

## **2. Programme and course design**

### *Renewing curriculum*

The curriculum of the Department is a continuous development process, influenced by the development in the field, feedback from the students and the labour market, and the societal needs. With the two-cycle degree system, the curriculum was renewed to meet international

challenges. The Bachelor stage emphasizes diversified and civilizing academic knowledge. At the Master stage, specialization allows students to pursue their own interests. Both the lower and the higher degree provide education which serves practical applications. The curriculum of the Department allows movement between the different fields of specialization. This increases the student's personal choices regarding the content of the degree.

The curriculum is reviewed annually by the working group for the development of teaching, and the responsible teachers revise the content of the courses on the basis of feedback. The revisions may concern textbook updates, methods, time or schedule of the course.

The Department is an active participant in curriculum development projects, and has received related funding from the University. The projects focus on defining the core contents of teaching. The present development projects include students' own voluntary study groups, which concentrate on the core topics of the required reading.

### *Research defines course unit contents*

Teaching is premised on visible, nationally and internationally recognized research. The contents of the course units are in line with the research conducted in the Department, and with the University's research focus areas. For example, the course Research in Northern Environment is based on departmental research on climate, timber lines and weathering phenomena. In applied geography and regional planning, most course units are based on teachers' own publications, which are used as textbooks in universities both in Finland and abroad.

Teaching covers also topics that are not researched as such in the Department. Initial stage studies and subject teacher training are designed to meet the Department's objective of extensive education.

The link between research and teaching concretizes in cooperation projects, where students write their thesis or otherwise act as members of the research staff. Projects commissioned by outside organizations are also always based on a scientific foundation.

### *Labour market orientation*

When selecting minor subjects, the students receive guidance from the amanuensis and the teachers. The goal is to produce degrees which are interesting to the students and appealing to the future employers. All subject teacher students complete a teacher training programme, and about a half of the other students opt for a three-month practical training as a part of their Master's studies. Training helps ease the transition to working life and earn valuable contacts. In addition, practical work done in cooperation with companies and organizations allows the students to gain a broader perspective on labour market. In spring 2006, the Department launched a Career Services coordinated mentoring programme, in which alumni who have graduated from the Department meet students at the final stages of their studies either in gatherings organized by the Department, or privately at the mentor's place of work.

### *Internationality and networking as special know-how*

International student exchange is very popular. The Department has concluded a student exchange agreement with 15 European universities. Every year 10–12 students or teachers choose to study or work abroad, and approximately a similar number of foreigners enter the Department. The Department has an English language study guide, and the number of international courses increases steadily. At the present, six course units are offered in English, and six partly in Finnish and partly in English. Some of the field courses are held abroad, including a tourism geography field course in Namibia. Several courses welcome visiting foreign

lecturers as special experts. International teaching supports both the studies of the exchange students, and the development of Finnish students toward becoming international experts.

The Department of Geography works in close teaching cooperation with several educational units and research institutes. Cooperation with, for example, the Department of Architecture and the local Environment Centre has been frequent and continuous. Multidisciplinary manifests itself in the diversity of the students: the Department's courses draw students from all faculties of the University. The Department offers courses in geography at the Open University and the Summer University, and further education in several localities. Presently, the Department is holding a further education course for subject teachers on location information and its application to teaching. The Department has organized Alumni meetings since 1999. In 2007, the meeting comprised a career profile seminar where geographers who have graduated from the Department told about their present employment, and the correlation between the studies and the working life.

### **3. Delivery of education**

#### *Small groups promote personalized learning*

The programme includes plenty of practical courses where teaching is conducted in small groups. One-to-one learning is efficient and aimed to bring depth to the key areas of education: scientific data acquisition and writing, critical thinking, production of graphic and cartographic documents, and oral presentation skills. Positive feedback from the students and the labour market shows that the goal has been met.

#### *Interactive, versatile methods as foundation for learning*

The courses implement methods based on inquiry learning, problem solving and cooperation. Inquiry learning is emphasized during field courses where theoretical skills are tested and applied in concrete natural or human environments. For example, in Field Course of Human Geography the students test questionnaires, interviews and landscape interpretation in practice, and compile a portfolio of their observations and experiences. Problem solving plays a central role in advanced studies project work. The GIS and RS project work, for example, is conducted as an actual project where the teacher commissions the work and a project manager, elected from among the students, is in charge of the realization. Cooperation-based study groups, implemented in several courses, have not only proven to be efficient and inspiring, but have also enhanced students' communication skills.

Almost all course units utilize many different methods. The combination of methods supports comprehensive learning and takes different types of learners into account. Some courses have been designed to suit students of different levels. Special Themes of Methodology, for example, has Bachelor's and Master's students, postgraduates and post doc researchers. Learning is optimal when objectives and assessment criteria are adjusted to coincide with the phase of the studies.

#### *Assessment as part of learning*

For years, the Department's assessment system has been developed to make it versatile and supportive of learning. Traditional exams are used to assess the mastery of key concepts and theories, while new assessment methods test the ability to analyse and apply the theories. The students can ask the teacher for individual feedback on lecture and book exams. Acknowledgement of one's strengths and weaknesses enhances and motivates future learning. New

evaluation methods employed in the Department include portfolios, pre-examinations, lecture journals, self-assessment and placement tests. Portfolios are especially useful for assessing fieldwork. They help students to critically evaluate the applicableness and reliability of the theories. Pre-examination method is employed in Remote Sensing in the Research of Land Use, where teams of two students write a small paper on the basis of the methods used during the course. The purpose of the exercise is to demonstrate that the students master the relevant databases and understand the main principles of the analytical methods. In Tourism Planning and Development, assessment is based on a lecture journal, in which the students ponder and discuss the different lecture topics. In Special Themes of Methodology, the students are provided with evaluation criteria with which they assess and grade their practical work. The self-assessment is taken into account in the final, teacher's evaluation. Field Course of Physical Geography is preceded by a placement test, which has been designed to ensure that the students have enough basic information to be applied in the field.

The different styles of learning are taken into account by offering several optional means of completing a course. For example, Special Themes in Human Geography can be completed by taking an essay exam, or as a lecture and practice course. Presently, the Department is scouting for new, alternative means of completing the courses. Next semester, for example, the Department plans to introduce oral testing as an alternative to traditional book examinations.

#### *Modern learning environments and interesting materials*

Information and communication technology is an integral part of teaching. The Department has inclusive and renewing websites. Almost all lecture materials are available in a web-based learning environment, and a part of the teaching has been converted to virtual format. Development of Remote Regions course has been realized with the help of the Optima Learning Environment. The Department of Geography takes part in the national Virtual University on Geoinformatics project, the Finnish University Network for Tourism Studies, and the Rural Studies network. In 2007, the Department was among the first units to adopt the WebOodi system, utilized in course enrolment, information distribution and feedback collection.

Course materials include teachers' own publications and empirical research material. Teachers have compiled essay and thesis writing guides and research methodology handbooks for the benefit of the students. Geoinformatics learning materials have been compiled into a web-based Virtual GIS data base, available for both the present students and the graduates.

#### *Functional studying environment and encouraging atmosphere*

The Department of Geography has two computer classes whose hardware and software are at the students' disposal both during courses and when working independently. When conducting fieldwork, the students can borrow the Department's research equipment and laboratory. Eight work stations guarantee that the students can work on their thesis in peace and quiet.

In addition to the physical surroundings, a high-quality learning environment needs to provide a motivating atmosphere. The ethical principles of the Department of Geography are stipulated in an equal opportunities book, compiled jointly by the staff and the students. The book is reviewed on a yearly basis by the Department Council. For several years the student guild Atlas has elected two staff members to act as equal opportunities representatives between the students and the Department management. Should problems arise, the students find it easier to talk to familiar teachers than the heads of the Department. Department representative has participated in drawing up ethical guidelines regarding teaching and studying at the

University. The first meeting between the Department management and the chairperson of the student guild Atlas was arranged this year.

#### *Individual study plan as a foundation for study guidance*

Personalized degree is a key to labour market success. Study planning with the help of an individual study plan is an integral part of the first year Orientation studies. The student can create a personalised programme by surrounding the geographic core with secondary subjects of choice. All first-year students review their study plan with the amanuensis. If studies do not proceed as planned, or interests change, the plan can be revised later. Thanks to the abundant contact teaching, all teachers participate in the tutoring of the students. In addition to the teachers, tutoring is provided by small tutor groups where the more senior students acquaint the newcomers with university studies.

#### *Seminars and follow-ups support postgraduates*

The Department is a member of the Finnish graduate school in geography, and arranges an annual national postgraduate seminar. Joint postgraduate meetings are held a few times a year for all Department postgraduates, and professors arrange frequent seminars for their own dissertation students. The Department supports postgraduates' active participation in national and international conferences.

The Department has written its own postgraduate guide to complement that of the Faculty. The purpose of the guide is to offer comprehensive information on postgraduate studies and study-related matters such as funding and publications, and to introduce nonlocal students to the practices of the Department. Postgraduates participate in an annual, thorough follow-up designed to monitor the progression of each student and factors influencing it.

### **4. Outputs**

#### *Increased efficiency with periodic teaching and exam system*

Degrees of the Department graduates are extensive, but the study times within recommendations. This shows that the intensive teaching system employed by the Department is successful. Periodic teaching allows the students to focus on a couple of course units at a time, and to complete courses at an even pace.

The geography course units must be completed within three exam cycles from the end of the course. General examination days are organised every three weeks. In addition, the Department arranges supplementary and course unit specific examinations. Due to the large amount of examination opportunities, examinations do not postpone graduation. The practical exam system has on its part contributed to the fact that from the 1990s onwards, the Department has almost always achieved its basic degree target.

#### *Permanent results from deep learning*

The modern teaching methods employed by the Department support deep learning, but in the end it is the student who is responsible for the learning. The Department has succeeded in motivating the students towards deep learning, which is proven not only by the course output, but also by the fact that the students are eager to participate in the voluntary study groups. Presently, for example, the Department hosts a group which uses guided process writing as a tool for writing Bachelor's thesis.

Geography students seldom drop out or change their major, which on its part underlines the interestingness of studying and the high quality of teaching. The graduates work in a diversity of fields in both the public and the private sector, which proves that the Department has succeeded in meeting its goal of providing comprehensive, specializing education. The quality of the education is further demonstrated by the fact that many graduates have come to hold high civil positions.

## **5. Continual development**

### *From self-assessment to implementing ideas*

The Department produces an annual self-assessment report, which includes results obtained in research and teaching, and describes the present activities of the Department. In order for the assessment of the quality of teaching to work, the students are encouraged to give continual oral feedback so that the possible problems can be tackled immediately. Written feedback is collected at the end of most courses. Feedback is summarized and complemented with teacher's comments. The summary can be sent to both student and personnel mailing lists. This is to ensure the transparency of the feedback system. The third means of collecting feedback is an online feedback form through which the students can give continual feedback on all study-related matters. This feedback is reviewed on special Department feedback days. On the basis of the feedback, both individual courses and broader educational policies are revised. Each teacher makes smaller changes independently, while larger revisions are prepared by the working group for the development of teaching, and approved by the Department Council.

### *Eyes on the future*

For years, the Department of Geography has focused on the development of the quality of research, the content and forms of teaching, and the societal impact of its activities. When assessing the successfulness of education, positive regard for the teaching and the learning is central. The regard for teaching manifests itself, for example, in the appointment process and the related demonstration lecture, which is not seen as a mere formality, but an integral part of the process. The Department encourages its teaching faculty to obtain pedagogical qualifications, and many staff members are attending related courses or studying at the School of Vocational Teacher Education.

When developing education, the Department strives to anticipate the changing circumstances and to keep an open mind towards them. So far, the strategy has yielded sound, concrete results. In 2005, for example, well before the abolition of the old degree system, the Department arranged a "thesis bee", as a result of which six students completed their thesis and degree. The potential rough spot of the new degree system, the Bachelor's thesis, has been reacted to in advance by offering students intensive guidance. Development of new teaching methods, such as interactive lectures, posters, and referee and revise practices, will be continued, and the experiences conveyed to the teaching faculty.

In regard to its strategic goal, the Department has decided to reach the highest scientific status (7/7), and the whole community is committed to achieving the goal. The level of teaching is also to be enhanced even further. The Department is introducing the quality system stipulated in the Bologna Declaration, and Department representative has participated in developing quality systems for virtual courses. The goal set by the Student Union of the University regarding the "scientification" of teaching has already been met. The Department of Geography strives, now and in the future, to be the best in Finland in its areas of focus.