

Report on fundamental and human rights research in Finland, HRC 2017

*Assi Harkoma**

The Finnish Human Rights Centre (HRC) has published a very first report on human and fundamental rights research in Finland. Research on fundamental and human rights is vital for ensuring the development and, ultimately, the implementation of human rights. Promoting research on fundamental and human rights is one of the statutory tasks of the Finnish Human Rights Centre (HRC) established in 2012. To carry out this task, the HRC examined how researchers and other experts view the state and future of fundamental and human rights research in Finland in cooperation with the Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law of the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland.

The study was conducted by interviewing 24 experienced experts. Information was also gathered with an online survey circulated among universities and other organizations

conducting relevant research. Some 200 responses were received.

The aim of the study was to avoid focusing only and primarily on research conducted in the field of law and instead take into account all Finnish research relevant to fundamental and human rights. Therefore, the study covered research directly focused on fundamental and human rights as well as other research with a fundamental and human rights dimension. The objective was to consider all research scattered across fields and disciplines as a single entity and to ensure that fundamental and human rights research will continue to be defined in broad terms also in the future. This approach may help promote multidisciplinary research on fundamental and human rights.

Overall, experts considered the state of fundamental and human rights research to be good. According to the respondents, Finland has strong expertise in fundamental and human rights research, which has helped the theme to become established among other fields of research during the past few decades. However, research was considered to have a relatively national scope, and it was hoped that researchers will in future publish more at international level.

* Project researcher, University of Lapland, Author of the Report on fundamental and human rights research in Finland, HRC 2017

Based on the study, it can be constituted that the volume of fundamental and human rights research is high and its contents are diverse. Critical fundamental and human rights research has an important role in the field. On the other hand, research in this vast and fragmented field is considered 'point-like', meaning that the choice of research topics and the presence of relevant research in different fields may be relatively haphazard and more stagnant than in the 1990s.

Two significant challenges clearly emerged from the data: rights-related expertise and research are often questioned by the central government and in public debate and research funding has been cut. Respondents consider the current social situation to put research under greater strain, fearing this may reduce the volume of research and the range of themes studied.

Therefore, instead of simply defending their own fields of research and fundamental and human rights, the respondents encouraged researchers to examine more thoroughly the reasons behind this change in attitudes extending beyond financial and economic issues. Respondents also called for discussion on how to react to the changing environment.

Respondents hoped that the research field would wake up to the social situation and respond to it with various active measures, for example by participating in societal debate, preventing the polarization of society, considering the choice of research topics and the sourcing of funding from a more strategic perspective and by empowering the research community from within and subsequently utilizing research as a force for building the society. The respondents estimated that this would help prevent the public and decision-makers from seeing fundamental and human rights as an obstacle or hindrance to development and would, instead, help them recognize the integration of rights, for example, in social reforms as a positive aspect that may prevent potential problems.

The survey gathered information on current research. The percentage of fundamental and human rights research among research topics varies greatly. The amount of research focusing on rights is almost equal to the amount of research that primarily focuses on other topics but involves a rights-related dimension. Thus, researchers conducting studies that are relevant to fundamental and human rights include people who consider themselves as fundamental and human rights researchers, people who identify with the field to some extent and people who

primarily identify themselves as researchers in other fields.

Fundamental and human rights research is conducted in a wide range of fields and disciplines. The dominant field is social sciences, with the following subfields being the most popular in terms of fundamental and human rights research: law, public and social policy / social work, educational sciences, sociology/demography, social research, history, linguistics, and women's and gender studies. However, it is noteworthy that research on fundamental and human rights cuts across all fields of science, including humanities, medicine and health sciences, natural sciences, technology and engineering, agriculture and forestry.

Research is conducted first and foremost at universities and their research institutes but also by other actors, such as state research institutes, the Government and ministries, non-governmental organizations, consulting companies and independent researchers. Key organizations conducting research in the field include the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights, the Erik Castrén Institute of the University of Helsinki, the Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law at the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland, faculties of law at the University of Turku and University

of Helsinki, and the University of Tampere. Other universities and universities of applied sciences also carry out research on fundamental and human rights.

Human rights institutes conduct research particularly from the viewpoint of international law and human rights. The Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights focuses on classical fundamental and human rights and their promotion while the Erik Castrén Institute carries out theoretical and critical research. The name of the Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law describes the unit's research profile well. At the faculties of law at the University of Turku and University of Helsinki, research on fundamental and human rights is conducted particularly within the subject of constitutional law, with an emphasis on fundamental rights. At the University of Tampere, relevant research is carried out especially at the Faculty of Management in the field of public law, focusing on fundamental rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Based on the survey, research topics concerning international issues are almost as common as national questions. In terms of content, research still seems to be concentrated with nearly equal shares on civil and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights.

Both branches are based on traditional international human rights.

The fundamental and human rights research conducted by researchers covers a diverse range of topics. Traditional research topics form a foundation for all research. They include the history, theory and concepts of human rights, the development of basic tenets, individual fundamental and human rights, systems for monitoring rights, and issues concerning citizens, power and policy in general. The rights of various groups of people, linguistic and cultural rights, freedom of expression and other communication rights as well as rights concerning safety and supervision were also brought up. They have emerged as research topics particularly in the context of the online world and new technology. Other fairly new topics include research relating to the environment, globalization and business.

Experts examined future research needs from various perspectives. Some suggested that fundamental and human rights research should be based on principles or wider objectives that would guide and steer research activities in the future. In this context, respondents mentioned research ethics and the reliability and high standard of research. Research topics should also be considered in the context of human rights history and norms as well as

current challenges associated with global phenomena. Respondents wanted to see multidisciplinary and diverse research projects covering a wide range of aspects. In addition to examining research topics in a critical light, the field should be open to self-criticism.

The independence, integrity and freedom of research emerged as important principles, particularly with respect to public and political decision making. According to researchers, fundamental and human rights research should highlight the contents and binding nature of the rights particularly because their original purpose is to serve as a yardstick of power and legitimacy. Respondents suggested that the aim should be to ensure that fundamental and human rights are mainstreamed and prioritized over other norms. At general level, experts also drew special attention to research on the actual implementation of human rights. They also hoped that researchers would aim for maximum social impact.

Experts highlighted a wide range of research needs. Many of these are already being explored but there is a need for additional research. This suggests that research in the field already covers relatively well the themes that were considered important in the future. Respondents highlighted, in particular, themes concerning current social challenges. They included social rights (e.g. in relation to the economic

crisis), rights in the context of the immigration and refugee crisis and rights relating to the online world, digitization and new technology. These phenomena were considered to cause problems in terms of fundamental and human rights in the future. Researchers should try to anticipate these problems and prepare for them by generating relevant scientific information and knowledge.

Experts expressed many views on how research could be developed with an active and long-term approach. It is noteworthy that many of the measures put forward by researchers concern the development of cooperation. Efforts to improve cooperation received strong support from the research field. The allocation of resources was also considered important for research. Research activities depend on financial resources, such as the core funding of universities and supplementary research funding, which lay the foundation for research and related activities, and research on fundamental and human rights is no exception in this respect.

Concrete proposals for resource-related measures included freezing the cuts in research funding, more efficient channeling of external financing to support fundamental and human rights, influencing funding systems and setting up foundations, research programmes and targeted calls to fund research on

fundamental and human rights. There were also calls for resources for launching a national doctoral programme. Moreover, it was proposed that funding opportunities should be utilized through multidisciplinary research cooperation.

The creation of systematic structures to support research was considered to foster research in many ways. Because financial resources are scarce, it should be carefully considered how research activities can be developed in the future. One of the solutions proposed to tackle this challenge was the creation of more efficient structures that would bring together researchers engaged in fundamental and human rights issues and make cooperation across disciplines more efficient. Concrete proposals included the creation of a national network of fundamental and human rights researchers. The activities proposed for this network included various events, such as national theme days on fundamental and human rights research, cooperation in postgraduate education, a mentoring programme, alumni activities and cooperation with people who work with fundamental and human rights issues. The network could also be used as a channel for disseminating scientific information by centralizing the dissemination of information and setting up various discussion and information exchange forums, multidisciplinary publishing

forums and databases with information on researchers and research.

Human rights education and training were also considered an important part of long-term efforts to promote research. Respondents hoped to see education and training to play a stronger role at all levels of education. They also wanted education and training to be provided to wide audiences in different languages, for example, on the internet.

One of the concrete measures proposed to promote research on fundamental and human rights was developing the related activities of the Human Rights Centre. Experts suggested that the HRC should have a clear role as a promoter of research and act as an additional source of resources and coordination support for those conducting research. They also hoped that the HRC would have resources for developing its own research activities. Researchers expressed strong support for the HRC's activities to promote human rights education and training.

Multidisciplinary cooperation clearly emerged as a cross-cutting theme in the survey. It was considered to be particularly important for promoting fundamental and human rights research in the future. According to assessments of the current state of research, multidisciplinary research on fundamental and human rights is

relatively rare considering how natural it would be because fundamental and human rights research is conducted in different disciplines. Cooperation between different fields was, in general, considered rather poor, and researchers were in favor of developing different forms of multidisciplinary cooperation. Multidisciplinary research was also mentioned as one of the principles and objectives that are important to research. It was considered to benefit all parties involved in research and to advance and improve researchers' thinking because it enables phenomena to be examined from different perspectives. This helps gain a deeper understanding of society and global phenomena that require multidisciplinary solutions.

Concrete measures to support multidisciplinary work include adopting a more positive attitude towards multidisciplinary approaches in the field, actively highlighting the benefits delivered by multidisciplinary research and using language that can be understood in different fields of study. Multidisciplinary networks and related events, funding applications, research groups, research projects and book projects play a key role in this respect. Moreover, respondents thought that human rights education and training should be provided across scientific disciplines, ensuring that education and training in themselves are multidisciplinary.