



UNIVERCITY
ACTION LAB

Finland

Good Practice Case Study

Turku Urban Research Programme

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PROJECT PARTNERS



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GENERAL INFORMATION

Title of the case	Turku Urban Research Programme			
Sales pitch	Providing research-based policy advice			
Organisations	• City of Turku, University of Turku, Åbo Akademi University			
Country	Finland			
Authors	• Alina Meloyan • Hacer Tercanli			
Nature of interaction	University-city cooperation			
Level of mechanism	<input type="checkbox"/> Government policy (e.g. law, funding framework) <input type="checkbox"/> Organisational strategy (e.g. university/business/agency) <input type="checkbox"/> Structural element (e.g. centre, lab, office) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Operational level (e.g. activity or programme)			
Length of programme	<table border="1"><tr><td>Unspecified</td><td>Formality</td><td>Informal</td></tr></table>	Unspecified	Formality	Informal
Unspecified	Formality	Informal		
Curricula-bound, co or extra-curricular?	<table border="1"><tr><td>Co-curricular</td><td>Level of initiative</td><td>Cross-disciplinary</td></tr></table>	Co-curricular	Level of initiative	Cross-disciplinary
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Summary

Turku Urban Research Programme (further Research Programme) is a joint initiative between the City of Turku, University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University. The Research Programme supports academic urban research and promotes research-based policy advice for urban governance, as well as fosters knowledge exchange between the universities and the Turku municipality. The Research Programme also supports cooperation with other universities, businesses and NGOs across Finland. The joint initiative positions itself as a knowledge brokerage partnership seeking to facilitate research-based policy advice.



CASE STUDY PROFILE

BACKGROUND

The Research Programme is a flexible network of city officials and universities, guided by a steering committee and managed by a 'broker' (jointly appointed research director). Having been on the agenda for several years, the Research Programme was finally initiated in 2007 by the Mayor of Turku and the Vice-Rector of the University of Turku. The Research Programme appeared as a result of a continuous discussion between the two to increase cooperation in the area of urban research. Officially, the Research Programme was launched in May 2009 after a kick-off seminar "Development of urban research and urban policy" in February 2009 that showcased a cooperation mechanism executed in Helsinki between the city authorities and universities.

The first round of the Research Programme took place from 2009 to 2014, and as it turned out to be a success, it was renewed for the second (2015-2018) and third rounds (2019-2023).

CONTEXT

The Research Programme is designed to tackle urban challenges and opportunities, as well as to support the City of Turku in implementing its strategy. Turku is the 6th largest city and the 3rd largest urban area in Finland. The business base of Turku is quite diverse, but maritime and medical industries along with various service-oriented enterprises stand out. The Turku Science Park, a new and ambitious spearhead project launched in 2016, supports high-tech and knowledge-based industries, and aims to become a sustainably growing city district.

In its current city strategy, Turku 2029 [1], Turku identifies sustainable promotion of its residents' well-being and competitiveness as a primary goal. The goal, as well as the themes of the

strategy, are covered in the Research Programme, and include competitiveness, social inclusion, sustainable development, good governance, with the accent put on the topics of social and spatial change.

Overall, the City of Turku believes that the city's growth should be based on an ecologically, socially and economically sustainable foundation. By 2029, the City expects to have the most satisfied citizens who will perceive their service experience as excellent. To achieve such an ambitious target, the City of Turku is employing the principles of residents' participation/customer orientation, responsibility & tolerance, along with regeneration & cooperation.

Another trigger, for the universities in particular, to embrace the urban societal challenges is related to the funding received from the state. According to the universities' core funding formula (2013, 2015, 2017, 2021), Finnish universities receive 10-15% of their state funds for the strategic development, which, among others, implies implementing university strategy and covering national education and science policy aims [2].

Both the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University, have their own respective strategies and strategic goals. The University of Turku has identified 4 strategic goals, in one of which it sees itself as 'a catalyst of social wellbeing and the economy.' [3] Åbo Akademi University, in one of their strategic goals related to cooperation and interaction, highlights the importance of connecting with major stakeholders in society by building 'solid educational and research partnerships with actors within business life, public organizations and cultural sector.' [4] Clearly, both universities have a well-defined direction towards accelerating societal and economic benefits in the region in which they are embedded.

National science policy is strongly bonded with the national education and innovation policies [5], which are designed to enhance the wellbeing and competitiveness of the society and to advance economic growth [6, 7].

OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVATIONS

Motivation

The motivation is largely defined by the two major stakeholders of the Research Programme, i.e. city leadership and universities. For the City of Turku, the interest in developing research cooperation lies in supporting knowledge-based decision-making and strengthening the impact of its development initiatives. More to that, the City seeks to increase knowledge ability of their city officials in all relevant policy sectors. For the universities, the motivation is in strengthening multi-disciplinary urban research capacity, as well as enhancing their "third mission", i.e. regional engagement and impact, including co-development with the practitioners.

Objectives (Goals)

There are 2 primary goals that the Research Programme strives to achieve:

- i) Increase the amount of academically relevant urban research which underpins policy advice to the city municipality
- ii) Enhance the exchange of the information between the city and local universities about their work [8]

The Research Programme supports the city's development in the following areas:

- i) Knowledge (conditions and factors of economic success, increasing attractiveness, collaboration with other cities and institutions, etc.)
- ii) Welfare (living conditions, safety, integration of immigrants, etc.)
- iii) Sustainable development (land use & planning, housing, transport, climate change, etc.)
- iv) Good governance (public services, local democracy enhancement, etc.)

STAKEHOLDERS

The **City administration** is related to the Research Programme as a primary beneficiary, and applies the research results to improve their decision-making and strengthen the impact of their development initiatives.

Through the Research Programme, **universities** enhance their research capacity and broaden their network. The interdisciplinary nature of the projects promotes and strengthens the collaboration inside the involved universities, as it increases the degree of interaction among the departments, and strengthens their knowledge production capability.

Researchers, who are involved in the projects carried out within the Research Programme, advance their own expertise in a relevant research area and gain experience from co-operating with the practitioners.

Students take advantage of available funding opportunities for their research, e.g. master's theses. They, especially PhD students, also benefit from the expertise of the research team and professors they work with in the area of their interest.

Citizens of Turku are the ultimate recipients of the outcomes produced within the Research Programme, especially through the continuous research impact in developing public policies, initiatives and services. The citizens could also directly participate in a number of projects developed on the basis of the Research Programme.

Businesses, industry partners & NGOs occasionally get involved into the projects and receive advice on their future involvement for more efficient cooperation.

INPUT

Human resources

The governing body is a steering group, that is jointly appointed, and consists of the Rector of the University of Turku, the Rector of Åbo Akademi University, the Mayor of the City of Turku, the Vice-Mayor of Turku, four professors in different key disciplines, and four top-managers of the City of Turku.

The jointly-appointed Research Director, or a knowledge broker, works as an operational manager of the programme. In essence, the broker's core task is to build the bridge of mutual understanding between the municipality, the universities and the project applicants, and to ensure that every party understands the benefits of their involvement. He draws up the agenda and proposals for the meetings. The Research Director holds the same job title both at the University of Turku and the City of Turku.

Financial resources

The City of Turku allocates an annual budget of 485.000€ to the Research Programme (including 90% of the costs of the research director, while the University of Turku funds the remaining 10%).

The Research Programme runs its own funding competitions yearly. Over the years, the Research Programme has given either research grants for PhD students and Post-Docs or grants for research projects led by professors. Lately, the emphasis has shifted to projects. The competitions have been co-funded by the West-Finland Housing Association of Public Utility, the University of Turku, and Åbo Akademi University. For instance, in 2018, the amount of research funding distributed in the competition was 600.000€ and the City of Turku's share was 42% of the aforementioned sum, taken from the annual budget (see above). Both universities invested 100.000€ and the rest 150.000€ was sponsored by the West-Finland Housing Association of Public Utility.

The Research Programme co-funds, providing "expanding" funding, the projects which are financed mostly from external sources, e.g. European and national funds, and facilitates their organizational access. The Research Programme also assigns small-scale projects that can be 100% funded by the municipality.

Physical resources

The Research Programme is organised as a network. It does not have an institute or a separate office. The research director works at the Department of Social Research, University of Turku. Each funded research project is hosted by their home department / home organisation. The project meetings are held predominantly on the premises of the city administration.

ACTIVITIES

The Research Programme sponsors research projects that are expected to meet both the city's and the universities' needs. A strong focus is placed on productive interaction during the projects, especially through discussions in project steering groups or with contact persons assigned for each project. A special attention is also paid to active dissemination of the project results. Projects can be initiated by either side, i.e. i) when the City of Turku announces a call (a funding competition) for research projects or assigns a project directly or ii) when an applicant/team applies for the financial sponsorship themselves.

In the funding competitions, the applicants have to pass two stages of assessment. During the first stage, the projects are assessed against a scientific merit, feasibility, applicability, topicality, and originality of its contributions. The research proposal is reviewed by a panel that includes representatives from the universities, the city administration and other potential funders. After successfully passing the first stage, the applicants are expected to incorporate the feedback into their final research plan to be presented at the final stage of the competition. Though it is a final version of the research project, it is still presumed that minor changes can be negotiated in the steering groups, if needed. The knowledge broker can help to reach an outcome that would satisfy both parties. Then, the City of Turku nominates a steering group for each winning project.

In case of a direct assignment, the knowledge broker helps practitioners to define a reasonable assignment and negotiate the details with the researchers.

In case of an individual/team initiative, applicants are welcome to approach the research director with the proposal that gets evaluated on its fit for the needs of the municipality.

At times, the grants function as seed funding that help partners develop the ideas and later apply for much larger national or EU research funds.

- On a yearly basis, the Research Programme also provides grants for Master's theses in Urban Research to students studying at the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University. Each year, 10 grants of 2.000€ tax free are offered on a competitive basis. Roughly, one in four applicants gets the grant. Students submit an application with a 2-page research proposal, which is reviewed by the research director. The application should be made when the thesis writing process has already started, as the grant will be paid only for a completed thesis next year. The final decision is made by the Mayor of Turku on the basis of the proposition submitted by the research director. The practice of providing grants for the Master's theses was put in place before the Research Programme was launched, but was later incorporated into the Programme as one of its activities.



OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

OUTPUTS

The results of the funded projects are expected to get published in academic outlets (especially referred journals). Also, they are published in a form of research briefs aimed for a broader audience, and are available for discussion at seminars that are primarily arranged with the city administration, but also with businesses, NGOs, etc.

The research results find practical applications on different levels of municipal governance, e.g. how the resources should be distributed with better efficiency, how to enhance collaboration with different stakeholders, how to better implement the strategy, etc.

The Research Programme has also become a testing ground for a pilot project that can find its implementation on a wider national scale. As an example, the research carried out on the character of homeless youth in Turku was triggered by the national programme on homelessness.

IMPACTS

The major impact that the Research Programme has generated primarily concerns research and policy advice. It has had some effect on education as well. By 2019, more than 100 research projects – all done in co-operation with the municipality – have been funded or co-funded by the Research Programme. More to that, the Research Programme has served as a trigger to create an Urban Studies Minor (seminars and courses of 25-35 ECTS) offered to students at the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University. The seminars and courses are expected to stimulate students to specialise in urban research within their major.

SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENT & SYSTEM

SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

The supporting mechanisms for the successful operation of the institution include:

- Provision of constant and sufficient funding from the municipality
- Co-funding from the universities and the West-Finland Housing Association of Public Utility
- Systemic co-operation procedures applied in the funded research projects
- Experience in results dissemination:
 - via their own channels, e.g. publications and podcasts
 - introducing results at managerial meetings, seminars, workshops, etc.
 - via co-operation with local media

BARRIERS AND DRIVERS

Barriers include:

- Finding the right ways to transfer the results to the practitioners, including whether the topic fits their momentary agenda
- Bringing stakeholders to the mutual understanding about each other's individual benefits
- Making all involved stakeholders truly interact with each other and thoroughly consider the potential implementation of the results
- Internal power struggle and politicizing the processes [8]

The factors, driving the success of the Research Programme, include a mutual interest of all key stakeholders in developing processes that support knowledge-based (or research-based) decision-making, and, more broadly, benefitting from academic insights to develop new ideas and initiatives.



LESSONS LEARNED

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

So far, the Research Programme has passed one internal and one external evaluation in 2013 and 2018 respectively. The external evaluation of the Programme concluded that the Research Programme had ensured favourable conditions for creating and applying knowledge, and indeed strengthened the knowledge-based management in Turku. It is also reported that the Research Programme is perceived to have put strategic decision-making into practice in Turku, and considerably strengthened co-operation and exchange between the city administration and universities [9].

The monitoring process is held on the project-by-project basis. Each project has a steering group that spurs the decision-making process and acts in accordance with the specifically designed guidelines. The research director, in his turn, initiates and monitors the interaction among the project stakeholders, and is involved in the work of the steering groups.

As for the overall course of programme management, the co-led steering group (with representatives of the municipality and the universities) decides on possible adjustments to be made in the programme. The municipality, however, has a leading role, as it is the main financial provider for the programme.

CHALLENGES

According to the Research Director of Urban Studies, at the initial stage, the challenge was to keep officials and academics 'informed about each other's work and priorities' [8]. In the long run, the main challenge is to find the right ways to convey research results to policy makers, as

well as to keep people informed about the programme's benefits in different departments of the city administration. Another challenge is to legitimise the programme's continuity. One way to overcome the challenge is the programme's own publishing series, Tutkimuskatsauksia (Research Briefings), which aims to report the research results in a short and clear fashion. See the Publications section.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

The key success factors of this joint initiative go in four directions:

1. High level of trust placed by all involved actors
2. Willingness to cooperate regardless of required extra resources
3. Willingness to experiment with new ideas and processes
4. Willingness of city officials to apply the research results in the decision-making process [8]



FURTHER INFORMATION

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

TRANSFERABILITY

It is believed by the research director that the model of the Research Programme stands a good chance to be replicated either partly or fully (depending on available funds and activities to be practiced) and on various geographical scales. Though with obvious difficulties, the latter implies the involvement of 2-3 cities (municipalities) in a research funding call and subsequent research project steering groups etc., as an example.

For the successful replication of the model, 3 essential conditions become a must:

- i) Appointing a broker who would steer the overall programme implementation and coordinate co-operation with its stakeholders
- ii) Having sufficient funding and a systemic plan of funds distribution
- iii) Having systemic guidance for collaboration among the stakeholders of the program

PUBLICATIONS

The links below direct to the lists of publications, i.e. Research Briefs and Research Reports, issued in the Research Programme since 2011. The papers are published mostly in Finnish and occasionally in English:

Tutkimuskatsauksia / Research Briefings:

<https://www.turku.fi/turku-tieto/julkaisut-ja-raportit/tutkimuskatsauksia-sarja>

Tutkimusraportteja / Research Reports:

<https://www.turku.fi/turku-tieto/julkaisut-ja-raportit/tutkimusraportteja-sarja>

LINKS

The City of Turku Official Website for the Urban Research Programme:
<https://www.turku.fi/en/turku-info/urban-research>

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