

INTERVIEW

Clear structures are needed

Is the cooperation across two types of Higher Education Institutions able to strengthen the flexibility of study programmes? Dr Marja Sutela ought to know. As Vice President, she is in a leading position at Tampere Universities (TUNI), a consortium of the Tampere University and Tampere University of Applied Sciences.



Dr Marja Sutela was Vice President of Tampere University until July 2026. Since August 2026, she holds the post of Rector of Lapland University of Applied Sciences in Rovaniemi.

Interview: Dr Sigrun Nickel and Anna-Lena Thiele,
CHE Centre for Higher Education

QUESTION How strong is the institutional linkage between the two partners?

Marja Sutela: Very close. Tampere University, TAU, where I serve as Vice President, is the second largest comprehensive university in Finland and owns the majority of the shares in Tampere University of Applied Sciences, TAMK. TAMK has been legally established as a limited liability company under Finnish law, as are all universities of applied sciences in Finland. In 2019, we were among the first in Finland to deepen collaboration in education between a university and a university of applied sciences. I know both institutions very well as I worked as Vice President for Education at TAMK before moving into a leadership position at Tampere University. The two partners remain independent and autonomous, but they have a common executive board and share support services such as the library and IT.

QUESTION In terms of flexibility, how would you describe the overarching study options of the Tampere consortium?

Marja Sutela: In recent years, we have developed shared courses at both Bachelor's and Master's level. One example is HUBS, our unit for innovation and entrepreneurship studies. HUBS offers courses in sustainable entrepreneurship as well as support and coaching for students who are interested in starting a company. HUBS offerings comprise all in all 85 credits. This support covers the whole entrepreneurial path, from the first idea and planning phase to the actual founding of a company. Students can also continue from a Bachelor's degree at TAMK to a Master's degree at Tampere University. To support this pathway, we have developed our admissions processes so that only a limited number of bridge studies are needed. For example, a Bachelor's student at TAMK can take courses at Tampere University during their studies. If the student later enters a University Master's programme, these credits can be recognised, which means that part of the required studies has already been completed.

QUESTION In your view, what are the greatest benefits for students of the collaboration between the two higher education institutions?

Marja Sutela: In my view, the greatest benefit is the opportunity for cross-institutional studies: students from both higher education institutions can include courses offered by the partner institution in their studies. At the same time, the collaboration also benefits the participating institutions. It gives them greater flexibility to respond to challenges such as changing expectations among prospective students, evolving labour market needs, and declining student numbers caused by an ageing society.

QUESTION Maybe a student is enrolled at the University of Applied Sciences, and then he or she attends some courses at the University and finds them more interesting. How far goes his or her freedom? Would it be possible to change from a study programme at the TAMK to a study programme at the TAU?

Marja Sutela: If a TAMK student wants to move on and become a degree student at Tampere University, they still have to apply through the regular admissions process, like everyone else. Usually, students use the credits they earn through cross-institutional studies as part of their elective studies, which typically amount to around 10 to 15 credits.

QUESTION To what extent are the cross-study opportunities offered by the Tampere consortium actually being utilized? Could you give us some percentages?

Marja Sutela: We monitor the development of cross-study credits, and in recent years, the numbers have remained fairly stable. So, this is an opportunity for some students, although not for all. At the same time, we can see that certain study opportunities are becoming increasingly attractive. For example, innovation and entrepreneurship studies have become more and more popular among students, and last year, around 2,000 students participated in them.

QUESTION What kind of difficulties are occurring in terms of cross-study possibilities at the Tampere consortium?

Marja Sutela: Developing a shared curriculum between a university and a university of applied sciences is quite demanding, and it takes time, because the degrees and degree programmes have different profiles. TAMK is more application-oriented, while TAU is more research-oriented, which means that the intended learning outcomes are partly different. Professors and teachers therefore need to agree on how many credits and which courses students can take at the partner institution. And, of course, not every degree programme or course is equally suitable for cross-studies. I would say that the possibilities are broader in fields such as the humanities, social sciences and civil engineering. In general, the more application-oriented a TAU study programme is, the greater the potential for cross-studies. Medicine is a good example of the limits: as in Germany, only universities can educate medical doctors. At the same time, TAU also has a joint unit with healthcare education at TAMK and the university hospital. Together, the three partners run a clinical skills centre where nursing students and medical students can learn and practise together. These courses are part of the curriculum, which makes the model quite unique. In fact, I believe the clinical skills centre in Tampere is the largest of its kind in the Nordic countries.

QUESTION Are the offerings of the skills centre only open for students or also for professionals interested in lifelong learning?

Marja Sutela: Some of the courses are also open to professionals as part of lifelong learning. They are free of charge for TAU and TAMK students, as well as for employees of the wellbeing services county, which co-finances the clinical skills centre.

QUESTION Is it usual for the students of the Tampere consortium to work besides studying, like in Germany?

Marja Sutela: Our degree programmes are full-time and mostly take place during the day, but quite many students work alongside their studies. As a result, although the Bachelor's and Master's degrees are designed to take five years in total, it is quite common for students to complete them in five and a half or six years.

QUESTION Finally, can too much flexibility in study programmes become a problem for students?

Marja Sutela: Yes, it can. Flexibility is valuable, but it needs clear structures. Curricula must be carefully planned, and students need a clear study plan and timetable to help them graduate on time. In the Tampere consortium, this also means agreeing together where cross-study credits can be included in the curriculum. When these structures are in place, flexibility truly supports students rather than making their study path more complicated.