

Equine Science Education in Finland

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Summary

The importance of the Finnish horse sector is continuously increasing. Horse production has undergone a phase of intense growth in the past twenty years and the number of horses has more than doubled over that period. This has simultaneously increased the need for well-educated professionals in the sector. The highest-level education in equine sciences in Finland is provided by two faculties of the University of Helsinki: namely, the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry. Some Finnish universities also provide short-term training courses in subjects like horse husbandry and nutrition. The second highest level of education in equine sciences is available at the Häme Polytechnic, a multidisciplinary institute of higher education. Vocational training is provided by eight schools specialised in horses and horse production. Nevertheless, more focused research is needed to ensure high-level education in the field and develop the horse sector further. To this end, MTT Equine Research and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine have increased their collaboration in order to enhance education and research in equine sciences in Finland.

Introduction

The horse industry in Finland is gaining more importance all the time. This means that there is also a growing need for qualified personnel to work in stables, riding schools, horse trade and other business, as well as for various other professionals in the industry, such as veterinarians, nutrition consultants, advisors, teachers, researchers, etc. However, it is not only a question of the number of professionals but also the level of their knowledge and skills. Firstly, there is a clear need to develop university education to meet the needs of highly educated specialists. Animal welfare and environmental questions will be among the key subjects to be addressed in research and education. This paper briefly outlines the system of education in equine sciences in Finland. A corresponding paper describing vocational training and advisory services in this field was presented at the 48th EAAP in Vienna in 1997 (Saastamoinen & Laine, 1997)

Horse production in Finland

There are currently about 65 000 horses and more than 14 000 stables in Finland. The number of horses has, in fact, more than doubled over the past two decades. However, if we look back to the time before mechanised farming and transportation, there were as many as some 400 000 horses in the country. The largest horse group today is the Standardbred trotter, which represents 37% of the total horse population. Riding horses and ponies are also on the increase; today they account for

32% of all horses. The share of Finnhorses – a breed used mainly for harness racing but also for riding – is about 31%.

The number of foals born yearly is about 3500. Some 1600 of these are Standardbreds, 1200 – 1300 are Finnhorses, and the rest are riding horse and pony foals.

Harness racing is the largest and economically most significant horse sport in Finland, although equestrian sport has gained wide popularity in recent years. Some 560 trotting race events are arranged yearly, involving nearly 8000 horses. There are approximately 150 professional trainers, and the register of amateur trainers contains over 7000 names. Internationally, Finland is among the five or six leading trotting countries in Europe.

There are more than 500 riding schools, of which about 200 have been approved by the Finnish Riding Federation. Altogether about 120 000 Finns name riding as a hobby.

University education and research

University-level education is available at the University of Helsinki in the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. The Department of Animal Science of the former faculty organises a course in horse husbandry, with lectures in horse nutrition, breeding and genetics as well as anatomy and physiology. Also numerous courses in animal science include subjects dealing with horses and horse husbandry. At the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, equine science is integrated into veterinary studies, with courses in horse physiology, nutrition, pathology, etc.

The most efficient way to deepen one's knowledge and skills in horse husbandry and equine medicine is by preparing an MSci. thesis at either of these two faculties. Many of the theses are supervised by MTT (Equine Research) researchers, and the research which they are based on is carried out at MTT. Practical training at MTT or at private horse clinics or stud farms during the studies plays an important role in education. Some universities also offer short courses covering areas like horse management and nutrition.

MTT Equine Research and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine have recently intensified their co-operation with the purpose of developing the quality and content of education and research in equine science. Today subjects like mare gynaecology and courses in mare practice including AI and reproduction problems are taught at MTT by its research scientists. Researchers also give lectures on horse nutrition, exercise physiology and laboratory analytics.

The University of Helsinki arranges further education to veterinarians who want to deepen their knowledge and skills concerning horses. Post-graduate education for other professionals such as teachers and advisors is not arranged systematically at the university level. However, professionals and amateurs are able to benefit from the horse course (30 hrs) offered within the so-called "open university" study system by the University of Helsinki. This course has gained wide popularity. The open university is a system of study which does not grant any degrees but whose courses can be incorporated as part of a university degree.

University-level education is based on research. Today Finnish equine research is mainly focused on the following areas: exercise physiology, nutrition, reproduction, clinical veterinary research, horse behaviour, environmental questions, breeding and genetics, and horse-sector economics. It is important that the conducted research yields top-quality doctoral and MSci. theses.

This year a new research programme in equine science is being prepared jointly by MTT and Finnish universities to enhance the financing and other resources for equine research. The new research programme will address subjects like welfare and environmental questions, economics of the horse sector, and nutrition, feed production and feed quality. MTT Equine Research has the capacity to offer unique possibilities for high-level equine science research and education in Finland.

Polytechnic-level education

The second highest level of education after university level is the polytechnic (BSci., Agric.). There is one polytechnic in Finland, Häme Polytechnic, which provides education in horse production and husbandry. It offers a study programme, the equine option, to 12 students yearly (Thuneberg-Selonen & Paakkolanvaara, 2005). This option covers extensive knowledge in horse management, including nutrition, breeding, veterinary treatment, etc. Häme Polytechnic works in co-operation with MTT Equine Research, which is located only 30 kilometres away. Co-operation comprises lectures and thesis supervision by MTT personnel. The polytechnic further maintains active contacts with other European colleges and universities, which opens up opportunities for students to do part of their studies abroad.

Some other Finnish polytechnics offer special short courses and so-called “open studies”, and even complete study programmes on horses and horse production.

Vocational education

Vocational training is available at eight schools. These provide study programmes (basic second-level education) in subjects like horse management and husbandry, and practical training in addition. International co-operation and contacts with corresponding schools abroad has come to form an important part of training also at this level of education.

The largest vocational school in this sector is Ypäjä Equine Collage, which co-operates with MTT Equine Research. MTT supports the training available at the college, for example by having its researchers give lectures and thereby offering the college a unique opportunity to utilise the latest research data in its teaching. This type of collaboration is a very efficient means of converting research results into practice. An important element of all vocational education is a six-month training period, which students can also do abroad.

After their basic second-level education, students can continue their studies at the polytechnic and even at the university level. Vocational studies give them a sound knowledge base covering the entire horse sector. However, to meet future requirements, vocational education needs to become more focused and the schools more specialised.

References

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