

## CHAPTER 9

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# THE FINNISH VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY AND FINLAND'S PATH TO A LEARNING SOCIETY

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### CHAPTER SUMMARY

Finland is one of the world's leading countries in the effort to create a learning society, open to all population groups and making full use of information and communication technology (ICT) for distance education purposes. An important part of this effort is the Finnish Virtual University (FVU), created in 2001 as a collaborative initiative of all the 20 universities in Finland. The FVU serves both regular students and lifelong learners and fulfils a variety of different functions – as a learning provider, an academic network, a technical service and a laboratory for the development of ICT-based education. This chapter describes how the FVU is administered and operated and how it may be a useful model for similar initiatives elsewhere.

### FINNISH HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INFORMATION SOCIETY

Finland is currently pursuing a far-reaching strategy to create a learning society in which high-quality education at all levels and for all sections of the population is supported by cutting-edge information and communication technology (ICT). In the sphere of higher education, this effort is exemplified by the Finnish Virtual University (FVU), an ambitious project initiated in 2001. Before discussing the FVU in detail, it may be helpful to describe briefly how the Finnish higher education sector is organised and the context in which the project arose.

There are 20 universities in Finland: ten multi-faculty institutions, three universities of technology, three schools of economics and business administration and four art academies. There are 29 polytechnics, most of which are multi-field institutions. All Finnish universities are government-run and primarily financed from the state budget. The universities have extensive autonomy. The polytechnics are either municipally or privately run and co-financed by the government and local authorities. Parliament passes

educational legislation and decides on the overall lines of education and research policy. Performance management and target outcomes constitute the most important tool for the Ministry of Education in steering the operations of the universities and the polytechnics. (Ministry of Education, 2004c)

The main policy guidelines and development targets are determined at a general level in the *Development Plan for Education and Research*, which is adopted by the government for a six-year period every four years. The current *Development Plan* (Ministry of Education, 2004a) is based on the education and science policy objectives set in Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's government programme and in the government's strategy document. One of the aims of the *Development Plan* is to make the education system more flexible with a view to better access to education and training for the adult labour force. Adults' opportunities to take university degrees will be improved by means of educational arrangements geared to working adults. People with higher education degrees will be offered more opportunities for further education appropriate for their situations and their prior learning. It is intended that adult learners following university courses of one kind or another will amount to approximately 20 per cent of the whole enrolment.

An important part of the adult education provision in Finland is covered by the system of open university instruction, provided by 19 Finnish universities. The system is open to everyone, regardless of their age or educational background. Open university education is arranged in co-operation with the subject departments of universities. It corresponds to regular degree studies in terms of both objectives and requirements. The open universities cannot award degrees, but the credits obtained in them are transferable and can be counted towards a university degree. The open university system will be further developed as a track to obtaining a degree. It is estimated that in the year 2008 about 3500 of the 5000 entrants in university adult education will start in separate Master's programmes, 1000 will proceed through the open university track to degree studies. Openings will additionally be reserved in graduate-entry education for some 500 students. (Ministry of Education, 2004a)

Adult education uses virtual education arranged by the universities themselves and by the FVU and develops flexible forms and methods of education in keeping with the principle of lifelong learning, understood as all learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of enhancing knowledge, skills and competences for personal, civic, social and/or employment purposes. The support services of the Virtual University are also available to university adult education. Lifelong learners are often keener on virtual learning than young learners because it enables them to study without the limitations of time and place.

The proportion of virtual teaching is growing, but currently available only in Finnish and Swedish. There are no age limits or requirements concerning prior learning in open university. Every effort is made to keep the fees charged for open university instruction at a moderate level. There are also special programmes for elderly people in the open university, which go under the name of The University of the Third Age.

In university extension education, mature students can pursue general, intermediate or advanced studies on courses geared to adults. The extension centres collaborate in developing different continuing professional education strategies, anticipating external and internal needs. Virtual education was used in extension education before it became established in undergraduate education. One of the principles underpinning extension education is to nourish lifelong learning in the universities.

A significant trend in Finland is the growth of cross-border education, which is expected to continue. This comprises both face-to-face teaching and virtual education offered by

foreign providers. In Finland, the principle of equal opportunity underpins all education. The target set in the Development Plan is that by the end of the present decade 8000 polytechnic students and 6000 university students will annually carry out part of their degree studies abroad and that a corresponding number of exchange students will study in Finland. Polytechnics and universities are to increase the number of foreign students to the extent that in 2008 there will be a total of 12,000 foreign degree students in Finland. To this end, the higher education institutions will arrange foreign-language programmes and courses according to their own specific profiles. Virtual education will play a major role in the provision. (Ministry of Education, 2004a)

The second national strategy, *Education, Training and Research in the Information Society 2000–2004*, described changes in the Finnish operational environment and outlined the overall development of an information society in Finland. It envisioned that “Finnish society will develop and utilise the opportunities inherent in [an] information society to improve quality of life, knowledge, international competitiveness and interaction in an exemplary, versatile and sustainable way”. (Ministry of Education, 1999). The implementation plan consists of projects like the Virtual University, the Virtual School, Research and Development in Learning Environments, and Information Society Structures. (Ministry of Education, 2000)

The *National Information Strategy 2000-2004* has significantly promoted the use of ICT in education and research. This in turn has generated new demands for developing information security and the protection of personal data and privacy, enhancing the quality of and open access to virtual education and materials, and developing copyright legislation to meet the requirements of the information society. These were some of the reasons for updating the strategy by means of a new programme that will support and guide future developments in the Ministry of Education sector. The *Information Society Programme for Education, Training and Research 2004–2006* contains major priorities and actions for boosting information society development. (Ministry of Education, 2004b)

## FINNISH VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Towards the end of the 1990s, the idea of a national Virtual University was raised by two stakeholders: the universities themselves and the Ministry of Education. At the time, the discussion began to focus on the globalisation of the educational markets and on a European higher education area. The Minister of Education suggested that the committee preparing the *Information Strategy for Education and Research* should include a proposal for a virtual university in it. According to the strategy, “A multidisciplinary virtual university will be established to produce and transmit high-quality educational services and facilitate network-oriented research. The network will include the services offered by the virtual open university”. The virtual university was to offer undergraduate, postgraduate, open university and continuing professional education.

In the summer of 1999, an organisation for implementing the strategy was set up; this included a working group on the virtual university. The working group prepared an implementation plan, and subsequently a development unit was established in 2000 to co-ordinate the start-up of the virtual university in collaboration with universities.

According to the implementation plan, the aim of the virtual university was to create a high-standard, internationally recognised virtual university to offer flexible net-based educational services as a joint venture between universities, research institutes and business enterprises. The aim was also to expand and diversify research which supports

higher education, including virtual education. The third aim was to capitalise on ICT for effective, user-friendly advisory, guidance, learning material, administrative and educational services.

The plan is in line with the Bologna Declaration of 19 June, 1999, a joint declaration of the European ministers of education, which aims at establishing a European area of higher education by 2010. The process is co-ordinated by the Bologna Follow-up Group ([www.bologna-bergen2005.no/](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/)). This area is intended to promote the mobility of people, the transparency and recognition of qualifications, the quality and European dimension of higher education, and the attractiveness of European institutions to third country students. The FVU is one means of facilitating virtual mobility. Finland has ratified the Convention on Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region, drawn up by the Council of Europe and UNESCO in April 1997.

### *Organisation and funding of the Finnish Virtual University*

The Finnish Virtual University (FVU) is a consortium of all the Finnish universities. In addition to the 20 universities in the Ministry of Education sector, the Consortium includes the National Defence College, administered by the Ministry of Defence. The Consortium Agreement was signed on 18 January, 2001.

The decision-making body in the FVU is the Consortium Assembly, which is composed of one representative from each member university and one from the Ministry of Education. The universities are mostly represented by rectors or vice rectors. The Consortium has one or two meetings per year. The agendas are drawn up by the FVU Steering Group, which also exercises authority between meetings. The Steering Group comprises five members nominated by the Consortium Assembly, one nominated by the Ministry of Education, and the director of the FVU Service Unit. There are also expert members, including representatives of Centre for Scientific Computing, the National Union of Students in Finland and the National Electronic Library. Besides participating in national collaboration, each member university has a special unit to promote and support online learning and teaching locally.

The financing allocated by the Ministry of Education to universities during the three-year agreement period provides the actual core funding, which amounts to some 87 per cent of the operational expenditure. The remaining 13 per cent constitutes financing of national tasks and programmes. The national programmes covering several years, initiated by the Ministry of Education, derive from the government programme, the *Development Plan for Education and Research* or the Ministry's own resolutions. The Virtual University is one of the national priority programmes in the period 2000-2006.

The funding of Virtual University activities is determined in the performance agreements separately concluded between the Ministry of Education and each university. The Ministry of Education has financed virtual university projects since 2001, when the total annual volume of the funding was €8.4 million. In 2005, the total is €9 million. Half of the funding is given to universities in proportion to their size for virtual teaching projects prioritised by each university and for staff-development training. The other half is given to the Virtual University networks.

### *Operational idea*

The operational idea of the Finnish Virtual University is that the universities provide services that enable students to find flexible ways to study and help the university staff

to make the best use of new educational technologies. New technologies are also used to promote nation-wide networking among subject fields and projects of common interest.

Another factor facilitating student mobility is an agreement on flexible study rights. In 2004 all the Finnish universities signed a Flexible Study Rights (FSR) Agreement in order to enlarge study opportunities, increase study options and promote progress in studies. This agreement enables undergraduate and postgraduate students to include studies offered by other universities in their degrees and avail themselves of the experts and specialities on offer in other universities. Before students start their FSR studies, their own university must approve the studies and the target university has to admit the student to the course. The student must be registered as being present at his or her home university. The target university describes the assessment scale and the home university adjusts the grade to its own scale. FSR studies are free of charge for the student, but the home university pays for the studies to the target university. If for some reason the home university does not do so, the student can take the course as a non-degree student. The non-degree study system is also open to those who are not enrolled at any university. A fee is charged for non-degree studies.

The FVU offers courses “owned” and organised by the universities themselves or by the networks, which are consortiums of several universities or faculties. For virtual studies, the student has to be enrolled in one of the member universities. The FVU itself does not award degrees or diplomas; this is always done by the member universities.

## **FVU NETWORKS**

There are three kinds of networks in the Finnish Virtual University. One form is an academic network serving a specific discipline or a multidisciplinary field, which produces and offers courses in its field for undergraduate students and some of them also for postgraduate students. The second form is a regional network that produces online studies and teaching geared to a given region and develops innovative regional concepts in the use of ICT in local universities. The third type of network produces support services both for internal use in universities and for shared use among the universities throughout the country. These services are developed by the support networks and made available by the FVU Service Unit in the FVU portal.

The academic and regional networks also organise joint courses, which are primarily intended for the students of the member universities but also open to other students. The universities offer many courses for students who are not enrolled in a university, such as upper secondary school students and open university students. Studies are free of charge for regular undergraduate students, but the open university system charges fees.

### ***Academic networks***

An example of an academic network is the University Network for Communication Sciences. It is a national partnership between the relevant departments in ten higher education institutions and has its own organisation for internal decision-making.

The purpose of the network is to facilitate scientific co-operation and knowledge transfer in the field of communication, to enhance basic studies in the field, especially with the help of ICT, to support doctoral and postdoctoral studies and to plan new programmes. In the academic year 2004-2005, it focuses on shared online courses, the Professional Licentiate Programme in Digital Communication and joint postgraduate education.

National virtual courses arranged by the network are open to students who have communication as their major or minor subject or who are exchange students at a member university. Enrolled students incorporate the network courses into their degrees in the home university. Other students can apply for Flexible Study Rights at a member university.

Courses arranged by the network do not constitute study modules in any subject. A virtual course is intended as an online alternative to a course offered as contact teaching or as an additional option for students whose own university does not offer that particular course. Students should find out in advance about credit transfer, unless the degree requirements in their subject specifically mention the equivalence and accreditation of network courses.

In 2004 the network arranged 13 virtual courses in Finnish, one in Swedish and three in English. Enrolment on the courses given in English was open to exchange students studying communication at one of the networked universities. From 2001 to 2004, a total of 1700 credits were awarded for the Web-based courses (the equivalent of about 3100 credits in the European Credit Transfer System).

### *Regional networks*

A good example of a regional network is the Eastern Finland Virtual University Network (EFVU). It started as a three-year project (2001-2003) on Ministry of Education funding. It is a partnership between the University of Joensuu, which co-ordinates the project, the University of Kuopio and the Lappeenranta University of Technology. The objective was to diversify university-level education and to increase study options in eastern Finland by means of an information network and thereby to contribute to regional development.

The Eastern Finland Virtual University Network produces Web-based courses, conducts research and development, trains university staff and improves educational technology. As part of the Finnish Virtual University, it contributes to the national development of university education. The EFVU has a staff of ten, based in the three universities. In addition to staff, many other experts participate in the planning and realisation of various courses and other projects.

The foremost aim of the network is to run a research network and develop virtual courses in eastern Finland. In 2004 the EFVU published a bulletin describing its research on virtual learning and announcing its establishment on a permanent basis. The bulletin looks at virtual teaching and learning from both teachers' and students' viewpoint and in terms of Web-course production and its costs.

In the current performance agreement (2004–2006), the Ministry of Education and the University of Joensuu agreed that €300,000 would be allocated in 2004 for the Eastern Finland Virtual University. As the co-ordinator, the University of Joensuu is responsible for the financial management of the network.

## **SERVICE UNIT**

The FVU Service Unit implements the strategy adopted by the Consortium Assembly and the aims set in the Consortium Agreement and executes tasks assigned by the Consortium Assembly. The Service Unit will operate as a project organisation at the Helsinki University of Technology until the end of 2006. Its future operations will be determined on a new strategy to be adopted by the Consortium during 2005.

The foremost task for the Service Unit is to support university ICT co-operation. This includes defining joint university standards, harmonising practices in electronic service access and ICT, and drafting standardisation agreements together with the parties to the FVU agreement. It is also important to communicate FVU activities to, and maintain contacts with, players relevant to the further development of these activities. Since the FVU portal was completed in late 2004, the Service Unit has been responsible for maintaining and developing the FVU portal and the services it offers.

The Service Unit has a Director, who is responsible for planning and developing its operations and for unit-level contracts. There are also two Development Managers, one of whom is responsible for planning, developing and implementing electronic student administration systems and quality assurance projects. The other develops the FVU portal, takes care of its administration, the data archive and standardisation projects. In addition, the Service Unit has a Head of Media Communications, an Education Co-ordinator, a Project Officer and two part-time secretaries.

## **EXPERIENCES OF THE FVU**

The Finnish Virtual University, a partnership of all the universities in Finland, was a new departure in the Finnish university sector. The fact that universities have a very large amount of autonomy in Finland and see themselves as rivals made this an exciting but also a problematical project. To a large extent, the virtual activities began as the universities' own internal ICT development projects, which included teachers' in-service training and networked teaching trials. Some networks had earlier operated within particular disciplines and subsequently enlarged and further developed their provision with the advent of the Virtual University. In addition to these disciplinary networks, there emerged a number of other structures to support the development of ICT-based and, above all, Web-based teaching in universities. These include IT-Peda, which has a service to help all the universities to draft and realise an ICT strategy for education. It has a tool called OSKAR for assessing knowledge and skills needed to use ICT in teaching. IT-Peda has also devised a tool called ARVO for assessing the usability, pedagogic usability, graphical design, accessibility and technical realisation of virtual courses. All the services are available in the FVU portal and can be accessed by all, including persons external to universities and the FVU.

Overall, both universities and individual teachers recognise that the Virtual University has generated a great deal of new knowledge and enthusiasm, as well as boosting co-operation amongst the universities. The number of credits awarded in the FVU has nearly doubled from one year to another. One reason naturally is that the supply of courses has been growing very rapidly. The Flexible Study Rights Agreement, which took effect in autumn 2004, will probably further accelerate the growth. The Ministry of Education will undertake an evaluation of the academic networks in the FVU during the spring of 2005.

The virtual provision has mainly been targeted to undergraduate and postgraduate students, but both the education provision and other services have also been used by open university students. Most of them want to improve either their general knowledge or their foundation skills with a view to university studies. Others pursue intermediate or advanced studies in a subject with a view to improving their labour market value. On the other hand, the Finnish open university system offers virtual courses that can also be taken by undergraduate students.

## *Commitment*

The Finnish Virtual University has been in operation since 2001 and will continue to operate on a project basis until the end of 2006. The Ministry of Education expects the FVU to operate on a permanent basis from 2007 onwards, as laid down in the *Information Society Programme for Education, Training and Research 2004-2006* (Ministry of Education, 2004b). At the moment, a new strategy is being devised under the leadership of the FVU Steering Group. This is a challenging task because the Finnish universities have to find consensus on what kind of a virtual university they want in Finland. They have to agree on the organisation of the activities and, more importantly, on the financing of the FVU. Up to now the universities have been able to decide how much of their own resources they want to invest in the FVU in addition to the earmarked funds allocated by the Ministry of Education. This means that they have participated in or implemented joint projects according to their own needs. In addition, all the services produced by the FVU Service Unit have been available to all. In the future, the universities must commit themselves to common aims and ground rules. As the universities in Finland are of different sizes and otherwise heterogeneous, finding a common financing base will be a major challenge. The current plan is that the universities will contribute to the FVU according to their size. These funds will go towards the Service Unit costs. Further costs will incur from the production of new services, from which the universities will choose those they need and pay only for them. This naturally involves the risk that it will not be profitable to produce services for want of buyers.

## *Funding the FVU*

In launching the FVU, the Ministry of Education intended to make funding available for initiating FVU activities and inter-university networks for the period 2001-2004. After this, the FVU operations were to be part of the universities' basic operations, funded from their core funding. However, the initial financing phase has been extended to the extent that in 2006 the universities will still receive this special funding.

In the first year, in 2001, a total of €8.4 million was granted to 20 universities; half of this was used to initiate 25 inter-university networks. The rest was spent by the universities themselves. The resources allocated to the networks are co-financing, that is, the universities must also contribute to the projects from their core funding. Some of these first networks became established in three to four years, whereas others still receive project financing. As the networks kept applying for funds, the Ministry of Education decided to reduce the sum by 25 per cent each year. This was intended to ensure that the same annual sum could also be used to launch new network projects.

The applications for network funding must include plans for permanent operations that indicate how the results obtained during the project will be used and how the project will continue on a permanent basis after the project funding ends. Similarly, the application must specify the project partners' own contribution and how the use of the funds is monitored.

## *Quality assurance*

Attention must also be paid to the quality of operations and outcomes from the outset. Quality assurance in virtual education must be examined from three different angles: the quality of virtual teaching and learning; the quality of virtual learning materials; and the quality of supportive services. The FVU has enhanced the quality of virtual education as

part of quality management. The aim of the ongoing project is to support and promote quality management in virtual teaching and learning in Finnish universities and to enhance the quality awareness and expertise of university personnel, as well as their commitment to quality assurance. There is also an FVU project geared to survey different models for producing virtual courses. These will be reviewed and the best practices will be made available in the FVU portal, together with a few models developed abroad.

### *Activities in universities*

The virtual education funds allocated to the universities are generally distributed among the faculties or subject departments to be used at their discretion. The universities have spent this money on teachers' in-service training and on the infrastructure, as well as on the development of virtual education. Universities have also allocated some of this money on a competitive basis to different projects. These have mostly involved the production and implementation of virtual study blocks. In view of the best value for money, it is important that each university assigns a person to support the implementation of the projects, taking care that the best practices and methods are made available to the whole university community.

With the proliferation of ICT, nearly all Finnish universities have set up educational technology centres to promote the use of and research on educational technology and thereby enhance the quality of university education and teaching. The development of educational technology is increasingly seen as an integral part of the overall development of teaching. With the progress of virtual education, these centres were established on a permanent basis and began receiving stable funding alongside project funding. Universities have also provided funds for permanent posts and other employment relations at the centres. At present, the internal allocation of virtual education funds in the universities is mostly co-ordinated by these centres.

### *Student response to the FVU*

When the Virtual University was being founded four years ago, one fear aired by students and teachers was that virtual education would undermine communality and isolate virtual students from the others. In practice, however, students only take a few virtual courses and most of these comprise both virtual and contact-teaching. In fact, the virtual education provision has added to the options available for students and diversified teaching and learning methods, also enhancing communality. The possibilities of virtual teaching and learning have been used in many different ways: some learning materials are made available on open access Web sites, others in closed learning environments, where students' projects and theses are available for comments to a given group. University personnel consider it a positive development that universities co-operate more actively amongst themselves in devising joint degree programmes.

### *National and international co-operation*

From the outset, one aim for the FVU was to strengthen international co-operation between universities in virtual learning and teaching. At the moment, most virtual courses and services are only available in Finnish or Swedish. But networks which have foreign universities as partners also offer courses in foreign languages, mostly in English. According to their virtual education strategies, the universities will progressively offer more Master's level courses in English and recruit foreign Master's and doctoral students

in fields that provide degree education in a foreign language. In this, virtual education has a major role to play.

One strategic aim for the FVU is to develop the marketing of its strength areas and spearhead projects, purchase international materials and otherwise engage in active international co-operation.

## CONCLUSION

In the four years since it began operation, the Finnish Open University has achieved encouraging results and has proved to be a fruitful partnership between the universities as well as between the academic world, the government, business and other stakeholders. Careful planning in the preparatory stages has enabled the institution to develop as an organic entity and to function as an integral part of the whole educational system including adult education and lifelong learning. The Consortium Assembly and the Steering Group have worked effectively, and the threefold network structure – comprising academic, regional and service networks – has functioned well. In particular the value of a strong central Service Unit, to take care of technological backstopping, standardisation and other such matters, has been clearly demonstrated. While striving to make the best use of the latest technologies, the FVU has at the same time made the quality of its provision a high priority. There has been a steady growth in the number of courses and in the number of credits awarded. The experience of the FVU in the first few years of its existence has yielded a number of policy lessons, which are set out below, and it is hoped that these will be useful to other countries and groups of universities that may be contemplating similar initiatives.

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The Virtual University has raised many new policy issues for discussion in the Finnish universities. Some of them are summarised and discussed here.

- ***Joint virtual education is a new departure for the universities. It requires extra resources and common policies.***

All the Finnish universities have signed the Consortium Agreement. Under this agreement, the Consortium Assembly is the decision-making body. It is composed of one representative from each member university and one from the Ministry of Education. The agendas are drawn up by the FVU Steering Group, which also exercises authority between meetings. The Steering Group comprises five members nominated by the Consortium Assembly, one nominated by the Ministry of Education, and the director of the FVU Service Unit. The main item on the agenda of the Consortium meetings is the FVU plan of action and budget for the next year. The Steering Group is also responsible for steering the work of FVU Service Unit.

- ***Virtual education entails new operational models and new services to succeed.***

When universities offer virtual courses for students enrolled in other universities, there must be a common portal for everything this entails. Both the teachers and the students need different kinds of support services to cope with virtual education. The FVU portal offers various counselling services on studies and learning skills, such as *OVI* – a tool for designing a personal study plan; *IQ Learn* – tools for the assessment and improvement of learning skills; and *IQ Team* – information, support and guidance for teamwork. For teachers, it offers an interactive guide for designing

online courses; an educational technology selection tool; a usability evaluation tool; and a tool for evaluating the staff's ICT skills level.

- ***To enlarge study opportunities and to increase study options, universities need to sign an agreement enabling students to count studies offered by other universities towards their degrees.***

On the basis of the Flexible Study Rights Agreement a student who is an enrolled degree student at one of the Finnish universities may apply for a temporary right to pursue studies that are part of degree studies in another Finnish university. The right to pursue studies becomes effective when the receiving university has granted the student the right to pursue the studies approved by the home university. Under the agreement, the costs incurring from such student mobility are reimbursed to the university providing the studies.

- ***University lecturers need technical and pedagogical ICT skills and support to plan and implement Web-based courses.***

One of the FVU projects called *TieVie* offers in-service training in the pedagogical use of ICT and in the planning of Web-based courses. In addition, nearly all Finnish universities have set up educational technology centres to promote the use of and research on educational technology and thereby enhance the quality of university education and teaching. The development of educational technology is increasingly seen as an integral part of the overall development of teaching.

- ***The ongoing changes in the demographic and labour structures entail that measures continue to be taken to further raise the level of education and knowledge.***

The development of adult education and training at all levels is one effective response to the educational needs of the adult population and the labour market. Regional development and the accessibility of education are supported by the production of virtual teaching services like the virtual university and virtual open university services. They enable all learners, regardless of their educational background, to study higher education courses. For the time being, there are no tuition fees for either domestic or foreign students in Finland.

## RELEVANT INTERNET SITES

### **Ministry of Education, Finland**

*[www.minedu.fi](http://www.minedu.fi)*

### **Finnish Virtual University**

*[www.virtualuniversity.fi](http://www.virtualuniversity.fi)*

The Finnish Virtual University (FVU) is a partnership of all the 21 Finnish universities. It is based on collaboration, division of labour, shared knowledge and expertise of these member universities. It promotes online learning and teaching and develops compatible information infrastructures.

### **Virtual Polytechnic**

*[www.virtuaaliamk.fi/channels/www/eng/etusivu.html](http://www.virtuaaliamk.fi/channels/www/eng/etusivu.html)*

The Virtual Polytechnic is the Finnish polytechnics' national co-operation organisation that promotes and develops online learning and teaching, networking and network-based services.

### **Open Universities**

*[www.avoinyliopisto.fi/english/index.html](http://www.avoinyliopisto.fi/english/index.html)*

Open university education is arranged in co-operation with the subject departments of the universities. It corresponds to regular degree studies both in terms of objectives and requirements. Open universities cannot award degrees, but the credits obtained in them are transferable and can be used counted towards a degree after enrolment in a university.

The university programmes for the third age are a special form of open university. Their aim is to impart knowledge of topical research findings to older people, as well as to offer them opportunities for independent studies at the university level without formal qualification requirements. The University of the Third Age (UTA) is a meeting place for scientific knowledge and life experience.

### **University Continuing Education Network**

*[www.dipoli.hut.fi/uce/english/index.html](http://www.dipoli.hut.fi/uce/english/index.html)*

University Continuing Education Network (UCEF) is a co-operative organisation for the extension education institutions in the Finnish universities. Every Finnish university is represented in the network, usually by their continuing education director. UCEF was founded in 1990. The headquarters is located at Helsinki University of Technology Lifelong Learning Institute Dipoli.

### **National Electronic Library**

*[www.lib.helsinki.fi/finelib/english/](http://www.lib.helsinki.fi/finelib/english/)*

The National Electronic Library (FinELib) acquires Finnish and international resources in support of teaching, learning and research. FinELib negotiates user-rights agreements for electronic resources on a centralised basis for its member organisations. Helsinki University Library, The National Library of Finland, is responsible for FinELib operations and development.

### **CSC, the Finnish IT centre for science**

*[www.csc.fi/suomi/info/index.phtml.en](http://www.csc.fi/suomi/info/index.phtml.en)*

CSC is the Finnish IT centre for science, administered by the Ministry of Education. CSC provides modelling, computing, and information services for universities,

polytechnics, research institutions and industrial companies. Funet communication links, maintained by CSC, provide research workers with Finland's widest selection of scientific software and databases and Finland's most powerful supercomputing environment.

### **European Higher Education Area and the Bologna process**

[www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf](http://www.bologna-berlin2003.de/pdf/Communique1.pdf)[www.bologna-bergen2005.no/](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/)

The Bologna Declaration aims at the establishment of a European area of higher education by the end of this decade. This area should promote the mobility of people, the transparency and recognition of qualification, the quality and European dimension of higher education, the attractiveness of European institutions for third country students.

### **Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the Lisbon Convention), 1997**

<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/Treaties/Html/165.htm>

The Convention, jointly drafted by the Council of Europe and UNESCO, is designed to facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications between countries of the European region.

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## *Explanatory notes*

### **Virtual university**

In this article, the virtual university means co-operation between universities and other partners with a view to the production and supply of internationally competitive, high-standard educational services by means of intensified university networking, a diversified provision of top-quality education and research, the development of relevant pedagogic know-how, innovative application of ICT to teaching, and an attractive alternative to ordinary higher education.

### **University of the Third Age (UTA)**

The university programmes for the third age are a special form of open university. Their aim is to impart knowledge of topical research findings to older people, as well as to offer them opportunities for independent studies at the university level without formal qualification requirements. The University of the Third Age (UTA) is a meeting place for scientific knowledge and life experience.

All the UTAs in Finland are connected with the universities. In some cases the programmes are arranged jointly with local summer universities. UTA programmes have been extremely popular in Finland from the outset. The total number of participants each year is about 4400 older people, 80 per cent of whom are women. The average age of the participants is 69 years, their basic education varying from primary level to tertiary.

### **Lifelong learning**

Lifelong learning is at the heart of Finnish national education policy. Degree structures have been planned to be compatible at the national level, and individual learning paths have also been made available across the board, including in universities. The credit system has made the modular structure possible and university students can combine work and studies fairly freely. The university degree reform in autumn 2005 will further enhance lifelong learning opportunities in higher education.

### **Diploma Supplement**

The Finnish universities and polytechnics have adopted the international Diploma Supplement, which has been jointly designed by the EU, the Council of Europe and UNESCO to provide information about the studies completed by the student, the status of the degree and the qualification provided by the degree for further studies and for jobs. In Finland the universities and polytechnics have a statutory duty to issue a Diploma Supplement to the student on request.

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