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FEATURES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN FINLAND

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ADULT EDUCATION IN FINLAND

Typical features of the Finnish adult education system are wide participation, a plentiful network of educational establishments, and state support for these institutions and for the adult students. Traditionally, Finns have been very actively involved in general adult education. A good opportunity for this is offered by the civic and workers' educational institutes, whose activities extend even to village level.

In recent years, emphasis in adult education has been on the development of vocational adult education. This has been especially needed as a result of the radical change in the structure of economic life. The old fields of production are reducing their labor forces, and new fields are being formed; retraining and further training of adults is essential. Also the internationalization of production necessitates additional training. Ever-increasing flexibility, efficiency, and economy is demanded of education. New strategies, approaches, and modes of implementation must be found in the area of training. In this situation, there has been a special endeavor to develop distance education.

DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education in Finland, as elsewhere, has its roots in correspondence courses. The first correspondence school was established in the 1920s, and today the status of these schools in Finland is assured by law. Distance professional training is given at present by eight correspondence institutions, and general education by four. There are over 30,000 students per year.

The most extensive fields of professional training by correspondence are business economy, marketing, technology, commerce, and other business activities. The most popular subjects of schools for general education by correspondence are in the educational field, psychology, languages, art subjects, and development of various social capabilities. In recent years, the correspondence schools have diversified their modes of teaching and have also made use of new communications technology in their training programs. A good example is Finland's largest distance education institute, the Markkinointi-instituutti

(Marketing Institute), which was founded in 1930. The Institute organizes about seventy training programs a year, in which over 14,000 students participate. In addition to providing distance education by correspondence, it produces written teaching material for its training programs, organizes intensive courses, and makes use of modern telecommunications in its teaching (for instance audio teaching and communication by computer). The work of correspondence schools has developed towards ever more extensive use of distance teaching methods.

The Finnish distance education system has, since the mid-1980s, been built to a considerable extent on radio and television, in addition to correspondence courses. Of particular interest to adult students have been the radio and television language programs broadcast by Suomen Yleisradio, the Finnish Broadcasting Company, since 1926 in a total of twelve languages. The adult education institutions frequently organize group study for the radio and television educational programs, and Yleisradio produces a wide range of study material to supplement the courses. The proportion of radio and television broadcasting time devoted to educational programs has been over five percent each year.

Distance education became a central part of the Finnish adult education strategy after the mid-1980s. The starting points of educational policy in Finland for improving the status of distance education and developing new modes of study were laid down in 1986 by the Ministry of Education's working group on distance education. The working group made extensive suggestions as to measures for developing distance education in the following areas: legislation, an information service for distance education, student support, teacher training, production of study material, payment policy, questions of copyright, and the application of new communications technology in distance education. Furthermore, in 1988 the government took a decision-in-principle on the development of vocational adult education. Stress was placed on the development of teaching methods, and especially of distance education. After that, at a rapid rate, numerous projects were started to experiment with and develop distance education, particularly in vocational adult education and open university teaching. These undertakings have been implemented with state financial support.

The projects in vocational adult education were started in institutions which had previously only used face-to-face teaching. Distance education was an entirely new mode of operation, and in the experiments there was an endeavor to develop various forms of combined teaching (face-to-face teaching, distance

education, linking of teaching to work). One of the more extensive experimental projects has been the Lapland adult education experiment, in which distance education has been applied to training in the fishery business and the data technology field. With the new training systems, an adult can train for a new profession by means of a flexible system of study requirements, in which earlier working experience can be combined with study in an educational institution, with independent study, and with various forms of distance education.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITIES

In the 1970s, there was lively discussion concerning the founding of an open university in Finland. Instead of establishing a special institution of that kind, distance education was introduced into many existing higher educational institutions in special "open university" programs.

Continuing education centers were established in universities, but no separate open university was established. All twenty Finnish higher education institutions now have supplementary training centers as well as thirty-eight regional teaching locations. The network of supplementary training centers offers a dense coverage of the whole country, whose population is about five million inhabitants.

The founding of the centers and the rapid increase in their staff has been the most significant growth phenomenon in Finnish higher education in the 1980s and 1990s. A Finnish university has traditionally been a very closed institution, giving training opportunities mainly to young students. Supplementary training and open university teaching has opened up higher education and brought adult students as well as new teaching methods into the university. In 1989, about 90,000 students received teaching from the supplementary training centers; of these, approximately 26,000 received open university instruction.

Most of the teaching organized by the centers is still traditional face-to-face teaching. However, nearly one-fifth of the students participate in distance education courses. The relative proportion of distance education use is growing, and there is in fact a conscious effort in this direction. For example, in connection with the supplementary training centers at Helsinki and Turku Universities, separate units have been set up to take care of the development of distance education. The centers also produce written study material and audiovisual material and have begun to initiate research activity relating to

distance education. The centers have very few teachers of their own; therefore, the courses are planned in cooperation with university departments and teachers.

COOPERATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

A typical feature of the Finnish open university distance education courses is cooperative organization. The parties cooperating with the university in implementation of the teaching are civic and workers' educational institutes, as well as folk high schools. Almost every Finnish township has such an establishment, or one of its teaching locations; there are 278 people's educational institutes and ninety folk high schools. The basic task of the institutions is to organize adult education of a general nature in their own areas. In Finland there is thus a ready-made network with lecture halls and administrative staff covering the whole country, and the universities have not had to build their own separate network of study centers. As very flexible educational establishments, the institutions can allocate teaching facilities for the universities' distance education programs, and can also hire the necessary local teachers. Additionally, the folk high schools can organize residential courses lasting several days. The institutions do not have permanent teachers for distance higher education, but rather for each course they hire a part-time teacher. The role of the university is to plan the distance education program, produce the study material, train the teachers, and evaluate the study performance. Each university decides annually which establishments will function as locations for distance education programs. The institutions may cooperate with several universities. The universities arrange distance education courses in cooperation with institutions either throughout the country or only in their own area. Courses covering the whole country have been organized by Helsinki and Turku Universities: in 1991 they each held nine such courses. Each of these universities cooperates with fifty to seventy educational institutions every year. There are ten to thirty institutions cooperating with a university in a course on any one subject. The traditional mode of teaching at the institutions is small group instruction. Because of this Finnish tradition, forms of group study, rather than study taking place alone, are often emphasized in distance education courses. The typical size of a study group at an institution is ten to thirty students. Group study offers many advantages for adult students; on the other hand, according to

experience, it can restrict independent study and progress. For this reason, new models, in which group support and self-determined study can be combined, have been developed.

MEDIA FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

The main medium for study is written study material; audiocassettes and, to a lesser extent, videocassettes are accessories for many courses. Telephone teaching has come into very wide use during the last two to three years. As an extension of audiotelconferencing, an audiographic media network is being developed for use by most of the universities. Communication by computer is spreading to distance higher education. The Yleisradio broadcasting corporation had an important role in the distance education experiments of the 1970s and 1980s. In Finland, there is a very high-quality basic communications network covering the entire country; it offers possibilities for the quick utilization of new innovations.

RESEARCH ACTIVITY

In connection with the current open university distance education projects, research has focused special attention on the following issues:

- Targeting of distance education;
- Didactical questions in distance education;
- Functionality of the distance education system from the student's point of view;
- Achievement of self-direction;
- Guidance and support for study;
- New teaching technology in distance education; and
- Costs of distance education.

The first research undertakings in connection with distance education development projects have been mainly in educational sociology at the macro level. However, the emphasis of research is shifting more and more towards examination of the learning process itself.

CREATION OF COOPERATIVE NETWORKS

In the development of distance education, increased interaction

is essential at both national and international levels. In December 1991, the Finnish Association for Distance Education (Suomen eteopetusyhdistys) was founded to coordinate cooperation at a national level and to promote international cooperation, research work, and training in the area of distance education. Together with the Swedish and Norwegian Associations for Distance Education, and the Danes, cooperation has been launched in the Scandinavian region. Moreover, Finnish educational institutions are involved in many projects for European cooperation, for example Eurostep, EuroPACE, Comett, Delta, and Saturn. The supplementary training center at Turku University, and Helsinki University's research and training center in Lahti, have close cooperative relations with the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at the Pennsylvania State University. The Director of the Center, Dr. Michael Moore, has worked in both Finnish centers for two summers. As one part of this cooperation, a course in program design of distance education was implemented in the fall of 1990 by means of audio teaching between Penn State and Finland. This cooperation in training will be continued in the fall of 1992.

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