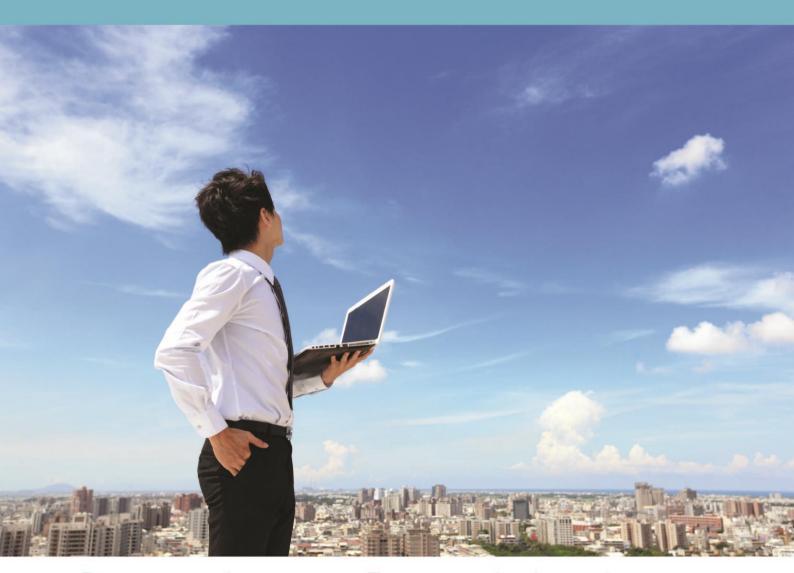# IDEAL

Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning

Distance education in European higher education

-THE POTENTIAL-

Finland case study

Distance education in European higher education – the potential Finland case study

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Introduction

The higher education system in Finland consists of universities and universities of applied sciences (i.e. polytechnic institutions). The universities provide scientific degrees at bachelor, masters and doctoral level. Although there are entry routes aimed specifically at adults, adult or mature degree students do not enjoy any special status. Universities also offer various forms of adult education courses which do not lead to a degree, including open university education and different kinds of vocational further education courses.

The universities of applied sciences offer more professionally oriented higher education. They provide degree education on bachelor and masters level. The bachelor's degree is the basic degree; special programmes exist for adults. Master's programmes are especially aimed at adults with work experience. The universities of applied sciences also provide open courses and further education which do not lead to a degree.

There are no separate open or distance teaching universities in Finland, but as in most universities in other Nordic countries (Scheller and Holmberg, 2014, p. 11-13), the HE institutions in Finland use different forms of distance education. Today, online and blended education are well-established, normal ways to organize teaching for adults, and elements of distance teaching are widely used in different kinds of courses (Hiidenmaa, 2014, p. 2). Recent initiatives in higher education policy in Finland have concentrated largely on the structures of higher education rather than the formats of teaching. This is also seen in the fact that, although different forms of distance or blended education are used, there are no national statistics on the numbers of distance education courses or the numbers of students on these courses, which makes it difficult to make clear judgments regarding the volume.

The present case report on Finland is divided into the following three parts. First, the report gives a short overview of the history of distance teaching in Finnish higher education institutions. Second, it describes the position of adults within Finnish higher education institutions and higher education policy. Third, the report summarizes the

results of previous studies showing what we know about the motives, needs and difficulties of adult learners in higher education in Finland.

History of distance teaching in Finnish higher education

The development of distance teaching in Finland is firmly connected to the history of open university education. Open university education was started at the beginning of the 1970s in some Finnish universities. The aim of the courses was to equalize entry to higher education by offering educational opportunities to those who did not fulfil formal entry requirements. Open university courses were specifically aimed at adults and a minimum age of 25 years was set, although it was only loosely applied. In addition to equality of educational background and age, regional equality was also seen as important. During the 1960s and 1970s a number of new universities were founded in different parts of the country. Open university education helped to increase access to higher education in rural areas (Haltia, 2012a; Halttunen, 2006.)

The UK Open University with its massive distance teaching 'industry' served as an example for the Finns, but as the resources and political situation in Finland were different, the resulting system took a different form. Open university courses were started in some Finnish universities as a locally organized, small-scale activity. At first, teaching on open university courses was mainly face-to-face and took place during evenings and weekends either at the university itself or at one of the local adult education institutions (Haltia, 2012*a*, p. 84-103; Halttunen, 2006.)

In the 1980s the distinctive Finnish version of distance teaching, so-called 'multi-form education', was introduced. In these courses, students study independently but also have regular face-to-face meetings with a local tutor. This mode of teaching and the government financed development projects which were launched in the universities in this period were of interest to many researchers. The atmosphere was very optimistic; it was hoped that the new distance teaching methods would make higher education more

accessible, widening participation and enhancing learning (e.g. Koro, 1993). However, many research texts reported that, while open university courses did enrol more students, they were not necessarily from educationally disadvantaged groups. Moreover, the academic community doubted the efficacy of the innovative teaching methods and questioned the standards of distance education. (Haltia, 2012, p. 131-162.)

In the mid-1990s ICT was introduced in open university education. The possibilities offered by ICT were used in various ways: on some courses a few elements of ICT were adopted to supplement other forms of teaching, whereas on others the whole course was organized online. Eija Mannisenmäki and Jyri Manninen (2004) conducted a research project on online education in open universities at the beginning of the 2000s. They discovered that the borders between online, multi-form and face-to-face education were blurred, since the different modes of education were often combined within one course. According to Mannisenmäki and Manninen's classification, about 4% of open university students in 2000 were studying on online courses, 8% on courses that combined online and multi-form education, and 24% on multi-form courses. The majority of students (64%) still attended face-to-face courses. (Mannisenmäki and Manninen, 2004, p. 28-30).

At the beginning of the 2000s a number of other research reports were published on the subject of distance teaching courses and experiences with this form of education. Since open university education was a forerunner of distance education, it served as a kind of laboratory for the researchers testing the functionality of distance teaching and debating how web-based courses should be organized (see Korhonen, 2003; Nevgi and Tirri, 2001, 2003). For example, it was found that too much freedom in the course structure made it more difficult for students to finish the course. Clearly designed and scheduled courses, even if they allowed only limited individual flexibility, were found to be more efficient (Nevgi, 2001).

Optimism regarding ICT and the possibilities it offers was also reflected in initiatives to widen the use of the new distance teaching methods to degree education as well. The national policy adopted an objective to create a new kind of consortium on distance teaching, the virtual university, which was to increase web-based learning and enhance cooperation between universities. Several virtual university projects were financed by the

ministry of education in 2001-2006. According to the project evaluations performed subsequently, these projects increased the use of ICT in teaching, enhanced know-how and strengthened the development culture within the universities. However, the projects were also criticized for short-sightedness, insufficient planning and lack of commitment in some areas (Nevgi and Heikkilä, 2005, p. 19-21; MoE, 2007, p. 48).

The virtual university consortium was ended in 2009, but some of the project's aims are still valid today. During the last decade, web-based learning has become part of teaching in all areas of higher education. A significant body of research has been carried out on learning processes in the context of degree education (e.g. Vuopala, 2013; Mäkelä, 2010) and on the quality of distance learning (e.g. Sariola and Evälä, 2005; Nevgi, Löfström and Evälä, 2005). Today there is no need to emphasize the technology and its forms per se because they have become so widespread. Rather, the question is about reforming and re-defining learning (Hiidenmaa, 2014, p. 2).

According to Hiidenmaa (2014), in many areas of higher education web-based learning is used as a natural way to organize teaching and much good practices can be observed. Nevertheless, distance teaching is still used in a rather haphazard way and online teaching formats are still in their early stages in some respects. There are significant differences between faculties and subject fields regarding the kinds of courses that are offered. For example, the open university, with its substantial and versatile distance learning opportunities, remains the forerunner. Students on degree courses do not have much choice regarding the mode of the teaching they receive; web-based learning is mostly used as an element of blended learning. According to Hiidenmaa, there are still issues to be settled here. Some of the technical solutions need further development as they are considered too clumsy. Moreover, temporary solutions and changes to the technical platforms often disturb longer-range planning. Both students and teachers need more education regarding distance learning. Perhaps most importantly, universities need to achieve consensus on views, targets and policies in creating these new kinds of learning opportunities within their institutions (Hiidenmaa, 2014, p. 6-7).

The latest theme in the discussion on distance teaching has been the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that have also been introduced to some extent in Finland.

There have been MOOCs in computing science and mathematics in the University of Helsinki, aimed at both degree students and those outside the university. It has also been made possible to gain entrance to degree studies after completing the web-based course. The courses have been beneficial in four ways: (1) by forming part of degree students' study path; (2) by building the image and reputation of the subject field and encouraging people to enrol in it; (3) by replacing the entrance examination; and (4) by encouraging people to make greater use of the distance education available (Hiidenmaa, 2013, p. 12-13).

Hiidenmaa (2013) points out that there are many questions to be considered when evaluating the development of MOOCs in Finnish universities: What are the aims of the courses? Are they designed to increase the reputation and visibility of the university or to develop its teaching? How does the question of equality relate to the MOOCs? What kind of cooperation is preferred? Naturally, there are also several practical questions which need to be answered. On the whole, Hiidenmaa argues, it is important to keep in mind that the different kinds of open and web-based courses available are only one element in increasing the openness of education. There are other forms of distance education besides MOOCS, all of which need to be considered when developing educational opportunities (Hiidenmaa, 2013, p. 23).

Although distance education is widely used in Finnish higher education institutions, there is currently no specific policy in Finland concerning higher education at a distance. On the more general level, ICT is considered an essential part of education, working life and the general functioning of society as a whole. The Finnish Ministry of Education believes that ICT offers the possibility for more flexible studies tailored to the needs of the individual (MoEC, 2011, p. 15). A recent document on the future of education states that digitalization changes the functions of society. Within higher education, 'digitalization supports the development of science, raises skills levels, accelerates the usage of resources and enhances the accessibility of education. In order to make the most of the possibilities offered by digitalization, it is necessary to create a learning-oriented culture and new kinds of teaching methods' (MoEC, 2014, p. 14 and 18).

The wider aims of recent political initiatives have been to lengthen individuals' working careers, to raise the educational level of the workforce, and to enhance the effectiveness of educational institutions. These goals are of course reflected in higher education as well. A major problem in higher education has been the slow transition of young matriculated students to the studies as well as the lengthening of study times. The fact that considerable proportions of new entrants to HE institutions have already taken a degree or already have a study place at another HE institution is also considered a problematic issue. The university admissions system has been under discussion for several years and is currently undergoing a reform designed to promote the enrolment of traditional young applicants. Adults who need to upgrade their education level or deepen their knowledge are directed towards separate admission channels parallel to the main entrance track, or to professional further education courses not leading to a degree (MoEC, 2011).

Adults in higher education – structures and policies

Higher education in Finland offers various study opportunities for adults and none of the areas excludes adults totally. However, there are differences in how adult students are positioned within the system. Open university education, as mentioned earlier, is traditionally aimed at adults. Open polytechnic education started in 1997 and was first aimed at degree students in polytechnic institutions, but has since been opened to non-degree students as well. Participation in both of these forms of education is open; it is not restricted according to previous education level, age, occupation, or any other criterion. The aim of open university and open polytechnic education is to equalize access to higher education and to create flexible and versatile study opportunities for lifelong learning (MoE, 2005, p. 9; Avoimen yliopiston foorumi, 2010).

There are fees for open courses, but they are regulated and subject to a maximum of ten euros per credit unit. Open university and open polytechnic education are fully equivalent to conventional degree courses. They function as modules of conventional degrees; if the student is or will become a degree student, the modules can be included in the degree. Studying in an open university or open polytechnic does not automatically lead to a degree, but it is possible to enter a degree course via the so-called 'open university gateway' or the 'pathway studies' of polytechnic institutions. However, the number of those entering degree programmes via the gateway remains low (see Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014).

Both universities and polytechnic institutions offer various forms of professional further education. These courses do not lead to a degree. They can include modules of degrees or be specifically tailored to certain groups of workers. The aim is to create courses relevant to adults who need to update their know-how due to changes in their working environment. Currently on the agenda are programmes combining work and education

and various different kinds of professional specialization courses designed to build the competences of workers in new areas of working life (Haltia, 2012*b*; MoEC, 2013, p. 7).

Professional further education courses are aimed at academic or expert workers who already hold previous higher education degrees. These individuals need to develop their skills and knowledge in order to meet the demands of their working life; the courses should be designed to allow them to do this. Whilst adults need education to respond to the challenges of working life, further education courses for adults are often prohibitively expensive, charging far higher fees than open university or open polytechnic courses. Because of this issue, many adult students prefer to enter conventional degree programmes which do not impose fees, and which in any case are better known and respected by employers (MoEC, 2011, p. 37-38; Haltia, 2012*b*).

Adults' position on degree programmes differs according to sector. In the polytechnic sector, institutions have separate bachelor programmes for young and adult students. However, adult applicants may enter the programmes aimed at young students. The difference between the programmes is that the adult programmes offer more flexibility for the student. Access is possible through the main entrance route or via the so-called 'path studies' which lead from open polytechnic to degree studies.

The masters' programmes in polytechnic institutions are clearly aimed at adults who wish to enhance their skills and deepen their knowledge in a field in which they already have experience. Applicants to these programmes must have a bachelor's degree plus a minimum of three years' work experience in the field. Master's degrees in the polytechnic sector are a relatively new phenomenon in Finland and are not yet familiar to employers (Ojala and Isopahkala-Bouret, in review). The aim of the national policy is to make these degrees more established and respected in the job market. Adults who have taken these degrees feel that, although they are officially at the same level as university masters' degrees, they are nevertheless viewed as a second-rate option (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2014).

In the university sector there is no specific status for adult or part-time students. Instead, adults mix freely with other students on degree courses. According to official statistics,

there are no adult or part-time students in Finnish universities. Adults may enter conventional degree courses either through the normal route or via separate selection channels. According to a study by Rinne et al. (2008) on adults' access to degree education, in 2003 about one fifth of university entrants were 25 years or older and about one in ten was 30 or over. The main entrance channel is the largest route and is mainly used by under 25-year-olds. Among the older applicant groups, the other selection routes are more popular (Rinne et al., 2008, p. 63-67).

The open university gateway is the entry route specifically aimed at adults. After pursuing a certain number of open university courses, a student is able to transfer to the status of degree student. The gateway is designed for mature students who have earned the required number of credits with sufficient marks. Successfully completed open university studies are to be taken as a proof of the student's ability and motivation to continue their studies and finish the degree. However, the number of people passing through this gateway has remained low (Haltia, 2012*a*).

On most university degree programmes, students gain entry to both bachelor's and master's degree courses simultaneously and may continue their studies right through both cycles. It is common for open university gateway entrants to transfer to degree studies after completing the courses included in the bachelor's degree. In practice, then, these students enter the degree course at the point when they are starting their master's degree studies.

There are many different masters' degree programmes available, including programmes taught in English and aimed at international students. Entry routes are available for adults with a bachelor level degree (for example, to allow kindergarten teachers to become primary or secondary school teachers). Recognition of prior learning is an important issue where these courses are concerned. The relevant policy documents present RPL as a means of enhancing flexibility and allowing for the life situation of adult students. On the other hand, it is also presented as an essential element in enhancing the effectiveness of education. Adults should not attend formal education any more than is necessary and the education that they receive should be relevant to their needs (Haltia, 2012*b*).

The question of entrance to degree programmes in higher education institutions is very timely, since the admissions system is currently in the process of being reformed. The aim of the reform is to improve access for applicants with no prior experience of higher education. The main entrance route will in future be more specifically aimed at these applicants; applicants with previous study places or degrees will be steered towards other tracks. The aim is also to direct those who have already taken a degree towards their own further education programmes instead of degree education. The policy documents state that those with degrees should use further education courses and open university or open polytechnic courses to supplement their degrees and thus strengthen their knowledge and skills (MoEC, 2011; MoEC, 2010, p. 11; Haltia, 2012*b*).

On the whole, it seems that the polytechnic sector has been more open towards adult students than the universities. The polytechnic institutions offer programmes specifically aimed at adults and have tailored their teaching to meet the needs of adult students. Polytechnic institutions have also been more proactive in working to develop the gateway from open polytechnic to degree studies (Haltia, unpublished manuscript). Moreover, the practices concerning APL have been developed further in the polytechnic sector than in the university sector.

The universities are more conservative in their attitude towards adult students. Policies and practices concerning APL have been developed much more slowly than in the polytechnic sector. Moreover, the open university system has always been regarded as marginal in relation to the 'core' university system. In particular, the gateway to degree studies has been under negotiation. The universities have resisted efforts to widen this gateway despite governmental initiatives to make it more functional. The universities control the size of the gateway not only by determining the number of students taken, but also by setting the specific requirements for open university education (Haltia, 2012*a*).

Within the university sector, however, institutions and subject fields differ widely in their openness towards adults. In the study of adults' access to universities mentioned above, degree programmes (or more specifically, selection units) were clustered into five different groups according to their friendliness towards adults. The first group comprised programmes where adults formed the majority of entrants. In these 'adult dominated'

selection units, adults acquired study places both through the main selection route and through other routes, including the open university gateway. Only a small fraction of selection units belonged to this group, mainly from nursing sciences.

In the second group the units' main admission routes were popular among adults. In general, these units were not very easily accessible but adults were nevertheless accepted slightly more often than younger applicants. Selection units in the subject fields of theology, business studies, psychology, social sciences, music and education were overrepresented in this group.

In the third group, adults were directed to their own routes and separated from other applicants. Adults were seldom accepted through the main selection route. These kinds of selection units seemed to be linked to certain professions and were especially popular among men. Overrepresented subject fields in this group included business studies, engineering, social sciences, industrial arts, education, nursery school teacher education, and computer science.

The fourth group comprised selection units which were accessible to all age groups, yet which tended to be avoided by adults. The selection units from language studies and natural sciences quite often belonged to this group. The final group comprised selection units which were difficult to access for all age groups and which were closed to adults. At least in terms of student recruitment, these units could be described as elitist. Adults were less likely to be accepted than younger applicants.

The grouping formed a continuum where the most adult-friendly units were found in the first-mentioned groups. These groups comprised units which seemed to be genuinely open for adults, and which allowed adults access through various different routes. The least adult-friendly was the last mentioned group where it was difficult for adults to gain a student place through the main selection route, but where no other kinds of routes existed either. In the middle were the selection units where adults were directed to their own separate routes (Halttunen, 2007; Rinne et al., 2008).

Adult learners and their needs

In Finland, participation in adult education is generally quite high. In 2000, 54% of the adult population (18-64 year-olds) had participated in adult education; in 2006 the proportion was 52% and in 2012 it remained the same. Women participated more than men and those in employment more than those not in employment. Those living in southern parts of the country and the cities attended adult education more often than those living in more rural areas. The most significant factors influencing participation were socioeconomic status and level of previous education. Whereas a third of those with basic level education took part in adult education, the participation rate of those with higher education degrees was 70 % (Niemi, Ruuskanen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 20-21).

In 2012, 4% of 18-64-year-olds in Finland (125,000 people) had participated in adult education in higher education institutions (Niemi, Ruuskanen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 19). When looking at participation in higher education, the 'Matthew effect' is also evident. Compared to the population as a whole, adult entrants to university degree programmes tended to be more educated and more often in white-collar positions. They were not, however, in particularly well paid positions (Rinne et al., 2008, p. 124-130).

In the same study on entry to degree education in universities, the adult applicants were divided into five groups according to their educational background and age. The first group comprised the 'returners' (16% of entrants): those who had already taken a university masters' degree. This group is considered a problem in higher education policy, since they are heading towards multiple degrees. Second, the applicants who did not fulfil traditional entry qualifications were separated as a group of 'second chancers' (11% of entrants). This is the group which enters degree education via the non-traditional route. For the remaining applicants, age was used as the dividing criterion. The third group consisted of those who were 30 or older, termed 'mature entrants' (31% of entrants). This was the largest and most female-dominated group. Those under 30 were divided into two groups according to their education. Those who had not obtained any other degrees after the matriculation examination were termed 'young seekers' (22% of entrants). Those who had gained another degree were termed 'young continuers' (20%

of entrants). The life situation of the entrants in these two groups was clearly different from that of the 'mature adults' and 'second chancers'. For example, they were less likely to have dependants than the entrants in the older groups. Thus, the 'adultness' of these groups is different (Rinne et al., 2008, p. 135-182).

In open universities and open polytechnics, the majority of the students are women of working age. Most of them are also employed. The students are nevertheless a heterogeneous group, and their social backgrounds and work and life experiences are varied. For example, some students on these courses have already pursued degrees at secondary and even at tertiary levels (Rinne et al., 2003; Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014; Lohikoski, 2008).

The recent survey on open university and open polytechnic students shows that the age of these students has significantly risen over the last ten years. According to a study which looked at open university students in 2000, over a third of the students were under 25 years old. Today, the proportion of young students has dropped to about 15%; most students are in their thirties and forties. The educational background of the students has also changed remarkably. Whereas in 2000 only about 2% of open university students had a master's degree, in 2012 the proportion had risen to one third. The proportion of master's degree holders in open polytechnics was also high: 14% of open polytechnic students had obtained a master's degree either in a university or in a polytechnic institution. These changes indicate that the function of open university education has changed somewhat. In the past it was more often used by young matriculated students who had not gained a study place at a 'proper university. Nowadays students are more often adults in professional positions who want to enhance their qualifications and skills (Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014).

As in other forms of higher education, the majority of the students on master's programmes in polytechnic institutions are women. According to a survey conducted in 2006, many of the participants were in their thirties, and the average amount of working experience was 12 years. As these programmes are aimed at people with a bachelor's degree, the students were highly educated. In addition to the required bachelor's degree,

they had in most instances also attended many further and supplementary education courses (Ojala, 2008).

In the national adult education survey covering all forms of adult education, the most common motivation to take part in adult education was to enhance the skills needed in working life and improve career prospects. About 70% of those who had participated in some form of adult education reported this motivation. The second most important motive was to develop knowledge and skills in a subject area that was felt to be interesting (64%). The third was to develop knowledge and skills needed in everyday life (45%) (Niemi, Ruuskanen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 107-108).

When looking at adults' participation in higher education, the motives reported are quite similar. Recent studies on the motives of open university students have cited the development of vocational skills, general education, getting to know the subject field and studying towards a degree (Avointen yliopisto-opintojen kysyntä pääkaupunkiseudulla, 2012, p. 10-11). Students in open polytechnics also cited similar motives: the most important reasons for studying were development of vocational skills and self-fulfilment. Pursuing a bachelor's degree in a polytechnic institution was also an important aim for some of the students (Lohikoski, 2008, p. 12-15).

In a study which analysed students in both open universities and open polytechnics, the most significant motive for studying was to supplement the knowledge and skills needed in working life. The motive to develop oneself in relation to a hobby or in a more general sense was also significant for many students (Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014). In this study, students were clustered in four groups according to their motives. The first and biggest group consisted of students who wanted to supplement their education either during or after finishing their degree. These students mainly wanted to acquire competences they needed in working life. The second group was composed of students who wanted to study mainly for non-instrumental reasons. They wanted to improve themselves in various areas of life. The third group comprised students who wanted to change career and planned to enter degree studies via the gateway specifically aimed at adults. In the fourth group were younger students whose main motives were to apply for

degree studies via the main entrance track and prepare themselves for the entrance examination (Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014).

In the above-mentioned study, most students were very happy with the study opportunities they had received through the open university or open polytechnic. About 90% stated that the studies had met their expectations. Particularly content were the adults who planned to enter degree studies via the separate entry channels. They claimed to have found their studies particularly meaningful and wanted to carry on studying.

Previous studies suggest that pursuing a degree can carry complex meanings for an adult. The dichotomy of changing vs. staying in the same field is seldom applicable in the case of adult students. There is some evidence that adults do not necessarily plan to get another job after graduation. Pursuing a degree can be mentally important, for example in a situation where studies have been started in an open university and obtaining a final seal for studies becomes an end in itself. Pursuing a university degree can also be more like updating previous education in a situation where a particular kind of job which used to require only bachelor or post-secondary education today requires a master's degree (Alho-Malmelin, 2010; Isopahkala-Bouret, in review; Moore, 2003, p. 152).

Open university and open polytechnic courses are arranged with different study formats. Even though we have no official statistics on the numbers of students in different study formats, we can be sure that a significant proportion of them are distance learners. Participation in web-based courses in particular has not been studied extensively during the last decade, but in a large-scale study on open university students in Finland, it was found that, when different study modes were compared, there were differences between the student body in web-based and non-web-based courses. The students on web-based courses were older than the students in face-to-face and multi-form courses. The students on web-based courses also had more children than the rest of the students. They were highly concentrated in the southern parts of the country and especially near the capital or other major cities. It could therefore be stated that web-based courses appeal more to people in the bigger cities in the south of Finland than to people in rural areas. There were some hints that students on web-based courses were slightly better

educated than students in other forms of education. They also tended to have a higher income than others (Rinne et al., 2003, p. 102-104).

Mannisenmäki and Manninen (2004) conducted a survey of open universities and the students on their web-based courses. The average student pursuing this form of education was a 36-year-old woman with at least secondary-level education, working in a white-collar occupation and living in a city. Their results also confirmed the finding that, compared to other students, students on these courses were older, better educated, and more likely to be employed in prestigious positions. Many of them had children and lived in the big cities in southern Finland. It seems therefore that web-based courses are better able to accommodate study alongside work and family commitments (Mannisenmäki and Manninen, 2004, p. 36-37).

When students on web-based courses were asked about their study motives and experiences of the study format, they particularly emphasized the importance of flexibility in terms of time and place. The students appreciated the ability to combine work, family and study, since they were typically in life situations where they needed this kind of flexibility. In their life situation, the online course might therefore actually constitute the only opportunity to study. On the other hand, the finding indicates that this format of education selects students with better-than-average learning skills and resources (Mannisenmäki and Manninen, 2004).

When students were asked to name the advantages of online study, they stated flexibility of time and place, independent learning, the web as a study format, general flexibility, communication and counselling. Among the disadvantages were lack of counselling, lack of communication and face-to-face meetings, shortages in the design of the course, problems with the timetable, technical problems, the need for self-discipline, and cost. When asked to state the differences between online study and other teaching formats, students stated that online education was more independent, lonelier, more challenging and demanded more responsibility. They also stated that there were differences in time management and communication between web-based and non-web-based study (Mannisenmäki and Manninen, 2004).

In a study by Nevgi and Tirri (2001, 2003), adult students and their teachers evaluated web-based courses and the factors that enabled or hindered study in two different educational formats: open university and education aimed at unemployed people with academic degrees. According to the students' view, the factor that most promoted successful study was students' own motivation and effort. The teachers, however, cited transfer of learning, feedback from the teacher and a constructive view of learning as the most enabling factors.

When evaluating barriers to learning, teachers were more likely than students to consider that significant barriers exist. According to the teachers' view, isolation and loneliness among students, the unfamiliarity of web-based discussion, and difficulties regarding network connections constituted the most significant barriers to learning. The barriers experienced by the students were not so powerful, but interestingly, open university students were more likely than students on courses aimed at degree holders to cite the high costs of network connections, lack of personal feedback and counselling and overly demanding course content as barriers (Nevgi and Tirri, 2001, 2003).

It is also worth noting that under half of open university students completed their course, whereas 62% of participants on the course aimed at degree holders finished the course on time. The reason for dropping out was most often an unexpected change in one's life situation. Teachers were more likely to consider dropping out a result of lack of time management skills and of students' unrealistic impressions about what studying on a web-based course would entail. The authors also point out that difficulties with technology can be related to difficulties in other areas of learning. Those who possess the necessary technical skills can more easily overcome the difficulties they encounter during studies (ibid.).

On a more general level, the barriers to participation in adult education most often cited are the difficulty of combining work and education, lack of time due to family responsibilities, and lack of educational opportunities within a suitable range. Lack of support from employers and high costs of education were also commonly cited barriers (Niemi, Ruuskanen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 106). The three most common barriers are ones that distance education and web-based courses can do much to overcome. But of

course, the adults themselves must also be willing to participate. As participation is very much linked to previous education level, distance education itself as a study format has limited potential for attracting more students to higher education. Moreover, a certain level of technical skill is necessary to take part in this form of education. In Finland, the adult population on average has excellent skills in technology as well as numeracy and literacy, but there are significant differences between people of different ages and education levels (MoEC, 2013, p. 19).

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