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University Open to Everyone?

The equalising and unequalising tradition of the Finnish open university education

Open university education in Finland is a unique opportunity that offers possibilities for everyone, regardless of age or prior education. Open university education has grown into a substantial form of activity in higher education institutions. However, its position has been controversial. The relation of the open university to degree education has especially been a disputed issue. Based on previous research, this article describes the open university education system in Finland and discusses the questions related to its organisation, mission, history and students. The article concludes with reflections on the future of open university education and speculates with a possible scenario concerning its position in enhancing the openness of higher learning in Finland.

The most famous open university in the world is the UK Open University (UKOU); from the beginning, it was created as a full-fledged university on its own.¹ The Finnish model differs from that of the UK in some respects. First, open university education in Finland is not a separate institution but organised as part of regular universities.² Higher education (HE) institutions provide open courses alongside their degree education, often in collaboration with local adult educational institutions. The set of courses serves as a form of lifelong education, providing modules for conventional degrees.³ In contrast to degree education, a maximum fee of 15 euros per credit point is charged.⁴

The second major difference from the UKOU is that it is not possible to earn the complete degree in the Finnish open university system. A candidate needs to obtain a position as a degree student in order to finish

a degree. To this aim, students may pursue different kinds of routes. In addition to the so-called main entry track (i.e., admissions based on entrance examinations and school grades), a special gateway is designed for open university students. It is meant to be open for those who have earned the required number of credits and sufficient marks within the open university system. As open university courses are equivalent to the courses provided as part of degree education, the former can be fully credited in case the applicant is accepted as a degree student.⁵ However, the number of students entering degree programmes via the gateway has been counted only in the hundreds, remaining significantly lower than the government has expected. Universities exercise considerable autonomy in their student admissions and have not been prone to making the gateway more functional.⁶

When open university education started, its initial objective was to equalise entry to HE by offering educational opportunities to those who did not fulfil the formal entry requirements of universities. Today, the mission emphasises providing everyone with opportunities for lifelong learning, the main target

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group being the adult population in their working life. The national strategy of open university education states, “*The values of the open university are based on equal opportunities for lifelong learning and education. The aims are to enhance individual learners’ knowledge, skills, competencies and expertise; to enable them to raise their educational level; and to promote their personal development, active citizenship, social skills and employment.*”⁷

Besides equalising opportunities, another common characteristic of open universities worldwide is their aim of providing education regardless of time and place.⁸ Open university education in Finland aims to foster flexibility, accessibility and high quality of teaching as cornerstones of its activity. The goal is to make education available in different parts of the country, for people with various kinds of life situations and educational backgrounds. Open university education has also functioned as a forerunner in developing web-based and distance teaching in Finland and has significantly contributed to developing pedagogies based on these methods.⁹

A brief history of open university education

Open university education was introduced in the early 1970s in some Finnish universities, with the aim of bringing more people to HE. Open university courses specifically targeted adults, and the minimum age limit of 25 years was set although only loosely applied. Even though open university courses started as locally organised, small-scale activities and only in some universities, their emergence can be perceived as a manifestation of the HE expansion at that time. During the 1960s and the 1970s, a number of new universities were founded.¹⁰ For its part, open university education helped increase access to HE in different parts of the country.¹¹

In the 1980s, the open university acquired a more established form as each was organised in a centre of continuing education, founded in each university. The institutional setting was thus created, and within this framework, the

activities were developed. More universities entered the field, and the number of students steadily increased. This progress was partly due to new teaching methods that were developed to save on resources and make it more economical to set up open university education on a larger scale. However, the academic community was not unanimously in favour of these developments, and there were doubts about the quality and the academic standards of the teaching that took place outside the walls of academia. Open university students’ gateway to a degree was also established “on paper” even though only a few of them transferred to degree programmes.¹²

In the beginning of the 1990s, the deep economic recession partly contributed to the change in the position of open university education. Due to the drastically worsened state of youth unemployment, earmarked funds from the Ministry of Education were aimed at centres of continuing education. At the same time, the age limit was abolished, and young people were welcomed to the open university. Due to the extra resources, the student numbers expanded, and the teaching was broadened to new subject fields. In this situation of financial cuts in degree education but extra resources for open university education, the relationship between the open university system and degree programmes became problematised. Moreover, as there were government initiatives to increase access through the open university gateway, the academic community resisted these developments. The fear voiced from the university core was that through the open university gateway, unbearably large masses of students would eventually flood the universities.¹³

During the 1990s as well, other and more profound changes occurred in the Finnish HE system. Polytechnic institutions, later named universities of applied sciences, appeared on the scene, which transformed HE into a dual system with two sectors: traditional universities and vocationally oriented universities of applied sciences.¹⁴ Universities of applied sciences also started providing open courses.¹⁵

The tension between the open university and degree education eventually subsided

during the 2000s. In 2005, the degree reform implemented in the Finnish HE system established the two-cycle degree system, which clarified the position of open university education as the provision of bachelor-level education. The degree gateway was also normalised as one option to enter the second-cycle studies in universities.¹⁶ In universities of applied sciences, the so-called path studies were established to provide opportunities to continue studies under a degree programme.¹⁷

Towards the end of the 2010s, what is timely in the Finnish HE system is the student admission reform. A major problem in HE has been the slow transition of young matriculated students to degree programmes, as well as the lengthening of the study durations. The fact that considerable proportions of new entrants to HE institutions have already earned a degree or have a study place at another HE institution is also considered a problematic issue.¹⁸ Thus, the positions of those applying for their first study place in HE are prioritised, and a special quota for them has been introduced in admissions. Furthermore, the importance of upper-secondary school certificates is being given more weight.¹⁹

In this framework, the position of the open university is negotiated in a new way. On one hand, adults who need to upgrade their educational level or deepen their knowledge are directed towards open university education or professional courses for further education that do not lead to a degree.²⁰ The importance of the open university in this respect is viewed more powerfully as a place for adults. On the other hand, there are new kinds of plans to utilise the open university and the gateway more efficiently in the admission of young students. Since the main entry track is being standardised and narrowed in terms of the admission criteria, there is the need for a secondary option for those who require a second chance.²¹

Many kinds of students, various types of motives for studying

Based on recent statistics, annually, about 80,000 persons take courses in open universi-

ties within traditional universities, and about 25,000 persons do so in universities of applied sciences.²² The majority of the students are women of working age, and most of them are also employed. Nevertheless, the students constitute a heterogeneous group, and their social backgrounds, as well as their work and life experiences, are varied.²³

It seems that since the beginning of the 2000s, some changes in the student body have occurred. At the turn of the millennium, over one-third of the open university students were under 25 years old, but in the 2010s, the proportion of young students has dropped to about 15 percent; most students are currently in their thirties and forties. The students' educational backgrounds have also changed remarkably. The proportion of master's degree holders has risen to about one-third.²⁴ These changes indicate that the function of open university education has been somewhat revised. A couple of decades ago, it was more often used by young matriculated students who had not obtained a study place at a "proper" university. Currently, students are more often adults holding professional positions who want to enhance their qualifications and skills.

The students' motives are also versatile. According to previous studies, the most significant motives for studying are to supplement the knowledge and skills needed in a person's working life, to develop oneself in relation to a hobby or in a more general sense, or to pursue a degree.²⁵ In one study, the students were clustered in four groups according to their motives. The first and largest group consisted of students who wanted to supplement their education, either during or after finishing their degree. These students mainly desired to acquire the competencies they needed in their working life. The second group was composed of students who wished to study mainly for non-instrumental reasons or improve themselves in various areas of life. The third group comprised adult students who aspired to change careers and planned to enter degree programmes via the open university gateway. The fourth group included younger

students whose main motives were to apply for degree programmes via the main entry track and prepare themselves for the entrance examination.²⁶

The students were also asked about the benefits of studying in an open university. The different kinds of answers to this open-ended question were classified under the following nine categories:²⁷

- benefits related to work and career,
- benefits related to future studies,
- growth of self-confidence and sense of capability,
- increase in life management skills and finding meaning and direction in one's own life,
- improvement in thinking skills,
- increase in subjective well-being,
- increase in social networks,
- benefits related to family and relatives and
- sense of self as an active and capable citizen.

The open university has significantly influenced many persons' lives, and this theme deserves further research in the future. Notably, most students were very happy with the study opportunities they had received through open university education. About 90% stated that the courses had met their expectations. The adults who planned to enter degree programmes via the open university gateway were particularly satisfied. They claimed to have found their studies particularly meaningful and wanted to continue their education.²⁸

The future of the open university

In the Finnish HE system, degree education is highly selective, with tough competition over the study places.²⁹ At the same time, open university education provides opportunities for all, without asking for any previous merits. Together with the gateway, it forms a second chance route to HE.³⁰ However, the gateway

has remained narrow despite the noticeably large number of degree-oriented students in the open university system. An open university student's position exemplifies a sort of peripheral participation in the university community, whereas the degree student has an identity as a 'proper' student, and this line is hard to cross.³¹

The future of open university education largely depends on the issue of how the degree route will be developed, or more generally, how the relation of the open university to degree education will be dealt with. Are universities finally more willing to utilise the open university system in their student recruitment and selection? If so, which groups will benefit the most from the changes?

The ongoing student admission reform is designed to promote the enrolment of traditionally young applicants to the HE institutions. To this aim, the main entry track is being standardised, but in considering the idea of broadening participation, the government policies have addressed the need to develop alternative routes to HE as well. Thus, new types of practices are demanded to utilise the open university in this new operational environment. This approach is also reinforced by the government plans that encourage enhancing co-operation between universities and upper-secondary schools.

Here, reference can be made to the Swedish scholastic aptitude test (SweSAT) (*högskoleprovet*) because some kinds of general proficiency tests are also suggested as constituting an element of alternative routes in Finland.³² The SweSAT was previously linked to the 25:4 admission scheme that enabled access to HE for those over 25 years old and with a minimum of four years of work experience. Since 1991, the SweSAT has been open for students of all ages, and in 2008, the 25:4 scheme was abolished. As a result, the demographics of the population taking the test have remarkably changed. Currently, many upper-secondary school graduates also take the SweSAT to increase their chances of gaining access to certain programmes. Thus, it serves as a second chance for those who did not perform so well

in upper-secondary schools and for mature students. However, the critics have claimed that while these changes have been made, the chances of mature students have been substantially reduced.³³

This matter leads to other topical questions related to the future of open university education: How is the open university able to respond to the demands of the adult population in need of more and better skills and competencies? How is the open university opening up to the working life, and how can separate degree modules serve in this regard? The Ministry of Education and Culture's policy documents state that individuals who already hold HE degrees should use further education courses and open university education to supplement their degrees and thus improve their knowledge and skills.³⁴ However, studies suggest that pursuing a degree can be an important goal for mature students as well. Sometimes, there is a clear need for a career change, although the dichotomy of changing professions versus staying in the same field is seldom applicable in the case of adult students. For example, pursuing a university degree can be similar to updating a previous education

in a situation where a particular kind of job that used to require only a bachelor's degree or post-secondary education now requires a master's degree. According to the previous studies, open university education has in many cases enabled mature students to sail through a career change smoothly, enabling them to study while working.³⁵

It can be claimed that both equalising and unequalising elements simultaneously exist in open university education. On one hand, the open university itself is available for everyone. As such, it is able to accommodate different kinds of needs and provide versatile study opportunities and meaningful learning experiences for all types of people. On the other hand, the possibilities for studying are limited; especially, the degree gateway is only open for a restricted number of students. Since changes are currently occurring in HE, it remains to be seen what the position of open university education in relation to degree programmes will be in the future. The fact that it offers such diverse study opportunities lies at the heart of open university education. This characteristic simultaneously signifies strength and poses a great challenge.

Notes

1. See Sargent (1997).
2. Thus, the phrase "open university education" is written in small letters.
3. Avoin yliopisto-opetus Suomessa 2014–2018.
4. Suomen asetuskokoelma (SA) (1436/2014).
5. See Alho-Malmelin (2010).
6. Haltia (2015).
7. Avoin yliopisto-opetus Suomessa 2014–2018.
8. Tait (2013).
9. Nevgi & Tirri (2003).
10. Jalava (2013).
11. Haltia (2012), Halttunen (2006).
12. Haltia (2012), Halttunen (2006).
13. Haltia (2012), Halttunen (2006).
14. Jalava (2013).
15. Ministry of Education (MoE) (2005, 9).
16. Haltia (2012).
17. Lohikoski (2008).
18. MoE (2010).
19. Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) (2016).
20. MoE (2010).
21. MoEC (2016, 2017).
22. Vipunen (2018).

23. Jauhiainen et al. (2007), Haltia et al. (2014), Lohikoski (2008).
24. Jauhiainen et al. (2007), Haltia et al. (2014).
25. Müller & Repo (2013), Lohikoski (2008), Haltia et al. (2014).
26. Haltia et al. (2014).
27. Haltia et al. (2018).
28. Haltia et al. (2014).
29. Nori (2011).
30. Orr & Hovdhaugen (2014).
31. See O'Donnell & Tobbell (2007).
32. MoEC (2017, 98).
33. Orr & Hovdhaugen (2014).
34. MoEC (2010, 11, 2011).
35. Alho-Malmelin (2010), Isopahkala-Bouret (2015), Moore (2003, 152).

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