

Accessible and Inclusive Studying at Higher Education Institutions in Finland

Markku Karhu¹

¹ Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences,
Vanha maantie 6, FI-02650 Espoo, Finland.
markku.karhu@metropolia.fi

Abstract. The paper discusses the work done for accessible and inclusive higher education provided by traditional research universities and universities of applied sciences in Finland. First, fundamental global needs and challenges to improve accessibility in higher education set by United Nations, European Council and national bodies are presented as an introduction. The operations of the national ESOK Network are described including some completed and some ongoing projects initiated and executed by the network. Some of them are national and some are European projects. The categories of various disabilities and respective needs are listed. Accessibility training activities are discussed briefly. A number of measures have been taken to improve the accessibility of higher education institutions in Finland. However, the need for awareness, information and instructions is so obvious that a new project was launched in 2013 and funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture to create a recommendation for improving the accessibility of information and communication environment at higher education institutions. In this paper the process and results of the project are discussed in more detail.

Keywords: inclusive education, accessible learning, disability, non-discrimination

1 Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [1] addresses the agreement established that all people despite of the type or severity of their disability have the right and opportunity to participate in education and to develop fully their personality, talents, creativeness and physical skills without discrimination. This declaration forms a wide ranging basis for prohibition of discrimination and the principle of equal treatment. The prohibition of discrimination is complemented with a wide range of measures to eliminate discrimination and to promote equality. Finland is in a process to ratify this agreement.

The Council of Europe is running a long-term programme on Disability Policy 2006-2015 [2]. It includes operations of education and training. The policy declares that all people who have a disability independently of its nature or degree have equal access to education and to develop their full personality, talents, creativity, and intellectual and physical abilities. It also declares that persons with disabilities have the opportunity to apply for study places in mainstream schools, obligates the

authorities to develop educational opportunities that meet the needs of people with disabilities in an adequate way. This signifies a fundamental change in supporting and encouraging people with disabilities and of all ages in lifelong learning, as well as facilitating a smooth and effective transition from one level of education to another, and from education to employment. Schools are responsible for promoting a respectful mental attitude towards the rights of persons with disabilities at all levels of education, including early childhood education for children. It should be ensured that all general education and learning materials and teaching are accessible to persons with disabilities.

The European Ministers of Education set the following targets in the Bologna process [3]. The inclusive higher education to be completed during this decade means that (1) higher education institution students should reflect the diversity of the population, (2) measures should be taken to ascertain that more students from underrepresented groups will enter higher education, and (3) conditions are to be created for everyone to complete their studies through developing learning environments and ensuring sufficient financial conditions, and the member countries should set their own targets for participation of the underrepresented groups to complete their studies.

Non-Discrimination Act prohibits discrimination [4]: No one shall be discriminated against on the basis of age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion, conviction, opinion, health, disability, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics.

Discrimination means:

- 1) the fact that someone is treated less favorably than another (person) is, has been or would be treated in a comparable situation (direct discrimination);
- 2) an apparently neutral provision, criterion or practice would get persons at a particular disadvantage in comparison to other groups, unless the provision, criterion or practice is a legitimate aim and the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary (indirect discrimination).

Over the years the **Ministry of Education and Culture** in Finland has initiated many measures and actions to implement Inclusive and Accessible Higher Education [5] and [6]. It is the task of the ministry to ensure the implementation of previous recommendations and requirements set by the various organizations and actors. In this context several subfields were introduced as issues to be developed. Recommendations for accessible learning concern the planning of university operations, staff and faculty training, study guidance, work and study spaces and communication including accessibility of online and printed communication.

2 Equal Study Rights for Everyone

The essential aim of inclusive higher education is to grant physical, psychological, and social accessibility in teaching and learning in Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs), so that everyone has the same right and access to study regardless of one's characteristics. A summary of this is presented in Fig. 1.

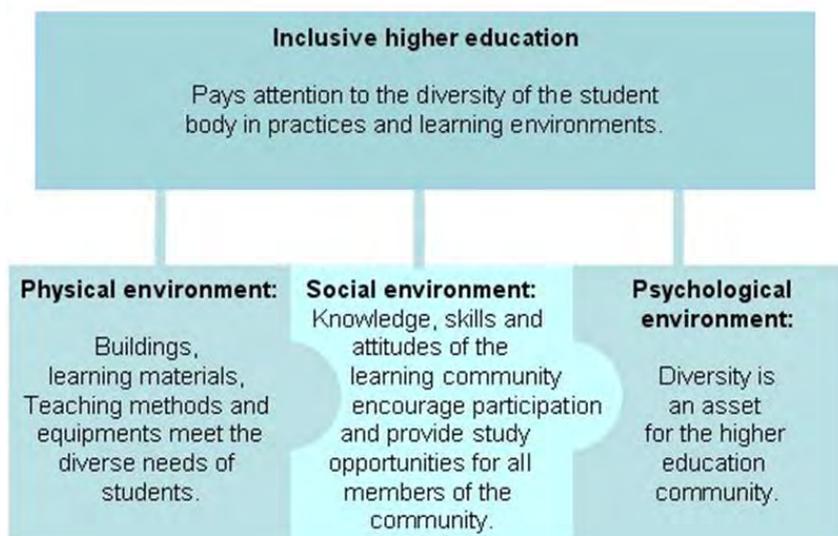


Fig. 1. The context of equal study rights for everyone.

Because the information and communication is increasingly shifting online in electronic form, the accessibility of all electronic channels must be ensured. Higher education institutions should allocate sufficient time and resources in order for, for example, the accessibility of the new e-learning environments, to be tested in an appropriate manner. Higher education institutions should also pay attention to the fact that their website implementation follows the guidelines of the web content accessibility, and that the web pages are designed for different senses and assistive devices to suit. The personnel of the higher education institutions should become familiar with how to create accessible e-learning materials.

Accessibility is to be considered as an investment that improves the overall functioning of the higher education community; improved accessibility solutions serve everybody. Accessible and barrier-free learning environment must be considered as a strategic and long term operation on all levels of the higher education community. Providing accessible and inclusive higher education requires commitment and the fact that in various organizations all know who is responsible for promoting accessibility.

The fast development of information and communication technology enables the implementation of accessible teaching and learning in easier ways. On the other hand, the e-learning environment and communication give rise to several accessibility challenges.

In 2013 – 2014, the ESOK Network (ESOK stands for Accessible Learning and Education) worked on an initiative to create recommendations of accessible information and communications environment at higher education institutions in

Finland [7]. The work resulted in a set of recommendations that form a good starting point and a kit set for higher education institutions.

Supporting the implementation of the recommendations, a web-based handbook was published. It includes articles, tutorials, examples and experiences of barriers and good practices, checklists, assessment tools and references to information sources. The recommendations provide a concise summary of the legislation and of recommendations created in the past and by various actors, standards and guidelines, and present them in a form suitable for higher education institutions.

Training sessions have been planned to be offered in different parts of Finland in 2014. The recommendations form a good base for other educational levels and governmental sectors, and for the Ministry of Education and Culture when developing their own information and communication environment. The Ministry of Education and Culture supports the project and believes it is important that higher education institutions start using the recommendations.

3 Objectives and Operations of the ESOK Network

The ESOK Network supports the accessibility work of all HEIs by promoting collaboration between HEIs and non-governmental organizations, organizing training, endorsing good practices and developing guidelines and recommendations.

The main key duties of the ESOK Network are (1) promoting awareness and spreading out information concerning accessibility among higher education institutions, like handbooks and online web portals and Facebook discussion forums , (2) promoting and managing the projects on accessibility among HEIs, (3) arranging seminars and workshops for nationwide collaboration, and (4) promoting the organization and operation of national and international collaboration between people in charge of equality and accessibility in Finnish HEIs.

The ESOK Network consists of 36 member HEIs and over 50 individual developers [8]. This means that all higher education institutions in Finland contribute to the ESOK Network. The Network has roots that date back to the year of 2005 when a study about inclusive studying was carried out by the Ministry of Education. As an outcome of this study the ESOK Network was established in 2006 together with a development project that was launched.

The establishment of the ESOK Network was also influenced by a memorandum by the associations of students and disabled people requesting “Accessible Learning is for All” already in 2003; the memorandum revealed problems in higher education and listed practical measures to promote accessibility. In those days the National Institute for Health and Welfare coordinated project activities on “Higher Education for All” while participating in the “Design for All” network in Finland.

The ESOK Network promotes accessible studying possibilities by collaboration with higher education institutions (HEIs), societies and other organizations. It aims to be open, flexible and practically oriented. It informs about different activities and projects concerning accessibility.

One of the ongoing projects (EU funded in 2013 - 2016) is to make a survey of how well people who suffer from autism or Asperger disorder are aware of

possibilities to carry out their studies and to develop measures to inform such people about study possibilities and student counseling. The project documents and analyzes the experiences of people who suffer from autism or Asperger disorder, their parents and other relatives and other supporting persons. The project aims to develop an interactive online tool to support learning and study skills and to aid supporting professionals. The project will publish best practices and evaluation reports in Finnish, English, Polish, Dutch, and Spanish.

There is an ongoing project called MapAbility coordinated by the European Union and Erasmus Student Network (ESN). The project conducts a survey of accessibility and related services in Europe. An online portal will be developed where students and other interested people have an easy access to information about accessible learning possibilities. MapAbility informs students with special needs about the accessibility of HEIs. The ExchangeAbility International Team has been working intensively on the MapAbility project since September 2013, especially on preparation and launching a questionnaire aiming at gathering information on the actual situation inside European higher education institutions. Furthermore, a website was created [9] and several partnerships signed with European network organizations dealing with students and people with special needs and disabilities.

The questionnaire was launched in January 2014 and has been disseminated to all European universities where the ESN network is present. Until now we have mapped around 70 universities and 230 university buildings and the submissions are continuing. The main goal of the questionnaire is to study and examine the accessibility of higher education institutions and services provided to students with disabilities. The most important outcome of the project will be an online map of HEIs and information about their services and accessibility. Using the web-based tool the students with disabilities have a chance to choose the right destination for their period abroad.

The ESOK Network manages an online web portal to inform about training and workshops concerning accessibility. One example of this kind of action is the announcement about a course called “Creating Accessible Digital Educational Contents” that was provided by the ESVI-AL Project in August 2014 [10].

4 Meeting the Needs of Diverse Student Body in Higher Education

Sharing general information and awareness about the needs of diverse students, a few practical booklets with a few pages for teachers and students have been published as web documents (.html) and word documents (.doc). They address these titles [11]:

- 1) Blind and low vision students and higher education
- 2) Dyslexia and higher education
- 3) Anxiety disorders and higher education
- 4) Physically disabled students and higher education
- 5) Asperger's syndrome and higher education
- 6) Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and higher education
- 7) Mental health problems and higher education

Other type of the activities of the ESOK Network concerns the cooperation with non-governmental organizations like Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired. It is a special service provider with a social element as well as an advocacy organization for the blind and the partially sighted.

The aim of the federation is to secure the blind and visually impaired an equal status with other Finnish citizens. To achieve this, the federation seeks to improve the capabilities and skills of the visually impaired, while also trying to influence the society at large. The visually impaired have established a number of associations (14 regional and 11 activity-related).

Celia is a special library which produces and provides literature in accessible formats for people who are unable to read standard printed books due to illness or disability – including visually impaired persons, persons suffering from dyslexia and learning disabilities, developmental disabilities and muscular diseases.

5 Review of Projects

A number of accessibility development projects where the ESOK Network has been involved are listed here. The projects have been carried out by Finnish higher education institutions and some non-governmental organizations. To give an overview, their contents are listed here in eight different categories.

Supporting Learning Readiness and Diverse Learners

- 1) The main objective is to develop and offer the students and the staff multidisciplinary practice methods and models for comprehensive student support and counselling.
- 2) The project aims to develop practices to recognize and support students with reading disabilities in Finnish-Swedish polytechnic and university education.
- 3) The Rehabilitation Foundation project develops and tailors new services for adults and young people with learning difficulties. The aim is to find each customer's unique strengths and create personal coping models by charting learning readiness, developing new working strategies and using peer support.

Teaching, Studying, and Counselling

- 1) Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences carried out a project on equality that aimed to promote equal opportunities for the students and staff of the university to participate in studies and work. The project focused on students and staff, and developing supportive actions for diverse learners and students with foreign backgrounds.
- 2) The project aims to support the well-being of students and produce an accessibility practices program for the involved higher education institutes. The program will include actions and tasks concerning physical, social, cultural and linguistic accessibility. Another aim of the project is to support work communities' accessibility surveys and actions to implement accessibility.

- 3) The aim of the project was through sign language studies to investigate and develop the use of interpreting services to remove communicative obstacles faced in studies.
- 4) The aim of the joint project was to prevent significant delay in studies or dropping out by developing counselling and support services for those polytechnic students who need special support with their studies.
- 5) The aim of the project was to find out what kind of obstacles employees with foreign backgrounds meet when they apply for higher vocational education. The project also charted the employment of tourism, catering and domestic services students with foreign backgrounds and what obstacles they encounter.

Learning, Teaching, Studying, and Counselling Environments

- 1) Research and product development project on accessibility and good usability in learning environments.
- 2) The project focused on developing physical and mainly pedagogic accessibility in learning environments.
- 3) The Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities project focuses on evaluating the accessibility of built environment, and aims to create a generally accepted evaluation system for accessibility.

Mental Health and Coping

- 1) Project to support students under 26 years in their studies and with challenges they face in everyday life.
- 2) The project “I Hope – Through the Studies with Careful Planning” aims to improve the studying capabilities of those students who suffer from depression or other mental disturbances.
- 3) The project aims to promote educational equality for recovering mental health patients and to make supported study models part of the operation of the institutes.

Information Technology

- 1) The Foxability project aims to develop a Mozilla Firefox browser extension that evaluates the accessibility and reachability of websites.
- 2) A cross-faculty MobIT research team examines how mobile technology, especially portable computers and a wireless local area network can be implemented in and supports studying, teaching and learning.

Working Life and Accessibility

- 1) The Finnish Association for Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome project develops models of support in work and studies for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. The aim is to promote public understanding of autism spectrum disorders, improve access to studies and to support entering working life.
- 2) The Finnish Federation of the Hard of Hearing project focuses on promoting equality of the hard of hearing and to improve accessibility in working life.

Higher Education Accessibility Guide (HEAG)

- 1) The HEAG database offers information resource for students with disabilities considering possibilities to study aboard. The goal will be to review, revise and update information in the current HEAG database.

6 Conclusions

This paper gives an overview of the completed and ongoing actions to improve the accessibility in many aspects at higher education institutions in Finland. Inclusive education is set to be a target by many declarations by international cooperative organizations, like United Nations and European Council. In Finland numerous activities have been initiated since early 2000. The Ministry of Education has been active in giving a number of general calls and invitations to the higher education institutions to promote and improve accessibility in many different ways and the higher education institutions have responded positively. A sample of completed projects is listed in the paper. A special acknowledgment goes to the ESOK Network that has been active since its establishment in 2006. The network has worked as a generator for a number of development projects, as a source of accessible information by providing a web portal, as a training operator and as a mediator between educators and organizations representing disabled people.

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