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Chapter XXV

An Evaluation of Web-Based Education at a Finnish University

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, an evaluation of two student cohorts' and their teachers' experiences of Web-based education at a university in Finland is presented. Discussion of Finnish national education policy and some crucial issues concerning Web-based education provide the framework for the evaluation. The results indicated that the students' and teachers' experiences were largely positive, and correlated with other international research results in this field. The authors are convinced that sharing these experiences will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of such online learning, as well as the skill requirements and needs for cultural reshaping in Web-based education. Such an exchange of experience should facilitate online education collaboration nationally and internationally. However, the overall consequences of Web-based education still remain unclear and must be carefully considered.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to provide an evaluation of Web-based education from our own perspective, as teachers, and that of two student cohorts from the Department of Health Policy and Management at the University of Kuopio in Finland. Our areas of expertise are social and health management sciences, thus, our interest is concentrated on Web-based education at the macrolevel, as part of Finnish educational policy, and also at the microlevel

as a pedagogical issue. The chapter is structured such that the background section offers a discussion of three main factors that have affected educational policy and the implementation of Web-based education in Finland, thereby providing a macrolevel frame for our study. Following this is a focus on some crucial issues in Web-based education based on previous research and literature. The empirical part outlines the results of the evaluation of an online course at the University of Kuopio, and finally, some concluding remarks on the basis of the empirical findings are made, and some future trends are discussed.

BACKGROUND

As in many other countries, the development of Web-based education has been rapid during recent years in Finland. A variety of features related to this development can be identified at different levels, and these are determined by numerous factors. Although these factors can also be identified at other educational levels, we prefer to focus on the information society, lifelong learning, and the quality of teaching and learning at university level as examples.

Finland is a good example of an information society, and many educational projects have been launched to promote this development. The Ministry of Education has published a document entitled "Education, Training and Research in the Information Society. A national strategy for 2000–2004," in which it outlines its vision for Finnish education:

"By the year 2004 Finland will be one of the leading interactive knowledge societies. Success will be based on citizens' equal opportunities to study and develop their own intellectual capacity and extensively utilize information resources and educational services. A high-quality, ethically and economically sustainable mode of operation in network-based teaching and research will have been established" (Education, Training and Research in the Information Society, 1999).

An information society is built largely on the principle of lifelong learning, the adoption of which is a prerequisite in meeting the increasing new skill requirements of working life in such a society. In this context, Web-based education is said to be a flexible way in which work and educational organizations can cooperate, and in which individuals can shift between working life and education (e.g., Pulkkinen, 1997). Concurrently, the supply of education is broadened to different learning organizations, e.g., universities and polytechnics, nationally and internationally (e.g., Rhinesmith, cited in Morss, 1999).

The education provided by Finnish universities has also met the expectations and opportunities raised in the information society. Traditionally, the basic mission of the Finnish universities has been to conduct research and provide education based on research (Higher Education Policy in Finland, 2000). Such a mission places greater emphasis on research than teaching, something that has created conflicting challenges for teachers. Individual careers and academic communities have been evaluated on the basis of the scientific merits of the research undertaken only, with the consequence that all investments in developing teaching have been viewed as detracting time and resources from scientific work (Sinko & Lehtinen, 1999, p. 117).

However, in recent years, the balance at universities has shifted toward more pedagogical issues. Quality of education, university teachers' education, and different methods for learning and evaluation have all been the subject of extensive discussion. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, the body responsible for evaluating the quality of education,