

# THE VIRTUAL POLYTECHNIC IN FINLAND

Veli-Matti Tolppi

Finland, Kuopio, Savonia University of Applied Science

## 1. Finnish higher education system

The Finnish higher education system consists of two parallel sectors: universities and polytechnics. Universities and polytechnics are complementary in their respective areas of strength, and both sectors have their own profiles. Universities emphasise scientific research and instruction based thereon. Polytechnics are high-quality experts in working life and its development.

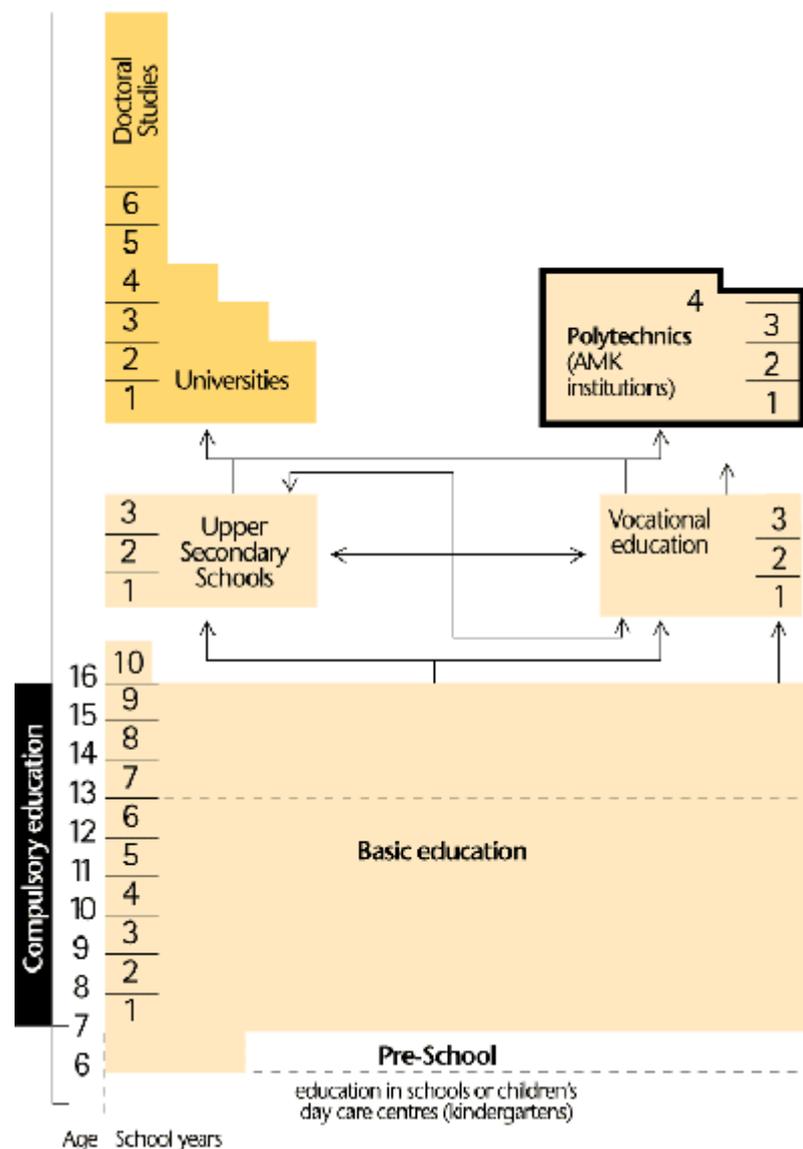


Fig 1. Finnish education system.

There are 20 universities in Finland all of them conduct research and offer studies to doctorate level. The total number of polytechnics is 29. They are mostly multi-field and regional

institutions of higher education, emphasising working life contacts in their operations. Compared with universities, polytechnic studies are more practically oriented; polytechnics educate experts for positions in working life and its development. In addition to their educational duties, polytechnics conduct research and development work which serves instruction and supports working life.

The provision of higher education is extensive. Within the entire higher education system - including universities and polytechnics - the intake for 2001 accounts for 66% of the average size of the relevant young age group. Of this, polytechnics and universities account for 37% and 29%, respectively.

## **2. The basis of Virtual Polytechnic in Finland**

After building up the normal structure of institutions of higher education, the focus in Finland is just now to make it possible to learn and teach independently from time and place for every customer. This year the Ministry of Education (<http://www.minedu.fi/minedu/index.html>) started the project called the Virtual Polytechnic (later ViPo).

The need for ViPo (<http://www.tpu.fi/virtuaaliyamk/>) is obvious, because more and more students want alternative ways to study, and modern information and communication technologies make possible the new ways to produce and deliver teaching. There are also same kind of projects going on in lower level and also in the university side in Finland.

The information technology has become a part of every profession and their working life, and information technology is also widely utilized in staff education. With studying in ViPo students facility for utilize new technology become better, and it is possible for students to try new ways of working and its developing. By this way students will get more facility for life-long-learning.

In addition to traditional books it has been appeared on the market a lot of electronical learning material. In the same time it has been noticed, how easy and cheap it is to copy and distribute electronical material. The production of training material is changing in a new kind of business, where also the Polytechnics in Finland with other educational institutions must take part in.

## **3. The objectives of Virtual Polytechnic**

The objectives of ViPo are:

- to combine the wide knowledge of polytechnics in ViPo
- to raise the facilities of partners to virtual teaching and learning
- to create the structure of distributing educational material of Finnish Polytechnics utilising modern information and communication technologies
- to make the common portal for electronical education material
- to create the rules and policies to produce, maintain and distribute the educational material and study projects, which are mainly made in co-operation
- to make co-operation with similar projects

## **4. The customers viewpoint**

The customers of the ViPo are students, teachers and administrative staff. For different kind of study groups, the ViPo offers possibility to reach both national and international modern distance education and its material.

For teachers the service offers supporting activities to implement virtual study courses and also a pedagogical discussion forum.

For administrative staff will the ViPo offers a policies for administrate the virtual education environment and share the teaching cost.

For everyone the ViPo is like a window for polytechnical education and channel for open studies.

## **5. The operations of Virtual Polytechnic**

The ViPo is a network of Polytechnics, which makes it possible for individual institutions to distribute their distance learning material under the rules, which are agreed together. The ViPo is not a juridical unit, and it does not make agreements in the names of polytechnics. The Ministry of Education will guarantee for every polytechnic in Finland an equal access to net and its basic services by FUNET (the Finnish university and research network ) computer net. In the same time the FUNET (<http://www.csc.fi/suomi/funet/index.html.en>) is also the maintainer of computer servers of the ViPo. The Ministry of Education pays the cost of that service directly to the FUNET.

There is in the first stage no project in the ViPo to build a common learning environment or choose program for educating. Every polytechnic use what learning environment they want. Of course, the ViPo follows, what is going on the market and can recommend suitable platforms and can also make their development work. The local networks and technical services in polytechnics do not also belong to duties of the ViPo.

In the first step (just now) the operations models and the rules have been built up for the activities of the ViPo. This means signing the cooperative agreements between polytechnics and starting to produce the learning material. This material is mainly realized in so called producer teams, which consists of voluntary representatives of finnish polytechnics. For example The Pohjois-Savo Polytechnic (<http://www.pspt.fi/eng/>) is leading the team, who is making material for electronic course. Also a lot investment has been made for teachers educating and for supporting activities of students. The aim is that there will be the common portal for all activities.

The ViPo in Finland is making its firsts steps and it is a new opportunity in finnish educational system. It is a network of polytechnics, not a legal institution, who can, for example, give a certificate. The normal Polytechnics are also responsible for objectives, contents and requirements of degree.

The project for building up the finnish Virtual Poytechnic started 1.11.2000 and it will last to the end of the year 2003. The Tampere Polytechnic is the coordinator and the director of the project is mrs. Marja Rautajoki ([marja.rautajoki@tpu.fi](mailto:marja.rautajoki@tpu.fi)).