Chapter 11
Life as Learning – A Finnish National Research Programme

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In this chapter, we present an example of programmes inviting researchers to create new knowledge on urgent themes in society: the Finnish national research programme Life as Learning *(LEARN), launched by the Academy of Finland for the years 2002-2006.*

The Finnish education system has received attention from all over the world because it came out on top in the first two PISA surveys. Finnish 15-year-olds are number one in terms of skills in mathematics, scientific knowledge, the reading of literature and problem-solving (OECD, 2001, 2004), and only a very few students fall within the lowest PISA categories. Likewise, differences between schools are small. PISA shows that Finland has succeeded in its policy to enhance the equity and quality of learning. It has been a long process, and the long-term development objectives were set almost 40 years ago.

According to researchers (Välijärvi, 2004; Simola 2005; Laukkanen 2006; Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen 2006), the educational policy has purposefully aimed at equity in education and promoted the common comprehensive school model. In the process, many important decisions have been made, *e.g.* the discontinuation of streaming, the strong allocation of affordable educational resources to lower secondary education and the decentralisation of decision-making powers. Primary school teacher education was also raised to the MA level. Support for weak students was taken care of. Different stakeholders have been invited to express their opinions.

The Ministry of Education and researchers of education have been closely collaborating in promoting a common comprehensive school for all. The review group for educational sciences (Educational Research in Finland, 1990, pp. 2-3) assessed that during the last few decades, most of the researchers and professors in education have been working hard towards developing the educational system and teaching arrangements. The research that academic experts have conducted with their colleagues and students at universities has been important input. This has promoted evidence-based policy-making, which has helped to develop the education system in Finland.

Life as Learning – The Finnish case of a national research programme

Important tools for evidence-based policy-making are research programmes which invite researchers to create new knowledge on urgent themes in society. A current

example is the national research programme *Life as Learning* (LEARN) launched by the Academy of Finland for the years 2002-2006 (*www.aka.fi/learn*).

The initiative to establish the programme came from many public and private sector partners in 1999. In the 1990s, Finland had defined itself as a knowledge-based society, and the significance of learning became more urgent than ever. The National Board of Education, the Ministry of Education, the Future Committee of the Parliament and Nokia Corporation took the initiative to contact the Academy of Finland. They emphasised that investment in research on learning and especially in basic research is a key factor when promoting the ideal of a learning society.

In 2000 the Academy of Finland set up a preparatory group to explore the main themes of the programme. The preparatory group organised national seminars and meetings for researchers. It also arranged an international workshop to which key persons from ongoing national research programmes of learning in the United Kingdom (*www.tlrp.org*) and in Norway were invited. Based on what was learned from these events, the Academy of Finland set objectives and themes for the research programme and released a call for proposals in order to start the programme in 2002 (*www.aka.fi/learn*).

Research areas that urgently required new approaches and findings were chosen as the themes. The programme was to focus on redefining the concept of learning and examining social and cultural contexts of learning, knowledge creation, working environments, and new teachership. The preparatory group emphasised the importance of ICT in teaching and learning, but the hope was that this topic would be integrated into the development of teaching and learning environments.

The objectives of the research programme reflect the principles of multidisciplinary, cross-boundary partnerships and the anticipation of the future. The programme aimed to:

- encourage the development of a new research culture and new research partnerships and the creation of interdisciplinary and international research projects around the problems of learning;
- find a way of managing the challenges of lifelong and lifewide learning in order to avoid new forms of exclusion;
- create a solid interdisciplinary research base for developing teaching and learning in different educational and working-life contexts; and
- anticipate future learning needs from the point of view of society, culture and the individual.

The review process had a phase for outlines (116 proposals) and one for full proposals. After the international review the Academy of Finland selected 17 projects with three large consortiums. The acceptance rate of outline proposals was only 15%. An open call for programme co-ordination was also held. The Academy of Finland selected the University of Helsinki as a co-ordination unit, Professor Hannele Niemi as Scientific Director, and Researcher Raija Latva-Karjanmaa as Co-ordinator.

The Academy of Finland was the main funding agency (5.1m euros) of the programme, although Tekes, the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation, and The Finnish Work Environment Fund also supported projects in their own focus areas. The Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education, the Centre of Expertise Programme within the Helsinki Region – Culminatum Ltd – and the

University of Helsinki provided the programme with resources for co-ordination activities, seminars and dissemination work.

The accepted projects extended to a broad scale of different disciplines: education, psychology, sociology, technology and engineering, neurology, and economics. The projects also covered a large variety of contexts of human learning in educational institutions and working life as well as non-formal learning settings and virtual learning environments. Learning was approached at individual and collaborative levels. Many projects were collaborative plans connecting researchers in several universities, and some projects also involved business partners. Some projects had an ambitious aim to create new tools for managing changing contexts or to change practices. Most projects also had strong international links.

Co-operation and dissemination throughout the programme

One aim of the programme was to create a new research culture and strengthen co-operation between different disciplines and partners. To increase cohesiveness and mutual interaction within the programme, joint meetings, conferences and social events were arranged each year. The co-ordination unit also arranged forums for researcher training, facilitated joint article and book writings in cross-over projects, and organised researcher meetings with other research programmes close to Life as Learning. Contacts with other European programmes were also offered.

A component of dissemination and partnership with practitioners and policy makers was included from the beginning of the programme. Even at the beginning of the LEARN programme, the projects already had well-grounded frameworks and foundations for their new projects and could offer important scenarios to urgent issues of learning. The national conferences "School and Teachers as Developers of Learning Environments" (2003 and 2005) were designed for teachers, headmasters, teacher educators and key persons in school policy. The conferences "Changing Working Life Contexts" (2004) and "The Social Innovations in Working Life" (2004) were organised in order to create contacts between learning researchers, enterprise and the public sector. These conferences also provided interactive sessions and discussions where practitioners could give their contributions and initiatives. The feedback from the participants was very rewarding. What teachers and practitioners were found to value was that high level researchers informed them about the projects of the Academy of Finland and that they had an opportunity to be partners in the programme.

Life as Learning has published one to three newsletters each year, LEARN periodicals (in Finnish and in English; see *www.aka.fi/learn*), in which the latest news from the projects and conferences have been introduced. Two special issues have been sent to all schools and working-life partners. The national TV and media have been actively involved in the programme's work. Four TV documentaries were released in 2005 and are to be used by digital TV for later broadcasts as well.

The programme has organised two international multidisciplinary conferences, INTERLEARN 2003 and 2005. Both conferences had 200-300 participants, of whom one-fourth were researchers from other countries. Many teachers and practitioners also participated in these conferences.

The co-ordination unit together with researchers drew up a publishing plan at a very early stage of the programme. The programme had a double strategy. One aim was to

publish high quality scientific articles in international scientific refereed journals. Joint writing groups and editorial teams for a special volume of journals were set. Another aim was to produce books and articles for Finnish society. The co-ordination unit arranged negotiations with national publishing companies. As a result, an agreement was made with a company specialised in teaching and learning issues. Further, some universities offered their own publication series for the publishing of new findings. Fours joint books (*www.aka.fi/learn*) have been already published for revising learning in schools and working places, even though the programme has not yet finished.

The dissemination and knowledge transfer has been an ongoing process. It has caused additional work for researchers, but it has also added to their motivation when they have understood the significance of their work to societal partners. This work has also been a learning experience for academic people, and sometimes finding the right way to communicate with practitioners has been difficult.

Strengths and challenges of the programme

The strengths of the project have been in promoting multidisciplinary approaches and cross-boundary co-operation and learning in different learning contexts. Even though the programme has not officially finished, we can see some promising tentative results.

Different generations of learners

Finnish society has different learning generations at the same time. Their needs and capacity to learn new skills vary a great deal. They all have different conceptions of knowledge and learning. How to help different learners to learn new ways of working is a big challenge. The younger generation also must prepare itself to learn several, perhaps three to four vocations or professions in their life course. This sets more and more emphasis on learning to learn skills in schools (Olkinuora and Rinne, 2005). In the area of vocational education new demands are to face occupational de-specialisation, multi-skills and knowledge work, simultaneous and contradictory processes of individualism and a new kind of collectivism at the same time (Heiskanen, 2005).

Learning to learn is decisive

Learning to learn has cognitive and emotional components. It is important how learners see the future and how they conceptualise themselves as learners. They must be capable of adjusting themselves to new environments. Students need a sense of hope in their learning, and motivation plays a key role in their learning paths. Learners use different strategic ways to influence their motivational orientations, and they also need strategies to cope with stress in schools and working life. Learning is more and more about sharing and being connected with networks, and people need collaborative skills when working in these environments. Multicultural groups set special demands on collaboration (Hautamäki *et al.*, 2006; Nurmi *et al.*, 2003; Pitkänen, 2003).

We can have an effect on exclusion

International comparisons (OECD, 2001, 2004) demonstrate that Finnish students have a high level of school achievements and also a high score in learning to learn skills. However, students at risk need special support in their learning. We have evidence that

we can prevent exclusion by allocating for special education and arranging flexible educational structures which give opportunities to continue learning and schooling at any phase of one's life course. We have interesting cases of how the early identification of signs of exclusion is important. An influential factor is the learners' own concept of themselves as learners. At an individual level it is also of great importance if someone (*e.g.* a tutor, friend, or teacher) gives a supportive impulse to a student who is in danger of being excluded. This support can very often happen in a very unofficial way (Martti, 2005; Suikkanen, 2005).

Learning and new technology

Web-based learning changes internal as well as external processes of organisations in knowledge creation. We need to model these processes and make them visible. Earlier roles of teachers and students have changed. In web-based learning there is a need to create richer symbol systems than only textual ones and pay more attention to emotions. Mobile technology opens new possibilities of enlarging learning spaces, and we have many new pedagogical applications available. The important message from the studies of implementations of new technologies is that unaccomplished, untested and unfinished environments estrange users. It may take a long time before they start to try again (Multisilta *et al.*, 2005; Paajanen and Multisilta, 2005). Some projects found evidence that the collaborative development and training simulations created a shared understanding of web-based teaching and studying as a collaborative process and helped to define the new roles and practices of the actors (Smeds, 2005).

New structures in working life

The change in key processes in work, from mass production to customer-intelligent services with mutual co-operation, creates totally new landscapes of learning. Team structures on working life are moving towards more flexible arrangements that can better serve the needs of customers. The nature of work is collaborative, multi-professional, and multicultural, requiring high problem-solving skills and continued learning (Engeström, 2005).

The LEARN programme covered several important areas of learning, but many urgent issues still demand more and deeper analysis of learning processes. We would need much more knowledge about the connections and relationships between processes and learning outcomes. A neuroscience perspective on processes and outcomes could open new ways to support different learners. We would need more research on methodological issues in multidisciplinary projects and how to combine individual processes and societal structures. In the economics of education, new models and more detailed analysis of effects on the investment of learning should be developed. Conceptual, philosophical and value analysis of learning is also needed when promoting learning in different environments and through different methods.

How to add additional value to the programme

Even though Life as Learning has been very successful in many respects, some issues have been threats to its effectiveness. Limited funding resources caused many restrictions on the original objectives of the projects. The Academy of Finland was forced to reduce the budgets of the proposals radically when accepting them into the programme. The

funding was available for four years, which seems to be too short a time for ambitious projects.

To add more effectiveness, the call for proposals could put more emphasis on joint activities and dissemination. This would steer researchers to include these aspects as real components of the projects. At this time it is very much the co-ordination unit's responsibility to get the researcher involved in joint activities during the programme. Joint seminars, meetings and other partnership activities also require resources, *e.g.* travel, accommodation and rent. The project funding mainly only covered the researchers' and the co-ordination unit's salaries. The co-ordination unit had to seek external funding for all dissemination seminars, workshops, and co-operation with stakeholders. Fortunately most co-funders provided some extra resources for these activities case by case, but the lack of funding created uncertainties in long-term planning.

The real gap in dissemination will be seen after the programme is over. The co-ordination ended in early 2006, and the research groups will finish their projects in 2006. Thereafter, neither forums nor resources will disseminate the primary results. The reality is that the best fruits of the programme could be gathered after the programme, but no organised way is available to create this additional value. How to bring major findings to the public awareness and how to inform stakeholders after the funding period is a challenge.

The new initiatives – next steps after the programme

The major funding agencies, the Academy of Finland and the National Technology Agency TEKES, published a document, FINNSIGHT 2015, in June 2006 (*www.finnsight2015.fi/*). It is a proactive national programme for innovation and competence for Finnish research policy. It is based on the work of ten expert panels, which identified the major urgent research fields in Finland: (1) learning and to renew society through learning, (2) services and innovations in services, (3) welfare and health, (4) the environment and energy, (5) infrastructures and security, (6) bio-competence and bio-society, (7) information and communication, (8) understanding and human interaction, (9) materials and (10) global business. Learning was set among the first priorities, with stress on the urgent need to discover how to facilitate the learning of various learner groups and to help organisations create fruitful environments for innovations and competence building. The main themes focus on a combination of Learning – Brain – Technology.

When drawing scenarios and future directions for research on learning, the FINNSIGHT 2015 report often refers to the network of CICERO Learning. This research network which stands for **C**ross-disciplinary **I**nitiative for **C**ollaborative **E**fforts of **R**esearch **O**n Learning, was established in 2005 by the University of Helsinki to promote multi-disciplinary research on learning. To a large degree, the Life as Learning research programme also contributed to the emergence of the CICERO Learning network. The network's new co-ordination unit is located on the premises of the University of Helsinki (for more information visit *www.helsinki.fi/cicero*).

The CICERO Learning network focuses on promoting nationally and internationally recognised high-level research on learning over the boundaries between different scientific fields, universities and corporate lives. The core areas of research of the

network are: (a) learning and the brain, (b) learning throughout life and in different contexts, (c) technologies of learning, and (d) learning and society.

Through conducting cutting edge research on learning, CICERO Learning aims at innovations and synergies between the research community, business and industry. An important goal of the network is to maintain Finland's position as one of the leading countries in innovations and industrial development.

As the new initiatives as well as the outcomes of the Life as Learning research programme demonstrate, promoting learning research is a long-term process, and knowledge-based societies urgently need learning research. Without systematic high-level basic research we cannot answer to those challenges.

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Web links

www.aka.fi/learn: Life as Learning Research Programme, Academy of Finland, Finland.

www.finnsight2015.fi/: FinnSight 2015: Exploring the Outlook for Science, Technology and Society. Academy of Finland and the National Technology Agency Tekes.

www.helsinki.fi/cicero: CICERO Learning. Multidisciplinary Research Network.

www.tlrp.org: Teaching and Learning Research Program (TLRP), Economic and Social Research Council, Great Britain.

Biography

Adrienne Alton-Lee is the Chief Education Adviser for the New Zealand Ministry of Education's Iterative Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) Programme. Her role is to strengthen the evidence-base informing policy and practice in education and to provide medium term strategic advice to government. Dr. Alton-Lee is a Fellow of the International Academy of Education. She was formerly a teacher, classroom researcher, Professor and an Associate Editor of *Teaching and Teacher Education*. She has published in leading educational journals including the *Harvard Educational Review,* the *Elementary School Journal,* the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* and the *American Educational Research Journal.*

René Bugge Bertramsen is the Deputy General Director for the Danish University and Property Agency within the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. Since 1999 he has been involved in reforms aiming at enhancing the quality of the Danish educational R&D system (such as the establishment of the Danish Pedagogical University – DPU – and the R&D centre Learning Lab Denmark). Mr. Bertramsen was responsible for the University Act of 2003 which gave Danish universities a new governance system, *i.e.* boards with external majority and employed rectors, deans and department heads. In 2006-2007 he was responsible for a merger process where government research institutes were integrated with the universities and a number of single-faculty universities were merged with larger multi-faculty universities, including the merger of DPU with multi-faculty University of Aarhus.

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Satya Brink is currently Director, National Learning Policy Research, Human Resources and Social Development Canada. She and her team are responsible for developing evidence in support of policy development for lifelong learning for the Government of Canada. This work includes analysis on outcomes for each age group and type of education as well as the impacts of earlier learning on subsequent learning. In her previous post, she was responsible for research on human development based on two major Canadian longitudinal surveys. During this time she and her team produced a major body of evidence based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth which influenced major new initiatives of the Canadian government in support of children and their families.

Tracey Burns is a research and policy analyst for the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, OECD, Paris. Previous to this she worked on social determinants of health across the life-span with Charles Ungerleider & Associates in Vancouver, Canada. As a Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of British Columbia, Dr. Burns led a hospital-based research team investigating newborn infants' responses to language. Tracey Burns holds a BA from McGill University, Canada and PhD from Northeastern University, USA. She is the recipient of various awards and honours, including the UBC Post-Doctoral Fellowship, a student-nominated university teaching award, and the American Psychological Association Dissertation Research Award.

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Jane Davidson is the Assembly Member for Pontypridd and former Deputy Presiding Officer for the National Assembly (Wales, United Kingdom). Since October 2000 she has been the National Assembly Education and Life-Long Learning Minister responsible for all aspects of education, training and lifelong learning. Educated at Malvern Girls' College, Birmingham University and the University of Wales, Jane has taught English, Drama and Physical Education. She is also an experienced youth worker and former Cardiff City Councillor. She was a member of the Arts Council for Wales and its Lottery Board, and Head of Social Affairs at the Welsh Local Government Association before her election to the Assembly. Jane has had a keen interest in education and youth work and is enjoying the challenges of the Education and Life-Long Learning portfolio.

Stephen Gorard holds the Anniversary Chair in Educational Studies at the University of York (United Kingdom), and directs the Centre for Research into Equity and Impact in Education. He is currently leading an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded project promoting the use and understanding of randomised controlled trials in public policy (*http://trials-pp.co.uk/*), and was the originator of the ESRC's Research Capacity-building Network. He has published widely about the research process in social science, but his substantive work focuses on issues of equity, especially in educational opportunities and outcomes, and on the effectiveness of educational systems. Recent books include "Teacher supply: the key issues", "Adult learning in the digital age", "Overcoming the barriers to higher education", and "Schools, markets and choice policies".

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Maria J.A. van der Hoeven is the Minister of Economic Affairs (Netherlands). Maria J.A. van der Hoeven was born in 1949. She was trained as a primary teacher and taught at schools of home economics and junior secondary commercial education. Thereafter she was head of the Adult Commercial Vocational Training Centre in Maastricht and of the Limburg Technology Centre. From 1991 to 2002 Ms. Van der Hoeven was a member of the House of Representatives for the Christian Democratic Alliance (CDA). She has held a variety of social and cultural posts. Ms. van der Hoeven served as Minister of Education, Culture and Science from 2002 until February 2007. She was appointed as Minister of Economic Affairs in early 2007.

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Hannele Niemi is Professor of Education (1998-) and Vice-Rector for academic affairs at the University of Helsinki, Finland (2003-). She has been Professor of Education in Oulu, Turku and Tampere Universities (1987-1998). She has been a member of the Standing Committee of Social Sciences of ESF, the Council for Society and Culture in the Academy of Finland, and the Scientific Council of the University of Helsinki. She is a Steering Committee member of the British national research programme on teaching and

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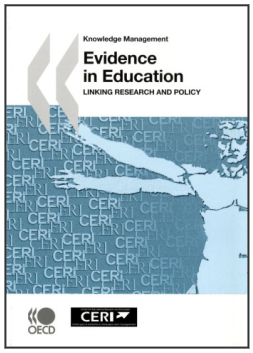

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