

Prisoners of Northern Finland study in a virtual school

In Northern Finland, a virtual school project concerning three prisons in Oulu, Pelso and Sukeva was launched by Oulu General Upper Secondary School for Adults in 2005. In the virtual school, prisoners are able to improve their basic education grades or complete the basic education syllabus, some courses of general upper secondary education or the whole syllabus, or take matriculation examination.

The project is based on the strategies made by the education authorities of Oulu and Oulu General Upper Secondary School for Adults according to the information strategy for education and research and the Information Society Programme for Education, Training and Research 2004-2006 of the Ministry of Education.

The education is realised with the help of information and communication technology (ICT) by using the video conferencing system from Oulu Prison. Oulu General Upper Secondary School for Adults is responsible for the education and the prisons are responsible for the equipment and material costs. In Oulu Prison, the prisoners receive the education in form of contact education and, in the other two prisons, in form of distance education.

The education takes place in a studio in Oulu Prison from where it is sent to Pelso Prison and Sukeva Prison by using the video conferencing system. The studio in Oulu Prison functions also as the class for the contact education. The basic tools of a teacher are a computer, a document camera and a normal camera. Everything the teacher shows on the computer is also available to all the students if needed. With the help of the computer, the teacher can transfer sound, videos, different kinds of exercises, etc. The camera and monitor enable the teacher to make eye and speech contact with the distance students of the two prisons.

Material for the students can also be transferred via home pages and email. Prisoners themselves do not have access to Internet but the study instructor of the prison using the distance education service assists in acquiring the material.

In principle, the lesson proceeds as it would take place in a classroom equipped with top equipment. An experienced teacher is able to merge the student groups in three different places into one learning environment.

The results of the autumn term 2005 and spring term 2006 have been good. All in all, 19 students have participated in the general upper secondary education. At the moment, there are 11 students left. In all cases, the reason for not completing the studies was that their prison term ended. The number of completed courses per student was higher than the average in general upper secondary schools for adults. Seven prisoners participated in all three available upper secondary education courses. They have all completed the following 9 courses:

Mother tongue and literature	2 courses
Advanced English	2 courses
Basic mathematics	3 courses
Biology	1 course
Information and communications technology	1 course

No differences have been detected between the results of those students receiving distance education and those receiving contact education.

As far as costs are concerned, the savings have been very significant. Without virtual school, Pelso Prison and Sukeva Prison would not have been able to arrange education because there are no suitable education institutions nearby the prisons.

During the pilot project, it was discovered that the following features require development:

- the arrangement of special needs education and remedial education,
- the production of study materials for independent work, and
- the proficiency of the teachers in mastering both the software and the equipment.

The goal is to develop the prison school system in Northern Finland to a permanent system so that the experiences can be used besides in all Finnish prisons, also in the whole EU region.

Seppo Vaaraniemi, Oulu General Upper Secondary School for Adults