

# IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION - LESSONS LEARNED FROM FINNISH NETWORKS

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Accessibility, higher education, online learning

## 1. Summary

Accessibility is a highly topical issue in higher education institutions (HEIs). Online learning enhances the opportunities for diverse students by offering flexibility and making higher education studies available for all students, regardless of their disabilities, personal life situation, or geographical location. Accessibility of digital environments is not only ethically important or desirable, but also a statutory duty. European higher education policies are strongly committed to enhancing the opportunities of diverse learners (European Commission, 2010; European Commission, 2017). The European legislation (Directive (EU) 2016/2102) also demands HEIs to be responsible for accessibility issues while developing their online practices (European Commission, 2016). Nevertheless, based on research and student feedback, digital services and environments are currently not accessible to all students. In this presentation we describe good practices for improving accessibility in HEIs.

## 2. A NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

At the end of 2016, the European Parliament adopted the Directive on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies, including HEIs and libraries. In Finland, the Act on the Provision of Digital Services entered into force on 1 April 2019. For HEIs, this means much stricter accessibility standards and thus they are facing many new challenges. To answer these challenges, Finnish HEIs have formed networks for sharing knowledge and cooperating. This is a productive approach in a geographically large country with a small population and language group but relatively many HEIs (13 universities and 22 Universities of Applied Sciences).

One of the established networks supporting HEIs to achieve the demands of the legislation is a national DigiCampus project (DigiCampus, 2020). It is a Finnish 2018-2020 higher education development project funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The project seeks to create an accessible digital campus: a shared digital learning environment, pedagogy and services for HEIs. For example, it offers a digital cloud learning environment for Finnish HEIs to support year-round and cross-institutional study opportunities. The Accessibility subproject aims to ensure accessibility of the activities, environments and contents developed. It helps to create established and exemplary accessibility practices and models along with mechanisms for the continuous assessment of practices in DigiCampus. The materials and training produced within the project will be accessible to all HEIs.

## 3. IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY VIA COOPERATION

When new electronic environments and services are developed and deployed, it is crucial to incorporate accessibility from the start. Accessibility issues concern all actors of HEIs. Thus cooperation and communication between administration, digital support services, course designers and teachers is essential. Both technical and pedagogical issues have to be considered. Practice has shown that this also includes staff's professional development needs. Even a relatively small technical or pedagogical solution can greatly improve the accessibility of learning environments and other facilities.

Digital learning environments play a key role in HEIs. Several factors should be considered when evaluating the accessibility of digital learning environments. To begin with, service providers and ICT

services are responsible for the technical accessibility of the platform and user interface. However, “content is the king”: teachers and other content providers should produce accessible materials. Content must be easy to follow and understand. Also pedagogical choices such as using providing materials in many formats (e.g. text, audio and video) and offering optional communication channels are essential

Overall, institutions also need a clear strategy and policies for accessibility. Students should be included in the process as they are experts of their own needs.

Therefore, the Accessibility subproject has implemented following actions to improve accessibility in HEIs via following actions:

- 1) Tested key shared digital study services, systems and learning environments in HEIs and evaluated their accessibility using a range of testing methods (e.g. accessibility testing tools, diversity of students, and students and staff who use a range of assistive technologies).
- 2) Developed technical and pedagogical solutions that improve the accessibility of the identified and tested systems and learning environments.
- 3) Produced information for the DigiCampus’s pedagogical support service for students and staff on practices, equipment, applications and accessibility tools that can facilitate study.
- 4) Contributed to the development of a learning environment quality indicator for measuring the accessibility of environments.
- 5) Provided webinars, blog posts, hands-on training and a technically and pedagogically exemplary online training about accessibility to support the professional skills of teaching, guidance and other staff in higher education.

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