From Division to Cooperation

The Finnish University Network for Communication Sciences

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In Finland, the research and teaching of communication, media and information studies has a long history, dating back to the first part of the 20th century. The field greatly expanded in the 1980's and 1990's. In 1997, the idea of strengthening cooperation and communication between the university departments in the field arose. Further encouragement came from successful experiences in older networks, such as Psykonet, the Network University of Psychology. Financial support for creating and developing a network of communication and media has been awarded by the Ministry of Education.

The University Network of Communication Sciences officially started in 1998. The network is national, comprising 20 member units (departments or degree programs in the departments) in the field of communication, media and information studies in ten Finnish universities. The network is multidiciplinary in nature: it encompasses a wide area, ranging from information studies to journalism, speech communication, organizational communication, media studies, visual communication and graphic design.

A written agreement defining the goals of the network has been signed by the universities. The goals are:

- to enhance scientific cooperation and exchange of information
- to enhance undergraduate instruction, especially with the help of information and communication technologies (ICT)
- to enhance doctoral studies and design novel research programmes
- to plan and implement innovative degree programmes
- to lobby for communication research and teaching.

Organization of Network

The task of building a network of university departments is challenging, as there is hardly any tradition of administrative cooperation between universities. The network´s general administration has been trusted to a coordinating university, which in 1998-2006 is the University of Tampere, the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication. Even though the network largely builds on existing organizations and their administration, it has been necessary to create new structures and practices.

The network has created its own structures for internal decision-making. Policy decisions are made and weighty issues resolved by the Board of Representatives. The member units of the network have one or two representatives in the Board. The chair of the Board is elected annually.

The meetings of the Board are prepared by the Executive Committee, consisting of four members, elected from the member units. For this purpose, the member units have been devided into four groups: (1) journalism and mass communication, (2) organisational communication, speech communication, language and culture, (3) visual and audiovisual communication and (4) information studies. The representatives of the network's projects can also attend the meetings of the Executive Committee.

Currently, the network's main projects are (1) the development and implementation of web courses and learning materials, (2) the coordinaton and implementation of joint doctoral studies and research projects, and (3) the Professional Licentiate Pro-

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gramme in Digital Communication (the PLDC programme). Each project has its own sub-committee (Instruction, Research, and PLDC), which sets the guidelines for activities. The sub-committees consist of representatives of member units and the project's personnel.

Internal communication is challenging in a network organization. Seminars and meetings offer an important forum for discussion. There are also contact persons in the member units. They inform about the network's activities in their own departments. Further they assist the coordinator in gathering necessary information from the member units. ICT is also much used for communication. There are several email lists. The network's web pages (http://www.uta.fi/viesverk/) give information and also have restricted areas for the working papers of administrative organs. Thus, internal communication is both face-to-face and web-based.

Web-Based Learning

One of the central activities of the network is to enhance undergraduate instruction with the aid of ICT. The instruction project has two main tasks: to plan and implement nation-wide web-based instruction and to produce web-based learning materials. Web-based courses on various themes develop multi-diciplinarity between departments. The member units also receive help in establishing web-based teaching in their departmental practices.

There has been a lot of interdepartmental cooperation in the production of learning materials. Such cooperation helps in quality assurance. It also helps departments to decide on which contents are essential and central in communication studies and which are the specialities of each department. Such cooperation has also revealed that departments have many common interests.

So far, the network has produced 23 learning materials (http://www.uta.fi/viesverk/oppimateriaalit/). All materials are in an open www environment, to give access to materials to anyone interested in communication sciences. In 2004, the network will arrange 19 web-based courses. The most popular courses, e.g. Ethics and Communication Legislation, are given twice each term, but normally each course is given once a year. Courses usually have about 30 students. The students come from all member universities, but those from the universities of Tampere, Jyväskylä and Vaasa have especially active.

Web-based courses arranged by the network:			
Year	Courses	Students	Credits
2001	3	97	76
2002	11	223	412
2003	16	240	561

Most of the courses are in Finnish, but the network also offers learning materials and courses in English and Swedish. Those in English serve both exchange students and Finnish students, and they can also serve as an introduction to Finnish communication studies for a broad international audience. Materials and courses in Swedish are mainly used at the universities of Helsinki and Vaasa, and at the Åbo Akademi in Turku.

Enhancing Research

There are two national, rather independent graduate schools in the area covered by the network, MUUVI (the Doctoral School of Changing Communications, www.uta.fi/jour/muuvi/) and ELOMEDIA (the Graduate School for Audiovisual Media, www.uiah.fi/elomedia). Until recently, there has been relatively little additional cooperation to support and advance postgraduate studies. A few years ago, the network started financing postgraduate courses and seminars, thus enhancing joint postgraduate studies. Such courses and seminars are open to all who study at a member department. Students can incorporate the credit taken in network courses and seminars into their studies.

The network organises conferences of communication research bringing together researchers and students from the different areas of communication, media and information studies. The first conference was organised in Jyväskylä in 2002 and the next one will be held in Helsinki in 2005.

The network has recently prepared for the Academy of Finland a proposal for an extensive research programme. The proposal is titled Citizenship in Communication Societies: Solidarity and Multimediality in the Information Economy.

Professional Licentiate Programme in Digital Communication

Old tools have been replaced by digital tools. Companies, public organizations and universities need

experts in the area of digital communication. In addition to engineers, they need professionals who understand the social consequences of ICT.

The Professional Licentiate Programme in Digital Communication (PLDC) prepares such experts. The PLDC programme started in 2002. The programme has funding until the end of 2005. It is a national programme with 21 graduate students from six universities, who have an M.A. degree or equivalent in communication, media, information studies or a related area. The Licentiate degree that they will take is a lower doctorate. During their studies, they work fulltime (unless they get a scholarship, as several have already managed to do). The students are enrolled and take their degree in their own universities.

The programme is both research-oriented and professionally oriented. The topics of the theses of the students cover a wide range, but there is always a conncection to their work. An aspect of ICT is included too, in contexts such as the media, the workplace, the library, and professional education.

In a national programme with students living widely apart, the practical organisation of instruction and supervision is a challenge. Instruction in the programme is a mix of face-to-face meetings (lectures, seminars) and web-based work. There are about eight two-day lecture and seminar meetings a year. Lectures are often given by visiting experts. The programme uses a web-based learning environment. The personnel comprises a professor and a senior assistant. In addition to a supervisor from the PLDC programme, each graduate student has another supervisor from her/his own department.

The PLDC programme was externally evaluated in the spring of 2004. The purpose was both to improve the present programme and to get ideas and insight for planning a new professional licentiate programme in digital communication.

Future of the Network

During the seven years that the network has existed, its activities can be divided into three phases:

1. Groundwork. In the first two years or so, the network, its organization and practices were created. Relatively few people took part in the network´s activities. There was only one employee, the coordinator.

2. Expansion. About during the third, fourth and fifth years, the activities of the network greatly expanded: web materials and courses were designed and implemented, cooperation with doctoral schools increased, the PLDC programme was started. For some time, the Master´s Programme of Electronic Photojournalism was part of the network. There was much enthusiasm in experimenting with new ideas (e.g. web-based instruction). There were up to seven employees in the network.

3. Renewal. During the sixth and seventh years, the network has maintained an established role in the field of communication in Finland. However, diverging views of the nature of the network have been presented, e.g. whether it is a "big" player arranging national degree programmes and the like or just an instrument for information exchange. In addition, it has become evident that funding by the Ministry of Education will not continue at the present level. In fact, it is already known that it is lower in 2005 than 2004. Thus, there is some uncertainty about how to provide for continuity in the future. On the other hand, such uncertainty may be fertile for the renewal of the network.

Today, organizations are changing. This applies also to universities, which have a long tradition of largely autonomous and self-sufficient departments and faculties. Cuts in funding have clearly been an incentive for universities to look for novel organizational models. For the Finnish University Network for Communication Sciences the challenge is how to make the network more useful to students, teachers, researchers and how to incorporate its activities in those of the member departments. This requires a genuine interest in collaboration.

Personnel:	
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