

FROM A LIMITED OPTION TO AN ESTABLISHED ADMISSIONS METHOD

Ideas for Developing the Open University Path

Summary of the Alternative Path to University project publication

Original publication edited by Heli Joutsen, Tuomo Kuivalainen,
Nina Haltia, Mervi Lahtomaa, Päivi Patja, Jenni Krapu,
Aino-Kaisa Ellfolk, Ulla Kekäläinen, Paula Savela and Satu Vuori



Toinen reitti
yliopistoon

FROM A LIMITED OPTION TO AN ESTABLISHED ADMISSIONS METHOD

Ideas for Developing the Open University Path

Summary of the Alternative Path to University project publication

**Original publication edited by Heli Joutsen, Tuomo Kuivalainen,
Nina Haltia, Mervi Lahtomaa, Päivi Patja, Jenni Krapu,
Aino-Kaisa Ellfolk, Ulla Kekäläinen, Paula Savela and Satu Vuori**

Translation: AAC Global

Layout & covers: Ville Korkiakangas

Jyväskylän yliopiston avoimen yliopiston verkkojulkaisuja 12

Permanent link to this publication: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-8717-6>

ISBN 978-951-39-8717-6 (PDF)

URN:ISBN:978-951-39-8717-6

ISSN 1797-979X

University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä 2021

Table of contents

For the reader.....	5
1 Background to the Alternative Path to University project.....	6
2 Objectives of the TRY project as part of the renewal of student admissions	9
Credibly-sized path.....	9
Path studies with appropriate scope and content.....	10
Smooth and transparent student admissions.....	10
More effective communications, guidance, and counselling	11
Strong cooperation between universities	12
3 Different path models.....	13
Scheduled path.....	14
Flexible path.....	15
Work-life oriented path.....	15
4 Communications, guidance, and counselling services for the open university path.....	16
Service design for the communications, guidance, and counselling services.....	17
Recommendations for developing communications, guidance, and counselling.....	18
Recommendations for critical points	19
5 Recommendations for developing an open university path.....	21
The open university path must be developed into a credible admissions method	22
A sufficient number of open university paths and student places in student admissions for a degree programme.....	22
Suitable path models support the goals of different target groups	23
The scope of path studies must be justified from the applicant's point of view	23
Study planning in an open university path is a collaboration.....	25
Applicant selection and recognition of path studies must also be planned.....	27
Communication does not happen in a vacuum, but as part of the entire open university path	28
Consistency serves all parties.....	28

	A smooth transition for path students to become degree students must be planned	29
	Integration into the university community is an important part of a student's life	30
6	Conclusion	31
	Operators in the Alternative Path to University project.....	33
	Sources.....	35
	Appendices.....	37
	Appendix 1. Path model pilots	37

FOR THE READER

This publication is a summary of a book, “Marginaalista vakiintuneeksi valintatavaksi – ideoita avoimen väylän kehittämiseen”, published in Finnish within the Alternative Path to University project. The book has been written to support the planning for open university paths. The publication presents the development of an open university path carried out in the Alternative Path to University project (2018–2021), which is part of the renewal of student admissions in universities. The project is a collaboration between 11 Finnish universities.

The aim is to share awareness, experiences, and best practices with departments responsible for universities’ degree programmes and open universities, as well as other parties working to develop paths into education, such as liberal adult education institutions.

Thank you to the Ministry of Education and Culture (OKM) for the funding that made this development project possible. I would also like to thank all those who have inspired and supported the development and renewal of the open university path and those who have participated in the writing, editing, and pre-reading of the book and the summary.

1 BACKGROUND TO THE ALTERNATIVE PATH TO UNIVERSITY PROJECT

Heli Joutsen, Marja-Leena Laakso, Jukka Lerkkanen & Paula Savela

The “open university path” refers to the admission path into university degree programmes based on open university studies. The concept has expanded to cover a wide range of methods for student admissions, where completed open university studies are the common factor. The aim of the Alternative Path to University project (TRY) has been to develop the idea of open university studies as a credible application method for degree studies. In order to raise the level of education, there is a social need for a functional open university path into university.

In addition to student admissions based on matriculation examinations and university entrance examinations, various competence-based methods for student admissions are used. Of these methods, the open university path is the most significant. On the open university path, students study open-university subjects, which are part of university degrees. The application for admission into university is usually based on the number of studies and the academic performance, and more detailed admission criteria are determined for each degree programme.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the open university and the open university path became the main study opportunity for working-aged people in particular. With the growing unemployment of youth in the 1990s, the doors also opened to young people (Haltia 2015, 43–44). However, the open university path has remained long and narrow for many study programmes available for application until today: Access to degree training from the Finnish open university has required a large

number of credits and few have actually become actual university students, as there have been only a few student places available. Even during the project period, the share of students selected via the path has remained only a few per cent of all those selected for degree programmes (see, for example, Härkönen 2020; Moitus, Weimer & Välimaa 2020, 68).

The Government Programme 2019 outlines the promotion of accessibility in higher education, increasing the number of student places available and raising the level of education and the number of higher education graduates. The goal is that by 2030, half of young adults aged 25–34 would have a university degree. (OKM 2019b, 14; Government 2019, 164.) The aim is to allocate study places especially to those completing their first university degree, but also to develop alternative admission paths for career changers and those seeking additional qualifications (Government 2019, 164–165).

The ongoing parliamentary reform of continuous learning aims to develop the skills of working-aged people alongside their work (OKM 2020a), for which solutions have also been sought in the development of an open university path. In addition, the exceptional situation caused by the coronavirus in spring 2020 showed that there is a need for different methods of student admission. There is therefore a greater need than ever for an open university path into higher education.

The current preparation for the reform of student admissions for higher education began in the 2010s. The reform of higher education admission procedures was recorded in the Government Programme of Sipilä's government in 2015. (Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret & Jauhiainen 2019, 279–280.) Practical development work started in 2017 with the admissions renewal project in higher education (2017–2020), the aim of which was to develop a cooperation model for admissions that would be applicable to universities based on study fields. In addition to admissions based on certifications and entrance exams, alternative admission methods were needed.

The main objective of the TRY project (2018–2021) funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture has been to develop the open university path into higher education. A total of 11 universities, two liberal adult education institutions and more than 30 academic subjects participated in the TRY project. In addition, a broad range of stakeholders from students, liberal education, study counsellors and universities outside the project (LUT and Hanken) were represented in the steering group in order to gain the widest possible view of the development of the open university path.

The TRY project tested various path alternatives with path pilots, which were monitored from the beginning of path studies to admission. Most of the

open university paths renewed or created in the project lead to bachelor's and master's programmes, some to a bachelor's or master's programme only. Cooperation within and between universities was also strengthened in the planning and implementation of the open university paths. Some path pilots involved an upper secondary school or a liberal adult education institution, such as a folk high school or a summer university. Cooperation was also carried out with professional bodies.

This summary briefly presents the objectives of the TRY project to renew the open university path as well as the path models created within the project. It will also describe the development of communications, guidance and counselling and give recommendations for the future development of the open university path. Finally, a few development and research topics will be presented for going forward. Actual results of the impacts of the TRY project are likely to be seen in 5–10 years' time when new and renewed open university paths have established their place as part of student admissions.

2 OBJECTIVES OF THE TRY PROJECT AS PART OF THE RENEWAL OF STUDENT ADMISSIONS

Paula Savela & Heli Joutsen

The aim of the Alternative Path to University project has been to develop the open university path as a credibly-sized method of student admissions to complement certification admission and entrance exams. At the same time, the scope and content of path studies, the smoothness and transparency of the student admission process, as well as communications, guidance and counselling services have been developed in a student-oriented manner. In addition, communications, guidance, and counselling related to path studies has been developed and cooperation between universities has been strengthened.

Credibly-sized path

The extension of the open university path to a **credibly-sized admission path** requires not only the opening of new paths to different universities and academic subjects, but also an increase in the maximum intake for existing paths in degree programmes. The maximum intake for a degree programme must be large enough to be the third most important admission path to complement entrance exams and certification admissions. This would increase equality in education, which means access to higher education and flexible training opportunities in the context of the open university path (Haltia 2016, 285–286).

Moreover, there must be a wide range of open university paths into different fields, even if they are not available for all degree programmes. Universities have welcomed both the opening of new paths and a controlled increase in the

maximum intake, and both were increased already for student admissions for spring 2020. In 2020, there were more than 200 paths into bachelor's and master's programmes. According to data provided by universities, there were 3,460 applicants via the open university path in 2020, 1,340 of whom were chosen as degree students.

As the popularity of the open university path grows, it is essential to remember that the decision on student admissions is still made by universities, thus controlling the student flow. The question of the number of applicants will perhaps be transformed into a question of how competitive the open university path will become.

Path studies with appropriate scope and content

The student-oriented development of an open university path means taking the needs of the applicant into account in planning the path. One desire has also been to develop the open university path so that it would become an application method that monitors an applicant's knowledge and skills relevant to student admissions, thus making it simpler to distinguish between the applicants and making them feel that the process is also fair. In this way, the open university path would serve both the applicant and those responsible for student admissions.

The content and scope of path studies in terms of credits must be viewed from the perspective of both the student and the decision-makers. The TRY project considered what studies should be required for eligibility and what would be a sufficient scope for the studies to demonstrate the applicant's ability for higher education. The number of credits required for a functioning path must be justified.

In the development of open university paths, it is also worth taking into account applicants who are in different situations in life. From this point of view, the TRY project has created three path models: *a scheduled path*, *a flexible path* and *a work-life oriented path*. In these models, it is possible to identify the main target groups for whom the path is particularly suitable, even though open university studies are generally open to all.

Smooth and transparent student admissions

Student admissions through the open university path into universities' degree programmes have usually been based on the number of credits and the student's

academic performance. Applicants may also be subject to other admissions and eligibility criteria, such as a specific educational background. The third objective of the TRY project was to **evaluate and develop the admissions procedure** in such a way as to clarify and streamline the admissions process from the perspective of both the student and the administrative staff making the choices.

In smooth and transparent student admissions, the eligibility and admissions criteria are reasonable and clearly communicated. The applicant has the right to know, already during the open university path studies, how the grades and the scope of the studies affect the scoring in student admissions. In this way, the path student understands the criteria based on which students are selected for the programmes. In addition, the admissions criteria must remain the same for several years in order to complete the necessary studies for the application.

More effective communications, guidance, and counselling

The TRY project also developed **communications, guidance, and counselling services** taking into account the path students' needs for information and support. In the initial situation, one challenge for the open university path was a lack of information and communications. It was difficult for students and guidance counsellors to find information about the path, the information was fragmented and difficult to understand due to the variety of concepts used, for example. At the same time, more guidance and counselling were needed to enable students to achieve their learning goals with sufficient and timely support.

Information on communications, guidance and counselling practices was gathered, for example, through a student survey and a survey aimed at coordinators in project universities. In addition, the path students' needs for information and support, as well as the different stages of the educational path, were mapped using a service design, and recommendations were given to develop the communications, guidance, and counselling services. In addition, the TRY project sought to raise public awareness of the open university path, as it was quite unknown to the general public. With the project, the open university path began to gain more visibility in the national media, both in terms of student experiences and development work.

Strong cooperation between universities

The TRY project also aimed at **increasing cooperation and coherence** between universities. Cooperation took place in a number of academic subjects. For example, joint university studies were developed in Theology, and the scope of 15 credits in Computer Science was harmonised between three universities (University of Eastern Finland, University of Oulu and Åbo Akademi). The University of Eastern Finland and the University of Vaasa jointly designed a study module for those aiming for a Bachelor's degree in Administrative Sciences. The University of Helsinki and the University of Tampere developed a joint elective course of 5 credits, which is part of the student admissions process for both universities' degree programmes (Social Research in Tampere and Social Sciences in Helsinki).

However, harmonising the practices relating to the open university path on a national level was seen to be challenging. For example, a nationwide harmonised scoring tool for each academic subject had been agreed in developing certification admissions, but in renewing the open university path, it was considered impossible to harmonise the admissions criteria within the resources and time allocated for the project. This issue is still very important for the further development of the open university path. It is necessary to continue national cooperation and development of the open university path after the TRY project, as there are still many common issues to discuss and align.

3 DIFFERENT PATH MODELS

Nina Haltia & Mervi Lahtomaa

In the Alternative Path to University project, open university paths have been developed in different universities and academic subjects for the needs of various target groups and with differing practices, so there are many variations between the development targets. However, the path pilots implemented can be divided into three different path models in the project: a scheduled path, a flexible path and a work-life oriented path. The development work was carried out on several levels: within individual development targets and path pilots, a work package they formed and the entire network created by the project.

During the initial phase of the TRY project, individual development targets were organised in different work packages when the development of paths for certain target groups started. The target groups were upper secondary school students, upper secondary school graduates on their year off, and adults in working life aiming for a degree. Open university paths according to the target groups were referred to as the “demonstration path”, the “alternative path” and the “lifelong learning path”. The fourth work package focused on the development of communications, guidance, and counselling services.

The aim of the demonstration path was to develop models for path studies that could be completed during upper secondary education. The alternative path was aimed at upper secondary school graduates as a path for a person who is spending a year off or who did not get a student place but could study at an open university and would like to be selected as a degree student. The lifelong learning path, in turn, was targeted at working adults who felt it necessary to acquire further education to advance in their careers, change careers, or develop in their profession (see Haltia & Lahtomaa 2019).

Over time, the boundaries of the work packages and paths of the three different target groups have been dissolved and shaped in such a way that, as a result of the project, the open university paths can be presented roughly as three main types:

- a scheduled path
- a flexible path
- work-life oriented path.

These path models function as a framework for the development carried out so far and provide universities with models according to which open university paths can be further developed. For each path model, it is possible to identify the target groups for which the path is especially suitable, but these target groups are viewed widely and there may be overlaps between the different models.

The pilots of the open university paths involved in the TRY project are summarised in Appendix 1.

Scheduled path

The basic idea of a scheduled path is that the student completes the required open university studies within a certain timeframe and can then apply as a degree student. Studies are organised to be completed within a certain period of time, and adherence to this timetable is one element in the qualification process on this path.

Within this path model, there are variations in the distribution of degree student places. Can all students who have completed their studies with the required success get a student place, or are they still competing for student places after completing the required studies, for example, according to their academic performance?

One form of this path model may also be cooperation with an upper secondary school, whereby the studies are completed as part of and during upper secondary studies. The scheduled path is suitable for students who are planning to apply for a place as a degree student and for students who are able to spend their time studying within this specific timeframe.

Flexible path

On the flexible path, studies are not strictly tied to a certain period of time, but the student can complete the required studies very flexibly and apply for a student place once the studies have been completed. The studies can also be completed quickly if desired, so from the student's point of view, there may be different alternative ways to complete these path studies.

Qualifications may be awarded to those who have completed the required studies, for example, on the basis of their performance in their studies or the number of studies completed. The target group here can be viewed very broadly, and the path is suitable not only for those who are studying for a degree from early on, but also for those studying at an open university, and for whom the idea of obtaining the entire degree only emerges during their studies.

Work-life oriented path

The work-life oriented path is aimed at adults in working life who need additional skills and qualifications. The work-life oriented path differs from the two models mentioned above in that the path studies meet the needs of working life.

Additionally, the contents of the studies may have been tailored for this purpose. The studies are not designed from the point of view of a newly graduated young person, but those who already have a bachelor's degree or who have acquired work experience and skills in a particular field benefit from this path. The target group is therefore determined based on professional needs, and the implementation of the studies can differ significantly.

4 COMMUNICATIONS, GUIDANCE, AND COUNSELLING SERVICES FOR THE OPEN UNIVERSITY PATH

Ulla Kekäläinen, Leea Huusko & Riina Kärkkäinen

The development of communications, guidance, and counselling services has been one of the key objectives of the Alternative Path to University project as adult learners' learning is promoted not only by flexible forms of study, but also by the support and counselling included in their studies (e.g. Ylönen 2011). The project produced a common knowledge base for the path developers through various surveys and using a service design approach to create user-oriented communications, guidance, and counselling services that take into account the needs of the students.

The open university path is not always identified as an alternative application method to complement certification admissions and entrance exams. For many, it is unclear how to apply to a university based on open university studies, or what admissions criteria are used (Salminen & Aittola 2020, 43). In addition, the applicant may not be able to identify where they can get guidance and counselling on the application process and admissions. This is why, alongside the renewal of the open university paths, it has been important for the TRY project to develop the related communications, guidance, and counselling services.

These services were developed by applying a service design approach. The service design project included training and workshops for project participants, as well as interaction with students, study counsellors, and representatives of co-operation institutions. In addition, one path pilot from each work package was selected for the service design. The aim was to take into account the

communications, guidance and counselling needs of upper secondary school students, young people spending a year off, and working adults as far as possible.

To support the service design, information was also collected, for example, by means of a student survey which examined experiences of studying at an open university, the transition to a degree programme, and actual degree studies. Experiences in communications, guidance, and counselling related to open university studies were also mapped in order to develop services that would be as student-oriented as possible. According to the survey, the open university path produces motivated students who received confirmation of their career choice and academic skills from the path studies (Kuivalainen 2019).

In addition to mapping the practices of communications, guidance, and counselling services, a survey aimed at coordinators at the project universities monitored how service design recommendations have been implemented in project universities. The results show that the development of communications, guidance and counselling has progressed in accordance with the recommendations at the project universities. Communications had been developed the most, which is the key development target for the communications, guidance, and counselling services. (see Joutsen et al. 2020, 108.)

Service design for the communications, guidance, and counselling services

The main goal of the service design was to create a user-driven student services concept for students applying for a degree programme through an open university path. The concept takes into account the needs of different target groups. The student services service design project for the TRY project was carried out by Hellon Oy, which was selected as a partner through competitive tendering. The user-driven concept of student services developed by Hellon has been published in full in Finnish on the TRY project website (see Rainio, Marttila & Riesen 2019).

The service design project specified the elements of the student services, i.e. the concepts of communications, guidance, and counselling according to their cost-effectiveness, accessibility, and effectiveness (Figure 1). In addition, critical points of the open university student's educational path were mapped out to identify the times when the student needs the most support (Figure 2; Rainio, Marttila & Riesen 2019). Recommendations for developing student services were received to take into account the different elements and critical points.

Elements of Student Services



Figure 1. Elements of Student Services

Recommendations for developing communications, guidance, and counselling

Communications provide the basis for student services by raising public awareness of open university paths. Targeted at the wider public, this is the most cost-effective of all the elements and should therefore be invested in from early on. An example of good communications is the university's website, which is optimised for search engines and contains practical information, and gives students an overview of path studies, applying as a student, and the opportunities offered by studies.

Guidance focuses on groups of students, especially in the early stages of studies. It should be available on multiple channels. Guidance can include reminders, tips, orientation events, study information, and peer support. The purpose of the guidance is to proactively answer questions that arise during studies, thereby supporting students and engaging them in their path studies and groups. Guidance is targeted at groups rather than individual students, so it is also quite cost-effective.

Counselling is the most personal and therefore the most expensive form of student services. When the communications and guidance measures work properly, also the need for personal counselling is reduced. Despite this, counselling must be available throughout the educational path. Students must have information about who to contact if they need counselling. Successful counselling can also be used to support students in their path studies towards a

degree programme in the event of possible changes in plans or surprises related to personal life.

Recommendations for critical points

The user-driven student services concept describes the service path of the student services that the student goes through during their studies at an open university (Rainio, Marttila & Riesen 2019). It illustrates at what stages students on the open university path need special support and how it should be offered to them.

Figure 2 summarises the critical points of the educational path where students on an open university path need special support for their studies. The figure also shows examples of which forms of communication, guidance, and counselling could be used at these stages.

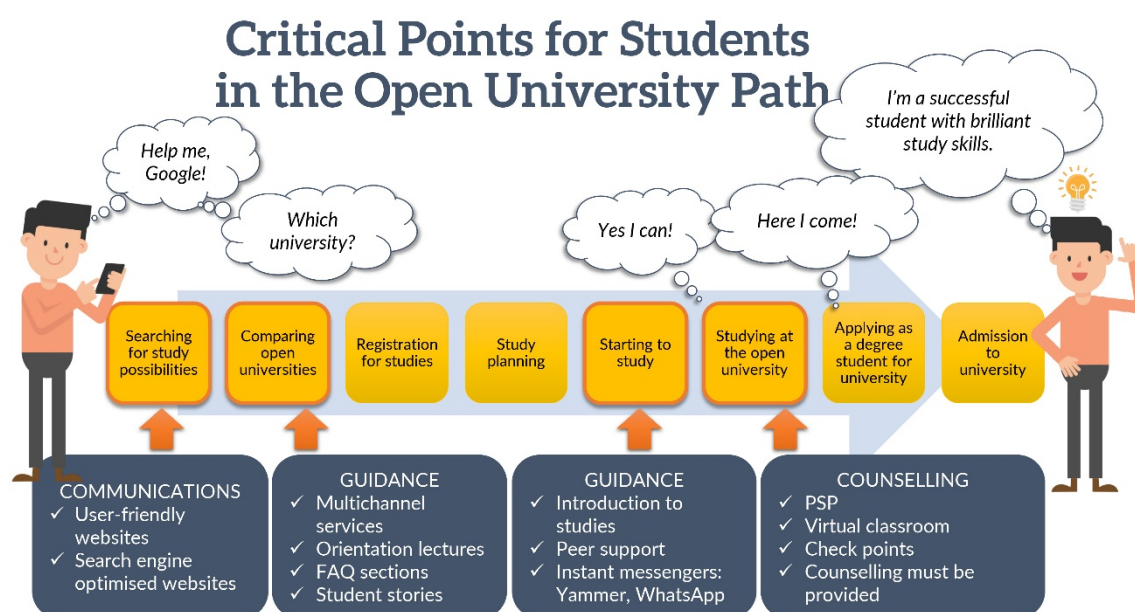


Figure 2. Critical Points for Students on the Open University Path

The educational path of an open university student is divided into eight stages according to the service design. The study path starts when students look for **study options** on different channels and online via various search engines. Information about the open university path is often difficult to find. It is recommended to create search engine optimised websites about the open university path, so that students can find the information they need more easily.

When searching for study opportunities, students **compare** different open university studies and study options. A well-functioning website also serves at this stage. In addition, FAQ sections, student stories, and information events describing path studies help the student to gain an accurate picture of the path and make a decision on enrolling in path studies.

The start of the studies should be focused so that studies and learning practices can begin as smoothly as possible. Guidance can be provided, for example, in orientation lectures which familiarise learners with the study of the academic subject and the practices of the open university. Peer groups and related IM chains also serve as support formats.

Studying at an open university is supported by the fact that the student knows who to ask for support and counselling if necessary. Creating a personal study plan (PSP) also serves as a good tool for counselling. Counselling must always be available to enable the student to progress along their study path up to the application stage and possibly to the degree student stage.

In order to ensure that the open university path remains student-oriented, it was also recommended to focus on the following:

- Cooperation between the faculty and the open university should be intensified, especially in the transition phase, when an open university student moves to the faculty as a degree student.
- Admissions criteria need to be determined for several years at a time, as path studies can last up to two or even three years. The stability of the admissions criteria over time supports the commitment to the studies and the achievement of objectives on the educational path.
- Students need to know at which university they will study also when studying at a university's cooperation institutions. The more operators who are involved in the chain, the more clearly each role needs to be described.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING AN OPEN UNIVERSITY PATH

Paula Savela, Tuomo Kuivalainen & Heli Joutsen

Based on the knowledge and experience gained in the TRY project, recommendations can be given for the development of a functioning path. Open university paths must be developed in a student-oriented way, although the path studies must provide relevant information about the applicant's knowledge and skills to decision-makers in student admissions. It is advisable at an early stage to involve those participating in the implementation in the planning of the open university path. The impacts of development on student admissions must be monitored and studied, and uniform reporting practices are needed for this.

In the Alternative Path to University project, the development of the open university path has especially taken into account what the open university path looks like as an admissions method from students' point of view. A student-oriented approach is needed, as there are path students from different age groups, with varying educational backgrounds and in differing situations.

The recommendations of the TRY project presented in this chapter are intended to provide guidelines and to present elements which can develop different paths into more efficient, effective, and equal tools for student admissions. The recommendations do not therefore mean a pre-packaged solution that is suitable for everyone. They are crystallisations and examples from project experiences that provide ideas and good practices for the development of the study paths.

The open university path must be developed into a credible admissions method

The scale of the path can be outlined based on both the number of student places available and the credits required for application. The credibility of the open university path as an admissions method can be improved by increasing the number of available student places and setting a more reasonable limit for the credits required. Joint recommendations on the maximum intake of students and the scope of studies can be made within the framework of the project, although there are sometimes justified variations.

A sufficient number of open university paths and student places in student admissions for a degree programme

Universities have welcomed both the opening of new paths and a controlled increase in the number of student places. An open university path is needed for more and more disciplines. It may not be suitable for all studies, but it is worth trying out the possibilities of the path concept in order to reach different target groups, for example. The TRY project therefore encourages the opening of paths to those study programmes where the admissions method is justified.

Universities have agreed on the share of certification admissions in selecting students, but in terms of the open university path, universities decide independently on the number of student places. The TRY project recommends that the maximum intake reserved for those coming from the open path should be at least 10–20% for those study programmes that can also be applied for through the path. In this way, an open university path would be a credible opportunity for the applicant to be selected for a degree programme. In implementing the recommendation, it is worth taking into account the different types of studies and, for example, the needs of the labour market, as well as monitoring how functional the path is.

If the number of applicants is many times higher than the student places available, the open university path is likely to work, but the scope of the maximum intake should be assessed. However, making more student places available for those in the open university path, must not replace the student places for those using other application methods, if the aim is to increase the level of competence and education of young adults in accordance with the Government Programme (OKM 2019b, 14; Government 2019, 164). In order to increase the number of higher education graduates, more student places are needed in addition to the different application methods.

Clear communication on the number of student places makes student admissions transparent for the applicants. Currently, depending on the discipline and the university, it may be challenging to find an unambiguous answer to how many student places are available, as there are differing practices in presenting information on the maximum intake of students. The TRY project recommends that the paths and student places are clearly communicated on the universities' own websites and in the Studyinfo service. The number of student places indicated for each application method must be unambiguous, so that it relates to that admissions method alone.

Suitable path models support the goals of different target groups

From the very beginning, the TRY project has sought to take into account different situations in students' lives through different target groups. However, as the development of the paths progressed, it was found worthwhile to abandon a strict breakdown of different target groups.

Instead of paths designed for specific target groups, the project created three path models with a broad view of the target groups and suitable for different situations in life: a scheduled path, a flexible path, and a work-life oriented path (see Chapter 3). Each path model can be used according to the needs and boundary conditions of the target group.

However, more information is needed on the strengths, weaknesses, and development challenges of different path models. In order to evaluate, develop, and perhaps consolidate the created models, the TRY project recommends testing these path models for different academic subjects and target groups.

The scope of path studies must be justified from the applicant's point of view

The aim of the open university path is to provide an efficient student admissions method that makes it possible to find the most suitable students for a degree programme from the group of applicants. At the same time, applicants need a smooth transition to higher education. In the open university path, the number of credits required for eligibility has varied from 6 to 180 credits prior to the project. It is not practical to maintain paths where even full-time study takes several years.

With regard to the credit requirement, a requirement of over 60 credits is not appropriate for student admissions, except for paths studied alongside work aiming for a bachelor's degree. The scope of the open university path in credits should therefore be clearly outlined in the general admissions criteria for

universities, as has been done in some project universities. It would also promote equality.

However, the design of the path must take into account the differences between various academic subjects. In disciplines where admissions pressure is high, path studies must contain elements that distinguish students' competences and abilities so that student admissions can be made transparently. In addition to the number of credits, one selection criterion could be, for example, study performance. Different scoring tools can be used to move from course averages to more precise differentiation. In case of identical scores, decisions must be carefully planned and communicated to applicants in the admissions criteria.

The credits defined as the eligibility criteria for the paths participating in the project vary mainly between 5 and 60 credits. There was also a path to a bachelor's degree designed for working life needs, the scope of which is 180 credits. There are many reasons for the variation in the number of credits: for example, the number of credits corresponding to basic studies gives the applicant a deeper understanding of the discipline and makes it easier to score applicants. With a lower credit score, requiring general university eligibility from the applicant and scheduling the study attainment in the path (e.g. if the studies must be completed in one go) will help in the differentiation and assessment of a student's abilities.

Different credit scores on open university paths can be divided, for example, as follows:

5 credits (not a discipline where admissions pressure is high, the applicant has general university eligibility)

15 credits (a scheduled path that is completed in addition to upper secondary education)

25 credits (the applicant does not have general university eligibility, academic skills are strengthened, the aim is to gain deeper understanding, e.g. for selecting an appropriate discipline, enables integration into the second semester)

40–60 credits (more differentiating factors to facilitate student admissions in disciplines where admissions pressure is high, enables integration into the second academic year)

More than 60 credits are justified only on those open university paths that enable, for example, flexible completion of studies for a bachelor's degree alongside work. Although open universities do not have the right to confer

degrees in Finland, bachelor's degree studies can be completed largely at an open university.

The predictability of the path, i.e. the publication and validity of the admissions criteria, is also important. Currently, the admissions criteria for universities are not published until October or November and are generally valid for one to two years. If a student does not find out what the admissions criteria are until the end of the year and then begins the studies, it may not be possible to complete the studies before for the application period in the spring, even if the required credit score is moderate. The TRY project recommends that the admissions criteria for the open university path should be valid for at least 3–5 years at a time. In this case, the studies can be marketed immediately after the application period in spring, so that the applicant can start the path studies no later than August, when registration for the new academic year of the open universities begins.

Study planning in an open university path is a collaboration

The use of open university studies in student admissions should be taken into account already when planning the open university programme. Taking into account this aspect of student admissions benefits both the university and the applicant, as it eliminates the need for double planning. Best practices can be achieved through cooperation between different operators in the field and by jointly reviewing the elements relating to the path. Therefore, cooperation between faculties, open universities and student and application services is already needed at the planning stage.

Figure 3 illustrates aspects that are important to take into account in the design and implementation of the open university path. It is good to discuss at least the following four factors in advance when planning a functional path: 1) path studies, 2) pedagogical solutions for path studies, 3) admissions criteria for degree programmes and 4) communications, guidance, and counselling services for the open path.

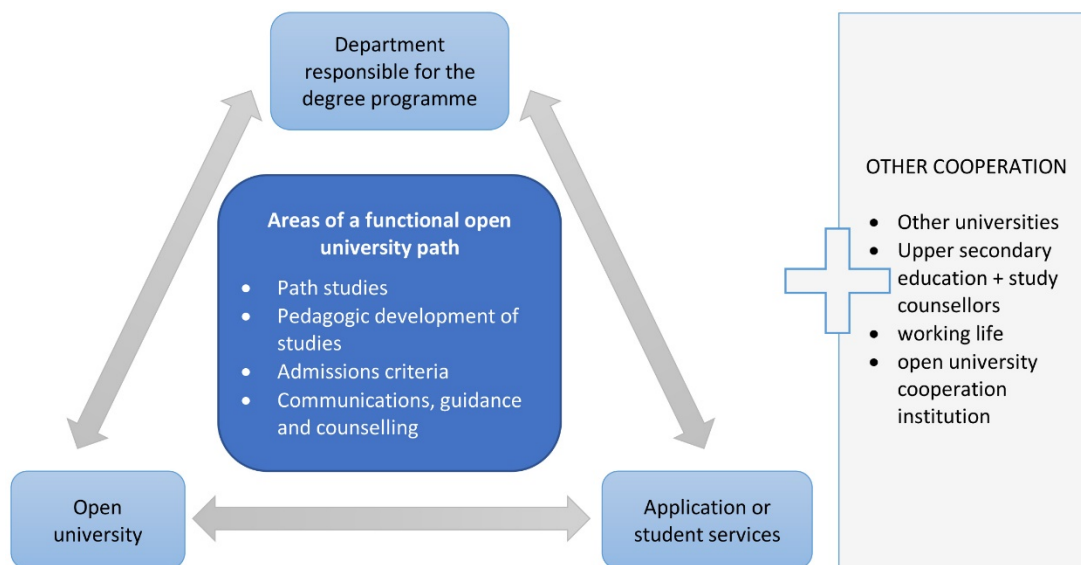


Figure 3. Operators and sub-areas in path planning

The solutions for the content of path studies should support a path student in getting a realistic picture of studying their major already during their open university studies. Path studies should also be intended to measure the applicant's suitability for a degree programme in the discipline. At the same time, care must be taken to ensure that path studies do not become too burdensome for the student. The following issues need to be considered for planning:

- What content and skills are required of the applicant in order to become eligible for degree studies?
- What is the scope of the path in terms of the number of credits? Is it a realistic admissions option in terms of its scope? Is it attractive from the applicant's perspective?
- What are the key issues for the student when considering whether or not to pursue a degree?

The pedagogical solutions during the path studies take a position on what kind of academic study skills path the students are thought to have after completing their studies. It is good to discuss at an early stage whether the pedagogical solutions designed for graduate students are also suitable for adult learners. The solutions should address the flexibility of studies and whether they respond to regional or national competence needs. Attention should also be paid at this stage to course schedules in order to identify the time frame within which path studies can be completed.

In terms of the admissions criteria, it is good to jointly consider how many student places for the degree programme will be opened for path students. In

addition, it is necessary to outline who are eligible and how applicants are ranked if there are more applicants than can be selected. It is also necessary to determine whether the student places that have not been filled can be transferred to other study programmes available for application.

The planning of **communications, guidance, and counselling services** should be started at an early stage, as effective communications will help interested students to find path studies. It is necessary to plan which channels information about the path will be communicated on, what kind of information and briefing events will be held about the start of path studies, how guidance and counselling will be integrated into degree-focused studies, and how students' learning and progress of studies will be supported and monitored. Communications may also require financial resources.

In addition to the above-mentioned issues, **the needs for cooperation** can also be considered outside one's own university. Interaction and cooperation with other universities, upper secondary schools or vocational colleges is necessary in some cases, for example, when considering the uniformity and stability of the admissions criteria and the number of student places and paths (Salminen & Aittola 2020, 43). There are also good experiences of working life cooperation. The role of open university cooperation institutions in path studies also deserves its own discussion.

Applicant selection and recognition of path studies must also be planned

As the number of applicants increases, open university paths may become more competitive, thus they will be facing different challenges than in the past when not all the available student places were filled. It is not a desired solution for the open university path to be a platform where students would constantly focus on just improving their grades, so it is necessary to decide how students are differentiated or ranked in practice.

Situations where two or more students get even scores are challenging for admissions, as reviewing course grades encourages students to constantly improve their grades. The TRY project therefore recommends that flexibility in student places would be the optimal way from applicants' viewpoint. For more information on the current practices to settle even scores, see Appendix 3. Since not all applicants are accepted to university, it is necessary to ensure that they receive guidance and counselling even after applying, so that they can move forward with their studies, find alternative study programmes to apply for or have the courage to try an entrance examination after gaining solid basic knowledge.

In the case of path studies, it is also necessary to have an outline of recognised open university studies between Finnish universities. Currently, applicants must always find out separately whether studies completed at another university are eligible for application.

Communication does not happen in a vacuum, but as part of the entire open university path

Communication is an integral part of the design and implementation of a functional open university path. Clear communication about the open university path with various study programmes, transparent admissions criteria, and precise information about the maximum intake are in the interest of the students. These issues must be communicated on universities' own websites and, for example, on the Studyinfo service. This will improve the comparison of different path and degree studies available. A permanent, automated system is needed to compile this application information from different universities, so that applicants can easily learn more about different universities' paths.

In addition to communications, the following levels of interaction, guidance and counselling must also be taken into account. Guidance must be provided on a multichannel basis, especially in the early stages of studies. In addition, the possibility of personal counselling must be available. The planning and implementation of communications, guidance, and counselling services must take into account, in particular, the critical stages of the educational path.

Accurate information is also needed within the university in order to inform applicants. The open university path's application period, admissions criteria, student admissions process, student places, and follow-up must be planned, documented, and visible, so that the parties responsible for communications can inform applicants about them in a timely manner.

There is also a need to actively harmonise and consolidate the concepts of the open university path at a national level. Harmonised concepts make the descriptions of paths clearer and facilitate the search for information. For example, the TRY project has sought to make the concept of the "open university path" an umbrella concept for all application methods in which the applicant is selected as a degree student on the basis of their open university studies.

Consistency serves all parties

Consistent practices between universities in terms of the scope, content, admissions criteria, and application period of open university paths are in the student's interest. Cooperation between universities can also be discipline-

specific, so that the universities can develop common admissions criteria and a procedure for recognising studies and other previous competences. In this way, the open university path will gradually become a clear and cohesive whole for the applicant, i.e. a third significant admissions method to complement certification admission and entrance exams.

Harmonisation will also make it easier to compare different universities' open university paths. It makes things easier for the applicant to compare the admissions procedure and the scope and completion of the path studies before making their decision to enrol.

It would also be helpful to harmonise the different methods used to report on paths, student places, and admittance. In this way, accurate information about the paths can also be produced nationally. If the path information and statistics from all universities were available on the Studyinfo service, the data would also then be comparable. Currently, it is difficult to compare the open university paths in different years, as the data must be retrieved by requesting it separately from different universities.

A national coordination group for open university paths consisting of representatives of all universities is needed to promote consistency. The establishment and operation of the coordination group can be envisaged during the extension period of the TRY project, as it is very important that the joint development work continues in the future.

A smooth transition for path students to become degree students must be planned

When developing path studies, it is also necessary to plan how a path student will integrate into degree studies and into the academic community. Integration is influenced by what studies the student has completed on the open university path. Integration can be assisted by a model curriculum for the degree programme, upon which students can build their own degree studies in the first year. At the same time, the student can create a broader personal study plan, or PSP, which they can work on in personal counselling.

The need for more personalised counselling and guidance must be taken into account not only during the studies, but also in follow-up counselling and marketing aimed at those applicants who were not selected. Different means of communication, such as indicative online tests, may be used to provide potential applicants with information on study requirements even before they start their path studies.

Integration into the university community is an important part of a student's life

Integration is also influenced by social factors. On the one hand, peer support from those who have been admitted via the path may be important, but on the other hand, the aim is also to integrate the student with other degree students regardless of the application method.

In path pilots, student tutoring and peer support have been used to complement the support and counselling from university staff. Combined education with degree students during the path studies provides an opportunity for the path students to get to know peer students already during their path studies. In addition, cooperation with student organisations can help in group integration if the student organisation can organise activities for potential new students without requiring them to have a degree student status.

Students selected for the degree programme through the open university path usually start their studies at a different stage than those who have been admitted based on certificate admission or entrance examinations. If the maximum intake of path students for the study programme is large enough, there are likely to be more new students who can then provide peer support for each other. Another option is to offer path students who have been admitted a common platform, either at the faculty or university level, so that they can exchange their experiences and reflect together on the transition from the open university path to degree studies.

6 CONCLUSION

Paula Savela, Heli Joutsen & Tuomo Kuivalainen

The development and evaluation of the open university path must be based on research. During the Alternative Path to University project, many themes and questions arose which are important for the further development and research of the open university path.

The TRY project has enabled a thorough review, planning and implementation in terms of developing path studies, admissions criteria, communications, guidance, and counselling services, as well cooperation. In addition to the research and studies presented earlier in this book, the experience and views of study counsellors and university administrators in relation to the open university path have also been mapped out to support the development work in the TRY project (Salminen & Aittola 2020). Research and studies will also be needed in the future. Some of the effects of the reform can only be examined a few years after the end of the project, once the new and renewed open university paths have been properly established.

One essential factor is that the open university path is subject to a charge, and this matter was discussed during the TRY project. The open university path is a method of student admissions leading to a degree programme, which cannot be subject to a charge in Finland by law (Universities Act 558/2009). Funding and income will be reviewed, for example, under the parliamentary continuous learning reform (OKM 2020a) and the social security reform, which will also take into account the objectives of continuous learning (OKM & TEM 2020).

The most important topic in relation to the objectives of the TRY project is the impact of the open university path reform on student admissions. It will be interesting to see how these path models and recommendations work in non-project pilots, how many applicants will make use of the open university path in

the future, what kind of students universities will have through the path, and how the transition to the university community will proceed.

The first evaluations of the student admissions reform are already under way: The study group of the State Economic Research Centre (VATT) is assessing how the reform of student admissions has succeeded in reducing the number of years off and study programme changes. In addition, VATT will examine the impact of the reform on the equal distribution of student places in higher education institutions. (VATT 2019.) The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) will continue its assessment of the smoothness of the transition phases, which started in 2017. The second phase will focus on transitions after a secondary school. (FINEEC 2020.)

The open university path offers an opportunity to try out an interesting discipline, study parts of university degrees even before entering the degree programme and apply for the programme on the basis of performance—perhaps one day completely free of charge, at least for those who do not have a university degree. At best, an open university path can increase educational equality and bring people from different backgrounds and situations into higher education, which would not be possible with other application methods. Therefore, it will be equally important to develop the open university path further in the future.

OPERATORS IN THE ALTERNATIVE PATH TO UNIVERSITY PROJECT

Universities

Aalto University
University of Helsinki
University of Eastern Finland
University of Jyväskylä (coordinator)
University of Lapland
University of Oulu
University of the Arts
University of Tampere
University of Turku
University of Vaasa
Åbo Akademi

Liberal adult education institutions

Alkio College
Työväen Akatemia

Project coordination

Paula Savela, Project Manager, University of Jyväskylä
Anne Allonen, Project Secretary, University of Jyväskylä
Heli Joutsen, Marketing Designer, University of Jyväskylä
Tuomo Kuivalainen, Project Researcher, University of Jyväskylä

Work group coordinators

Work group 1: Jenni Krapu, University of Helsinki
Work group 2: Satu Vuori, University of Jyväskylä
Work group 3: Nina Haltia, University of Turku
Work group 4: Ulla Kekäläinen, University of Eastern Finland

Steering group

Marja-Leena Laakso, University of Jyväskylä
Jani Kykkänen, National Union of University Students in Finland
Jukka Lerkkänen, Open University of Jyväskylä and Open University Forum
Armi Nurmi, Finnish Guidance Counsellors
Minna Martikainen, Hanken (until 31 July 2020)
Linda Gerkman, Hanken (since 1 August 2020)

Tytti Pantsar, Suomen kansanopistoyhdistys ry

Hannu Rantanen, Suomen kesäyliopistot ry

Anna-Kaisa Tikkinen, The Union of Upper Secondary School Students in Finland
(until 30 September 2020, replaced by Toni Ahva between 1 August 2019
and 31 May 2020)

Toni Ahva, The Union of Upper Secondary School Students in Finland (since 1
October 2020)

Leena Wahlfors, Finnish Council of University Rectors UNIFI (until 30 November
2019)

Tuija Österman, Suomen kesäyliopistot ry (since 8 October 2019)

SOURCES

- Haltia, N. (2015). Avoimen yliopiston väylä siltana avoimen ja tutkintokoulutuksen välillä. *Kasvatus & Aika*, 9(3).
<https://journal.fi/kasvatusjaaika/article/view/68536>
- Haltia, N. (2016). Avoin yliopisto ja tasa-arvon muuttuvat tulkinnat. Teoksessa Silvennoinen, H., Kalalahti, M. & Varjo, J. (toim.). *Koulutuksen tasa-arvon muuttuvat merkitykset* (s. 265–291). Turku: Suomen kasvatustieteellinen seura FERA.
https://jyx.jyu.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/69817/1/978-952-5401-94-3_SKTS_jyx.pdf
- Haltia, N., Isopahkala-Bouret, U. & Jauhiainen A. (2019). Korkeakoulujen opiskelijavalintauudistus ja aikuisopiskelijan opiskelumahdollisuudet. *Aikuiskasvatus* 39(4), 276–289. <https://doi.org/10.33336/aik.88081>
- Haltia, N. & Lahtomaa, M. (2019). Toinen reitti yliopistoon – millaisia polkuja aikuisille? *Aikuiskasvatus* 39(3), 229–235.
<https://doi.org/10.33336/aik.85714>
- Härkönen, A. (2020). Avoin yliopisto on vaativa väylä. *Helsingin Sanomat* 29.8.2020.
- Joutsen, H., Kuivalainen, T., Haltia, N., Lahtomaa, M., Patja, P., Krapu, J., Ellfolk, A.-K., Kekäläinen, U., Savela, P., Vuori, S. (toim.). (2020). *Marginaalista vakiintuneeksi valintatavaksi – ideoita avoimen väylän kehittämiseen. Toinen reitti yliopistoon -hankkeen julkaisu.* Jyväskylän yliopisto.
- Karvi (2020). Opiskelijan siirtymät ja opintopolun sujuvuus koulutuksen nivelvaiheissa. Kansallisen koulutuksen arviointikeskus. Viitattu 26.10.2020. <https://karvi.fi/lukiokoulutus/teema-ja-jarjestelmaarviointit/opiskelijan-siirtymat-ja-opintopolun-sujuvuus-koulutuksen-nivelvaiheissa/>
- Kuivalainen, T. (2019) Avoimen väylän kautta valittujen kokemuksia – Toinen reitti yliopistoon -hankkeessa toteutetun kyselyn tuloksia. Toinen reitti yliopistoon -hanke.
<https://www.avoin.jyu.fi/fi/avoin-yliopisto/hankkeet/try/tyopaketit/try-tp4-kyselyraportti-2019.pdf>
- Moitus, S., Weimer, L. & Välimaa, J. (2020). Flexible Learning Pathways In Higher Education – Finland's country case study for the IIEP-UNESCO SDG4 project in 2018–2021. Finnish Education Evaluation Centre Publications 12:2020. https://karvi.fi/app/uploads/2020/09/KARVI_1220.pdf
- OKM (2019b). Korkeakoulutus ja tutkimus 2030-luvulle: vision tiekartta. Julkaistu 30.1.2019.

https://minedu.fi/documents/1410845/12021888/Korkeakoulutus+ja+tutkimus+2030-luvulle+VISION+TIEKARTTA_V2.pdf/

OKM (2020a). Jatkuva oppiminen. Viitattu 20.10.2020.

<https://minedu.fi/jatkuva-oppiminen>

OKM & TEM (2020). Jatkuvan oppimisen uudistus – Tuet ja tavat hankkia työelämässä tarvittavaa osaamista tarkastelussa. Uutinen 13.10.2020.

<https://minedu.fi/-/jatkuvan-oppimisen-uudistus-tuet-ja-tavat-hankkia-tyoelamassa-tarvittavaa-osaamista-tarkastelussa>

Rainio, I., Marttila, S. & Riesen, P. (2019). TRY / Opintopalvelujen käyttäjälähtöinen konsepti. Palvelumuotoilun loppuraportti. Hellon Oy.

https://www.avoin.jyu.fi/fi/avoin-yliopisto/hankkeet/try/tyopaketit/try_palvelumuotoilun_loppuraportti_2019.pdf

Salminen, T. & Aittola, H. (2020). Avoimen väylä hakutapana yliopistokoulutukseen: raportti opinto-ohjaajille ja yliopistojen opintohallinnon henkilöstölle suunnattujen kyselyjen tuloksista. Jyväskylän yliopisto: Koulutuksen tutkimuslaitos. <https://www.avoin.jyu.fi/fi/avoin-yliopisto/hankkeet/try/ajankohtaista-try/try-kyselyt-raportti-06-2020.pdf/>

Valtioneuvosto (2019). Hallitusohjelma 2019. Valtioneuvoston julkaisuja 2019:31.

VATT. (2019). Tutkimusryhmä selvittämään korkeakoulujen opiskelijavalintauudistuksen vaikutuksia. Uutinen 11.12.2019. Valtion taloudellinen tutkimuskeskus VATT. <https://vatt.fi/-/tutkimusryhmaselvittamaan-korkeakoulujen-opiskelijavalintauudistuksen-vaikutuksia>

Yliopistolaki 558/2009. <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/2009/20090558>

Ylönen, M. (2011). Aikuiset opin poluilla – Oppimistukikeskuksen asiakkaiden opiskelukokemuksista ja kouluttautumishalukkuudelle merkityksellisistä tekijöistä. Väitöskirja, Itä-Suomen yliopisto. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-61-0520-8>

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Path model pilots

The tables below show the open university path models included in the TRY project: the scheduled path, the flexible path, and the work-life oriented path.

Scheduled paths for everyone aiming for a degree

Universities and the open university path	Credits
Aalto University's technology path	Bachelor of Technology and Master of Science in Technology, 27 credits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automation and Information Technology • Bioinformation Technology • Electronics and Electrical Engineering • Energy and Environmental Engineering • Chemical Engineering • Mechanical and Civil Engineering • Built Environment • Information Technology
University of Eastern Finland's theology path	• Degree Programme in Western Theology / Theological Line, Bachelor of Theology and Master of Theology: 29 credits

Scheduled paths aimed at upper secondary school students

Universities and the open university path	Credits
Joint legal sciences path between the Faculty of Law in the University of Helsinki and in other Finnish universities	• Bachelor's Programme in Law, Bachelor of Laws and Master of Laws: 1–2 credits (= online introductory course) + approx. 15–20 credits (= demonstration)
University of Helsinki's social sciences and University of Tampere's social research path	• Degree Programme in Social Sciences, Bachelor of Political Science: 5 credits ("Yhteiskunta tänään" online course) • Degree Programme in Social Research, Bachelor of Social Sciences: 5 credits ("Yhteiskunta tänään" online course)
University of Helsinki's theology and religious research path	• Bachelor's Programme of Theology and Religious Studies, Bachelor of Theology: 2 credits + 3 credits = 5 credits
Öpuled i Teologi, Åbo Akademi	• Utbildningslinjen för teologi, teologie kandidat och magister: 5 sp

University of Eastern Finland's Information Technology path & Åbo Akademi's Öpuled i informationsteknologi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree Programme in Computer Science, Bachelor of Science: 15 credits(minimum of 5 credits of programming) • Study Programme in Computer Science, Bachelor of Science: 15 credits(minimum of 5 credits of programming) • Informationsteknologi, Bachelor of Science: 15 credits(minimum of 5 credits of programming)
--	--

Flexible open university paths

Universities and the open university path	Credits
University of Oulu's open university paths to the fields of technology and computer science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree Programme in Mechanical Engineering, 15 credits • Degree Programme in Civil Engineering, 15 credits • Degree Programme in Process and Environmental Engineering, 15 credits • Degree Programme in Computer Science, 15 credits • Degree Programme in Electronics and Communications Engineering, 15 credits • Degree Programme in Computer Science, 15 credits
Åbo Akademi's pharmaceutical path	• Pharmacist, 25 credits
Åbo Akademi's theology path	• Utbildningslinjen för theologian, 30 credits
Open university paths for business studies at the University of Jyväskylä	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor's and Master's Programme in Business Studies, 45 credits • Bachelor's and Master's Programme in Economics, 45 credits
Open university paths in educational sciences at the University of Helsinki	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor's and Master's Programme / Special education, 50 credits (+ VAKAVA entrance examination + aptitude test) • Bachelor's and Master's Programme in Educational Sciences / General and Adult Education, 50 credits (+ VAKAVA entrance examination)
University of Jyväskylä's educational sciences paths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor's and Master's Programme in Special Education, 50 credits (+ aptitude test) • Bachelor's and Master's Programme in Education and Adult Education, 60 credits • Bachelor's Programme in Early Childhood Education and Master's Programme in Early Childhood Education, 40 credits (+ aptitude test)

University of Eastern Finland's educational sciences paths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree in Early Childhood Education and Teacher Education, 25 credits (+ aptitude test) • Educational Sciences and Adult Education, 25 credits • Special Education Teacher, 60 credits (+ aptitude test)
University of Turku's educational sciences paths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree Programme in Educational Sciences, 50–60 credits • Degree Programme in Early Childhood Teacher Education, 50–60 credits (+ aptitude test)
University of Helsinki's legal sciences path	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor's Programme in Law, Bachelor of Laws and Master of Laws, 45 credits

Work-life oriented paths

Universities and the open university path	Credits
Modular Bachelor's Degree Programme in Administrative Sciences at the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Vaasa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 180 credits
Master's Degree Programme in Art Management and Entrepreneurship at the University of the Arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 credits + aptitude phase (incl. interview and written assignment in English, plus CV) + applicable previous university degree
University of Oulu's Master Programme in Nursing Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20–25 credits (research methodology studies) + applicable previous university degree
University of Eastern Finland's nursing science path	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100 credits (basic and subject studies in Nursing Science, advanced studies, and other university-level studies) + previous degree in health care

