

THE NATIONAL ELECTRONIC LIBRARY PROGRAMME – THE BACKBONE OF THE INFORMATION SUPPLY IN THE ELECTRONIC RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT IN FINLAND

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Finland's National Electronic Library Programme will be celebrating its fifth anniversary this year. This article discusses the results of the programme and its main impact. The programme is also being evaluated this year and the results of the evaluation will be available in 2003.

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The National Electronic Library Programme

The main objective of the National Electronic Library Programme (FinELib) is to support higher education, research and learning in Finland. The means chosen to realise this objective are:

- to increase the amount of electronic information available to users on the net,
- to improve information retrieval from the net,
- to develop a graphical user interface/portal to give access to heterogeneous information resources.

FinELib was started by the Ministry of Education in 1997. It was run as a project until the end of 1999 and became a permanent activity at the National Library in 2000. A lot has happened since the early days of FinELib. In the networked environment many tasks previously carried out by individual libraries can be centralised, and it can actually be more effective to perform these tasks centrally. FinELib is one example of a centralised service for the entire libraries network. In FinELib, the universities, polytechnics and public libraries, which come under two departments at the Ministry of Education, plus the libraries of research institutes, work side by side to develop the same conditions for research and learning throughout the country. The consortium model that has been adopted has broken the boundaries between the education and research sectors and can be used as a model for other national programmes as well.

The FinELib consortium was formed in early 2001. Some of the basic facts about the consortium are listed in Table 1.

FinELib's core activity is licensing, but many other services related to acquisitions and making the resources available on the Internet are provided for the consortium and other stakeholders. Some of the services are listed in Table 2.

Table 1. FinELib consortium – Facts

Background	<i>Number of members</i> 102	<i>Operational level</i> National	<i>Organisation type in the consortium</i> University Polytechnic Research institute Public library	<i>Budget 2002</i> €9.3 million
Administrative structure	<i>Formal agreement</i> Memorandum of Understanding	<i>Funding</i> Self funding Central funding	<i>Legal body</i> National Library	<i>Negotiating body</i> National Library (FinELib)
Figures	<i>Number of contracts</i> 31	<i>Staff total</i> 6	<i>Resources</i> E-journals (8200) Databases (120) Dictionaries Reference books	

Table 2. Services offered by FinELib

Services to the consortium	Services to publishers	Services to end-users
Licensing, Invoicing, Annual cost estimates/organisation, Administration (IP, contact, price information, etc.), Coordinating training, Production of promotion materials, Running annual user surveys, Running consortium surveys, Evaluation of FinELib, Collection of usage statistics, Cataloguing the journals, Running the portal development project.	Providing a single negotiating point for publishers, Providing publishers with information about the Finnish library field.	Supply of electronic resources on the web (24x7) throughout the country, Development of the usability of the resources (portal), User surveys to analyse user satisfaction, Information about resources and user rights on web pages.

Results and impact of FinELib

The most significant result of the FinELib Programme is the improvement of high-quality content services on the Internet. The electronic material available to researchers, teachers and students is considerably more extensive than ever before and it can be accessed nationwide. Information provision has improved at all universities, especially the smaller ones, and at the polytechnics, because they have received the same selection of titles as the bigger institutions. On the Internet, the material is always available and opening hours are irrelevant. According to the user surveys, researchers, students and teachers particularly appreciate the selection of resources, and the ease and rapidity of access.

A National Service Unit with high-level expertise on licensing has been created. This concentrated expertise is one of the main benefits for the entire library and academic community. A strong joint unit with a number of full-time staff can develop a better knowledge of licensing practices and the legal issues attached to them, and at the same time guarantee better continuity of this expertise than would be possible for an individual library. It also has greater opportunities for maintaining national and international contacts and thus being better informed. All these factors, together with greater purchasing power, give such a mechanism a much stronger position in negotiations with service providers than could ever be achieved by an individual library.

Table 3. Impact of the FinELib Programme

ACTIVITIES	IMPACT
Acquisition of electronic material <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elsevier • Web of Science • Nature • etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement of research and study conditions • Increase in the competitiveness of research • Improvement of material availability of e-resources nationwide • Part of the Virtual University and Virtual Polytechnic services • Savings at libraries
Development projects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portal • Web thesaurus • Guides 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement of the usability of e-resources
The consortium <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 102 members • Universities, polytechnics, public libraries, 30 research institutes • Common principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More co-operation nationwide • Active co-operation with other consortia • Increase of influence • Good agreements • Stronger negotiating power
Creation of National Service Unit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater potential in negotiations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good agreements • Follow-up and information on international developments
Feedback from users <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surveys since 1998 • 2115 replies in 2001 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services based on user needs

The first steps have been taken to license electronic resources for public libraries as well. The responsibilities of the National Library, Helsinki City Library and regional public libraries have been defined and working methods have been specified. The first licence, Ebsco Masterfile Premier, can be accessed from every public library in Finland. As the public libraries network is dense and covers the whole country, the availability of FinELib resources through public libraries has an impact on studies and research, especially in sparsely populated rural areas.

Centralised acquisition has saved an enormous amount of time in libraries and costs, too. Significant savings in manpower come from centralised negotiations. A licence is negotiated only once instead of a number of times in separate negotiations at individual libraries. There are also savings in manpower at libraries due to the acquisition of electronic resources. Many tasks related to the handling of journals (shelving, binding, serials check-in, routing of serials, etc.) are not needed in the electronic environment.

Licensing of electronic resources and many

tasks connected with it – for example, collection of usage statistics, cataloguing of journals licensed, development of the portal and running user surveys – are done centrally at the National Library. The aim is to provide the consortium with a comprehensive service attached to the licensing and use of electronic resources.

The basic aim of the National Electronic Library Programme is to support research, learning and higher education in Finland. The National Library is working in close co-operation with libraries and other national programmes to fulfil this task. The impact of the programme is directed towards both libraries and end users (Table 3).

User surveys – a guarantee of user satisfaction?

FinELib has been running web-based user surveys since 1998. In 2000, the web formula was connected to a statistics system, which makes additional analysis of the data possible. Quite a lot of time and energy has been devoted to running the surveys. It is likely that few electronic library programmes have paid as much attention to user

Table 4. Information about users and usage of FinELib resources

Who are the users?			
	1999 %	2000 %	2001 %
Females	46	51	51
Males	54	49	49
Age under 36	59	64	64
Students	23	37	35
Researchers	61	48	52
Working environment			
		2000 %	2001 %
In own office		52	55
At the library		17	15
In a computer class		8	6
At home		8	10
How often are electronic resources used?			
	1999 %	2000 %	2001 %
Daily	9	12	16
Several times per week	-	30	31
Weekly	38	18	18
A couple of times per month	18	26	25
Less frequently	35	15	11

studies and user feedback as FinELib.

There are two main reasons why user surveys are considered of the utmost importance in Finland, the first being the aim of developing a service based on user needs. The first survey was carried out before the licensing of electronic content was started, to get an idea of what kind of electronic resources were needed. Later surveys have been organised to evaluate user satisfaction with the services available on the Internet and to study user behaviour in the electronic environment.

Another reason behind the decision to run user surveys has been the need to be able to inform decision-makers and funding bodies of the usage of the electronic resources and the degree of user satisfaction. In the final analysis, usage and user satisfaction have enormous influence on funding. User feedback can be utilised for many other purposes as well.

Some results of the user surveys in Finland

The typical user of FinELib electronic resources seems to be a researcher aged under 36. Males

and females use the service more or less equally. The number of students using the service has grown from the start, but further growth can be expected in the future as studies become more problem-based and students participate in the work of research teams from the beginning of their studies.

The most common working environment is the individual's own office, followed by the library. Remote use is still fairly uncommon, because the remote access infrastructure at Finnish universities is still under construction.

Frequency of use has grown significantly since 1999. In 1999, 47% of the respondents used the resources weekly or more often than that. In 2001, the corresponding figure was 65%, indicating that electronic resources on the Internet are becoming an everyday tool for both researchers and students. Table 4 gives full information on the user surveys.

In the Finnish surveys we have also tried to determine the purposes for which the resources are used. This question was intended to investigate whether the users are familiar with the question of user rights, for example, whether

they have the right to produce course packs out of the material. According to the surveys, the most common ways the resources are used are:

- Information retrieval for research
- Follow-up of recent developments
- Searching for answers to specific questions
- For preparing classes
- For preparing learning materials
- For studies and theses.

One of the most important questions has been whether the users are satisfied with the content of FinELib. The level of satisfaction has been fairly steady since 1999. Some 60% of the respondents say that the content satisfies their needs either well or very well. The result is quite satisfactory bearing in mind that the focus in licensing has been on resources serving a large user base. Resources for highly

specialised fields of science have not been licensed.

The information collected in the surveys can help us answer questions such as the following. What kind of influence has the National Electronic Library Programme had on research? Has competitiveness among the universities increased? Does the easily accessible content of the electronic library affect the quality of research? Does access to the resources 24 hours a day produce savings in manpower? The National Electronic Library Programme will be evaluated in 2002 to answer some of these questions and to provide guidance for the further development of the programme. Research on the impact of digital library services on the working methods of scientists would be most welcome, and could be carried out by university departments of information studies.