

Vapaa  
Sivistystyö ry  
(Finnish Adult Education  
Association)  
Annankatu 12 A 18  
00120 Helsinki  
[sivistystyo.fi](http://sivistystyo.fi)

Bildningsalliansen rf  
(Liberal Adult Education  
Association in Swedish in Finland)  
Yrjönkatu 18  
00120 Helsinki  
[bildningsalliansen.fi](http://bildningsalliansen.fi)

Centre for  
International Mobility  
CIMO  
Hakaniemenranta 6  
00530 Helsinki  
[cimo.fi](http://cimo.fi)



*Every fifth Finnish inhabitant is engaged with self-motivated learning.*

In recent years, the Finnish education system has gained plenty of attention in several international education evaluations. The OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC 2012) investigated adults' basic skills in 24 countries. Finnish adults' literacy and numeracy skills were found to be excellent. A significant factor promoting success is the existence of a broad and varied liberal adult education system alongside the official education system. This brochure describes the Finnish liberal adult education system which, with more than 300 institutions, attracts around one million people every year, i.e. one in five people living in Finland, to self-motivated study.

The brochure is particularly intended for those education experts wanting to get to know the Finnish adult education system while visiting or taking part in joint projects. There are five types of adult education institutions: adult education centres, folk high schools, summer universities, study centres and sports institutes. They all receive funding from the state. Some of the institutions operate in Finnish, and some in Swedish. All institution types have their own umbrella organisation that can be contacted to find out more about the activities of these institutions.

Liberal adult education is regulated through state legislation, but in practice activities can vary greatly between institutions with different values and ideological backgrounds, and locations. Different regions' economic and cultural characteristics also have an effect on the activities of local liberal adult education institutions. The liberal adult education institution may also have been given authorisation to provide vocational education and training or general education.



Study centres are third-sector (voluntary) institutions that are run by non-governmental organisations, political parties and trade unions.

The activities are mostly meant for volunteers and active participants in the organisations. The training takes place in the form of courses, lectures, seminars and study clubs, which facilitate peer learning. Teaching mainly takes place in the evenings or during weekends, often at facilities owned by the organisation.

Study centres offer a wide range of education opportunities that support democracy and active citizenship and help participants play a full and active part in society, particularly at grassroots level.

Training is organised flexibly in different parts of the country, depending on where the students are. An increasing amount of learning takes place online. This helps education providers respond to the education needs that arise in less time.

**12**  
institutions



The Association of Study Centres:  
**opintokeskukset.fi**



**Jaana, 31, executive director of a small non-governmental organisation**

took part in an online course on volunteer management organised by a study centre:

"I was able to study flexibly from home in the evenings. I watched video lectures, talked to other active members of other organisations and received feedback for assignments. I learnt from others' experiences and gained lots of useful knowledge and ideas to use to make our organisation's volunteer activities more effective."



"Education is to be considered the most important competition factor for a small nation."

Timo Toiviainen, researcher in adult education, Secretary-General of the Finnish Adult Education Association 1987–2000



14  
institutions



The Association of Sports  
Institutes of Finland:  
[urheiluoopistot.fi](http://urheiluoopistot.fi)

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**Katri, 52,  
office worker**

took part in a one-weekend *well-being course* at a sports institute:

“I came here with three co-workers. The programme included a wide selection of instructed sports and exercise. When we were doing some Nordic walking in the beautiful setting of the institute, we decided to start jogging together regularly! We also learnt new things about nutrition and received guidance on a healthy lifestyle. The course motivated me to start doing sports and to change to a healthier lifestyle.”

Sports institutes provide education that improves the sports participation, well-being, and health of the whole population. Some of the sports institutes are state-level institutions, and others are regional.

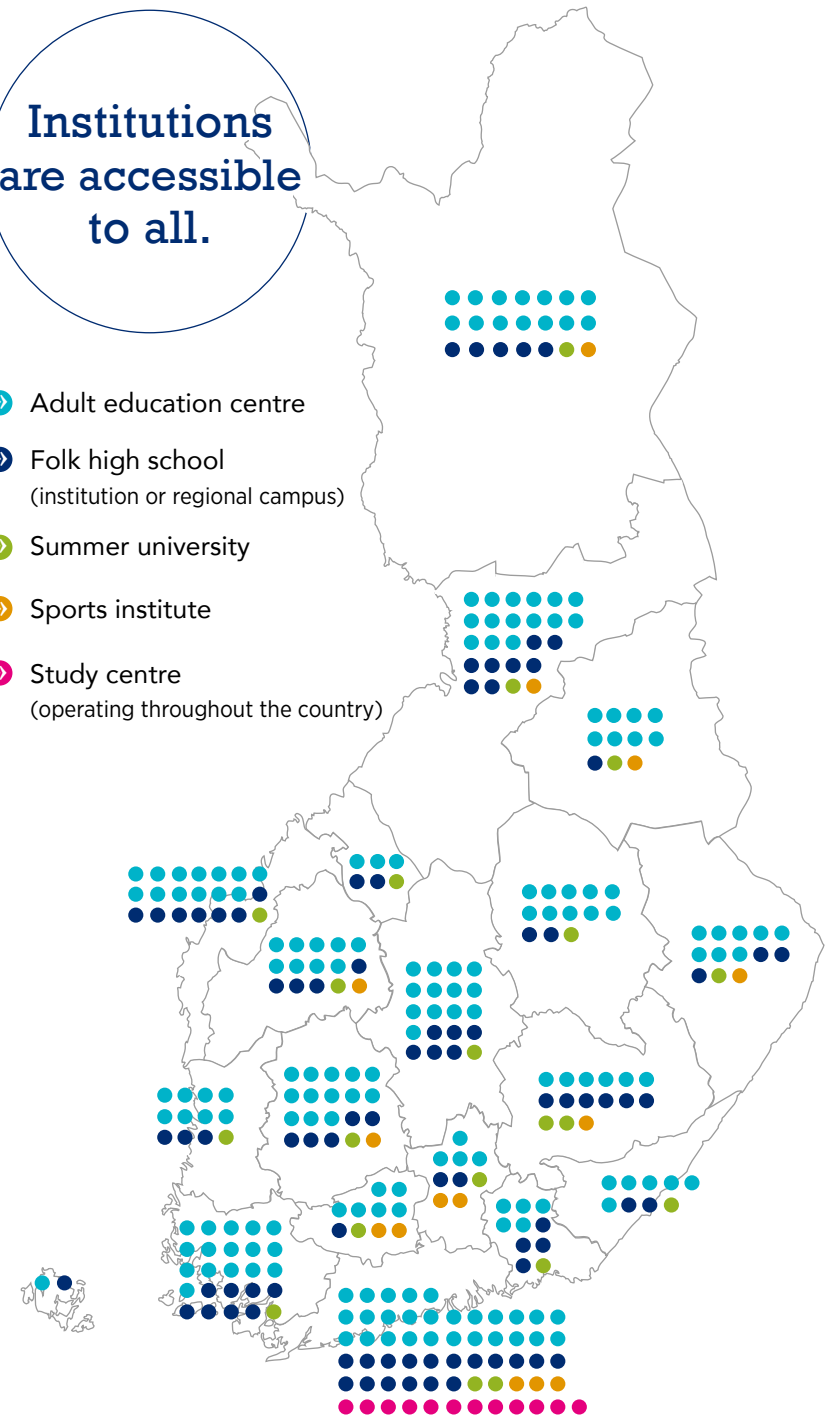
Most of the liberal adult education courses are 3–5 day exercise courses, sports camps for children and young people, or courses for families.

The institutes also offer semester-long basic courses in physical education that aim to strengthen participants’ sports and instruction skills, encourage an active lifestyle, and prepare participants for further studies in sports.

In addition, sports institutions also provide training to sports clubs and associations, coaching activities, basic and further vocational training and courses for companies.

Institutions  
are accessible  
to all.

- » Adult education centre
- » Folk high school  
(institution or regional campus)
- » Summer university
- » Sports institute
- » Study centre  
(operating throughout the country)



## The characteristics of liberal adult education



### THE PURPOSE AND AIMS OF LIBERAL ADULT EDUCATION

“The purpose of liberal adult education is, on the basis of the principle of life-long learning, to support the all-round development of individuals’ personalities and the ability of individuals to function in communities, as well as to promote the realisation of democracy, equality, and pluralism in Finnish society.”

(Act on Liberal Adult Education 632/1998 §1)

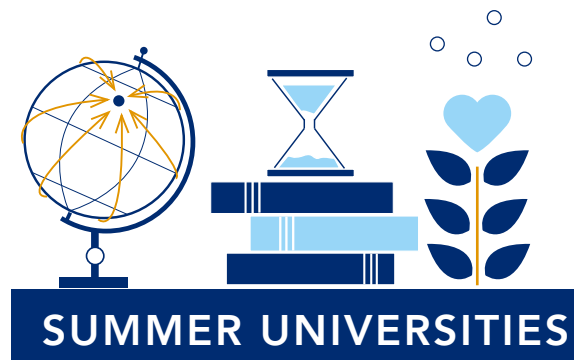
Institutions have great freedom and autonomy: they set their own goals, plan their own curricula and choose their own staff.

Courses are open for anyone, regardless of age or educational background, and they are usually non-formal, not counting towards a degree.

Studying is voluntary, and its aim is to build up knowledge and skills and aid personal development.

The teachers work either full-time or on an hourly basis. Some institutions also use volunteers and peer tutors. In Finland, students can specialise in adult education during teacher training at university.

The network of liberal adult education institutions covers the whole country and reaches from the biggest cities all the way to sparsely populated rural areas.



Summer universities are regional institutions that mainly operate in cities. They have 31 permanent offices, and education is organized in 110 localities. Their activities mainly consist of offering open university courses and responding to the regional education and skills development needs. Summer university courses provide opportunities for both personal and professional development.

The region’s highly educated population is an important target group. Nevertheless, the courses are open for all, regardless of age and educational background. Teaching takes place year-round in the form of courses, and is short-term.

Summer universities are in close cooperation with institutions of higher education as well as other kinds of institutions. They offer many multidisciplinary programmes in, for example, culture, arts, Finnish language and culture, European studies, education, environmental research, health sciences, and social sciences.

In addition to that, summer universities also offer continuing education courses, public lectures, regional seminars, and culture events, as well as university education for senior citizens (University of the Third Age).

20 institutions



Summer Universities in Finland:  
[kesayliopistot.fi](http://kesayliopistot.fi)



**Sanni, 42, M.Sc. (B.A.)**

took part in a course called *Leadership and Management* (5 ECTS credits):

“Summer university is an excellent place to study while working. Highly competent teachers and a relaxed atmosphere create a pleasant study environment.”



The Finnish Association of Folk High Schools:  
[kansanopistot.fi](http://kansanopistot.fi)

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**Teemu, 20**

studied game development at a folk high school for an academic year:

“The year at the folk high school changed my life! Now I know what I want to do in the future! The year on campus also helped me make lots new friends who I’m still in touch with.”

Folk high schools organize general education programmes (e.g. in arts, languages, education or theology) at 87 campuses. Studies are full-time and last for a whole academic year. During the year, students can revise school subjects, study special fields and try out new ways of learning.

Many students attend folk high schools to prepare for higher education and to take open university courses that may be useful for university studies later on.

Folk high schools provide vocational training and basic education courses alongside liberal adult education courses. They also provide courses complementing basic education (“Year Ten”) that aim to improve grades from comprehensive school.

Folk high schools are boarding schools. Living in student residences and studying in small groups give studies a sense of community. At folk high schools, students can improve themselves and their workplace skills, grow independent and make friends. A folk high school may also be a suitable place for people who want to complete basic education or are planning to go on to higher education, and for those on sabbatical leave.

Folk high schools can be divided into four groups according to their background organisations: non-political (Grundtvigian), Christian, civil society based and folk high schools with special education.

## Liberal adult education has always RESPONDED TO THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY

The groundwork for the current network of liberal adult education institutions in Finland was laid at the turn of the 20th century, before Finland gained independence. Finland still being an autonomous part of the Russian Empire, the independence efforts gained ground and raising the population’s education level was seen as being even more important. The first folk high schools offered general education and vocational training to young adults in rural areas. Adult education centres were at first meant for urban populations. Study clubs were a key activity for workers’ associations and youth associations.

From this time forwards, liberal adult education has been part of the Finnish education system. Liberal adult education has always been led by social change and has always responded to the needs of the times. That is why its current structures and activities are varied.

Examples and influences have also been sought from beyond the country’s borders. Denmark was the model for folk high schools, and inspiration for associations’ study club activities was found in Sweden. The Nordic countries’ adult education systems have common features, but each country has developed its own unique system.



### THE STATE SUPPORTS LIBERAL ADULT EDUCATION

The state covers approximately half of the expenses of liberal adult education institutions. The rest is covered by the students and the owners of the institutions. The state subsidy is determined by the Act on Liberal Adult Education (1998). The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture sets out an annual maximum amount of tuition for institutions, based on which the subsidy is determined. In addition, the Ministry instructs liberal adult education institutions and negotiates with them specific development themes, for which extra funding can be applied.

## Who takes part in liberal adult education?

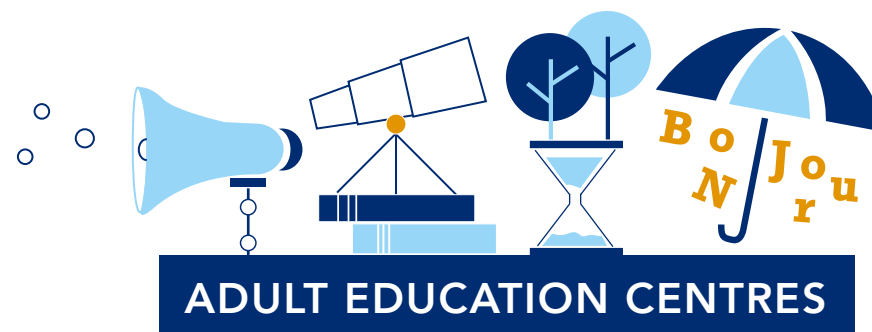
Liberal adult education is mainly meant for the adult population. People of all ages and social backgrounds come to study at the institutions. The majority of students at summer universities and adult education centres are women for whom personal development is an important part of life. Institutions also offer courses for children and young people.

Liberal adult education institutions are also important providers of education for adult immigrants. According to a 2015 survey, 80% of the institutions had immigrant students. Liberal adult education institutions provide integration education for immigrants. Adults from immigrant backgrounds also take courses that are open for everyone alongside members of the native population.

Liberal adult education institutions also offer training for young immigrants. Immigrants under 25 years of age and immigrants aged between 16 and 17 who have arrived without a guardian are special groups.

### Advances in liberal adult education through international cooperation

Liberal adult education has made use of international networks from the very beginning. Nordic cooperation and development cooperation have been part of some institutions' activities for decades. The start of the European Union's education programmes have made international cooperation possible for practically all liberal adult education institutions. Finns have actively taken part in EU education programmes and the Nordic Nordplus programme.



Adult education centres are the biggest adult education institution by the number of students in Finland. Teaching is offered in all municipalities, and one of the main principles of operation is to bring education close to the people. Activities usually take place in locations owned by the municipality – for example, at schools and leisure centres.

The courses offered usually include courses on arts, crafts, music, language and literature, home economics, sports, IT, and social studies. Courses are offered for all age groups.

Adult education centres respond to local and regional education needs. Feedback from students is used when planning new courses. This gives students an opportunity to influence what courses are made available.

In addition to liberal adult education, adult education centres offer open university studies and tailored courses for clients such as municipalities and companies.

185 institutions



The Finnish Association of Adult Education Centres:  
[kansalaisopistot.fi](http://kansalaisopistot.fi)



Juha, 45,  
chief financial officer

taking part in a course called "Easy and healthy home cooking":

"I came to adult education centre to find a counterpoint for my hectic work life. I still have decades left in my career and I want to take care of my mind and body. I have been able to make friends with people from my neighbourhood and to challenge myself in a new way."