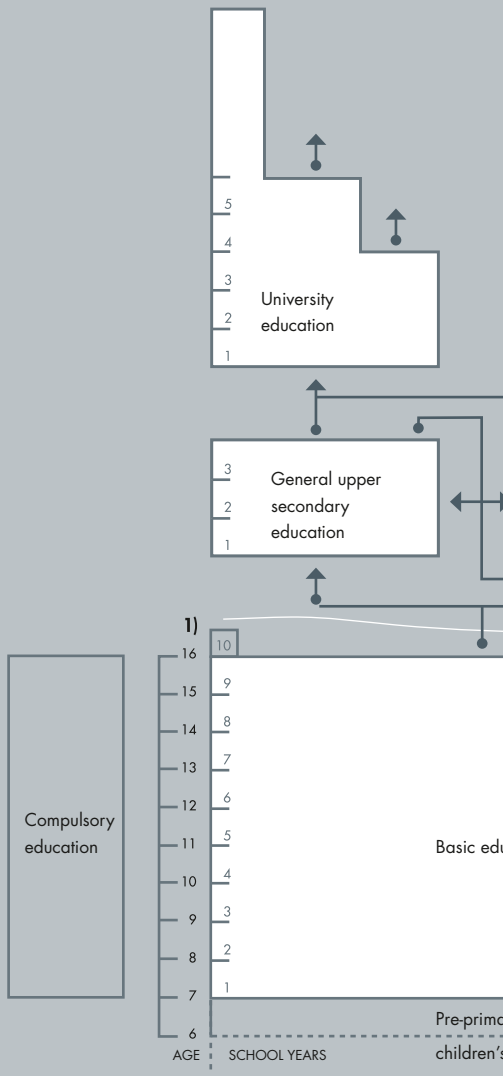
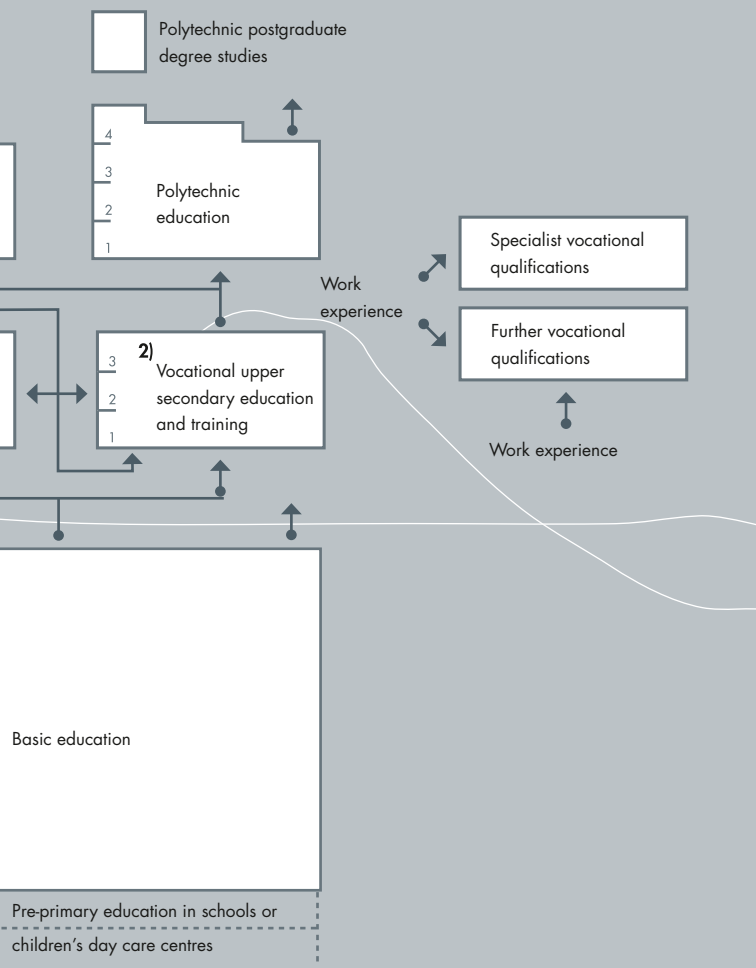
EDUCATION IN FINLAND

FINNISH NATIONAL
BOARD OF EDUCATION

Finnish Education System




Polytechnic postgraduate degree studies
4
3
2
1
Polytechnic education
Specialist vocational qualifications
Work experience
Further vocational qualifications
2)
3
2
1
Vocational upper secondary education and training
Work experience
Basic education
Pre-primary education in schools or children's day care centres

1) Voluntary basic education (10th year) gives pupils an opportunity to improve their grades and clarify their career plans.

2) Vocational upper secondary education and training is arranged in vocational schools (including at least six months of on-the-job learning) and in the form of apprenticeship training. Adults can obtain vocational upper secondary qualifications also in competence tests.

EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

A central objective of Finnish education policy is to provide all citizens with equal opportunities to receive education, irrespective of their age, domicile, financial situation, sex or native language. Thus pre-primary education, basic education and upper secondary education are, in principle, free of charge: tuition, welfare services and school meals are provided free of charge at all levels, whereas learning materials and text books are free in pre-primary and basic education; in basic education, travel to and from school is also arranged by the education provider.

Educational guidance supports the pupils

Educational guidance is essential when striving to establish equality in education. In the first six years of basic education, guidance is integrated into regular instruction, but curricula in the upper forms of basic education and in upper secondary education include specific lessons in pupil and student counselling respectively. This aims to support, help and guide pupils to ensure that all pupils perform as well as possible in their studies and that they are able to make correct and appropriate decisions concerning their education and career choices.

Compulsory education begins at the age of seven

Compulsory education begins at the age of seven. After nine years in basic education, it is possible to continue either to general upper secondary education or to vocational upper secondary education and training, and then to a polytechnic or university.

Language minorities

Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. Approximately more than six per cent of students in basic and upper secondary education attend a school where Swedish is the language of instruction. Both language groups have their own institutions also at higher education level. In addition, there are educational institutions where all or at least some instruction is provided in a foreign language (most commonly English). Local authorities are also required to organise education in the Saami language in the Saami-speaking areas of Lapland. Care is also taken to ensure educational opportunities for Romany and other minorities as well as for people who use sign language.

ADMINISTRATION AND FUNDING

Local administration plays a key role

Education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The Finnish National Board of Education works with the Ministry of Education to develop educational aims, content and methods for primary, secondary and adult education. In addition, each of the six Finnish Provinces has an Education and Culture Department that deals with these issues. Local administration is the responsibility of the local authorities (municipalities), which play a prominent role as education providers.

Most education is publicly funded

Most institutions providing basic and upper secondary level education are maintained by local authorities or joint municipal boards (consortia of municipalities). In 2004, 98 percent of basic education institutions were publicly funded and 92 per cent and 52 per cent of general and vocational upper secondary institutions respectively were publicly funded. Private institutions are under public supervision: they follow the national core curricula and qualification guidelines confirmed by the Finnish National Board of Education. They also receive the same level of public funding as publicly funded schools. Responsibility for educational funding is divided between the State and the local authorities. Of the funding for primary and secondary education, the state subsidy averages 57 per cent of the costs, while municipal contributions amount to an average of 43 per cent.

Educational autonomy

Local authorities determine how much autonomy is passed to schools. The schools have the right to provide educational services according to their own administrative arrangements, as long as the basic functions, determined by law, are carried out.

Polytechnics are mostly municipal or private. All universities are maintained by the State and enjoy extensive autonomy.

Evaluation instead of inspection

There is no separate school inspectorate and inspection visits to schools conducted by state authorities have been abandoned. The activities of education providers are guided by objectives laid down in legislation and the national core curricula. The system relies on the proficiency of teachers in their efforts to meet the objectives laid down in the curricula. There is strong focus on both self-evaluation and external evaluation. A separate Evaluation Council for Education and Training has been operating in conjunction with the Ministry of Education since April 2003. It is responsible for planning, co-ordinating, managing and developing the evaluation of basic education and upper secondary education and training. The polytechnics and universities are responsible for the evaluation of their own operations and outcomes. In this respect, they receive support from the Higher Education Evaluation Council.

PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

From birth to the age of six, children can attend day-care centres (kindergartens) or smaller family day-care groups in private homes, all of which charge fees depending on parental income. All 6-year-olds have had the right to free pre-primary education since 2001. Each local authority may decide whether to provide pre-primary education in schools, at day-care centres or in family day care referred to in the Act on Children's Day Care or at some other appro-priate location. In 2004, 95 per cent of 6-year-olds participated in pre-primary education.

BASIC EDUCATION

The Basic Education Act no longer separates comprehensive school into lower and upper stages. It only states that basic education lasts nine years and that instruction is usually given by class teachers in the first six forms and by subject teachers in the last three forms.

Children must begin compulsory education in the year of their seventh birthday. Approximately one per cent start school a year earlier, but this requires a certificate to prove the child's readiness to attend school. All basic education is free of charge. Local authorities assign a school place to each pupil close to their place of residence, but parents are free to choose the comprehensive school of their preference, though certain restrictions are applied.

School year is the same everywhere

The school year comprises 190 days between mid-August and the beginning of June. Schools are open five days a week, and the minimum number of lessons per week varies from 19 to 30, depending on the level and number of optional subjects taken. In addition, there is local autonomy concerning extra holidays.

National core curriculum leaves room for local variations

There are no regulations governing class size. Teaching groups normally consist of pupils of the same age. However, where appropriate, pupils of different ages may be taught together, particularly in small schools. The national core curriculum has been drawn up by the Finnish National Board of Education and includes objectives and assessment criteria. Within this framework, schools and local authorities then form their own curricular regulations that are sensitive to the local context. Teachers choose their own teaching methods and have freedom to select their own teaching materials.

Assessment is part of daily schoolwork

Teachers carry out assessment in their respective subjects on the basis of objectives written into the curriculum. Assessment is an ongoing part of daily school life and each student receives a report at least once every school year. In addition, an intermediate report may be given at least once during the school year. Achievement is assessed both continuously and through tests set by teachers. A certificate is awarded when a pupil successfully completes the full nine years of comprehensive schooling; an additional certificate is awarded for those completing the optional 10th year.

UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION

Most students continue their studies

Students who have successfully completed compulsory education are eligible for general and vocational upper secondary education and training. Student selection to upper secondary schools is mainly based on previous study record, whereas selection criteria used by vocational institutions also include work experience and other comparable factors and possibly entrance and aptitude tests. Although tuition is free, contributions towards teaching materials may be required. Well over 90 per cent of the relevant age group start general or vocational upper secondary studies immediately after basic education. Completion of upper secondary education, both general and vocational, gives students eligibility to move into higher education.

General upper secondary education

The Finnish National Board of Education decides on the objectives and core contents of the subjects and study modules for both general upper secondary education and vocational education and training. Based on the relevant national core curriculum, each education provider then prepares the local curriculum. Due to the modular structure of upper secondary education and training, students may combine studies from both general education and vocational education and training.

The syllabus of general upper secondary education is designed to last three years, but students may complete it in 2 to 4 years. Instruction is organised in a form not tied to year classes. Each course is assessed on completion and when a student has completed the required number of courses, he or she receives a school-leaving certificate.

National matriculation examination

General upper secondary schooling ends with a national matriculation examination, which comprises four compulsory tests covering the two national languages, a foreign language and mathematics or general studies (humanities and natural sciences). Students may also include optional tests in the examination. Upon successful completion of the matriculation examination and the entire upper secondary school syllabus, students are awarded a separate certificate that shows details of the tests passed and the levels and grades achieved. Students in vocational upper secondary education and training may also take the matriculation examination.

Vocational education and training

Vocational education and training cover seven sectors of education, 52 vocational qualifications including a total of 112 different study programmes. The scope of studies is three years (120 credits). Each vocational qualification consists of vocational studies including at least 20 credits of on-the-job learning in companies, core subjects, such as languages and sciences, free-choice studies, student counselling and a final project. The studies are based on individual study plans, comprising both compulsory and optional study modules.

Students' skills and knowledge are assessed after completion of each study module. A qualification certificate is awarded after completion of all studies included in the individual study plan.

Since 2006 vocational skills demonstration have been integrated into all vocational upper secondary qualifications. These demonstrations are practical work situations planned, implemented and assessed together by the education provider and representatives from the world of work. In these practical situations the students demonstrate how well they have achieved the objectives of the education.

Vocational upper secondary qualifications can be taken in school-based education or as apprenticeship training. Students' individual study plans determine their choices and the progress of their studies.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education is offered by universities and polytechnics that are professionally oriented higher education institutions. Both sectors have their own profiles; universities emphasise scientific research and instruction, whereas polytechnics adopt a more practical approach.

University education

The Finnish matriculation examination provides general eligibility for higher education. In addition, those with a Finnish polytechnic degree, a post-secondary level vocational qualification or at least a three-year vocational qualification also have general eligibility for university education. Universities may also admit applicants, who have completed open university studies required by the relevant university or who are otherwise considered by the university to have the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the studies.

There is restricted entry, 'numerus clausus', to all fields of study. As applicant volumes far outweigh the number of places available, universities use different kinds of student selection criteria.

Polytechnic education

The general requirement for admission to polytechnics is completion of general upper secondary education or vocational education and training. In other words, the following applicants qualify for polytechnic studies: those who have taken the matriculation examination or completed upper secondary school, or have a vocational qualification (or a post-secondary qualification), or a corresponding international or foreign qualification. Student selection to polytechnics is mainly based on school achievement and work experience and, in many cases, entrance examinations.

Completing a degree takes from 3 to 6 years

According to the degree system at universities, it is possible to take either a lower or a higher academic degree. The lower or Bachelor's degree (180 ECTS credits) and the higher or Master's degree (120 ECTS credits) can be completed in 3 and 5–6 years respectively. In addition, universities offer scientific postgraduate degrees that are Licentiates and Doctorates.

Studies leading to a polytechnic degree take 3,5–4 years or 210–270 ECTS credits, depending on the field of study. Some polytechnics offer postgraduate degree studies.

ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

All forms of education and training intended for young people, ranging from comprehensive school to university studies, are also provided for adults. Some educational institutions concentrate exclusively on adult education and training. Adult education and training are also provided in the form of in-service training within companies.

At upper secondary schools for adults, adults may study for and take part in the same matriculation examinations as young people. Adults may also study for the same upper secondary vocational qualifications as young people.

Competence-based qualifications

A flexible way for adults to study for and achieve vocational qualifications is through the system of competence-based qualifications, which is designed specifically for adults. The system allows people to demonstrate their vocational skills in competence tests irrespective of whether they have acquired the skills at work, through study or as a result of their leisure interests. The studies are based on individual learning programmes, which are drawn up separately for each student. There are three levels of competence-based qualifications: upper secondary vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications. The requirements for competence-based qualifications are decided by the Finnish National Board of Education. Organisation and supervision of the system, on the other hand, are the responsibilities of tripartite qualification committees, which are made up of representatives of employers, employees and teachers.

The system of competence-based qualifications reflects the principles of lifelong learning. The State also promotes the principle of lifelong learning by financing liberal adult education institutions. These educational institutions have extensive autonomy as well as the freedom to decide on the objectives, target groups and methods of instruction.

SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

In basic education, special needs education is to be provided primarily in conjunction with mainstream education. If a pupil cannot be provided with instruction in a regular teaching group due to disability, illness, delayed development, emotional disorder or for other similar reasons, he or she must be admitted or transferred to special needs education. In such cases, special needs education may also be provided in a special class or at some other appropriate location. Instruction is provided by a special needs class teacher. An individual curriculum must be drawn up for each pupil transferred or admitted to special needs education. In addition, those in need of special support are also to be provided with pre-primary education and vocational education and training by regular institutions wherever possible.

WELL-TRAINED TEACHERS

Pre-primary education

Teaching and guidance staff within day-care centres have either Bachelor's degrees from a university or a polytechnic. In addition, they may be assisted by other child-care professionals with relevant upper secondary vocational qualifications.

Basic education and general upper secondary education

Teachers in the first six forms of basic education are usually generalists (class teachers), whereas those in the last three forms and at upper secondary level are subject specialists (subject teachers). Class teachers are Masters of Education and subject teachers have completed a Master's degree in the subject they teach as well as pedagogical studies.

Vocational and higher education

Depending on the institution and subject, vocational and polytechnic teachers are required to have either 1) an appropriate higher (or postgraduate) academic degree; 2) an appropriate polytechnic degree; or 3) the highest possible qualification in their own vocational field, at least three years of work experience in the field, and completed pedagogical studies. University teachers are generally required to have a doctoral or other postgraduate degree.

FINLAND IN BRIEF

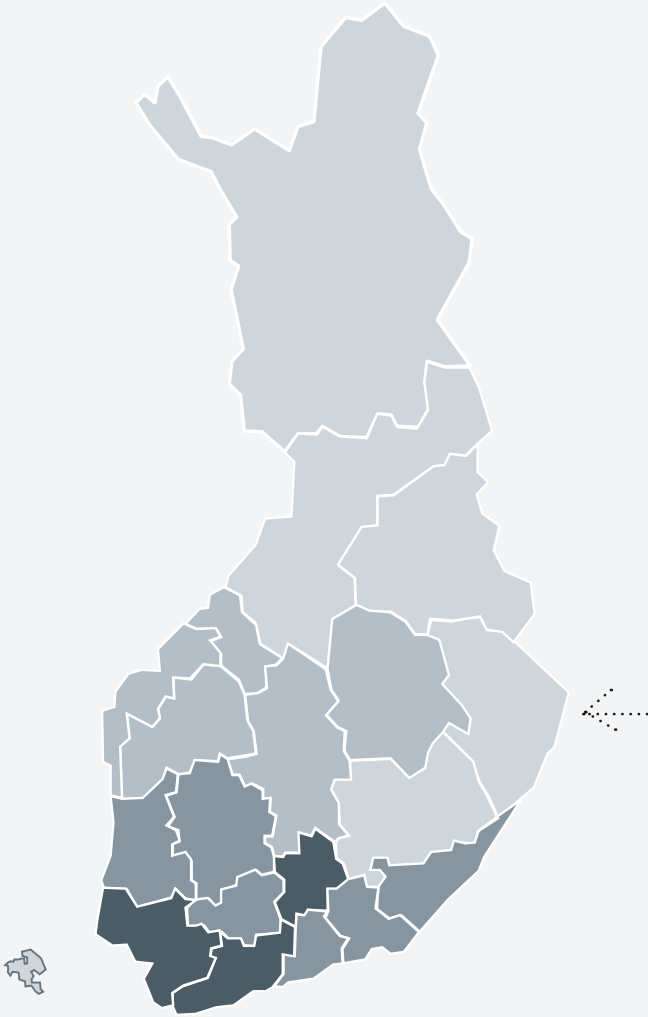
Population	5.2 million
Surface area	338,000 km^2
Official languages	Finnish (92 %) and Swedish (6 %). Saami language in the Saami domicile in Lapland.
Religion	Lutheran (85 %), Orthodox (1 %), unaffiliated (13 %)

Education in brief

Public expenditure on education was 5.1 per cent of GDP in 2004.

Number of students and educational institutions (2004)

	STUDENTS	INSTITUTIONS
Basic education	593,000	3,720
General upper secondary education	121,000	473
Vocational upper secondary education	171,000	240
Polytechnics	143,000	31
Universities	174,000	20



Population density in Finland (2003)
Population per square kilometre of land

- 2–13
- 13–23
- 23–37
- 37–208

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