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INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS OF SOME FEATURES OF FINNISH EDUCATION AND TRAINING
International comparisons of some features of Finnish education and training

The education system

The objective of the Finnish education system is to provide everyone with equal opportunities for education and training. The success of a nation is built on a well-educated population. The education system does not have any dead ends. All study tracks are open from pre-primary education through to higher education according to every individual’s own abilities. Consequently, after completing an education or training programme, every citizen can in principle always move on to a higher level of education. An essential aspect of safeguarding equality is to provide support for those with special needs.

Education is financed almost completely through public funding. There are few private educational institutions and even those are part of the formal education system, receiving state subsidies on the same grounds as municipal institutions.

Pre-primary education is intended for six-year-olds and it may be provided either as part of day care or at school. Parents are free to choose whether to enrol their children in pre-primary education, but providers of pre-primary education, that is, local authorities, are required to offer the opportunity to all six-year-olds living within the municipality. In practical terms, almost all six-year-olds receive pre-primary education. Pre-primary education is provided free of charge for the children’s parents.

Finland has nine-year compulsory education starting at the age of seven. This basic education is provided by comprehensive schools which increasingly have a single structure, that is, no division into primary or lower secondary education. There is no ability grouping and each age group is taught as a whole. Virtually the entire age group also completes basic education.

Basic education is generally provided in Finland by local authorities (municipalities); only 61 comprehensive schools were private in 2007, while another 30 were maintained by the State. After finishing their nine years in basic education, pupils still have the opportunity to participate in additional basic education for another year. In 2007, this opportunity was taken up by 1,300 pupils.
Figure 8.1  The Finnish education system

In 2000 there were just under 3,200 comprehensive schools in Finland, with a total of 561,000 pupils. Nearly 56,700 children started first grade, while 66,500 pupils were awarded basic education certificates in the spring of 2008.
When they finish their basic education, young people have two options for continuing their studies: general upper secondary education or upper secondary vocational education and training (VET). The aim is for as many young people as possible to move on to upper secondary level. Every comprehensive school leaver can apply for upper secondary studies through the national joint application system. This contributes to ensuring that 95 per cent of basic education leavers continue their studies immediately on completion of basic education. In 2008, 51 and 42 per cent of comprehensive school leavers moved on to upper secondary school and vocational education and training, respectively, while 2% continued their studies in voluntary additional basic education.

Upper secondary schools provide general education, which is organised in courses instead of year classes, allowing students themselves to choose their courses. The nominal duration of general upper secondary education is three years. In 2008 just under 14 per cent of the age group finishing upper secondary school spent more than three years completing their general upper secondary education. The final upper secondary school examination is the national matriculation examination. the total number of students was 114,200. In 2007 32,600 students passed the matriculation examination.

Similar to upper secondary school studies, upper secondary vocational education and training lasts three years and provides eligibility to apply to higher education institutions. Even though the proportion of basic education leavers opting for vocational studies is smaller when compared with upper secondary school entrants, the total number of students starting vocational education and training is higher than the total number of upper secondary school entrants. This is due to the fact that those starting vocational studies come from several age groups, whereas upper secondary school studies are generally pursued immediately after comprehensive school.

In 2008 a total of 275,500 students were studying in vocational education and training provided in educational institutions or as apprenticeship training. Of these students 70 per cent were in initial (upper secondary) vocational education and 30% in education preparing for further and specialist qualifications.

Higher education is provided in Finland by universities and polytechnics, also known as universities of applied sciences. The total number of university students in 2008 was 164,100, with 19,600 being new entrants. The total number of graduates was 38,200, which was considerably higher than in the previous year. The exceptionally high number of graduates was due to the degree reform carried out during 2008, which made universities encourage older students to complete their studies. Female students accounted for 56 per cent of university entrants and for an even higher proportion (64%) of graduates. In the same year, the number of students enrolled in professionally oriented polytechnics was 135,300, with 36,600 of them being new students. A total of 21,000 students completed a degree in that year. Female students accounted for 56 per cent of polytechnic entrants and 64 per cent of graduates.

There is a wide variety of options for adult education and training in Finland. Adults are offered both qualification-oriented education and training and studies relating to leisure interests. Competence-based qualifications are a way of demonstrating vocational skills through competence tests regardless of how these were acquired – the competence required in competence tests can be obtained through work, interests and studies alike.
In 2008 a total of 18,000 qualifications were completed within the competence-based qualifications system, comprising 6,700 upper secondary vocational qualifications, 9,400 further qualifications and 1,800 specialist qualifications. The net number of students – in some cases, students may have participated in several courses – in liberal adult education, at summer universities, adult education centres, folk high schools, sports institutes and study centres was 1,022,900 in 2008.

Highly educated population as a resource

Differences in the level of education between age groups are quite pronounced in Finland. While 90 per cent of the 25–34 age group have completed a post-compulsory qualification, the equivalent proportion for those aged 55 to 64 is 66 per cent. The entire Finnish population aged between 25 and 64 is slightly better educated than the OECD average. The proportion of higher education graduates is close to the top OECD countries: the only countries where the proportion of higher education graduates is clearly higher are Canada, the United States and New Zealand. At the same time, however, almost a fifth of the working-age population have only completed compulsory education, while the equivalent proportion in countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia is 10 per cent or less. The number of people without any post-compulsory schooling is, nevertheless, decreasing rapidly. In 2008, about 40 per cent of the 60–64 age group did not have any post-compulsory qualifications, while the equivalent proportion in the 55–59 age group, for example, only accounted for about 30 per cent.

One fifth of the entire adult population (those aged 25–64) have completed a university or polytechnic degree (ISCED 5A and 6). However, the proportion of people with a higher education degree is still growing, as the proportion among those aged 25–34 is already one third.

Figure 8.2 Educational attainment: adult population (2008).

Distribution of the 25–64-year-old population, by highest level of education attained.

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2010
Universities apply the so-called numerus clausus principle, which means that not all applicants are admitted to the programme of their choice. This, combined with universal national service for men, explains the slow transition to higher education in international terms: Finns start their higher education studies at a later age than their peers in many other countries. More than 80 per cent of young Japanese people have already enrolled at higher education institutions at a time when not even one fifth of Finns have started their studies.

The median age of entrants to higher education in Finland is 21.4 years, while the figure for Japan, Belgium and South Korea is less than 19. Then again, the median age in Iceland, Sweden and Denmark is more than 22 years. Over 40 per cent of students completing upper secondary school start studying at a higher education institution immediately after their upper secondary studies. One fifth of Finnish higher education entrants will only start their studies after their 26th birthday.

**Figure 8.3** Age distribution of new entrants (2008) to higher education (ISCED 5A)

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2010

**Education and employment**

Finland’s most important resource to guarantee welfare is the high level of competence of the population. This is why it is considered important to ensure that no-one is left without an education. Less than 4 per cent of young Finns aged between 15 and 29 are neither studying nor at work. The proportion is clearly smaller than in countries such as the UK, France and Germany, on the one hand, but higher than, say, in the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, on the other. The proportion of those outside both employment and education is highest among the 20–24 age group. This is partially due to the fact that not all applicants are admitted to the higher education programme of their choice on completion of their upper secondary studies.
In Finland, women are in the majority at all levels of education with the exception of basic education, that is, primary and lower secondary levels. Accordingly, the proportion of women aged 15 to 29 not in education and unemployed is slightly lower than the corresponding proportion among men, even though the employment rate is lower among women than among men.

**Figure 8.4** Percentage of the cohort population not in education and unemployed (2008), age group 15–29, all levels of education.

In international terms, young Finns spend a long time in education. In 2008, 43 per cent of people aged 20 to 29 were in education, whereas the OECD average for this age group was 25 per cent. Denmark and Iceland were the only other countries with 35 per cent or more of young people in that age group enrolled in education.

**Educational expenditure at a reasonable level**

In Finland provision within the formal education system is mostly financed through public funding. All education providers, both municipal and private bodies, receive state subsidies on the same grounds. The majority of providers of basic and upper secondary education are local authorities or joint municipal authorities, while the number of private schools is quite small. Education and training provided by public institutions is free of charge for students and their parents at all levels of education from pre-primary to higher education.

The total educational expenditure for 2007 in Finland accounted for 5.6 per cent of the GDP, which is more or less the same as the OECD average (5.7%). In 1995, the GDP percentage was clearly higher (6.3%). At the time, Finland was undergoing a period of deep recession and the GDP had been dropping for several years, but policy-makers had still tried to exercise more re-
When compared internationally, educational expenditure is highest in Finland at lower secondary and higher education levels, where Finland’s expenditure exceeds the OECD average. Nevertheless, at 13,550 US dollars per student (incl. R&D expenditure), expenditure on higher education, for example, was exactly half the amount spent on higher education in the United States.

The main part of educational expenditure is made up of payroll expenses. In Finland, education at the lower secondary level of basic education is provided by subject teachers and the average class size is relatively small, less than 20 pupils. In other words, there are about ten pupils to each lower secondary teacher, which means that expenditure is higher when compared with primary level, where all subjects are generally taught by a single class teacher.

Higher education expenditure per student reflects, first and foremost, the education policy decision to invest in a high level of competence. Investments focus on university and polytechnic R&D activities in particular; the proportion of expenditure per student in these areas is clearly above the OECD average.
### International comparisons

Figure 8.6  
Annual expenditure on educational institutions per student for all services in Finland and OECD average (2007)  
In equivalent US$ converted using PPPs for GDP, by level of education, based on full-time equivalents

![Diagram showing annual expenditure on educational institutions per student for all services in Finland and OECD average (2007).](image)

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2010

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#### Teaching and teachers

In Poland, the number of instruction hours specified in the basic education curriculum is the lowest of all OECD countries. Polish 7–14-year-olds receive 4,715 compulsory hours of instruction, while the OECD average is 6,777 hours. At 5,750 hours, Finland ranks third lowest behind Poland and Estonia. The highest number of compulsory hours of instruction within the OECD can be found in Italy with 8,300 hours. In Finland, the minimum number of lesson hours is determined in the Government Decree on the distribution of lesson hours. The minimum lesson hours determined in the Government Decree for each subject or subject group comprise the education that every child is entitled to receive. However, education providers – mostly local authorities – usually provide more instruction than required by the Government Decree.

Also teachers' teaching duties in Finland are among the lowest in the OECD. Greece and Poland are the only countries with lower amounts of teaching time. While the annual teaching hours for lower secondary teachers in the United States and Mexico totalled more than 1,000 hours in 2008, the figure for Greece, Poland and Finland remained under 600 hours, being only just over 400 hours in Greece.
Class teachers provide instruction in grades 1–6 of basic education that is at primary level and have the highest number of teaching hours, totalling 677 hours per year. This is one of the lowest figures among OECD countries. In grades 7–9 of basic education, that is, at lower secondary level, instruction is provided by subject teachers, whose annual teaching hours are less than that, totalling 592 hours. South Korea is the only OECD country where teachers have fewer teaching hours. US lower secondary teachers, in turn, have almost double the number of teaching hours of their Finnish colleagues.

Among general education teachers, upper secondary school teachers have the lowest number of teaching hours, 550 per year. However, this is clearly more when compared with their Danish counterparts, whose annual teaching hours amount to less than 400. South Korean and Japanese lower secondary teachers in general education also have less than 500 teaching hours. However, the number of teaching hours does not reflect the teachers’ total workload. In addition to teaching, teachers also participate in joint planning of teaching and naturally spend time planning and preparing their own classes.

Source: Education at a Glance 2010, OECD
Finnish comprehensive school classes are smaller than the OECD average. The smaller average class size can largely be attributed to the fact that there are plenty of small schools in Finland’s sparsely populated areas. Just over a quarter of all comprehensive schools have less than 50 pupils. The average class size for grades 1–6 of basic education is 19.8 pupils, while the OECD average is 21.6 pupils. In grades 7–9, the average class size is 20.1 pupils in Finland, while the OECD average is 23.9 pupils.

In terms of pay Finnish teachers are ranked at the OECD average level when compared using purchasing power parity (PPP). The starting salary of Finnish primary education class teachers is more than triple the amount paid to teachers in Poland, but only two thirds of a German teacher’s salary.

Finnish teachers’ salary development over the course of their careers is fairly positive when compared with their counterparts in other countries. A Finnish teacher’s salary improves by 63 per cent from the starting salary to the top of the pay scale, whereas the corresponding change in South Korea may even be as high as 177 per cent.

Vocational education and training is popular

In Finland upper secondary level is divided into general upper secondary education and vocational education and training. Both types of education last three years and provide eligibility to apply for higher education. In recent years, vocational education and training has become more popular. In 1998, 35 per cent and 54 per cent of those leaving basic education moved immediately
to vocational education and training and upper secondary school, respectively, while another 3 per cent continued in voluntary additional basic education and 8 per cent did not continue to the next level immediately after finishing basic education. In 2008 altogether 42 and 51 per cent of those finishing basic education moved on to vocational education and training and upper secondary school, respectively, while 2 per cent continued in voluntary additional basic education and 5 per cent did not continue their studies immediately.

In international terms, the number of vocational students in proportion to those in general education is high in Finland. Two thirds of upper secondary students are in vocational programmes, whereas the proportion in Japan, for example, is only one quarter.

**Figure 8.9 Upper secondary enrolment patterns (2008)**

![Upper secondary enrolment patterns (2008)](image)

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2010

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**Finnish women receive more education than men**

In international terms, Finns participate in formal education very actively. Boys are in the majority at comprehensive school, because virtually all children go to comprehensive school and there are always more boys than girls within the young population. Women account for 57 per cent of upper secondary school students, 51 per cent of students on all types of upper secondary and further vocational programmes and 55 per cent of all polytechnic students. Of all university students, 53 per cent are women, accounting for 55 per cent at Bachelor level, a slight minority or 49.5 per cent at Master level, and 53 per cent in postgraduate (third-cycle) higher education.

Finnish women’s high level of education is also visible in the comparisons of the population’s level of education. South Korea, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are the only OECD countries
where the proportion of women with post-compulsory qualifications is higher than in Finland, when examining the 25–34 age group. In 2008 nearly 92 per cent of women had completed a post-compulsory qualification in Finland, whereas the figure for men was 88 per cent.

**Figure 8.10 Population (25–34 year-olds) with at least upper secondary education (2008)**

The higher education level of Finnish women cannot, however, be seen in their pay levels when compared with men. The higher the level of education women have, the more their pay falls behind that of men. On average, women’s pay accounted for 79 per cent of men’s pay among those without any post-compulsory schooling, while the figures for those with upper secondary certificates and higher education degrees were 77 and 73 per cent of men’s pay level, respectively.

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2010
An English chapter on international comparisons of some features of Finnish education and training is also included in the 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2009 publications. These can be downloaded from the Internet at http://www.oph.fi/tietopalvelut/tilastotiedot/koulujen_maaralliset_indikaattorit
International comparisons