The Education and Research Development Plan promotes equality

The Education and Research Development Plan is the key document of the Finnish education and research policy. The Development Plan is adopted by the government every four years, and it directs the implementation of the education and research policy goals stated in the Government Programme. The Development Plan for 2011–2016 covers all forms of education from early childhood to adult education as well as research conducted in universities and polytechnics. Decisions on the contents of legislation on education and research are made by the Parliament based on government proposals.

The key objectives of the Development Plan include promoting equality in education, enhancing the quality of education at all levels and supporting lifelong learning. It also aims to reduce gender and regional differences in skills and education levels as well as the impact of socioeconomic background on participation in education.

The plan also strives to combat unemployment and exclusion among young people through education. From the beginning of 2013, the government will implement an educational guarantee under which each student completing comprehensive school will be guaranteed a place in a general upper secondary school, vocational education and training, apprenticeship training, a workshop, or by other means.

Equality in early childhood education and basic education

From the beginning of 2013, the administration, drafting of legislation and steering of early childhood education will be transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health to the Ministry of Education and Culture. An act on early childhood education will be drafted in the Ministry of Education and Culture. A government bill to this effect will be submitted to the Parliament during the spring session of 2014.

Pre-primary education will be developed as uniform instruction which ensures equal prerequisites for the whole age group. Before the end of 2012, the government will look at the possibilities of making pre-primary education mandatory in order to ensure that the entire age group will participate in early childhood education of a high pedagogical standard.

Promoting equality in education at comprehensive school level is a key part of the Development Plan. An effort will be made to reduce differences between schools, for example by developing the financing system. As part of a project to reform central government transfers to local authorities to be launched in 2012, the grounds for granting government transfers for basic education will be reviewed. The aim is that in the future, the financing criteria would increasingly be based on indicators describing the operating environment of basic education, including the proportion of immigrants in the local population, the adult population's educational level and the unemployment rate.

The government will allocate special subsidies to the municipalities for reducing group sizes in basic education. The Ministry of Education and Culture will undertake a review of the need for and possibilities of legislating on maximum group sizes in basic education by spring 2013.

The government will decide on the general national aims for basic education, and on the time allocated to the teaching of various subjects and subject groups and to guidance counselling (allocation of lesson hours) in spring 2012.
Cooperation and flexibility in secondary education

Secondary education in Finland comprises general and vocational upper secondary education. In the future, the matriculation examination to be taken after general upper secondary school and vocational qualifications to be completed in vocational education and training will be developed as separate certificates. In the reform of secondary education, the students’ possibilities of including modules from other study programmes in their qualifications will be improved. This will give the students a possibility of planning flexible study tracks. In vocational education and training, work-centred study methods and alternative study models will be used, for example by combining institutional education and apprenticeship training.

In order to safeguard the regional accessibility of secondary education, the Ministry of Education and Culture is launching an action plan to improve the service capacity and cooperation in upper secondary education and training. The aim of this plan is increasing the joint use of facilities, support services and teacher resources across institutional boundaries. The plan will support the creation of a vital and functional network of educational units.

Reinforcing higher education

A reform of polytechnics was initiated in autumn 2011 with the aim of transferring their financing from local authorities to the government while altering the legal personality of the polytechnics. The purpose of this is to expedite the structural reform of polytechnics and to improve the quality and impact of their operation. From the beginning of 2014, the steering of polytechnics based on financing and statutes will be reformed. This reform will also concern the operating licences of the polytechnics.

Together with higher education institutions, the Ministry of Education and Culture will agree upon a reform of student admissions and study structures by the end of 2015 to facilitate access to higher education.

The universities will as a rule gather their doctoral programmes and postgraduate students in various sectors into single postgraduate schools to make researcher training more systematic and efficient. Postgraduate education will primarily be implemented as four-year programmes of full-time study.

The role of the Academy of Finland in enhancing international research cooperation will be strengthened, and good operating conditions for world-class research will be secured by means of long-term funding. Systematic development and financial management of research infrastructures will be enhanced.

Better opportunities for adults in education and training

The share of those taking part in adult education in Finland is high by international comparisons. The government’s aim is to further increase the participation rate and to ensure that no section of the adult population will be permanently excluded from adult education and training.

Identification and recognition of learning acquired outside the education system will be promoted in all types of education be means of legislation, steering and financing.

The competence-based examination system developed for adult needs, which is independent of the manner in which the vocational competence is obtained, will be reinforced as a mechanism for demonstrating knowledge and skills acquired in working life and as a flexible system for recognizing competences.

The opportunities of graduates for continuing education will be expanded by creating specialised competency modules at higher education institution that complement the qualification and are based on working life needs.

The goal is to support responding to individual educational and training needs by introducing personal training accounts. The proposal of a rapporteur concerning the form and introduction of personal training accounts will be completed in late 2012.

Developing student financial aid

The aim of student financial aid is to secure an income during the studies for full-time students who need financial support. The level of student financial aid will improve with its index-linking from 1 September 2014. Financial aid available for upper secondary studies is also to be improved.

Improving the accessibility of education

The Development Plan also contains quantitative targets for the educational offer in 2016. The intake numbers in both secondary and higher education will increase compared to the age group size, improving the accessibility of education.

The offer of education will be cut back in the fields of culture, natural sciences, and natural resources and the environment, as well as and in tourism, catering and domestic services. The offer will be increased in the social services, health care and sports sectors as well as in the field of humanities and education.