



Distance education in Finland during the COVID-19 crisis

Initial observations



FINNISH NATIONAL
AGENCY FOR EDUCATION



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About the study

The study on Distance education in Finland during COVID-19 crisis initiated by the Finnish National Agency for Education examines international and Finnish studies and reports related to distance education organised by basic education schools and secondary level educational institutions (general and vocational upper secondary schools) during the COVID-19 epidemic. The Finnish National Agency for Education initiated the study in March 2020 as soon as the exceptional conditions began. The study will continue until the end of the year 2020.

The Distance education in Finland during COVID-19 study collates and summarises a number of Finnish studies and reports with the aim of facilitating further reforms and development of education in the future. So far, initial observations have been made based on, among other things, reports from education and training providers (including municipalities). In total, they represent the experiences related to digital learning and the period of distance education of some 20,000 teachers, guardians, learners and principals. The study also covers publications of different research projects, surveys conducted by trade unions and student organisations, and reports produced by various authorities; the challenge thus lies in collating the diverse survey data for use as a tool for education development.

Measures taken as a result of the coronavirus epidemic in Finnish education

Start of the epidemic and invoking the Emergency Powers Act

- On 13 March, the Finnish National Agency for Education issued instructions to education and training providers, urging them to prepare for using flexible operating forms.
- On 16 March 2020, the Government decided that contact teaching would be replaced by distance education at schools and educational institutions between 18 March and 13 April.
 - The facilities of schools, educational institutions, universities, universities of applied sciences as well as adult education institutions and other liberal adult education providers were closed, and contact teaching was suspended. As an exception, however, pre-primary education and contact teaching for basic education grades 1 to 3 were arranged for the children of parents working in sectors critical for the functioning of society. Another exception was made by providing, where necessary, contact teaching for pupils who had received a decision on special support.
- On 20 March, the Government issued a new decree under which all pupils in pre-primary education, basic education grades 1 to 3 and pupils in need of special support, including pupils within the scope of extended compulsory education, have the right to contact teaching. The amending decree entered into force on 23 March 2020. A decision was made to formulate a more specific policy as the definition of critical fields had caused confusion and resulted in varying interpretations among basic education providers.
 - However, the updated policy did not oblige pupils to go to school, either, and it was strongly recommended that pupils in grades 1 to 3 also participate in the distance education where possible.
- On 30 March 2020, restrictions on contact teaching at different levels of education were extended until 13 May. At this time, provision was made for continuing the exceptional teaching arrangements until the end of the term if this were required to curb the epidemic.
- Early childhood education and care units and pre-primary education delivered in connection with them continued to operate.



- While restrictions were in force, it was recommended that children in early childhood education and care, pupils in pre-primary education and basic education grades 1 to 3, and other pupils entitled to contact teaching stay at home where possible.

What did the restrictions mean in practice?

- Basic education providers had no obligation to deliver basic education as contact teaching.
- As a rule, teaching for pupils in grades 1 to 9 and voluntary additional basic education was organised via remote connections.
- However, contact teaching had to be provided for pupils in basic education grades 1 to 3, those who had received a decision on special support, pupils within the scope of extended compulsory education, and to pupils participating in instruction preparing them for basic education. On the guardian's request, distance teaching also had to be organised for these pupils entitled to contact teaching.
- The schedule for the tests of the matriculation examination was condensed so that the tests could be completed before the epidemic accelerated.

Dismantling of restrictions

- Early childhood education and care and basic education re-introduced contact teaching from 14 May on. Instructions issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare had to be followed in contact teaching.
- The Government recommended that universities, universities of applied sciences, general upper secondary schools, vocational education and training, liberal adult education and basic education for adults continue with distance education until the end of the term. Re-introduction of contact teaching was permitted from 14 May.

Summer and autumn term 2020

- As a rule, basic education will be organised as contact teaching in autumn term 2020.
- If the coronavirus situation makes it impossible to deliver contact teaching safely, exceptional teaching arrangements can be introduced under an amendment to the Basic Education Act. The safety of contact teaching will be assessed together with regional infectious diseases authorities. A temporary amendment to the Basic Education Act was passed on 26 June 2020 and will remain in force from 1 August till 31 December 2020. This amendment secured the safe organisation of teaching in compliance with the Basic Education Act during autumn term 2020.
- A temporary amendment regarding competence demonstrations was made to the Act on Vocational Education and Training that will remain in force from 1 July 2020 till 31 July 2021. If, for reasons attributable to the coronavirus epidemic, a demonstration of vocational skills and competence required for a qualification unit cannot be conducted in authentic work situations and processes, the demonstration may be given by performing other practical tasks that are as similar to authentic work situations as possible.

How did distance education work in Finland?

Both international comparisons and national studies indicate that the transition to and delivery of distance education in Finnish schools and educational institutions were highly successful considering the circumstances. This is attributed to the high professional skills of teachers and society's investments in



education and digitalisation. The view that distance education worked well considering the circumstances was repeated by teachers, pupils and guardians alike in numerous Finnish reports and studies.

An initial observation is that those learners who were contacted more often by the school and who received more real-time teaching were likely to be more positive in their assessments of the distance education period. A survey conducted by Finnish Parents' League, for example, indicates that by keeping actively in touch, teachers could support the motivation and coping of the family and the child.

Most basic education pupils have access to a digital device

The preliminary results indicate that most basic education pupils in Finland had a digital device that enabled them to follow distance teaching in the spring, for example a smartphone, tablet or laptop, and in general, schools and educational institutions have a reasonable number of digital devices at their disposal. While this made the use of digital means for organising distance education possible, some challenges related to ICT devices and data connections still persist. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) found in its report that about one out of five basic education providers and teachers felt that lack of a digital device or an internet connection had undermined the equal delivery of distance education to all pupils.

It also appears that in basic education, as few as around one half of the teachers have a work phone for their personal use, whereas such instant messaging services as WhatsApp played a crucial role in communication between teachers as well as pupils. Regional variations in the number and quality of the devices used by teachers and pupils also come up in the reports of basic education providers.

All basic education schools in Finland mainly rely on hardware and software provided by multinational ICT companies. A significant proportion of the schools' distance teaching lessons, video conferencing and assignment submissions last spring took place using Google and Microsoft software as well as electronic learning environments of Finnish education technology companies and learning material publishers. According to learning material publishers, the numbers of users and assignment submissions in their services were many times higher in spring 2020 than in a typical school year.

Many ways of keeping in touch

Basic education providers report that around one half of the teachers contacted their pupils daily during the distance education period of the spring, and almost all contacted their pupils at least once a week. Not only phones but also the schools' electronic learning environments as well as the widely spread Wilma digital school administration and information system and WhatsApp were used to keep in touch with families and learners. According to international reports, WhatsApp was used in many countries during the distance education period to complement teachers' possibilities of communicating directly with students and families.

A report produced by the Trade Union of Education in Finland, OAJ indicates that while teachers managed to reach the majority of their pupils during the distance education period, approx. 70% said they also had individual pupils who were difficult to reach.

According to OAJ's report, distance education was only partially provided in real time, with 61% of teachers reporting that they delivered real-time teaching. This observation is supported by municipalities' reports, according to which the number of live lessons was relatively low, at best one half of the lessons in the normal timetable. Based on initial observations, an effort should be made to increase and develop interaction in distance education, giving the pupils possibilities to communicate and interact more with both their teachers and each other.



A number of different reports and preliminary studies indicate that while distance learning was a positive experience for most pupils, it also required support mechanisms, and the pupils had to learn to work independently and become self-directed. For some children and young people with sensory hypersensitivity, neuropsychological spectrum diagnoses and school anxiety, distance learning was a highly positive experience.

A higher workload and potential improvements in digital competence

Approx. 70% of basic education teachers said that distance education involved a higher workload than typical contact teaching at school, and about one teacher out of five reported a poor level of coping at work.

One half of the pupils found that the number of school assignments was appropriate, while the other half felt there was too much work. Of basic education pupils, those in the lower grades were the most satisfied and those in the higher grades the least satisfied with their workload. On average, 80% of the guardians considered that the amount of school work their child was expected to do was appropriate.

On the other hand, teachers and pupils said that distance education improved their digital competence as new digital learning methods were deployed. If they did not know them already, the distance education period of the spring at the latest familiarised many teachers with the different digital tools of online and distance learning. Similar developments have also been reported in European studies.

Reports indicate that teachers and pupils need significantly more support and clearer instructions for distance education situations of this type. Last spring, the best form of support for teachers came from their peers; the tutor teachers played a major role, in particular, and this model proved highly important.

Distance learning went well in general upper secondary schools but coping was a challenge

The majority of general upper secondary school students felt that distance learning went well, and digital learning also taught new skills to them.

Of general upper secondary school students, 96% said they had a digital device required for distance learning, whereas 16% felt they lacked the required study skills. Roughly one half of general upper secondary students felt their study motivation was poor during the lockdown. On the other hand, most of them found that the distance learning period did not hold them back in their studies. This view is supported by similar observations reported by teachers.

While teachers also improved their online and digital teaching skills, about one half of general upper secondary school students found that the quality of teaching had deteriorated. Publishers' electronic learning materials were a significant help in monitoring and assessing the students' learning, for example by using learning analytics. On the other hand, teachers said that supporting the students' interaction during the distance education period was difficult.

Teachers also managed to diversify their teaching in the challenging situation. Similarly to basic education, both teachers' and students' workloads and stress levels also increased in general upper secondary education during the spring marked by uncertainty.

Fields poorly suited for distance learning a challenge in VET

In vocational education and training, both teachers and students found that distance learning has worked well. Of VET students, 87% had a device that enables distance learning, whereas 13% felt that their study skills were insufficient for the exceptional conditions.



On average, teachers' devices were adequate for coping with distance education. Teachers said they had boldly deployed different digital methods, and many of the new digital learning methods they learned during the distance education period are about to become part of educational institutions' normal activities.

As a great challenge was found the unsuitability for distance learning of certain fields, where the development of vocational skills and competence requires special teaching and learning environments in the facilities of the educational institution. The fact that workplaces used for on-the-job learning and competence demonstrations closed down created many challenges to making progress in studies.

The majority of students estimated that their studies had progressed despite the lockdown. However, less than one third of the students reported that their motivation to study was poor during the lockdown, and more than one half felt that studying in the exceptional conditions was mentally more stressful than in normal circumstances.

A great deal of self-direction was required of VET students in the spring, and preliminary reports indicate that this was more challenging for them than for general upper secondary school students.

How will distance education work from now on?

In the light of international and Finnish reports and studies, last spring's challenging period of distance education went relatively well under the exceptional circumstances. In the future, the preconditions for successful distance education are likely to include more opportunities for interaction, both at schools and educational institutions, and more real-time teaching, which should also increase the interaction and sense of community called for by learners.

It is obvious that in distance education, all learners need more support, instructions and training related to regulating their studies and resources sustainably. The new digital working methods in distance education also challenge all stakeholders to consider how telework and remote studies could be made more communal, sparing the individual's resources. Teachers also need support and training for distance education, especially for the use of digital devices and software.

The Finnish National Agency for Education has sought to support schools and teachers by publishing instructions and recommendations. Additionally, discretionary government transfers have been and will be granted to schools to compensate for the impacts of the exceptional conditions. The Finnish National Agency for Education also provides discretionary government transfers for teachers' continuing education and, for example, the development of different learning environments. In the spring, the Finnish National Agency for Education was involved in a campaign titled *Computers for everyone*, in which companies donated second-hand computers to schools.

Once the study has been completed, more precise information will be available on the types of support measures and training teachers need. The final results will be taken into account in the Finnish National Agency for Education's training offering and support materials, among other things.



Background on the Finnish education system

In Finland, the national administration of education and training has a two-tier structure. The Ministry of Education and Culture is the highest authority and is responsible for all publicly funded education in Finland. The Ministry is responsible for preparing educational legislation, all necessary decisions and its share of the state budget for the Government.

The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) is the national development agency responsible for early childhood education and care, pre-primary, basic, general and vocational upper secondary education as well as for adult education and training. Higher education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture. EDUFI also promotes internationalization in education and training, youth, culture and sports.

The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare have issued recommendations to help reduce coronavirus infections and limit exposure to the virus in contact teaching and early childhood education and care. The recommendations will support local actors in seeking the best ways to organise teaching and early childhood education and care in a safe and well-functioning manner.

The Finnish National Agency for Education has compiled support material for education providers. The material provides information on how to prepare for the exceptional teaching arrangements, organisation of teaching, support for learning and school attendance, student welfare, school meals, school transport, international cooperation and other school activities that may be affected by the coronavirus epidemic during autumn 2020.

Basic education

Basic education comprises 9 years of comprehensive school free of charge. Teaching is organised in a local school ensuring that school journeys are as safe and short as possible. Pupils have the right to receive sufficient support to assist in learning and in school attendance as soon as the need for support is detected. Teaching and teaching equipment are available to pupils free of charge. Additionally, pupils are provided a warm meal every day at school. Local authorities (i.e. municipalities) and the State are responsible for organising basic education.

Class teachers normally teach years 1 to 6. Years 7 to 9 involves mainly subject-specific teaching, which is provided by subject teachers. As a rule, teachers have completed a Master's degree at a university.

Teachers participate actively in updating and improving their competence during their careers. In recent years, a tutor teacher model has been introduced in Finland. Tutor teachers support the pedagogical development and competence of teacher communities as well as digitalisation and technology use in teaching. The tutor teacher model has been introduced in every Finnish municipality, and significant government support has been allocated to it.

Upper secondary education and vocational education

General upper secondary education provides students with extensive general knowledge and the readiness to begin studies at a university, university of applied sciences and vocational training based on the general upper secondary education syllabus. At the completion of general upper secondary school studies, students take the Finnish national matriculation examination.

General upper secondary school students are taught by subject teachers with a Master's degree providing both high level of competence in a certain subject and pedagogical competence.

Vocational education and training (VET) is designed both for young people without upper secondary qualifications and for adults already in work life. VET is organised mainly in institutions (on-the-job learning included) or as apprenticeship training. VET provides skills for both life and work. A vocational qualification gives general eligibility for university of applied science and university studies.

Vocational institutions have subject teachers who teach general subjects, including foreign languages, and vocational teachers, who teach subjects aiming for a vocational qualification, such as information technology.