
FACT SHEET

Education system in Finland

1. Introduction

1.1 The education system in Finland is often cited as a successful model as the Finnish students are among the top performers in the international assessments of students' competency such as the Programme for International Student Assessment ("PISA").¹ This fact sheet aims at providing an overview of the education system in Finland and highlighting its salient features.

2. Overview of the education system

2.1 In Finland, the education system is made up of the following elements:

- (a) early childhood education for children up to six years old plus a one-year pre-primary education for children aged six. Participation of early childhood education and pre-primary education is voluntary;
- (b) compulsory basic education provided by comprehensive schools ("peruskoulu" in Finnish). It is an integrated nine-year programme for students aged 7-16 with no division into primary stage and lower secondary stage;²
- (c) non-compulsory upper secondary education provided by general upper secondary schools and vocational institutions. Both tracks require three years to complete. General upper secondary school students sit for the national matriculation examination at the end of their schooling while no national examination is required for students graduating from vocational institutions; and

¹ It is a triennial international survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to measure 15-year-old students' ability in science, reading and mathematics. The last PISA took place in 2012 covering 65 countries/regions in which the Finnish students ranked 5th in science, 6th in reading and 12th in mathematics.

² Students who have completed their nine-year compulsory schooling may opt for an extra year voluntarily to better prepare for their studies at the upper secondary level.

- (d) higher education offered by universities and polytechnics. The duration of programmes leading to a bachelor's degree in these institutions ranges from three to four years. Universities offer a full range of academic studies, while polytechnics provide students with practical professional skills.

At present, more than 60% of students who have completed upper secondary education enrol in higher education. After graduation from universities or polytechnics, students may pursue postgraduate studies (see **Appendix**).

2.2 The national education administration of Finland is organized at two levels: the Ministry of Education and Culture for formulating education policy and the Finnish National Board of Education for policy implementation. Meanwhile, a number of laws govern the education system, such as the *Basic Education Act* to regulate pre-primary education and basic education, the *General Upper Secondary Schools Act* on general upper secondary education and the *Universities Act* on university education. In 2012, total expenditure on education amounted to €12 billion (HK\$124 billion) or 6.3% of Finland's Gross Domestic Product.³

3. Salient features of the education system

3.1 The Finnish system is distinctive from the other places, where privatization, standardization of student performance and test-based accountability tend to dominate. To facilitate Members' understanding of the uniqueness of the Finnish system, its salient features are highlighted below:

Free and equitable education at all levels

3.2 In order to provide people an equal access to schooling, the Finnish education features a free and equitable system under which free education is provided at all levels, including pre-primary and higher education. Hence, Finns are entitled to receive education irrespective of their age, domicile, sex, economic situation or mother tongue. The equity in schooling ensures that differences in educational outcome are not the results of differences in the students' socio-economic background. In fact, PISA shows that the impact of socio-economic status on students' academic performance in Finland is relatively weak compared with other participating countries/regions.

³ See Statistics Finland (2014).

3.3 In Finland, it has a predominately publicly-funded school system with very few private schools⁴ in operation. Even for those private schools, they resemble public schools as they are granted the same government funds and have the same admission standards as their counterparts. The private schools are also required to follow the national core curriculum and qualification requirements. Such arrangement helps Finland maintain an equitable education system as school privatization policy usually increases segregation among students.

Quality education at the Finnish schools

3.4 Finland is committed to providing students quality education in order to promote the well-being of children and maintain the competitiveness of its economy. As such, the Finnish schools offer not only education, but also affiliated services (e.g. daily meal, psychological counselling, health care and dental services) to address the nutrition, physical health and psychological needs of students.

3.5 At comprehensive schools, the average class size is small with about 20 students and instruction is usually given by the same class teachers in most subjects in the first six-year classes and by subject specialists in the last three years. The supportive learning environment helps teachers better understand individual needs of students and provide them timely feedback.

3.6 The quality education in Finland is also characterized by the hours spent on instruction. Notwithstanding that the Finnish students receive fewer instruction hours of about 600 hours a year as compared to 1 080 hours in other developed countries with the most instruction hours, they consistently achieve high performance in PISA.

3.7 However, teachers in Finland do not work less than their peers. Instead of spending time in classroom teaching, teachers devote their working hours to various professional activities, such as developing lesson plans, improving teaching methods, assessing students' performance and collaborating with parents. The Finnish students can also make use of the longer after-school hours to take part in the activities organized by the schools, the educational or recreational clubs, or the youth and sport associations, which are beneficial to their overall learning and growth.

⁴ The majority of the private schools in Finland are religious.

Extensive support for children with special educational needs ("SEN")

3.8 To maximize the potential of every individual, educational support under the form of guidance, counselling or special education⁵ is provided to the required students at comprehensive schools.

3.9 For special education, it is provided in three different forms depending on the students' needs:

- (a) general support (e.g. differential teaching and before and after school activities) to cope with student diversity;
- (b) intensified support for students who need regular support (e.g. small-group learning with a part-time special education teacher); and
- (c) special support for students who cannot cope with mainstream education. These students may be assigned to special groups or classes within the same schools or separate institutions if necessary.

3.10 It is noteworthy that Finland adopts a broad definition of students with SEN, which covers not only those with disabling conditions such as sensory impairments and intellectual disabilities, but also students with difficulties in reading, writing, mathematics and foreign languages. The Finnish system has also put in place an early intervention approach to help students with SEN so that they will not be falling behind when progressing along the learning journey. As a result, up to half of the students completing their compulsory education have received special education at some point in their schooling. This significantly reduces the negative stigma often associated with special education.

⁵ Unlike special education which is remedial in nature, the purpose of guidance and counselling is to help students perform well in their studies and make the most appropriate decisions in education and career planning. The systematic guidance and counselling help reduce grade repetition and drop-out rates at comprehensive schools.

Standardized test-free learning environment

3.11 Unlike other places in the world, Finland does not consider standardized tests a key to raise students' achievement and hold teachers and school administrators accountable for their students' learning. The rationale is that teachers tend to give higher priority to those subjects that are tested and adjust teaching methods to drilling and memorizing information rather than understanding knowledge. Since there are no standardized high-stakes tests in Finland⁶ prior to the national matriculation examination at the end of upper secondary education, teachers can focus on teaching without being disturbed by the frequent testing.

3.12 Instead of external standardized tests, the Finnish system relies on the continuous classroom assessments conducted by teachers and school-based evaluation to ensure the teaching quality and accountability. The responsibility of teaching quality assurance is therefore collectively vested with teachers and school administrators.

Alternative pathway for the more technically inclined students

3.13 After completion of compulsory education, students may pursue their study at general upper secondary schools for academically-oriented subjects. Alternatively, the more technically inclined students have the option of studying at vocational institutions. The programme offered at vocational institutions combines school-based coursework and at least six months on-the-job learning in workplaces. As for the coursework, about 75% of the course contains vocational elements in the students' field of choice and the remaining 25% is in the core curriculum subjects, which are common to all upper secondary pathways. The design of vocational education curriculum enables the graduates to develop extensive basic knowledge and expertise in a particular field.

3.14 Students who have completed vocational upper secondary education can continue their study at polytechnics or universities. Similarly, those general upper secondary school graduates can apply for both university and polytechnic places. In other words, students who have completed either track can study at polytechnics and universities. This flexible admission arrangement renders vocational training not a "dead-end" route but an appealing option for the more technically inclined students.

⁶ The only external test at comprehensive schools takes place in grades six and nine on a sample basis for the purpose of monitoring instead of accountability.

Professional teacher force with a high level of public trust

3.15 A professional teacher force is one of the determining factors attributing to the high level of students' performance across the Finnish schools. In Finland, teachers enjoy great respect and trust as the Finns regard teaching as a prestigious profession akin to medicine and law. As a result, teacher training programme is highly selective, admitting only one out of every 10 students who apply, and only the most suitable applicants are selected for the teaching profession.

3.16 Moreover, the Finnish teachers are renowned for their high qualifications: those in early childhood and pre-primary education must have a bachelor's degree while the entry requirement for comprehensive and upper secondary school teachers is a master's degree. The Finnish teacher training programme is also characterized by: (a) a research-based curriculum that prepares teachers in content, pedagogy and educational theory, as well as the capacity to conduct their own research and develop creative pedagogical solutions for teaching; and (b) training for special education so that teachers have the basic knowledge and skills to handle students with SEN.

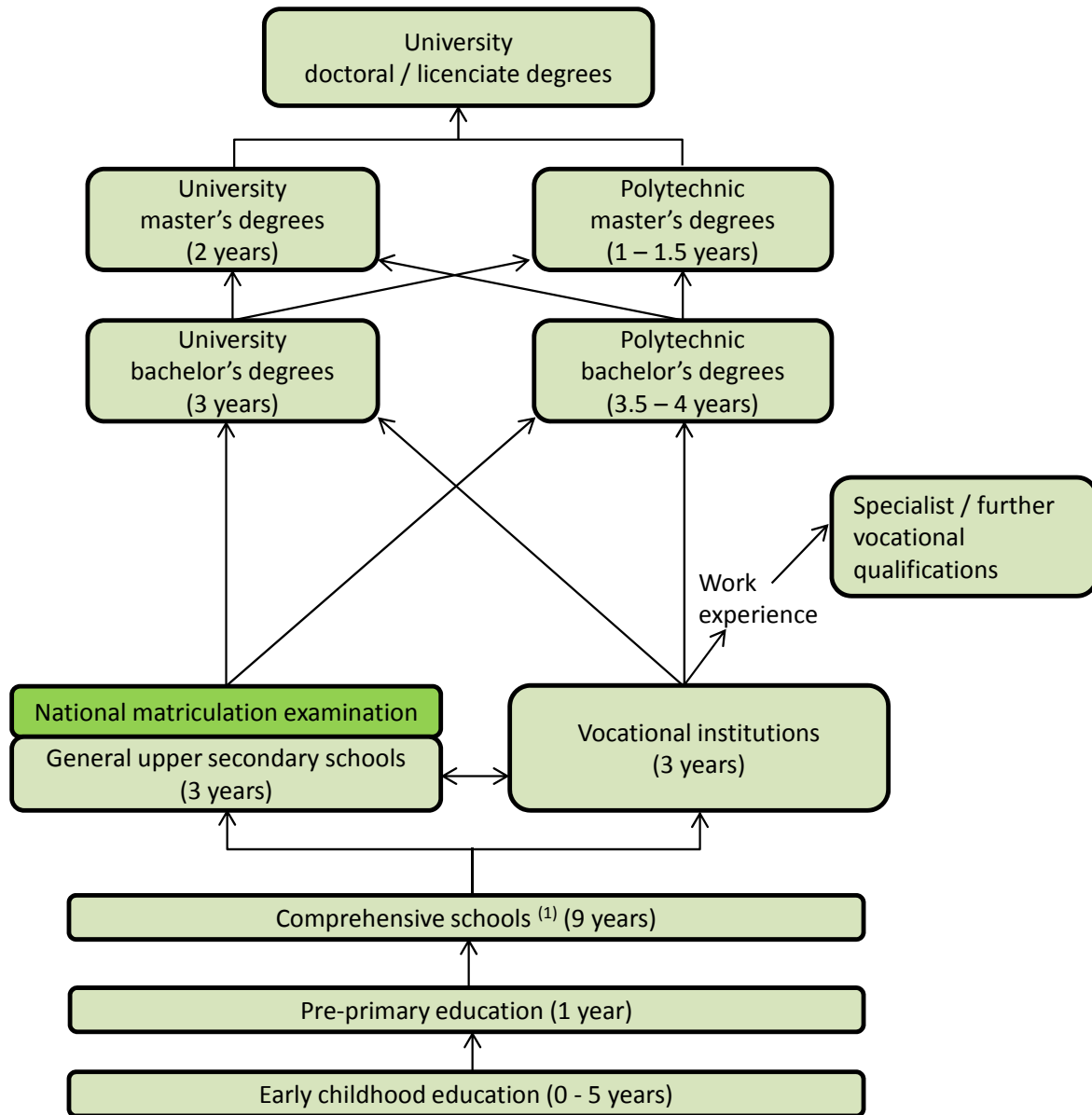
3.17 Building on the ground of competitive admission process, high teacher qualifications and quality teacher training programme, Finland has cultivated a culture of trust towards teachers. The education authorities and parents believe that teachers are well-educated professionals who know how to provide the best possible education for their students. The high level of public trust in teachers is reflected by the abolition of the school inspection system in the 1990s as an external accountability measure. Since then, the education authorities have relied on school-based evaluation to monitor students' performance.

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Appendix

Education system in Finland



Note: (1) Students who have completed their nine-year basic education at comprehensive schools may opt for an extra year voluntarily to better prepare for their studies at the upper secondary level.

Source: Ministry of Education and Culture (2014).

References

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