



Research Office  
Legislative Council Secretariat

## Fact Sheet

# Education system in Finland

FSC17/18-19

## 1. Introduction

1.1 Finland has one of the best education systems in the world, as evidenced by the repeated success of the Finnish students in national education rankings. For example, they ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in science, 4<sup>th</sup> in reading and 12<sup>th</sup> in mathematics in the Programme for International Student Assessment ("PISA"<sup>1</sup>) that took place in 2015. In addition, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has praised the Finnish schools for serving all students well, regardless of family background, socio-economic status or ability.<sup>2</sup> This fact sheet aims at providing an overview of the education system in Finland and highlighting the salient features of the system.

## 2. Overview of Finland's education system

2.1 In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for formulating the national education policy and the Finnish National Agency for Education is tasked with policy implementation. Meanwhile, there are a number of laws governing the education system.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, total public expenditure on education amounted to €11.8 billion (HK\$104.4 billion) or 5.3% of Finland's Gross Domestic Product.<sup>4, 5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "PISA" is a triennial international survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ("OECD") to measure 15-year-old students' ability in science, reading and mathematics. See OECD (2018b).

<sup>2</sup> See OECD (2011).

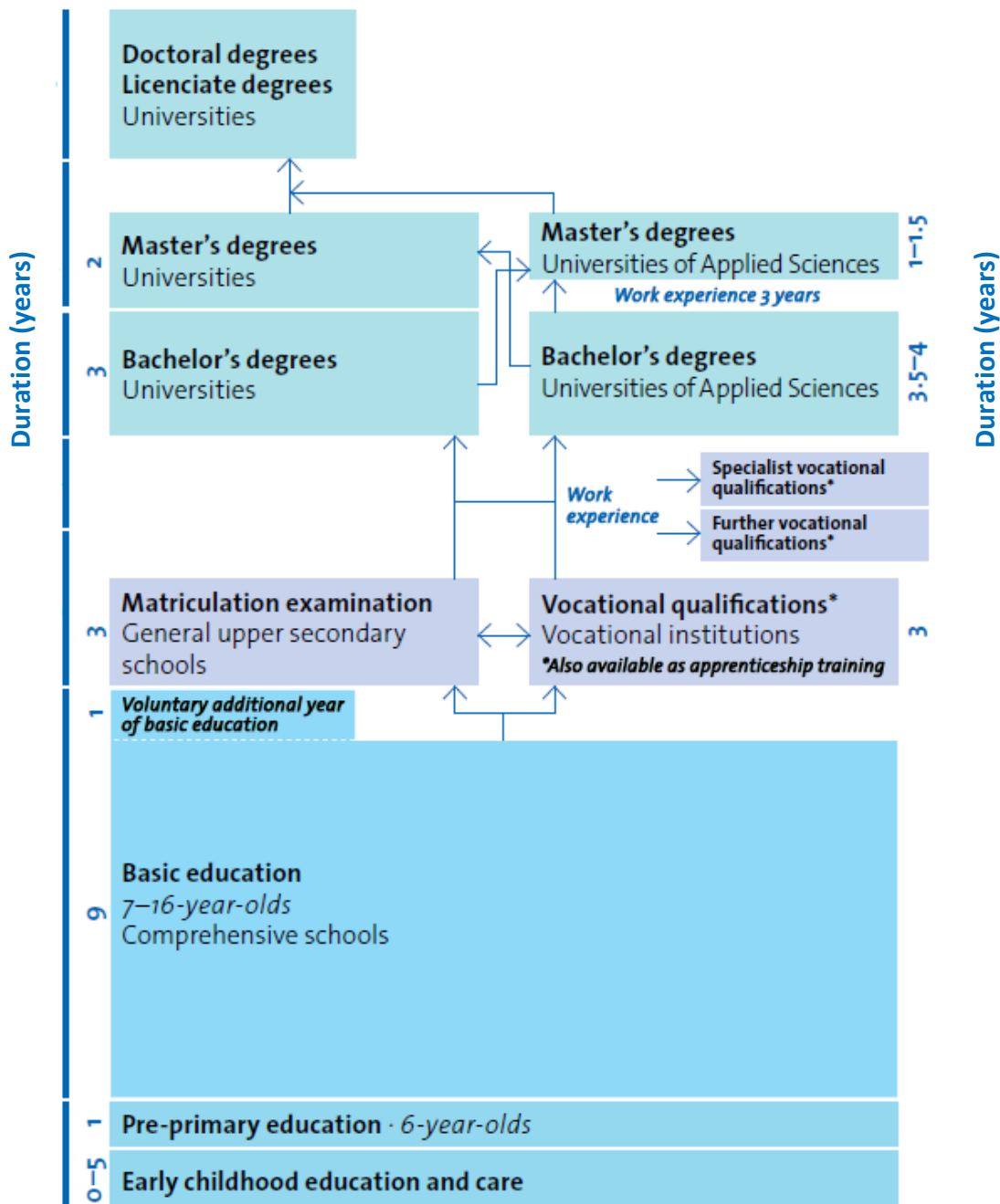
<sup>3</sup> For example, the Basic Education Act regulates pre-primary education and basic education, the Upper Secondary Schools Act governs upper secondary education, and the Universities Act and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act apply to higher education.

<sup>4</sup> See Statistics Finland (2019b).

<sup>5</sup> According to the recent statistics available, Finland spent a higher percentage of GDP on education than the OECD average (5.7% versus 5.0%) in 2015. See OECD (2018a).

2.2 The education system in Finland is made up of early childhood education, basic education, upper secondary education and higher education as depicted in the **Figure** below. Meanwhile, the Finnish system also provides adult education which includes a multitude of alternatives from basic to higher education as well as vocational training.

**Figure — Education system in Finland**



Source: Finnish National Agency for Education (2017).

## Early childhood education

2.3 In Finland, planning and implementation of early childhood education are guided by the relevant national curriculum guidelines approved by the Finnish National Agency for Education. The early childhood education comprises **voluntary early childhood education and care** ("ECEC") and **compulsory pre-primary education**. All children aged 0-5 are entitled to ECEC should their parents so decide.<sup>6</sup> ECEC is provided or arranged by municipalities and/or private service providers as centre-based early education activities and family-based day care activities.<sup>7</sup> A client fee is charged for the ECEC services organized by local authorities, which depends on family size, family income and the number of hours that the child takes part in ECEC. Families are subsidized by local authorities and they are required to pay 14% of the costs on average. The fee for private ECEC services is determined by the service provider concerned, and a family may apply for child care allowances<sup>8</sup> from the government to help cover these costs.

2.4 ECEC comprises the intertwining dimensions of care, education and teaching, and these dimensions receive a different emphasis according to the age of the child and the situation.<sup>9</sup> ECEC also places high importance in encouraging children to play outside, as outdoor activities are strongly valued for the positive effects they have on children's well-being. In Finland, the universal entitlement to ECEC is 20 hours per week. Yet families may apply for full-time early education if (a) both parents are working or studying; (b) the children need special support with learning Finnish; or (c) there is a difficult family situation.<sup>10</sup> While ECEC is not compulsory, the enrolment rate for children aged 3-5 stood at a high of some 80% in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

2.5 When the children turn six, they will receive free and compulsory one-year **pre-primary education** before they are due to begin their basic education. Pre-primary education is usually organized from Monday to Friday,

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<sup>6</sup> Children aged six may still receive ECEC on top of pre-primary education. See Salminen (2017).

<sup>7</sup> Family day care involves an individual care provider looking after the children in his or her own home or in the children's home.

<sup>8</sup> See Kela (2017).

<sup>9</sup> The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland stated that "the younger the child is, the greater the extent to which interactions between the child and educators take place in care situations. These situations also involve education, teaching and guidance, being important for both the child's general well-being and learning". See Finnish Government (2004).

<sup>10</sup> See InfoFinland (2019).

<sup>11</sup> See Finnish National Agency for Education (2018b).

four hours a day. The children start to learn useful skills in school, such as letters, in addition to considerable amount of outdoor activities.

### Basic education

2.6 In Finland, free and compulsory basic education is provided for students aged 7-16 by "comprehensive schools". A comprehensive school provides primary education in Grades 1-6 and lower secondary education in Grade 7-9. Local authorities are responsible for organizing basic education based on both national and local curricula. In 2018, there were 2 234 comprehensive schools in Finland, providing basic education for 541 200 students.<sup>12</sup>

2.7 Basic education schooling begins in August and ends in late May or early June, with the summer vacation in June and July. Students are required to attend about 20 hours of tuition per week. Individual lessons usually take 45 minutes. In order to provide refreshment and aid in concentration, there are 15-minute recesses in between lessons. Students can go outside into the school yard during recesses to spend time together, play and move around.

2.8 Within the framework of the national core curriculum, the local authorities or the schools themselves are free to decide on the allocation of lessons for individual subjects each year. In Grades 1-6, every student should basically receive the same education, but schools may focus on different subjects in different ways due to the flexible time allocation. In Grades 7-9, both common and elective subjects are included.<sup>13</sup> After the nine-year schooling, students may opt for an extra year of education voluntarily to better prepare for their studies at the upper secondary level.

2.9 The Finnish school system provides immigrant children with one-year free preparatory education programme before receiving basic education. Preparatory teaching is supposed to enhance immigrant children's socialization as it aims to promote students' skills they need for studying at basic education. Furthermore, preparatory teaching enhances the students' development in the

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<sup>12</sup> See Statistics Finland (2019c).

<sup>13</sup> Elective subjects may include, for example, advanced courses in the compulsory subjects, or courses where the knowledge acquired in those subjects is applied in a new way, courses in foreign languages, or computer skills. The local curriculum determines which optional subjects will be offered at each school.

Finnish language and further on, the possibility to become equal members of the Finnish society.

### Upper secondary education

2.10 After completing the compulsory basic education, students are eligible to receive the highly publicly-funded<sup>14</sup> **general upper secondary education** or **vocational education and training**. Although the upper secondary education is not compulsory, over 90% of comprehensive school graduates had their upper secondary studies.<sup>15</sup>

#### *General upper secondary education*

2.11 **General upper secondary schools** provide all-round education<sup>16</sup> for students preparing to sit for the national matriculation examination. The scope of the syllabus is three years and teaching is organized in modular form and not tied to year classes. Students can complete the studies in two, three or four years. Each course is assessed on completion. When a student has completed the required number of courses, he or she will receive a general upper secondary school certificate and sit for the national matriculation examination.<sup>17</sup> Upon passing the examination, they are eligible for further studies at universities or universities of applied sciences.

#### *Vocational education and training*

2.12 Comprehensive school leavers may choose to receive **vocational education and training** as an alternative to pursuing general upper secondary education. They will spend three years in (a) full-time studies in a vocational

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<sup>14</sup> Students are only required to pay for the textbooks, learning materials and other personal study equipment.

<sup>15</sup> See Finnish National Agency for Education (2017).

<sup>16</sup> General upper secondary schools are primarily focused on natural sciences and humanities in addition to language. There are also some general upper secondary schools focusing on education in arts or targeting at music or physical education.

<sup>17</sup> As the first national examination for students in Finland, the examination comprises four compulsory tests, covering (a) mother tongue; and (b) three subjects selected from (i) a second national language, i.e. Finnish or Swedish, (ii) a foreign language, (iii) mathematics, and (iv) one subject in general studies such as humanities and natural sciences. See Finnish National Agency for Education (2017).

institution, including at least half a year of on-the-job learning in workplaces; or (b) apprenticeship training. Education and training offered in vocational institutions are very practical and designed to satisfy the needs of the labour market. Vocational education and training covers 10 fields<sup>18</sup>, over 100 study programmes and accreditation of more than 50 vocational qualifications.

2.13 Throughout the period of study, students' learning and competences acquired are assessed based on the requirement of the Finnish National Framework for Qualifications. After obtaining the first level of competence-based qualifications, i.e. "vocational qualifications", the students may proceed to pursuing the qualifications at higher levels such as "further vocational qualifications" and "specialist vocational qualifications".

2.14 The holders of vocational qualifications have general eligibility for universities and universities of applied sciences. Since they have not taken the national matriculation examination before, universities may admit them based on the assessment of whether they possess the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the degree programme.

### Higher education

2.15 Free higher education is offered by universities and universities of applied sciences to the Finnish students.<sup>19</sup> **Universities** engage in both education and research. **Universities of applied sciences**, however, adopt a more practical approach that often includes practical training or work placements to educate students for professional work life. Both universities and universities of applied sciences award bachelor's and master's degrees. Licentiate<sup>20</sup> and doctoral degrees are only awarded by universities.

2.16 A bachelor's degree at universities generally takes three years to complete, while a master's degree takes two years on top. The completion of a bachelor's degree awarded by universities of applied sciences usually takes 3.5-4 years. After graduation, a candidate is required to obtain at least

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<sup>18</sup> Vocational education and training is offered in the fields of (a) agriculture and forestry; (b) business, administration and law; (c) education; (d) health and wellness; (e) humanities and arts; (f) information and communication technologies; (g) natural sciences; (h) service industries; (i) social sciences; and (j) technology. See Finnish National Agency for Education (2019a).

<sup>19</sup> In 2018, Finland had 14 universities and 25 universities of applied sciences. See Statistics Finland (2019c).

<sup>20</sup> A licentiate degree is more advanced than a master's degree but less so than a doctorate.

three years of work experience before applying for a master's degree programme, which lasts for 1-1.5 years in the universities of applied sciences.

### Adult education and training

2.17 According to the Finnish government, the "Finnish education system has no dead-ends"<sup>21</sup>. Adult learners may pursue their upper secondary school studies in "upper secondary schools for adults"<sup>22</sup>. They may sit for the national matriculation examination after taking individual subjects or completing the entire upper secondary school syllabus. Tuition may include contact teaching, distance education, online education and independent studies. Alternatively, they can study at adult education centres which are the biggest adult education institution by the number of students in Finland.<sup>23</sup> Teaching is offered in all municipalities which provide basic and general and interest-oriented education, including courses on arts, music, language and literature, home economics, sports, information and communication technologies, and social studies.

2.18 In addition, the competence-based qualifications framework provides adults with a flexible way of demonstrating, renewing and maintaining their vocational skills, or of qualifying for a new profession when their work tasks change. It recognizes an individual's vocational competences regardless of how the skills being obtained – through work experience, education or other activities. Vocational skills are demonstrated in competence tests, and candidates can receive "vocational qualifications", "further vocational qualifications" or "specialist vocational qualifications" if they show their competence in practical work assignments.

2.19 Meanwhile, adults may have their further studies in higher education. They can complete higher education studies at open universities or open universities of applied sciences, which are open for everyone. This open instruction system aims to provide a wide range of study opportunities for working-age adults, including degrees and professional specialization.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Finnish National Agency for Education (2017).

<sup>22</sup> Upper secondary schools for adults are either separate institutions or adult education units operating linked to institutions providing education for young people. They are mainly intended for persons over 18 years old.

<sup>23</sup> In 2018, there were 178 adult education centres providing education for 465 400 adults. See Statistics Finland (2019c).

<sup>24</sup> See European Association for the Education of Adults (2011).

### 3. Salient features of the education system

3.1 Leveraging on its high-quality teacher force, the Finnish education system is characterized by free, equitable and quality education, extensive student support, test-free learning environment, and flexible pathways for students. It distinguishes itself from many other education systems in developed economies where privatization<sup>25</sup>, standardization of student performance, and test-based accountability tend to dominate.

#### 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 education is free from pre-primary level to higher education. In addition to tuition-free education, students in pre-primary and basic education are also entitled to free textbooks, daily meal and transport.<sup>26</sup> To further ensure the opportunities to study for everyone, there is a well-developed system of study grants and loans.<sup>27</sup> All in all, the Finnish system emphasizes that the same education opportunities are made available to all Finns irrespective of their ethnic origin, age, wealth or domicile.<sup>28</sup>

3.3 Furthermore, Finland has a predominately publicly-funded school system with very few private schools<sup>29</sup> in operation. Even for those private schools, they are funded largely by the government<sup>30</sup> and have the same admission standards as their counterparts. They also follow the national core curriculum and qualification requirements, which have applied to all schools in Finland since 1994.<sup>31</sup> The above arrangements help Finland maintain an

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<sup>25</sup> Education privatization is a process in which private organizations participate in education activities that traditionally have been the remit of government. See Verger et al. (2016).

<sup>26</sup> Students at upper secondary level are entitled to free daily meal, and meals are subsidized by the state for higher education students. See Finnish National Agency for Education (2017).

<sup>27</sup> In Finland, full-time students at upper secondary schools, vocational institutions and higher education institutions may apply for student financial aid, which is provided by the government in various forms such as study grant, allowance for the purchase of study materials, government guarantee for a student loan, loan interest assistance, transport and meal subsidies.

<sup>28</sup> See Finnish National Agency for Education (2017).

<sup>29</sup> Most of the private schools in Finland are religious.

<sup>30</sup> According to the OECD (2013), 97.6% funding of privately managed schools was provided by the government in 2013.

<sup>31</sup> See World Bank (2018).



equitable education system, as school privatization policy in other developed economies usually increases segregation among students.

### Quality education at the Finnish schools

3.4 Finland is committed to providing its students with quality education and maximizing the potential of each student in order to promote their development, health and well-being and maintain the competitiveness of its economy. Indeed, the Finnish schools offer not only education, but also affiliated services such as education guidance, psychological counselling, as well as health care, dental services and mental health services<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> Instruction is usually given by the same class teachers in most subjects in the first six years of classes and by subject specialists in the last three years. Under such supportive learning environment, teachers get to know students better and are able to develop the tuition that best fits the individual needs of students.<sup>34</sup>

3.6 The Finnish quality education is also characterized by the time spent on instruction. A Finnish student of comprehensive school typically receives about 4-5 hours of tuition per day or about 20 hours per week. An average Finnish teacher teaches 600 hours per year as compared to some 1 080 hours of in-class instruction given by teachers in some developed economies.

3.7 With fewer lesson hours, the Finnish students can make use of the longer after-school hours to take part in the activities organized by the schools, educational or recreational clubs, or youth and sport associations, which are beneficial to their overall learning and growth.<sup>35</sup> For teachers, less classroom teaching time means that they can devote more time to other job duties such as developing lesson plans, improving teaching methods, assessing students' performance and communicating with parents.

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<sup>32</sup> See City of Helsinki (2019a).

<sup>33</sup> See OECD (2019).

<sup>34</sup> See City of Helsinki (2019b).

<sup>35</sup> See Darling-Hammond & Rothman (2015).

## Extensive student support

3.8 To maximize the potential of every individual, educational support in the form of guidance and counselling is provided at comprehensive schools to those students who need it. The purpose of guidance and counselling is to help and guide students to perform well in their studies, thereby reducing grade repetition and drop-out rates at comprehensive schools.

3.9 Special education is also provided to those students with special educational needs ("SEN"), who include not only students with disabling conditions (such as sensory impairments and intellectual disabilities), but also students with difficulties in reading, writing, mathematics and foreign languages.<sup>36</sup> Special education is provided in the following three different forms based on the students' needs:

- (a) **general support** to provide students with individual pedagogical solutions as well as guidance and early intervention support measures as part of daily school life. It is given in general education classroom<sup>37</sup> (e.g. differentiating instructions to cope with student diversity) and co-taught lessons by the classroom teacher and a special education teacher. Should the need for support grow, the students will be offered intensified support;
- (b) **intensified support** (also known as "enhanced support") to help students who need regular support measures or several forms of support at the same time.<sup>38</sup> It is based on a personalized plan for learning drawn up individually for each student in need. Intensified support aims at preventing existing problems from becoming more serious; and
- (c) **special support** to help students who cannot adequately cope with mainstream education in spite of general and intensified support. The main purpose of special support is to provide students with broad-based and systematic help so that they can complete the compulsory basic education and be eligible for upper secondary education.

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<sup>36</sup> Finland has adopted such a broad definition of students with SEN since 2011.

<sup>37</sup> See Burnett et al. (2019).

<sup>38</sup> For example, a student may receive weekly 1:1 lessons with a special education teacher on enhancing his or her reading skills.

3.10 In 2018, 11% of comprehensive school students had received intensified support and 8% special support.<sup>39</sup> In addition, under the broad definition of SEN students, up to half of the students completing their basic compulsory education had received special education at some points in their schooling as at end-2015. This significantly reduces the negative stigma often associated with special education.

### Standardized test-free learning environment

3.11 Finland does not consider standardized tests a key to raise students' achievement. There is no standardized, high-stakes test prior to the national matriculation examination, and teachers can focus on teaching without being disturbed by the frequent tests. More importantly, the arrangement helps minimize the tendency for teachers to give higher priority to those subjects that are tested and adjust teaching methods to drilling and memorizing information rather than understanding knowledge.

3.12 Instead of relying on external standardized tests, the Finnish education system makes use of (a) continuous classroom assessments conducted by teachers, and (b) school-based national evaluation to ensure the teaching quality and accountability.<sup>40</sup> The national evaluation does not rank the performance of participating schools, as the evaluation findings are only used in the development of the education system and the core curricula and instruction.

### Alternative pathway for the more technically inclined students

3.13 After completion of compulsory basic 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

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<sup>39</sup> See Statistics Finland (2019a).

<sup>40</sup> The national evaluation of learning outcomes is conducted every year through a test among sampled schools according to the evaluation plan of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Schools will receive their own results for development purposes.

students' field of choice and the remaining 25% is in the core curriculum subjects, which are common to all upper secondary education. The design of vocational education curriculum enables the students to develop extensive knowledge in a particular field.<sup>41</sup>

3.14 Students who have completed *vocational* upper secondary education may continue their study at universities or universities of applied sciences after obtaining some work experience. Likewise, those *general* upper secondary school graduates can apply for places in both universities and universities of applied sciences. After all, students who have completed either track can study at universities and universities of applied sciences. This flexible admission arrangement renders vocational training not a "dead-end" route but an appealing option for the more technically inclined students.

### Professional teacher force with a high level of public trust

3.15 A professional teacher force is one of the contributory factors leading to the high level of students' performance across the Finnish schools. In Finland, teaching is an attractive career choice and enjoys great respect and trust. The teacher education institutions select those applicants most suitable for the teaching profession. For example, the admission rate of primary teacher education was only 11% in 2016. For kindergarten teacher education and vocational teacher education, the admission rate was 16% and 41% respectively.<sup>42</sup>

3.16 Moreover, the Finnish teachers are renowned for their high qualifications. Teaching and guidance staff in early education and pre-primary education generally have a bachelor's degree. A master's degree is the prerequisite for teachers engaged in basic and upper secondary education.<sup>43</sup> Teachers in vocational education and training are required to hold an appropriate degree<sup>44</sup>, plus at least three years of relevant work experience and completion of pedagogical studies.

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<sup>41</sup> See National Center on Education and the Economy (2019).

<sup>42</sup> See Finnish National Agency for Education (2018a).

<sup>43</sup> Class teachers (in Grades 1-6) are required to have their master's degree in education while subject teachers (in Grades 7-9 and upper secondary level) are required to have completed their master's degree in the subject they teach as well as pedagogical studies. See Finnish National Agency for Education (2017) and Ministry of Education and Culture (2016b).

<sup>44</sup> The "appropriate degree" is referred to (a) a higher or postgraduate degree; or (b) a degree from universities of applied sciences or the highest possible qualification in their own vocational field.

3.17 Building on the competitive admission process and high teacher qualifications, Finland has cultivated a culture of trust in teachers reflected by the following measures implemented over the years:

- (a) the school inspection system as an external accountability measure was abolished in the 1990s. The education authorities have since then relied on school-based evaluation to monitor students' performance;
- (b) teachers are given extensive freedom in developing their own work and plan their tuition independently based on the national and local curricula;
- (c) teachers have the power to decide which teaching methods and learning materials they would like to use; and
- (d) no national evaluation or registration of teachers is required in Finland.

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