



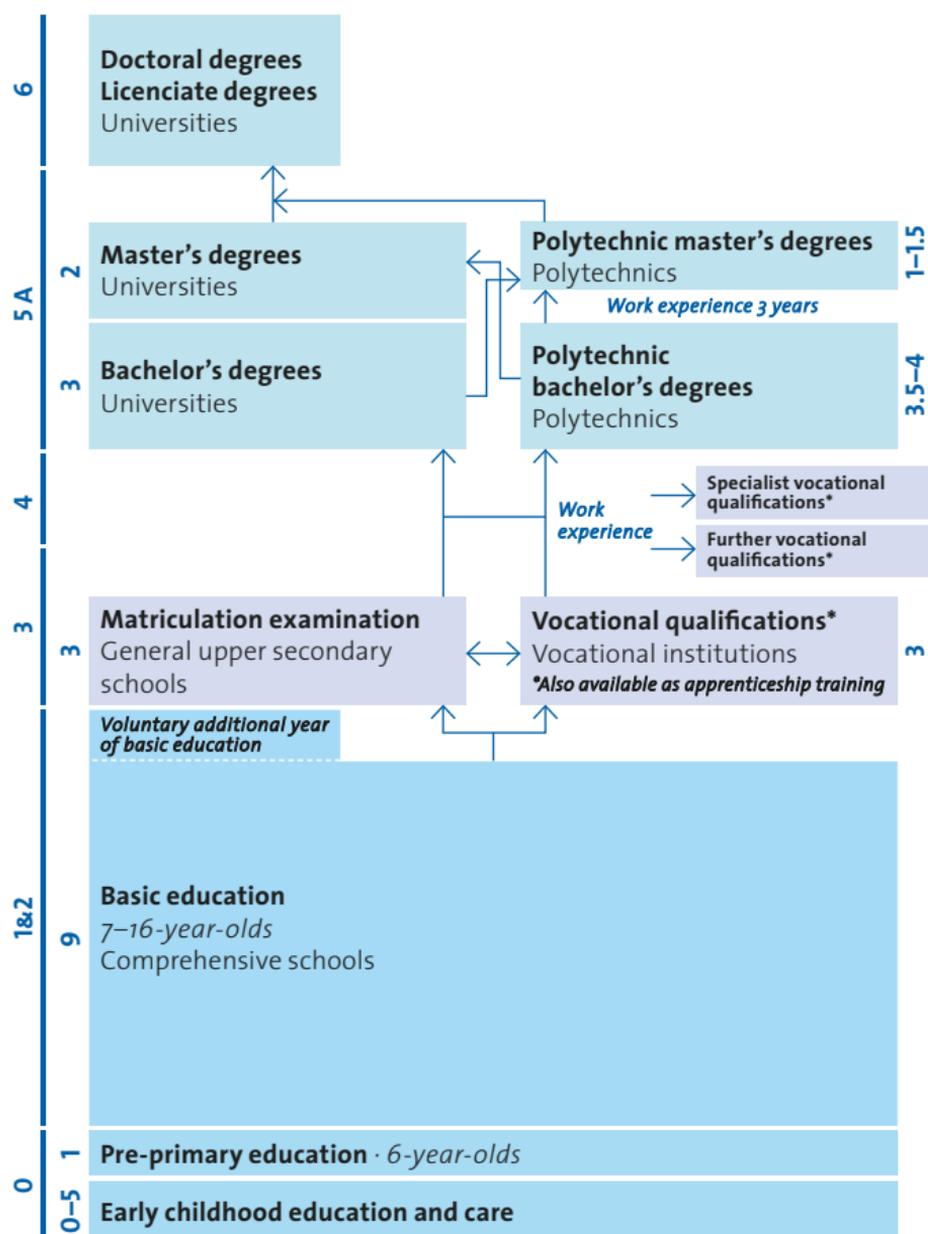
# **FINNISH EDUCATION** in a nutshell

EDUCATION IN FINLAND

A red pencil with a sharpened wooden tip lies diagonally across a blue grid pattern. The pencil is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the frame, pointing towards the bottom right. The background consists of a blue grid with white lines, which is slightly out of focus. The overall image has a soft, professional aesthetic.

A central  
objective  
is to provide  
all citizens  
with equal  
opportunities.

# EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FINLAND



ISCED-CLASSIFICATION  
DURATION  
IN YEARS

## ISCED-CLASSIFICATION 1997

- 0 Pre-primary education
- 1-2 Primary education or lower secondary education
- 3 Upper secondary education
- 4 Post-secondary non-tertiary education
- 5 First stage of tertiary education
- 6 Second stage of tertiary education

DURATION  
IN YEARS

# CONTENTS

---



## **EQUITY IN EDUCATION** **6**

---

- Education is free at all levels \_\_\_\_\_ 6
- Every pupil and student has the right to educational support \_\_\_\_\_ 7
- Special needs education is generally provided in conjunction with mainstream education \_\_\_\_\_ 7
- Efforts to support language minorities and migrants \_\_\_\_\_ 8
- Life-long learning in focus \_\_\_\_\_ 9



## **EDUCATION SYSTEM BASED ON TRUST AND RESPONSIBILITY** **10**

---

- Most education is publicly funded \_\_\_\_\_ 10
- Local administration and educational institutions play a key role \_\_\_\_\_ 12
- Educational autonomy is high at all levels \_\_\_\_\_ 12
- Quality assurance is based on steering instead of controlling \_\_\_\_\_ 13



## **EARLY CHILDHOOD AND BASIC EDUCATION AS PART OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING** **14**

---

- Early childhood education supports children's development and learning \_\_\_\_\_ 14
- Basic education is provided within a single structure \_\_\_\_\_ 15
- School year is the same everywhere but timetables are local \_\_\_\_\_ 15
- National core curriculum leaves room for local variations \_\_\_\_\_ 15
- Assessment is part of daily schoolwork \_\_\_\_\_ 16



## **GENERAL AND VOCATIONAL PATHWAYS**

### **AT UPPER SECONDARY LEVEL 17**

- Most students continue their studies \_\_\_\_\_ 17
- General upper secondary education is flexibly organised \_\_\_\_\_ 18
- First national examination at the end of general upper secondary education \_\_\_\_\_ 18
- Vocational education and training in cooperation with the world of work \_\_\_\_\_ 20
- Competence-based qualifications offer a way to demonstrate prior learning \_\_\_\_\_ 21



## **HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **WITH A DUAL STRUCTURE 22**

- Most university students aim for a Master's degree \_\_\_\_\_ 22
- Polytechnic degrees provide students with practical professional skills \_\_\_\_\_ 23



## **HIGHLY EDUCATED**

### **TEACHING PERSONNEL 24**

- The most common pre-service requirement is a Master's degree \_\_\_\_\_ 24
- Educational leaders are required a teacher qualification \_\_\_\_\_ 26
- Continuing teacher education is encouraged \_\_\_\_\_ 26

## EQUITY IN EDUCATION

---

One of the basic principles of Finnish education is that all people must have equal access to high-quality education and training. The same opportunities to education should be available to all citizens irrespective of their ethnic origin, age, wealth or where they live.

### Education is free at all levels

In Finland education is free at all levels from pre-primary to higher education. In pre-primary and basic education the textbooks, daily meal and transportation for students living further away from the school are free for the parents. At secondary level and in higher education the students themselves or their parents purchase their own books. At secondary level the students have the right to a free meal and in higher education meals are subsidised by the state. Adult education is the only form of education that may require payment.

To ensure the opportunities to study for everyone there is a well-developed system of study grants and loans. Financial aid can be awarded for full-time study in an upper secondary school, vocational institution or institution of higher education.



The potential  
of every  
individual  
should be  
maximised.

## Every pupil and student has the right to educational support

The current thinking in Finland is that the potential of each pupil should be maximised. Therefore educational guidance is seen as essential. Guidance and counselling aims to support, help and guide pupils and students so that they can all perform as well as possible in their studies and be able to make correct and appropriate decisions concerning their education and careers.



Guidance and counselling is seen as the work of all education personnel. Thus teachers are required to treat the children and young people as individuals and help them to proceed according to their own capabilities. Learners should also experience success and joy of learning. Today all pupils and students have the right to educational support. This support can be remedial instruction or

support for the pupil's special needs.

## Special needs education is generally provided in conjunction with mainstream education

In Finland the ideology is to provide special needs education primarily in mainstream education. If a pupil cannot be taught in a regular teaching group, he or she must be admitted to special needs education. This education is provided at regular schools wherever possible.

All pupils of compulsory school age have the right to general support, that is, high-quality education as well as guidance and support. Intensified support must be given to those pupils who

need regular support measures or several forms of support at the same time. The aim is to prevent existing problems from becoming more serious or expansive. If children cannot adequately cope with mainstream education in spite of general or intensified form of support, they must be given special support. The main purpose of special support is to provide pupils with broadly based and systematic help so that they can complete compulsory education and be eligible for upper secondary education.

Special needs support is also provided in upper secondary education. In vocational education and training, students in need of special needs education are provided with an individual education plan. This plan must for example set out details of the qualification to be completed, the requirements observed and support measures provided for the student.

### **Efforts are made for supporting language minorities and migrants**

Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. Approximately five per cent of students in basic and upper secondary education attend a school where Swedish is the language of instruction.

Both language groups have their own institutions also at higher education level. In addition there are educational institutions where all or at least some instruction is provided in a foreign language, most commonly in English.

Local authorities are also required to organise education in the Sami language in the Sami-speaking areas of Lapland. Care is taken to ensure educational opportunities for Roma and other minorities as well as for people who use sign language. Education providers can for example apply for additional funding for organising instruction in the official national languages for Roma, Sami and migrant children and for instruction in the

pupil's mother tongue. Education providers also organise preparatory education for immigrants to enable them to enter basic or upper secondary education.

### Life-long learning in focus

The Finnish education system has no dead-ends. Learners can always continue their studies on an upper level of education, whatever choices they make in between. The practice of recognition of prior learning has been developed in order to avoid unnecessary overlapping of studies.

Finland has a long history of participation and promotion of adult education. The first Finnish folk high school started in 1889. Adult education is very popular, the participation rate is high also in international terms.

The main objectives of adult education policy are ensuring the availability and competence of the labour force, providing educational opportunities for the entire adult population and strengthening social cohesion and equity. The objectives should support efforts to extend working life, raise the employment rate, improve productivity, implement the conditions for lifelong learning and enhance multiculturalism.

Educational institutions organise education and training intended for adults at all levels of education. Efforts have been made to make the provision as flexible as possible in order to enable adults to study alongside work.

Adult education comprises education and training leading to a degree or certificate, liberal adult education and staff-development and

Adult  
education  
has a long  
and strong  
tradition.

other training provided or purchased by employers as well as labour market training, which is mainly targeted at unemployed people.

Liberal adult education offers non-formal studies. It promotes personal growth, health and well-being by offering courses relating to citizenship skills and society and in different crafts and subjects on a recreational basis.

In both general and vocational education, there are also separate educational institutions for adults. In vocational training competence-based qualifications are specifically intended for adults. In higher education adults can study in separate adult education programmes offered by polytechnics. ●



## **EDUCATION SYSTEM**

---

## **BASED ON TRUST**

---

## **AND RESPONSIBILITY**

---

### **Most education is publicly funded**

Most institutions providing basic and upper secondary level education are maintained by local authorities or joint municipal boards. Responsibility for educational funding is divided between the State and the local authorities. Most private institutions do not differ from those that are

publicly maintained. They follow the national core curricula and qualification requirements. They also receive public funding.

Pre-primary and basic education is part of the municipal basic services that receive statutory government transfers. The statutory government transfer is based on the number of 6–15 year olds living in the municipality and the special conditions of the municipality. This funding is not ear-marked and the municipality can decide for itself how it allocates this funding. The statutory government transfer for municipal basic services is approximately a third of the calculatory costs.

The funding for upper secondary education and vocational education and training is based on the number of students reported by the school as well as on the unit prices set by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

In the funding of polytechnics the Government allocates resources in the form of core funding, which is based on unit costs per student, project funding and performance-based funding. For example completed degrees are part of performance-based funding. Polytechnics also have external sources of funding. Both in vocational training and in the funding of polytechnics the education providers are encouraged to improve their results through performance-based funding.

Finnish universities are independent corporations under public law or foundations under private law. Each university and the Ministry of Education and Culture set operational and qualitative targets for the university and determine the resources required every three years. The agreement also defines how these targets are monitored and evaluated. Universities receive

funding from the state but they are also expected to raise external funding.

### **Local administration and educational institutions play a key role**

The national education administration is organised at two levels. Education policy is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture. A national agency, the Finnish National Board of Education, is responsible for the implementation of the policy aims. It works with the Ministry to develop educational objectives, content and methods for early childhood, pre-primary, basic, upper secondary and adult education. Local administration is the responsibility of local authorities, most commonly municipalities or joint municipal authorities. These make the decisions on allocation of funding, local curricula, recruitment of personnel. The municipalities have also the autonomy to delegate the decision-making power to the schools. Typically the principals recruit the staff of their schools.

### **Educational autonomy is high at all levels**

Education providers are responsible for practical teaching arrangements as well as the effectiveness and quality of its education. There are, for example, no regulations governing class size and the education providers and schools are free to determine how to group pupils and students.

Local authorities determine how much autonomy is passed on to schools. The schools have the right to provide educational services according to their own administrative arrangements and visions, as long as the basic functions, determined by law, are carried out. In many cases for example budget management, acquisitions and recruitment is the responsibility of the schools.

The teachers have pedagogical autonomy. They can decide themselves the methods of teaching as well as textbooks and materials.

Polytechnics and universities enjoy extensive autonomy. The operations of both polytechnics and universities are built on the freedom of education and research. They organise their own administration, decide on student admission and design the contents of degree programmes.

### **Quality assurance is based on steering instead of controlling**

In Finland school inspections were abolished in the early 1990s. The ideology is to steer through information, support and funding. The activities of education providers are guided by objectives laid down in legislation as well as the national core curricula and qualification requirements. The system relies on the proficiency of teachers and other personnel.

There is strong focus on both self-evaluation of schools and education providers and national evaluations of learning outcomes. National evaluations of learning outcomes are done regularly, so that there is a test every year either in mother tongue and literature or mathematics. Other subjects are evaluated according to the evaluation plan of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Not only academic subjects are evaluated but also subjects such as arts and crafts and cross-curricular themes.

From the schools' perspective, the evaluations are not regular as they are sample-based. The education providers receive their own results to be used for development purposes.

The main aim of the national evaluations of learning outcomes is to follow at national level how well the objectives have been reached as

set in the core curricula and qualification requirements. Consequently, the results are not used for ranking the schools.

In higher education the polytechnics and universities are responsible for the evaluation of their own operations and outcomes. In this they also receive support from the Higher Education Evaluation Council. ●



## **EARLY CHILDHOOD AND BASIC EDUCATION AS PART OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING**

### **Early childhood education supports children's development and learning**

Early childhood education and care comprises care, education and teaching to support children's balanced growth, development and learning. Every child has a subjective right to attend early childhood education. It can take place at kindergartens or smaller family day-care groups in private homes. The fees are moderate and are based on parental income.

All 6-year-olds have the right to participate in pre-primary education. It is free and voluntary for children but municipalities are obliged to provide pre-primary education. Almost all

6-year-olds participate in pre-primary education. At pre-primary level children will adopt basic skills, knowledge and capabilities from different areas of learning in accordance with their age and abilities. Learning through play is essential.

### **Basic education is provided within a single structure**

Compulsory education starts in the year when a child turns seven and lasts nine years. Local authorities assign a school place to each pupil close to their homes, but parents are free to choose the comprehensive school of their preference, with some restrictions.

Basic education is provided within a single structure, that is, there is no division into primary and lower secondary education. Instruction is usually given by the same class teacher in most subjects in the first six year-classes and by subject specialists in the last three years.

### **School year is the same everywhere but timetables are local**

The school year comprises 190 days between mid-August and the beginning of June. Schools are open five days a week, and the minimum number of lessons per week varies from 19 to 30, depending on the level and number of optional subjects taken. Daily and weekly timetables are decided in the schools. In addition, there is local autonomy concerning extra holidays.

### **National core curriculum leaves room for local variations**

The national core curriculum for basic education is determined by the Finnish National Board of Education. It contains the objectives and core contents of different subjects, as well as the

principles of pupil assessment, special needs education, pupil welfare and educational guidance. The principles of a good learning environment, working approaches as well as the concept of learning are also addressed in the core curriculum. The national core curriculum is renewed approximately every ten years.

The education providers draw up their own curricula within the framework of the national core curriculum. Thus there is room for local or regional specificities. All local curricula must, however, define the values, underlying principles, as well as general educational and teaching objectives. Also questions such as the language programme and the local lesson-hour distribution must be addressed. Further, cooperation with homes and instruction of pupils requiring special support or belonging to different language and cultural groups should be defined.

There are no national tests for pupils in basic education in Finland.

### **Assessment is part of daily schoolwork**

In Finland the main type of pupil assessment is the continuous assessment during the course of studies and final assessment. Continuous assessment is to guide and help pupils in their learning process. Each student receives a report at least once every school year.

There are no national tests for pupils in basic education in Finland. Instead, teachers are responsible for the assessment in their respective subjects on the basis of the objectives written into the curriculum. Also the grades in the basic

education certificate, the final certificate given at the end of year 9, are given by the teachers. On the basis of this assessment pupils will be selected for further studies. Therefore, the national core curriculum contains assessment guidelines in all common subjects.

One task of basic education is to develop the pupils' capabilities for self-assessment. The purpose of this is to support the growth of self-knowledge and study skills and to help the pupils to learn to be aware of their progress and learning process. ●



## **GENERAL AND VOCATIONAL PATHWAYS AT UPPER SECONDARY LEVEL**

### **Most students continue their studies after basic education**

Students who have successfully completed compulsory education are eligible for general and vocational upper secondary education and training. Student selection to upper secondary schools is mainly based on the students' grades in their basic education certificate. The selection criteria used by vocational institutions can include work experience and other comparable

factors, also entrance and aptitude tests. More than 90 per cent of the relevant age group starts general or vocational upper secondary studies immediately after basic education. Completion of upper secondary education, both general and vocational, gives students eligibility to continue to higher education.

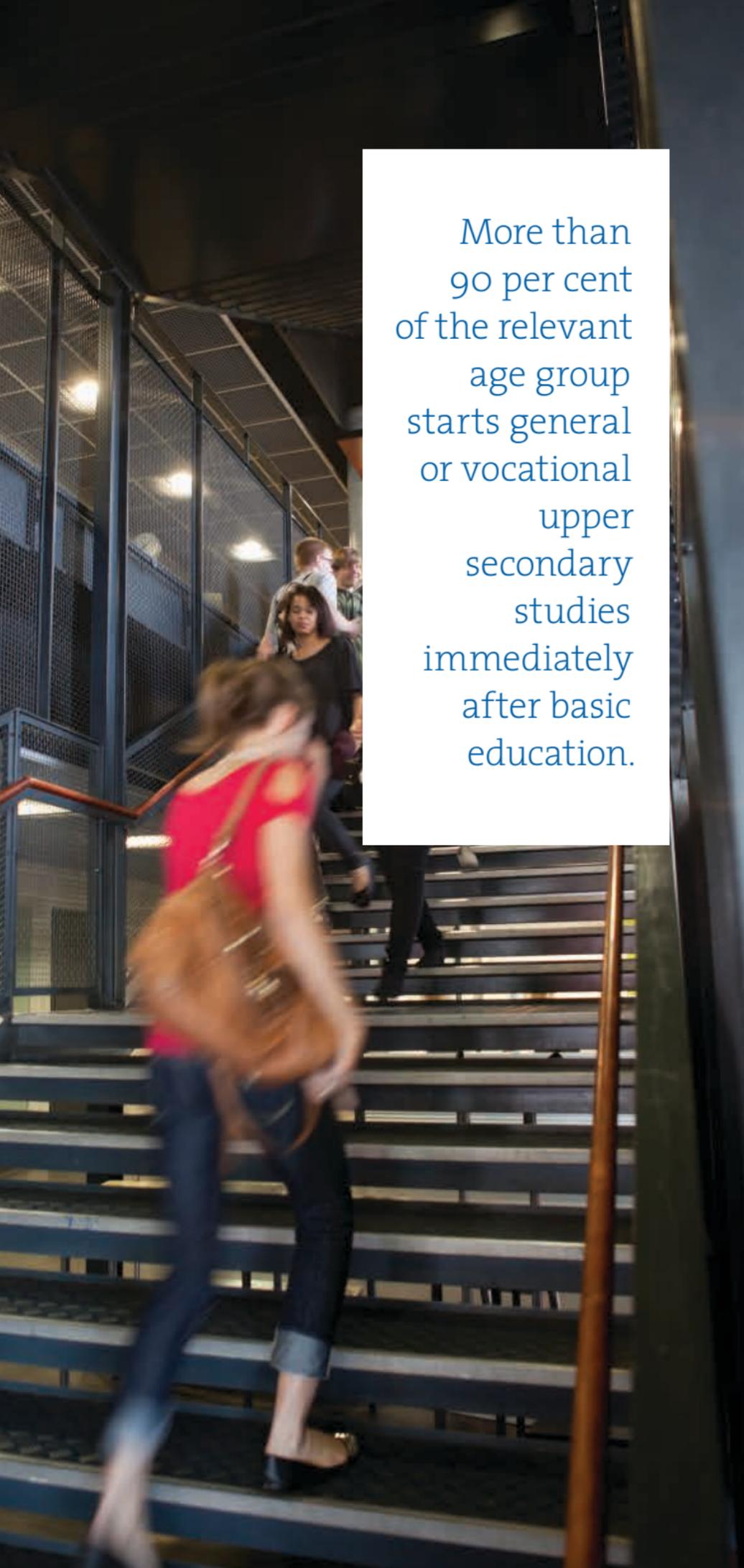
### **General upper secondary education is flexibly organised**

The syllabus of general upper secondary education is designed to last three years, but students may complete it in 2 to 4 years. Instruction is organised in modular form not tied to year classes and students can decide on their individual study schedules rather freely. Each course is assessed on completion and when a student has completed the required number of courses, which include compulsory and elective studies, he or she receives a general upper secondary school certificate.

The Finnish National Board of Education decides on the objectives and learning outcomes of the different subjects and study modules for general upper secondary education. Based on the national core curriculum, each education provider then prepares the local curriculum. Due to the modular structure of upper secondary education, students may combine studies from both general education and vocational education and training.

### **First national examination at the end of general upper secondary education**

General upper secondary education ends with a national matriculation examination, which comprises four compulsory tests: mother tongue and, according to each candidate's choice, three



More than  
90 per cent  
of the relevant  
age group  
starts general  
or vocational  
upper  
secondary  
studies  
immediately  
after basic  
education.

of the following: the second national language, a foreign language, mathematics or one subject in general studies, such as humanities and natural sciences. Students may also include optional tests. Having completed the matriculation examination and the entire upper secondary school syllabus, students are awarded a separate certificate that shows details of the examinations passed and the levels and grades achieved.

### **Vocational education and training in cooperation with the world of work**

Vocational education and training covers eight fields of education, more than fifty vocational qualifications including over a hundred different study programmes. The scope of vocational qualifications is three years of study and each qualification includes at least half a year of on-the-job learning in workplaces. Vocational education and training can be completed in the form of school-based training or apprenticeship training.

The national qualification requirements have been based on a learning-outcome approach from the early 1990s. Consequently close co-operation with the world of work has been essential.

Vocational qualifications are developed in co-operation with the world of work and other key stakeholders. This is done in order to ensure that the qualifications support flexible and efficient transition into the labour market as well as occupational development and career change. In addition to the needs of the world of work, development of vocational education and training and qualifications takes into account the consolidation of lifelong learning skills as well as the individuals' needs and opportunities to complete qualifications flexibly to suit their own circumstances.

The studies are based on individual study plans, comprising both compulsory and optional study modules. The students' learning and competences acquired are assessed throughout the period of study. The assessment is based on criteria defined in the national qualification requirements. One of the main assessment methods is the vocational skills demonstrations. These are work assignments relevant to the vocational skills requirements and are given in authentic settings. Skills demonstrations are designed, implemented and assessed in co-operation with representatives of the world of work.

### **Competence-based qualifications offer a way to demonstrate prior learning**

Competence-based qualifications provide adults a flexible way to enhance and maintain their vocational skills. A specific benefit of this system is that it makes it possible to recognise an individual's vocational competences regardless of whether they have been acquired through work experience, studies or other activities. Representatives of the world of work and business life play an important role in planning, implementing and assessing these competence-based qualifications.

An individual study plan is prepared for each student taking a competence-based qualification. The candidates demonstrate their skills in competence tests, which are assessed by training experts and representatives from enterprises together with the candidates themselves. There

Vocational studies take into account individual needs and circumstances.

are three levels of competence-based qualifications: vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications. ●



## HIGHER EDUCATION

### WITH A DUAL STRUCTURE

Higher education is offered by universities and polytechnics. Both sectors have their own profiles. Universities emphasise scientific research and instruction. Polytechnics, also known as universities of applied sciences, adopt a more practical approach.

There is restricted entry to all fields of study. As applicant volumes outweigh the number of places available, universities and polytechnics use different kinds of student selection criteria. Most commonly these include success in matriculation examination and entrance tests.

#### **Most university students aim for a Master's degree**

The Finnish Matriculation Examination provides general eligibility for higher education. In addition, those with a post-secondary level vocational qualification or at least a three-year

vocational qualification have general eligibility for university education. Universities may also admit applicants, who are otherwise considered to have the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the studies.

At universities students can study for Bachelor's and Master's degrees and scientific or artistic postgraduate degrees, which are the Licentiate and the Doctorate degrees. In the two-cycle degree system students first complete the Bachelor's degree, after which they may go for the Master's degree. As a rule, students are admitted to study for the Master's degree.

The target time for taking a Master's degree is generally 5 years. The average time for taking a Master's degree in Finland is, however, six years. The policy-makers have introduced several measures to shorten graduation times and increase completion of studies, including personal study plans and financial incentives, for example.

### **Polytechnic degrees provide students with practical professional skills**

The general requirement for admission to polytechnics is completion of general upper secondary education or vocational education and training. Student selection to polytechnics is mainly based on entrance examinations, school achievement and work experience. Polytechnics may also admit applicants who are otherwise considered to have the necessary skills and knowledge to complete polytechnic studies.

Degree studies at polytechnics give a higher education qualification and practical professional skills. They comprise core and professional studies, elective studies and a final project. All degree studies include practical on-the-job learning. The extent of polytechnic degree studies is

generally 210–240 ECTS points, which means 3–4 years of full-time study. It is further possible to take a polytechnic Master’s degree after acquiring a minimum of three years’ work experience. The polytechnic Master’s takes 1.5–2 years, and is equivalent to a university Master’s degree. ●



## HIGHLY EDUCATED

## TEACHING PERSONNEL

Teaching is an attractive career choice in Finland. Thus the teacher education institutions can select the applicants most suitable for the teaching profession. For example the intake into class teacher education is only 10 per cent of all applicants. In subject teacher education the intake varies from 10 to 50 per cent depending on the subject. In vocational teacher education the intake is 30 per cent of the applicants.

### The most common pre-service requirement is a Master’s degree

Teachers in basic and general upper secondary education are required to hold a Master’s degree. Also teachers in vocational education and training have to hold a higher education degree. The high level of training is seen as necessary as teachers in Finland are very autonomous

professionally. Teaching and guidance staff within day-care centres generally have Bachelor's degrees. Pre-primary teachers in schools hold a Master's degree.

Teachers in the first six years of basic education are usually generalists, class teachers, whereas those in the last three years and at upper secondary level are subject specialists, subject teachers. Class teachers have a Master's degree in education. Subject teachers have completed a Master's degree in the subject they teach as well as pedagogical studies.

Depending on the institution and subject, vocational teachers are generally required to have an appropriate higher or postgraduate academic degree, an appropriate polytechnic degree or the highest possible qualification in their own vocational field. In addition at least three years of work experience in the field and completed pedagogical studies are necessary.

Guidance counsellors in basic and upper secondary education and training support pupils or students in their studies and any possible learning problems. The qualification requirements are a Master's degree and guidance counsellor studies. Special needs teachers help learners who have more serious problems both in mainstream education or special needs education. They also support and consult teachers. Special needs teachers hold a Master's degree with special pedagogy as the main subject or a teacher qualification including special needs teacher studies.

Teachers at polytechnics are required to have either a Master's or a post-graduate Licentiate's degree, depending on their position. They must also complete pedagogical studies. University teachers are generally required to hold a Doctoral or other postgraduate degree.

## **Educational leaders are required a teacher qualification**

Responsibility for the operations of basic education schools and upper secondary schools rests with principals. Principals are generally required a higher academic degree and teaching qualifications. In addition, they are required to have appropriate work experience and a certificate in educational administration or the equivalent.

University rectors must hold a doctorate or a professorship. Most commonly the rector is appointed from among the professors of the university. In polytechnics, rectors are required a postgraduate Licentiate's degree or doctorate and have administrative experience.

## **Continuing teacher education is encouraged**

At most levels of education the teachers are required to participate in in-service training every year as part of their agreement on salaries. Finnish teachers consider in-service training as a privilege and therefore participate actively.

The State also provides in-service training programmes, primarily in areas important for implementing education policy and reforms. The education providers can also apply for funding to improve the professional competence of their teaching personnel.

Teachers are recognised as keys to quality in education. Therefore continuous attention is paid to both their pre-service and continuing education. ●●●



Teachers are  
recognised  
as keys to  
quality in  
education.

## “Education in Finland” series published by



Ministry of  
Education  
and Culture



FINNISH NATIONAL  
BOARD OF EDUCATION



CIMO