

**National summary sheets on  
education system in Europe  
and ongoing reforms**

**2009 Edition**



# **FINLAND**

**AUGUST 2009**

---

## **1. Education population and language of instruction**

In 2008, there were ca 562 500 pupils in basic education. The percentage of young people aged 0-29 was 35.6 % (2007). Finland has two national languages, Finnish and Swedish. Approximately six 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 from early childhood to higher education level. In addition there are educational institutions where all or at least some instruction is provided in a foreign language (most commonly English). Local authorities are also required to organise education in the Sami language in the Sami-speaking areas of Lapland. Care is also taken to ensure educational opportunities for Romany and other minorities as well as for people who use sign language.

## **2. Administrative control and extent of public-sector funded education**

Education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) works with the Ministry to develop educational aims, content and methods for primary, secondary and adult education. In addition, each of the six Finnish Provinces has an Education and Culture Department that deals with these issues. Local administration lies in the responsibility of the local authorities (municipalities), which play a prominent role as education providers.

Most institutions providing basic and upper secondary level education are maintained by local authorities or joint municipal boards (federations of municipalities). Less than 3 per cent of pupils in basic education attend private schools. Private institutions are under public supervision: they follow the national core curricula and qualification guidelines confirmed by the FNBE. They also receive the same level of public funding as publicly funded schools. Responsibility for educational funding is divided between the State and the local authorities.

The state funding is based on a calculatory unit price. Of the funding for primary and secondary education, the state subsidy averages 42 per cent of the costs, while municipal contributions amount to an average of 58 per cent.

Local authorities determine how much autonomy is passed to schools. The schools have the right to provide educational services according to their own administrative arrangements, as long as the basic functions, determined by law, are carried out.

Polytechnics, professionally oriented higher education institutions, are mostly municipal or private. Universities are maintained by the State and enjoy extensive autonomy.

There is no separate school inspectorate and inspection visits to schools conducted by state authorities have been abandoned. The activities of education providers are guided by objectives laid down in legislation and the national core curricula. The system relies on the proficiency of teachers in their efforts to meet the objectives laid down in the curricula. Education providers are responsible for self-evaluation of the education they provide and they are expected to participate in national and international evaluations. A separate Education Evaluation Council has been operating in connection with the Ministry of Education since 2003. It is responsible for planning, co-ordinating, managing and developing the evaluation of basic education, general and vocational upper secondary education as well as adult education and training. Moreover the FNBE carries out national evaluations of learning outcomes. The polytechnics and universities are responsible for the evaluation of their own operations and outcomes. In this respect, they receive support from the Higher Education Evaluation Council.

### 3. Pre-primary education

From birth to the age of six, children can attend day-care centres (*päiväkoti/daghem*) or smaller family day-care groups in private homes (*perhepäivähoitopaikka/familjedagvårdsplats*), all of which charge reasonable fees depending on parental income. All 6-year-olds have the right to free pre-primary education (*Esiopetus/Förskoleundervisning*). Each local authority may decide whether to provide pre-primary education in schools, at day-care centres or at some other appropriate location. In 2008, over 99 per cent of 6-year-olds participated in pre-primary education.

### 4. Compulsory education

#### (i) Phases

<i>Perusopetus/Grundläggande utbildning</i> (basic education)	Age 7-16
---	----------

The scope of the basic education syllabus is nine years, and nearly all children complete their compulsory education by attending comprehensive school. Comprehensive schools may also provide additional basic education, the voluntary 10th year.

#### (ii) Admissions criteria

Children must begin compulsory education in the year of their seventh birthday. Approximately one per cent start school a year earlier, but this requires a certificate to prove the child's readiness to attend school. All basic education is free of charge. Local authorities assign a school place to each pupil close to their place of residence, but parents are free to choose the comprehensive school of their preference, though certain restrictions are applied.

#### (iii) Length of school day/week/year

The school year comprises 190 days between mid-August and the beginning of June. The minimum number of lessons per week varies from 19 to 30, depending on the level and the number of optional subjects taken. In addition, there is local autonomy concerning extra holidays. In the first

two forms, a school day may consist of no more than five lessons; in the other forms, the maximum number is seven lessons per day. A lesson usually lasts 60 minutes; instruction accounts for at least 45 minutes and the remaining time is used for a break.

Morning and afternoon activities are provided for children in forms 1-2 of basic education and for children in special needs education in all forms.

#### (iv) Class size/student grouping

There are no regulations governing class size, except for special needs education, where the maximum number of students is 6-10 depending on their special needs. Teaching groups normally consist of pupils of the same age. However, when appropriate, pupils of different ages may be taught together, particularly in small schools. Pupils in the first six forms have the same teacher for most of the subjects but subject teachers are also used, particularly in subjects such as visual arts, music and physical education. Pupils in forms 7-9 have separate teachers for almost each subject.

#### (v) Curriculum control and content

The current national core curriculum was verified by the FNBE in 2004 and includes objectives and assessment criteria. Within this framework, schools and local authorities then form their own curricular regulations that are sensitive to the local context. Teachers choose their own teaching methods and have freedom to select their own teaching materials. Compulsory core subjects in basic education are mother tongue (i.e. Finnish or Swedish) and literature, second national language, foreign languages, environmental studies, health education, religion or ethics, history, social studies, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, physical education, music, visual arts, craft, home economics and pupil counselling.

The additional basic education is aimed at pupils who haven't received a study place or who need time to make future plans for studying. It is also possible to familiarise oneself to a certain VET branch during the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

#### (vi) Assessment, progression and qualifications

Teachers carry out assessment in their respective subjects on the basis of objectives and assessment criteria written into the curriculum. Assessment is an ongoing part of daily school life and each pupil receives a report at least once every school year. In addition, an intermediate report may be given at least once during the school year. Achievement is assessed both continuously and through tests set by teachers. The national core curriculum also includes the descriptions of good performance (grade 'good' or 8) in all common subjects. These are meant for teachers as a tool and support. A pupil may be required to repeat a year if his/her performance in one or more subjects has not been accepted, or if he/she is deemed not to have the necessary knowledge and skills to manage the next grade. In practice, however, this is marginal. A certificate (*peruskoulun päättötodistus*) is awarded when a pupil successfully completes the full nine years of comprehensive schooling; an additional certificate is awarded for those completing the optional 10th year.

## 5. Upper secondary and post-secondary education

### (i) Types of education

<p><i>Lukiokoulutus/Gymnasieutbildning</i> (upper secondary general education)</p> <p><i>Ammatillinen koulutus/Yrkesutbildning</i> (upper secondary vocational education and training)</p>	From the 16-year age
--	----------------------

Both types of upper secondary education include young and adult (aged over 25) students. Upper secondary vocational education and training can either be school-based or taken as a competence-based qualification. Competence-based qualifications consist mainly of competence tests that demonstrate the required competences. They are generally intended for adults with working life experience. In addition, there is a possibility for both young students and adults to study in apprenticeship training, which can follow a curriculum or prepare for competence tests. Qualification-oriented vocational education and training takes place at the upper secondary level (ISCED 3), with the exception of specialist vocational qualification (*erikoisammattitutkinto/specialyrkesexamen*), which is classified into ISCED 4.

### (ii) Admissions criteria

Students who have successfully completed compulsory education are eligible for general and vocational upper secondary education and training. The application procedure takes place mainly through the national joint application system. Students are entitled to apply nationally to any institution offering upper secondary education. Student selection to upper secondary schools is mainly based on previous study record, whereas selection criteria used by vocational institutions may also include work experience and other comparable factors and possibly entrance and aptitude tests. Although tuition is free, contribution towards learning material may be required. Over 90 per cent of the students continue their studies immediately after basic education: in 2007, 51 per cent opted for general upper secondary studies, and 41 per cent for vocational upper secondary studies.

### (iii) Curriculum control and content

The FNBE decides on the objectives and core contents of the subjects and study modules for both general upper secondary education and vocational upper secondary education and training. Based on the relevant national core curriculum, each education provider then prepares the local curriculum.

The compulsory subjects in general upper secondary school include mother tongue and literature, second national language, foreign languages, mathematics, environmental and natural sciences, religion or ethics, philosophy, psychology, history, social studies, arts and physical education as well as health education. In addition, the syllabus includes additional courses, the provisions of which are decided by schools. The students must also be provided with educational and vocational guidance.

Vocational upper secondary qualifications can be taken in school-based education, as apprenticeship training or as competence-based qualifications. Vocational education and training cover eight sectors of education (Humanities and education; Culture; Social science, business and administration; Natural sciences; Technology, communication and transport; Natural resources and the environment; Social services, health and sport; and Tourism, catering and domestic services), 53 vocational qualifications including a total of 119 different study programmes. Each vocational

qualification consists of studies in core subjects, free-choice studies and at least 20 credits of on-the-job learning in work life. The core curriculum includes mother tongue, the second national language, a foreign language, mathematics, physics, chemistry, social studies and working life, physical and health education as well as arts and culture. The studies also include student counselling and a final project.

#### (iv) Assessment, progression and qualifications

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 a form not tied to year classes. Each course is assessed on completion and when a student has completed the required number of courses, he or she receives a school-leaving certificate (*lukion päättötodistus*). Assessment is based on the objectives defined in the national core curriculum.

General upper secondary schooling ends with a national matriculation examination, which in addition to the test in mother tongue, comprises three compulsory tests. These three can be chosen from the following: other national language; a foreign language; mathematics; or one test in the general studies battery of tests (humanities and sciences). Students may also include optional tests in the examination. Upon successful completion of the matriculation examination and the entire upper secondary school syllabus, students are awarded a separate certificate (*ylioppilastutkintotodistus*) that shows the tests passed and the levels and grades achieved. Under certain conditions students in vocational upper secondary education and training may also take the matriculation examination.

The scope of studies for a vocational qualification is three years (120 credits). Students' individual study plans determine their choices and the progress of their studies. Students' skills and knowledge are assessed after completion of each study module. The national core curricula contain criteria for student assessment. A new type of assessment, skills demonstrations, has been added in the certification of vocational modules. The test is organized in cooperation with local working life and assessed together by teachers and representatives of working life. A qualification certificate is awarded after completion of all study modules included in the individual study plan. The certificate is awarded by the education provider / vocational institution.

Competence-based qualifications have been part of vocational education and training since 1994. They enable working-age adults to gain qualifications without necessarily attending formal training. It is possible to take competence-based vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications (*ammattitutkinto/yrkesexamen*) and special vocational qualifications (*erikoisammattitutkinto/-specialyrkesexamen*) or only parts of them through the competence test system, within which competence acquired through various ways is recognised and validated. The competence test is completed by demonstrating competence required in the profession.

Upon completion of apprenticeship training students receive two certificates: a certificate for participating in training and a qualification certificate.

Completion of upper secondary education, both general and vocational, gives students eligibility to move into higher education.

## 6. Higher education

### (i) Structure

Higher education is offered by universities (*Yliopisto/Universitet*) and Polytechnics, *Ammattikorkeakoulu/Yrkeshögskola*), professionally oriented higher education institutions. The

latter are often referred to as universities of applied sciences. Both sectors have different profiles; universities emphasise scientific research and instruction, whereas polytechnics adopt a more practical approach.

## (ii) Access

The Finnish matriculation examination provides general eligibility for higher education. In addition, those with a Finnish polytechnic degree, a post-secondary level vocational qualification or at least a three-year vocational qualification also have general eligibility for university education. Universities may also admit applicants who have completed Open University studies required by the relevant university or who are otherwise considered by the university to have the necessary skills and knowledge to complete the studies.

There is restricted entry, 'numerus clausus', to all fields of study. As applicant volumes far outweigh the number of places available, universities use different kinds of student selection criteria. Usually the selection is based on previous study record and an entrance exam.

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 school achievement and work experience and, in many cases, entrance examinations. Eligibility for second-cycle polytechnic degrees is given by a relevant first-cycle degree with at least 3 years of relevant work experience.

## (iii) Qualifications

According to the degree system at universities, it is possible to take either a lower or a higher academic degree. The lower or Bachelor's degree is generally 180 ECTS credits and can be completed in 3 years. The higher or Master's degree is in most fields 120 ECTS credits, which corresponds to two years of full-time study after the first-cycle degree. In addition, universities offer scientific postgraduate degrees that are Licentiates (optional advanced predoctoral degree) and Doctorates.

Studies leading to a first-cycle polytechnic degree take 3½ years or 180-240 ECTS credits, depending on the field of study, at which point the polytechnics grant the student a degree certificate (Bachelor's degree, indicating the field of study, e.g. Bachelor of Health Care, Bachelor of Engineering). The second-cycle polytechnic degree (Master's degree) consists of 60-90 ECTS credits, which corresponds to 1½ or 2 years of full-time study. The requirement for the second-cycle polytechnic degree in polytechnics is a Bachelor's level polytechnic degree and at least three years of work experience. The second-cycle polytechnic degree is equivalent to a university Master's degree in the labour market. The title in the second-cycle polytechnic degree indicates the field of study, for example Master of Art and Culture.

## 7. Special Needs

Each pupil of compulsory school age has the right to receive remedial instruction and special needs education when necessary. Special needs education (SNE) is also provided in pre-primary and upper secondary education and training. The objective is to support pupils in such a way that they have equal opportunities to complete their schooling according to their abilities alongside with their peers. Pupils with minor learning or adjustment difficulties receive part-time special needs education by a SNE teacher in conjunction with mainstream education.

If a child cannot cope in mainstream education due to disability, illness, delayed development, emotional disorder or for other similar reasons, he or she is transferred to special needs education.



An individual educational plan must be drawn up for each pupil transferred or admitted to special needs education. Instruction is provided by a special class teacher. The first alternative is to include pupils with special educational needs in mainstream classes, but when necessary, education may also be provided in a small group or special class within regular school or in a special school.

In 2008, 47 300 children were admitted or transferred to special needs education, which is 8.4 % of all the pupils in basic education. The number of pupils in part-time special needs education was 126 300, which is 22.5 % of all the pupils in basic education.

## **8. Teachers**

Teaching and guidance staff in early childhood education and care have either Bachelor's degrees from a university or a polytechnic or what used to be known as post-secondary vocational qualifications. In addition, they may be assisted by other child-care professionals with relevant upper secondary vocational qualifications.

Pre-primary teachers are either kindergarten teachers who have completed a Bachelor's degree in Education or class teachers. Teachers in the first six forms of basic education are usually generalists (class teachers), whereas those in the last three forms and at upper secondary level are subject specialists (subject teachers). Class teachers are Masters of Education and subject teachers have completed a Master's degree in the subject they teach as well as pedagogical studies.

Applicants to class teacher education must have successfully completed the matriculation examination. The entrance examination for class teacher education includes a written examination, an aptitude test and interviews. Some universities also include a group situation and an optional teaching demonstration in their entrance examination.

Subject teacher applicants apply to the respective university faculties and departments responsible for their main subject (e.g. mathematics), following the usual procedure. Those aiming to be subject teachers will then separately apply for subject teacher education. At some university faculties students can apply directly to subject teacher education.

Depending on the institution and subject, vocational and polytechnic teachers are required to have either 1) an appropriate higher (or postgraduate) academic degree; 2) an appropriate polytechnic degree; or 3) the highest possible qualification in their own vocational field, at least three years of work experience in the field, and completed pedagogical studies of 60 ECTS. University teachers are generally required to have a doctoral or other postgraduate degree.

Teachers have civil servant status.

## 9. Current reforms and priorities

Education policy priorities are outlined in the Government's five-year Development Plan for Education and Research. Focus in the period 2007-2012 will be on equal education opportunities, high quality education and research, access to skilled labour, higher education development, and competences of teaching staff.

In order to prevent dropout from school and social exclusion, the Ministry of Education initiated the Preparatory instruction and guidance for VET (*Ammattistartti*) which attempts to assist young students who have completed basic education and remained uncertain of their study prospects, or are in risk of dropping out at beginning of their vocational studies. The programme is scheduled for years 2006–2010.

The core curricula for initial vocational education and training are being revised during 2006–2010 by the Finnish National Board of Education. At the same time the curricula for preparatory education for immigrants as well as the rehabilitative education for the disabled are being renewed. The revisions concern both vocational upper secondary education and training and competence-based qualifications. Education providers and qualification committees are expected to follow the new curricula from August 2010 onwards.

The autonomy of universities is being strengthened by making changes in the legal status of universities. Universities will form a new type of a legal entity, legal person under public law or foundation under private law. Furthermore, the administration and the decision making of universities will be reformed. The new legislation will come into force in August 2009. The network of universities and polytechnics will be developed so that overlaps in programmes are reduced and by bringing together administrative and support services. This will be done through merging universities and polytechnics, intensifying cooperation in teaching, research and shared equipment. In the polytechnic sector already three remarkable mergers have been carried out and the regional network has been made more compact. In the university sector a foundation-based innovation university, Aalto University, was formed through a merger of 3 universities, and other mergers are under way. Such new universities are expected to start operations at the beginning of 2010.

In 2009, a strategy for the internationalisation of Finnish higher education institutions was completed for the years 2009-2015. The aim is to develop an internationally strong and attractive higher education and research community in Finland. The strategy was prepared by the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the higher education institutions and stakeholders.

Measures are taken to develop quality and quality assurance in education. Examples of this include the definition of national quality criteria for basic education as part of a programme for improving the quality of basic education (POP Programme). A national quality strategy for vocational education and training is being prepared and the audits of higher education institutions' quality assurance systems will be established as a permanent system of external quality assurance.

In 2009, a working group under the Ministry of Education finalised a national programme for ensuring professional competence in education and among teaching staff. The OSAAVA programme, planned for years 2010–2016, will legally bind education providers to systematically and continually train their teaching staff according to the professional competences needed. Continuing education shall also be taken into account in employers' staff strategies with respect to the supply, participation in, and quality assurance of in-service training.

In general, there is an increasing emphasis on adult education. A general reform concerning adult education (AKKU) is meant to improve particularly the administration, financing and labour market cooperation of adult education and training. Essential concepts of the reform include learning at

work, lifelong learning and performance-based funding of education providers. The possibilities for acquiring additional skills and qualification will be improved through developing apprenticeship training and competence-based qualifications, in particular. There is also a special emphasis laid on the adult education of immigrants and on improving their language skills in Finnish. The AKKU programme will start in 2010.

For more detailed information on education systems in Europe, you may consult the EURYDICE data base, EURYBASE (<http://www.eurydice.org>)