

The Story of Finnish Education

One of the main principles of Finnish education is that everyone must have equal learning opportunities and access to high-quality education and training. Learning environments should encourage innovation, make room for creativity and allow every individual to flourish. As we see it, the best way to achieve sustainable economic growth and well-being is to mobilize the competence and talents of all citizens. We do not ask what the cost of education is, but what the cost of not educating people would be.

But how did we get to where we are today? As a small nation, you have to work with what you have. The path to becoming the welfare state Finland is today began by investing in education and equality. As Finland moved towards its independence (achieved in 1917), **education became one of the keys** to the nation's growth and success. We realized that we cannot afford to leave anyone behind, that a nation can only fulfill its true potential of every citizen, HÄN (the inclusive Finnish pronoun for (s)he), has the opportunity to do so. This meant making education available to everyone, regardless of gender, socio-economic status or linguistic and cultural background. In Finland, every school is a good school.

Our education system is a consequence of this long-term commitment to equity, equality and inclusion. Almost 90 per cent of 25–64 year-olds have completed at least a secondary-level education and over 40 per cent have a higher education degree. Adult education and lifelong learning are popular and have a high participation rate. While Finland fares well in international comparisons, we aim to continuously develop the education system through various parliamentary reforms and projects.

Equality is a part of every Finns life from the very beginning. In Finland, all

children have **access to early childhood education and care**. This is important, not only to help children get an equal start and opportunities early in life, but also for both guardians' equal possibilities to participate in working life. In our understanding, the success of Finland as a country is to a great extent linked to equality between men and women. The share of female business leaders, politicians and decision makers is among the highest in the world.

In early childhood education and care it really is about play and social interaction. This promotes the **joy of learning**. The idea is to keep that joy lit all the way from early childhood education and through all levels of education. Studies suggest that a strong beginning in early learning promotes the development of cognitive, social, language and numeracy skills, as well as a motivation and joy of learning later in life. When the games and play of early childhood are over, focus still lies on the pupils wellbeing as we move up thorough the educational levels. Different kinds of indoor and outdoor physical activities are integrated into the school day and often continue in the afternoon as after-school activities. Finland is one of the few countries to combine high performance with life satisfaction in basic education (PISA 2018).

Teachers in Finland are highly educated, skilled, motivated and have professional autonomy. They are encouraged to create, experiment and mainstream new pedagogies and new learning environments. On both primary and secondary levels, a Master's degree is required, and teacher education includes teaching practice. The high level of education among teachers makes it possible for schools not to have standardized testing, but to instead focus on creating a motivating environment in the classroom, support for those who need it, and on a holistic perspective on children's well-being. There are no school ranking lists or inspection systems. The first national examination is held only at the end of general upper secondary education. Focus is on learning and support, not on steering and control.

New learning environments and digital pedagogies are becoming increasingly important. Learning does by no means always happen in the classroom, and digital environments are used frequently. Therefore the switch from contact teaching to distance learning can be made rather smoothly in unexpected situations, like during a pandemic. Both international comparisons and national studies indicate that the transition to distance education in Finnish schools in the

spring of 2020 was successful considering the circumstances. Highly competent teachers with considerable autonomy, combined with a flexible education system, and the society's investments in education and digitalisation, made this possible.

For children to have equal opportunities, it is important to acknowledge that inclusive education calls for **special and individually tailored support** for special needs students, as soon as the need arises. Common forms of support include teaching in small groups and one-to-one guidance. Every child has the right to attend the nearest school and pupils with minor or medium learning difficulties go to same schools and classrooms as the others. Holding a pupil back for a year is very rare in Finland. There are also programs that aim to prevent school bullying.

General upper secondary education offers individual and flexible study paths, provision of the guidance and support students need, interdisciplinary studies, and close cooperation with higher education institutions. Digital teaching materials are widely utilized in teaching, and the matriculation examination has been fully digitalized.

In Finland, high-quality education is not a privilege, it is a constitutional right. All education in Finnish or Swedish, from preschool to universities, is free of charge. And it's not just meant for children and young people. Since we do not know the jobs of tomorrow, it is becoming ever more important to gain strong basic skills and key competencies to be able to learn more whenever needed.

Continuous learning aims to respond to people's lifelong need for upskilling and reskilling now and in the future.

Finland is a country of avid readers, and the **library** is seen as a realization of civilization and democracy: open to everyone and free of charge. Libraries authenticate the idea that everyone should have equal opportunities for education and self-development. The library supports lifelong learning by helping citizens in finding and using diverse sources of information, promoting reading and

Did you know that:

- In the old days, the church required that both men and women be able to read, if they wanted to get married. Due to this, by the end of 19th century, almost 100 % of the population were able to read.
- Finnish children begin their school later, spend less time in the classroom and have less homework than children in many other countries; yet their learning outcomes are excellent.
- Finland was the first country in the world to give women full political rights already in the beginning of the 1900's.
- To support the wellbeing of all children, a free school meal was introduced in 1948. School meals have been found to have a significant effect on learning and their introduction greatly improved equal opportunities for children from different backgrounds.

culture hobbies and supporting learning skills needed in digitalized and global everyday life.

The world is changing rapidly, and we need to adapt. **Globalization, digitalization (including artificial intelligence)** and the challenges of a **sustainable future**, are but a few things that are changing our society. This is why education is more important than ever, for everyone. Problem solving, critical thinking and communication are skills we need to develop, and we are applying new learning environments and methods to meet those needs. Education is a vital cornerstone of economic competitiveness, and helps pupils and students with the competencies and skills required in society and working life today.

In a continuously changing world, the education system must be fit to respond to people's lifelong need for upskilling and reskilling. By making it possible to combine work and studies, we are able to keep up with the rapid changes in the world.

Finnish vocational education and training is a dynamic part of continuous learning and is a popular and attractive pathway in Finland, chosen by roughly half of all upper secondary students. VET is developed and delivered in close cooperation with industries, the private sector and other job providers. The Finnish VET emphasizes broad-based competences, flexible study paths, recognition of prior learning and work-based

learning. Lifelong learning has become the new normal, as work is constantly changing. Consequently, our classes are a mixture of young and adult students and the system suits those with academic background, as well as those who have recently completed lower secondary education. Skills are updated whenever necessary.

Finland's competitiveness and wellbeing are built on **knowledge, research and innovation**. We have a good capacity for public sector collaboration, enterprise and research cooperation, an open-mindedness for science and technology, an evolving experimental culture and a broad commitment to knowledge-based growth and prosperity. Research in computing sciences and AI is also strong in Finland. By 2030, Finland aims to invest 4% of its GDP in Research and Development. We have one of the highest levels of cooperation between higher education and business life, but we also aim for international interaction. This means increasing international mobility and cooperation and attracting more students and researchers to Finland.

Although a relatively small country, Finland will bear its global responsibility. We are committed to **sustainable development** and seeking solutions to global challenges in cooperation with other countries. We believe that knowledge, skills and innovations are the key to achieving the universal 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.