



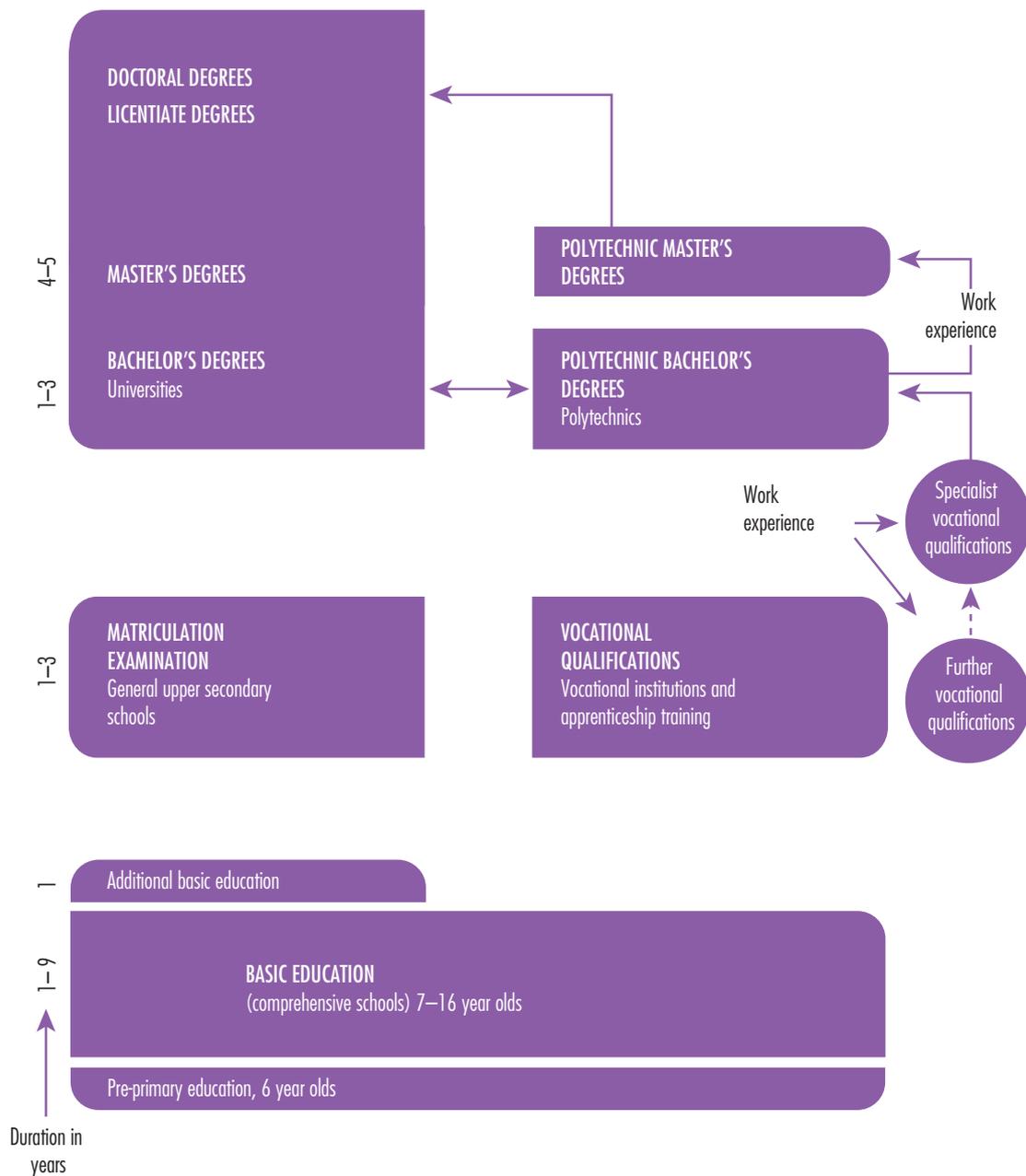
FINNISH NATIONAL
BOARD OF EDUCATION

Matti Kyrö

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS OF SOME FEATURES OF FINNISH EDUCATION AND TRAINING

International comparisons of some features of the Finnish education and training system

The education system



Municipalities have to be able to offer pre-primary education for all six-year-olds, but pre-primary education is not obligatory for children.

Normally, children start their comprehensive school education relatively late at the age of 7.

The Finnish education system is almost entirely publicly funded. The compulsory education is provided completely free of charge and there are no fees at higher levels either.

There are few private and no segregated basic schools in Finland. Almost all children attend their nearest local school.

Teachers are respected professionals and have a high level of autonomy in their work. There are no school inspections.

There are no dead-ends in the education system. All programs provide eligibility to move on to further education.

The only national assessment is the matriculation examination, which is taken at the age of 18-19 by general upper secondary school students.

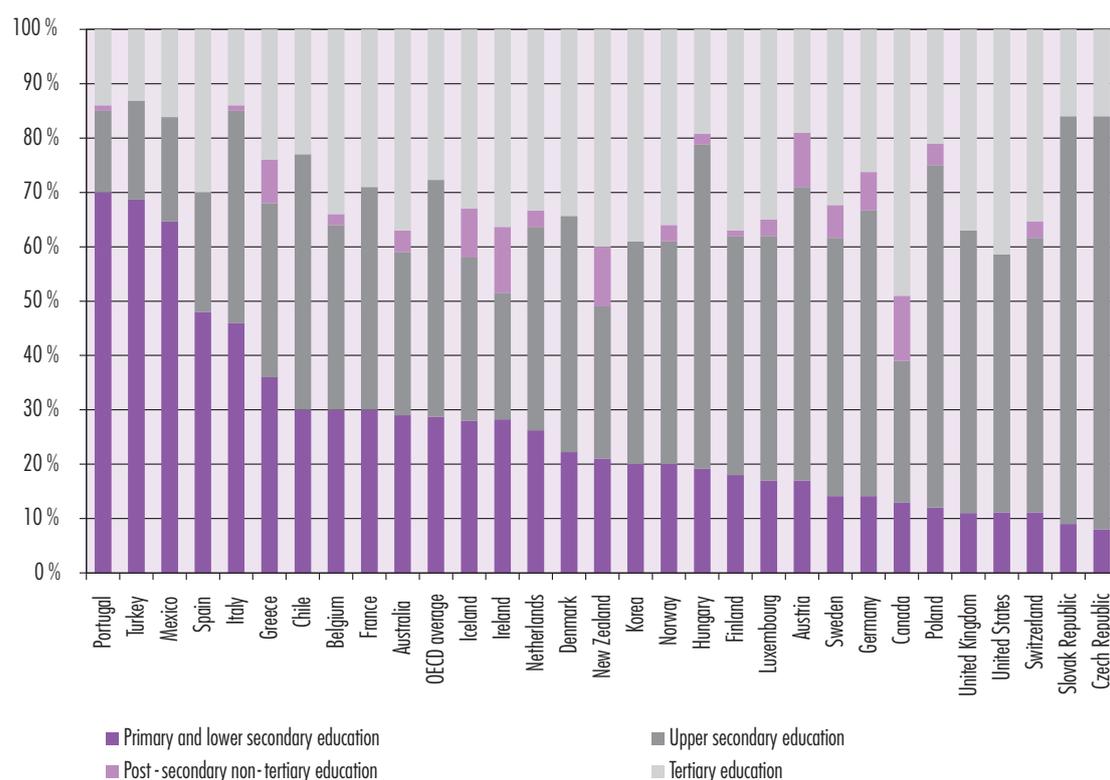
Education providers have autonomy at a local level. The Finnish National Board of Education provides national core curricula for basic and upper secondary education, but more specific curricula are created at a local level.

Highly educated population as a resource

Differences in the level of education between age groups are quite pronounced in Finland. While 90% of the 25–34 age group have completed a post-compulsory qualification, the equivalent proportion for those aged 55 to 64 is 67%. The entire Finnish population aged between 25 and 64 is somewhat better educated than the OECD average (figure 1.). The proportion of higher education graduates is close to the top OECD countries: the only countries where the proportion of higher education graduates is clearly higher are Canada, the United States, New Zealand and South Korea. At the same time, however, almost a fifth of the working-age population have only completed compulsory education, while the equivalent proportion in countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia is 10% or less. The number of people without any post-compulsory schooling is, nevertheless, decreasing rapidly. In 2009, 38% of the 60–64 age group did not have any post-compulsory qualifications, while the equivalent proportion in the 55–59 age group, for example, only accounted for 28%.

Over a third of the entire adult population (those aged 25–64) have completed a university or polytechnic degree (ISCED 5A and 6). (The proportion of people with a higher education degree is still growing, as the proportion among those aged 25–34 is already almost 40%.) The graduation rate in advanced research programmes (ISCED 6) is among the highest in the OECD countries at 2.5%. Only Switzerland and Sweden exceed 3% and the OECD average is essentially lower at 1.5%.

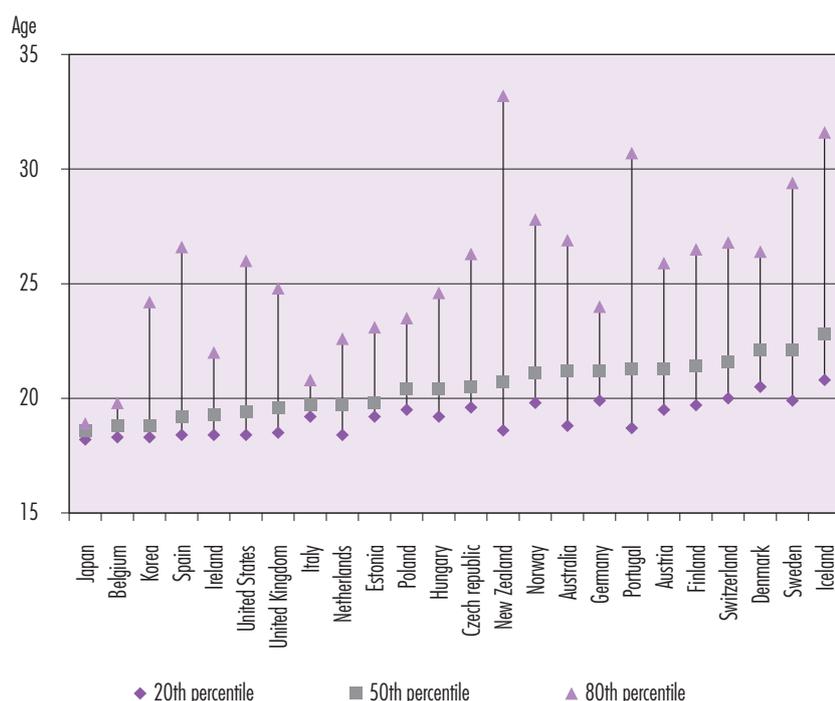
Figure 10.1. Educational attainment: adult population (2009)
Distribution of the 25–64-year-old population, by highest level of education attained



Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2011

Universities apply the so-called *numerus clausus* principle, which means that not all applicants are admitted to the programme of their choice. This, combined with universal national service for men, explains the slow transition to higher education in international terms: Finns start their higher education studies at a later age than their peers in many other countries. More than 80% of young Japanese people have already enrolled at higher education institutions at a time when not even one fifth of Finns have started their studies.

The median age of entrants to higher education in Finland is 21.4 years, while the figure for Japan, Belgium and South Korea is less than 19 (figure 2.). Then again, the median age in Iceland, Sweden and Denmark is more than 22 years. Over 40% of students completing upper secondary school start studying at a higher education institution immediately after their upper secondary studies. One fifth of Finnish higher education entrants will only start their studies after their 26th birthday.

Figure 10.2. Age distribution of new entrants (2009) to higher education (ISCED 5A)

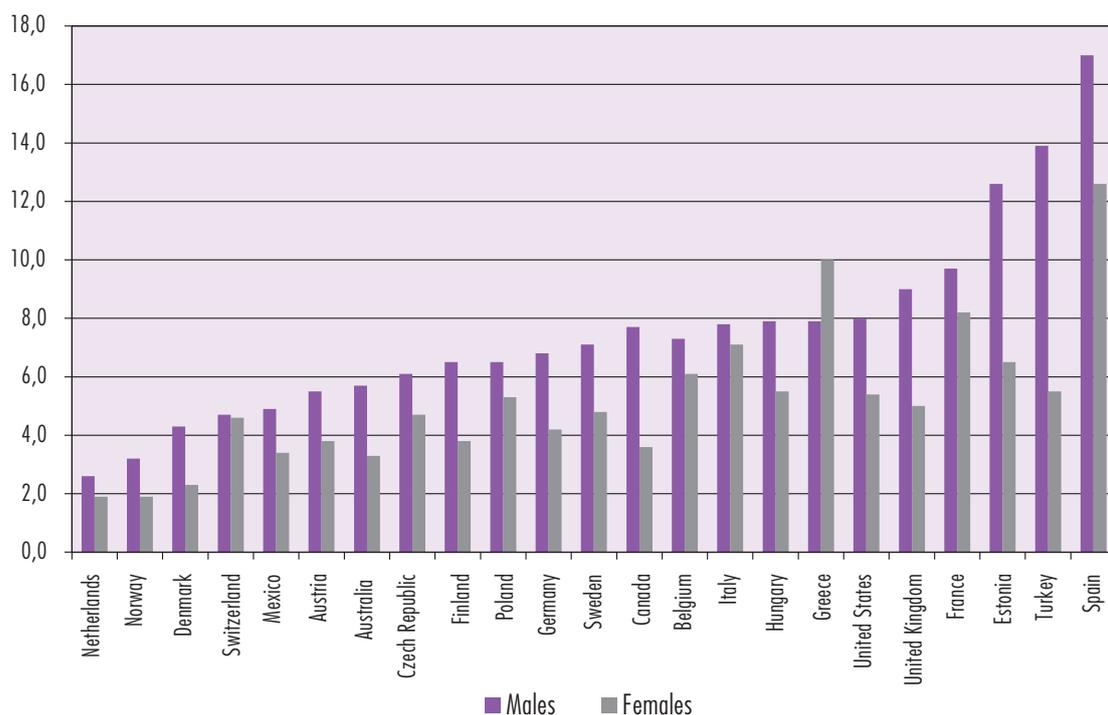
Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2011

Education and employment

Finland's most important resource to guarantee welfare is the high level of competence of the population. This is why it is considered important to ensure that no-one is left without an education. Unemployment rates among young people have climbed throughout the OECD countries due to the recent economic turmoil. In 2009, about 6% of young Finns aged between 15 and 29 are neither studying nor at work (figure 3.). The proportion is clearly smaller than in countries such as the UK, France and Germany, on the one hand, but higher than countries like the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, on the other. The proportion of those outside both employment and education is highest among the 20–24 age group. This is partially due to the fact that not all applicants are admitted to the higher education programme of their choice on completion of their upper secondary studies.

In Finland, women are in the majority at all levels of education with the exception of basic education, that is, primary and lower secondary levels. Accordingly, the proportion of women aged 15 to 29 not in education and unemployed is slightly lower than the corresponding proportion among men, even though the employment rate is lower among women than among men.

Figure 10.3. Percentage of the cohort population not in education and unemployed (2009), age group 15–29, all levels of education.



Source: OECD, Education at a Glance 2011

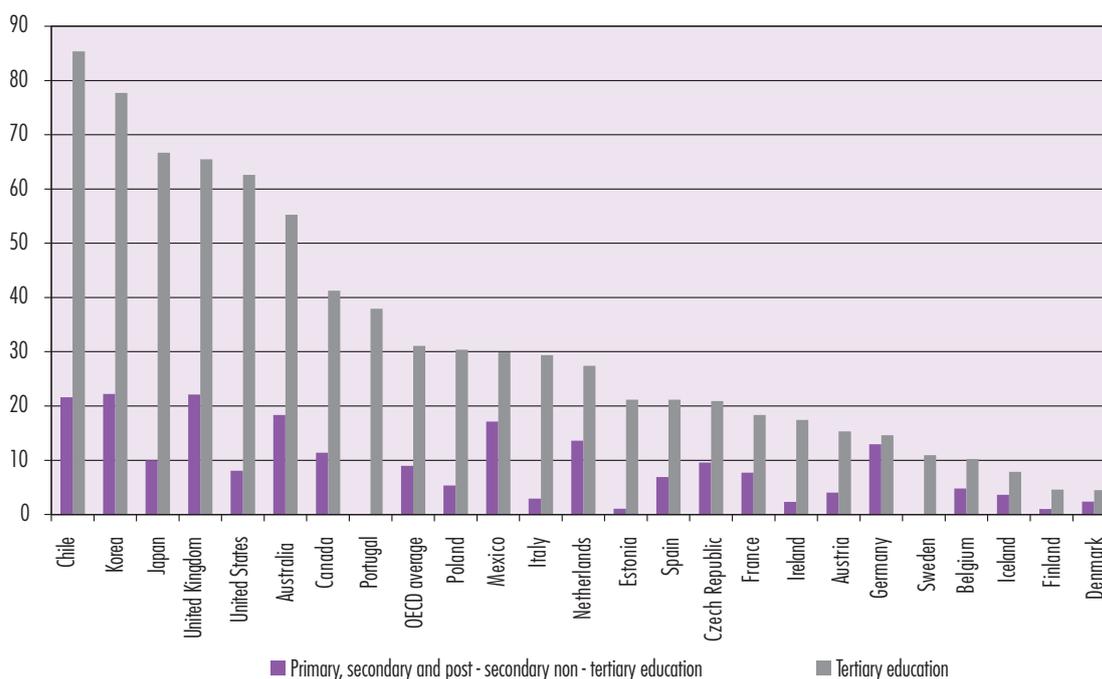
In international terms, young Finns spend a long time in education. In 2009, 41% of people aged 20 to 29 were in education, whereas the OECD average for this age group was 26%. Denmark and Iceland were the only other countries with 35% or more of young people in that age group enrolled in education.

Educational expenditure at a reasonable level

In Finland, provision within the formal education system is mostly financed through public funding. All education providers, both municipal and private bodies, receive state subsidies on the same grounds. The majority of providers of basic and upper secondary education are local authorities or joint municipal authorities, while the number of private schools is quite small. Education and training provided by public institutions is free of charge for students and their parents at all levels of education from pre-primary to higher education.

Even though most primary and secondary education is publicly funded everywhere, there is a sharp contrast with the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan, whose tertiary education relies on private funding, mostly in terms of tuition fees. The share of private expenditure spent on educational institutions (all levels) in 2008 was 2.6%, which is the lowest among OECD countries, the OECD average being 16.5%.

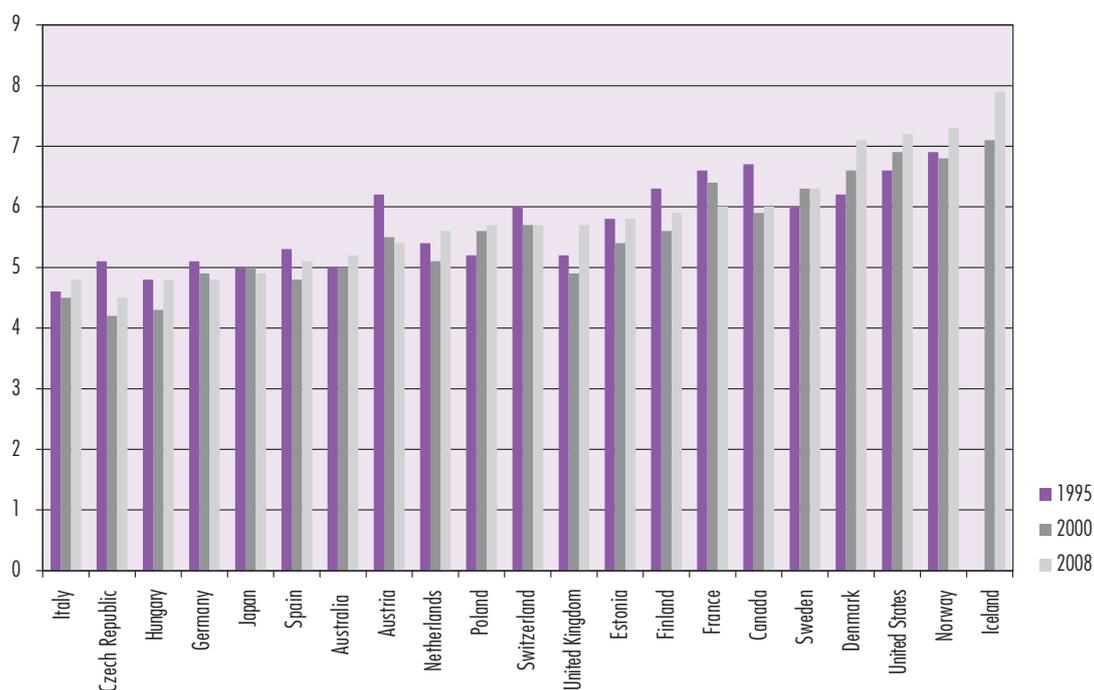
Figure 10.4. Relative proportions of private expenditure on educational institutions, as a percentage, by level of education (2008)



Source: Education at a Glance 2011, OECD

The total educational expenditure for 2008 (figure 5.) in Finland accounted for 5.9% of the GDP, which is exactly the same as the OECD average. In 1995, the GDP percentage was clearly higher (6.3%). At the time, Finland was undergoing a period of deep recession and the GDP had been dropping for several years, but policy-makers had still tried to exercise more restraint in curtailing educational expenditure compared with other expenditure. That was a period when the level of Finland's educational expenditure was close to the highest expenditure in the OECD, that is, that of Canada (6.7%). In 2008, Finland was far behind the country with the highest relative educational expenditure i.e. Iceland, where its GDP percentage was 7.9%.

Figure 10.5. Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP (1995, 2000, 2008), total all levels of education



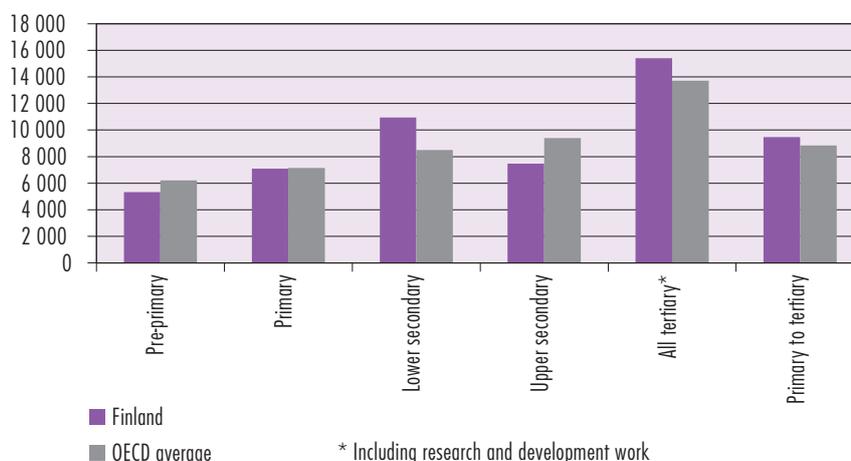
Source: Education at a Glance 2011, OECD

When compared internationally, educational expenditure is highest in Finland at lower secondary and higher education levels, where Finland's expenditure exceeds the OECD average. Nevertheless, at 15,400 US dollars per student (incl. R&D expenditure), expenditure on higher education, for example, was about half the amount spent on higher education in the United States (figure 6.).

The main part of educational expenditure is made up of payroll expenses. In Finland, education at the lower secondary level of basic education is provided by subject teachers and the average class size is relatively small, less than 20 pupils. In other words, there are about ten pupils to each lower secondary teacher, which means that expenditure is higher when compared with the primary level, where all subjects are generally taught by a single class teacher. In Finland, one meal per day, instruction materials and transport to school are provided free of charge. These benefits increase the costs of education for the municipalities and the state.

Higher education expenditure per student reflects, first and foremost, the education policy decision to invest in a high level of competence. Investments focus on university and polytechnic R&D activities in particular; the proportion of expenditure per student in these areas is clearly above the OECD average.

Figure 10.6. Annual expenditure on educational institutions per student for all services in Finland and OECD average (2008)
In equivalent US\$ converted using PPPs for GDP, by level of education, based on full-time equivalents



Source: Education at a Glance 2011, OECD

Instruction and teachers

In Poland, the number of instruction hours specified in the basic education curriculum is the lowest of all OECD countries. Polish 7–14-year-olds receive 4,715 compulsory hours of instruction, while the OECD average is 6,496 hours. At 5,750 hours, Finland ranks third lowest behind Poland and Estonia (figure 7.). The highest number of compulsory hours of instruction within the OECD can be found in Italy with 8,300 hours. In Finland, the minimum number of lesson hours is determined in the Government Decree on the distribution of lesson hours. The minimum lesson hours determined in the Government Decree for each subject or subject group comprise the education that every child is entitled to receive. However, education providers – mostly local authorities – usually provide more instruction than required by the Government Decree.

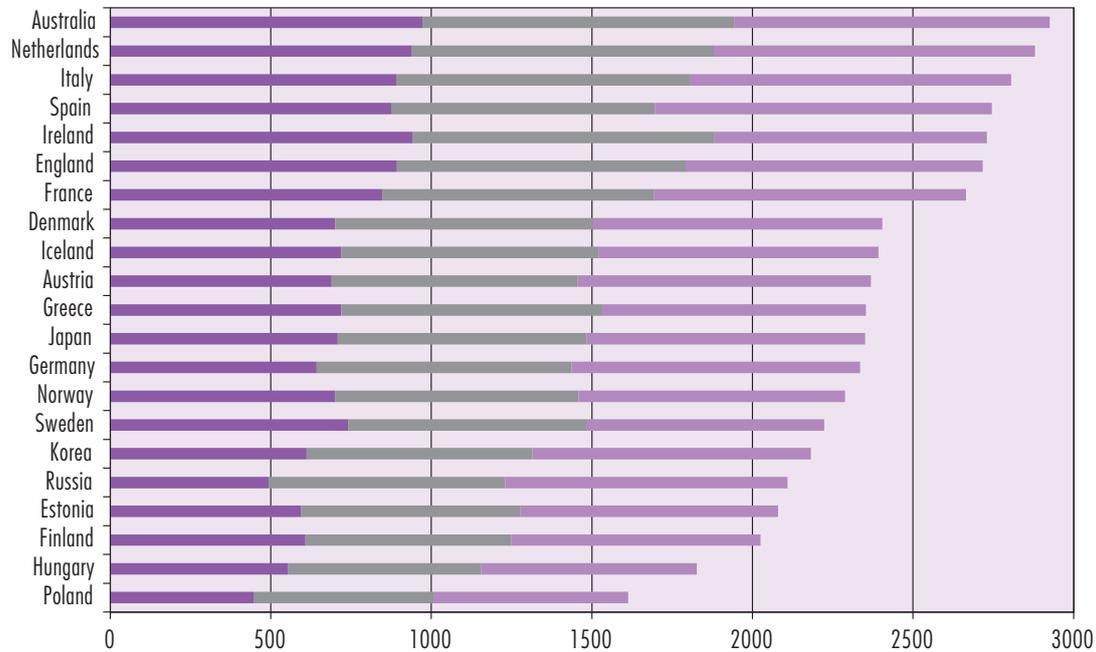
In addition, teachers' teaching duties in Finland are among the lowest in the OECD. Greece and Poland are the only countries with lower amounts of teaching time. While the annual teaching hours for lower secondary teachers in the United States and Mexico totalled more than 1,000 hours in 2009, the figure for Greece, Poland and Finland remained under 600 hours, being only just over 400 hours in Greece.

Class teachers provide instruction in grades 1–6 of basic education that is at primary level and have the highest number of teaching hours, totalling 677 hours per year. This is one of the lowest figures among OECD countries. In grades 7–9 of basic education, that is, at lower secondary level, instruction is provided by subject teachers, whose annual teaching hours are less than that, totalling 592 hours. US lower secondary teachers have almost double the number of teaching hours of their Finnish counterparts.

Among general education teachers, upper secondary school teachers have the lowest number of teaching hours, 550 per year. However, this is clearly more when compared with their Danish counterparts, whose annual teaching hours amount to less than 400. However, the number of teaching hours does not reflect the teachers' total workload. In

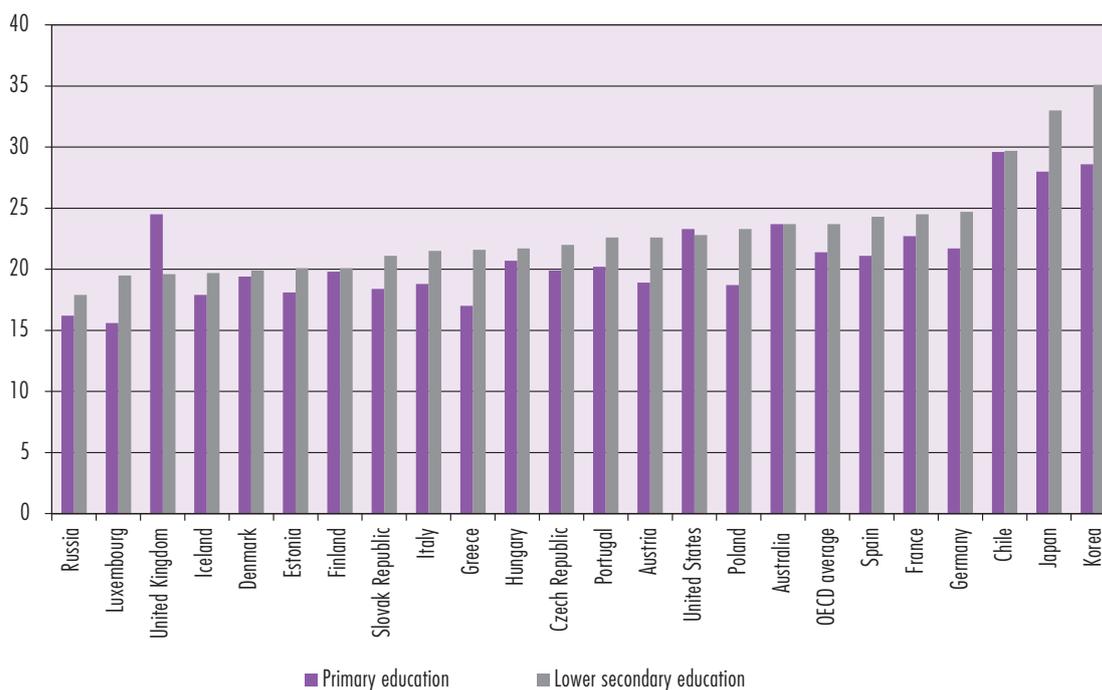
addition to teaching, teachers also participate in joint planning of teaching and naturally spend time planning and preparing their own classes.

Figure 10.7. Compulsory and intended instruction time in public institutions (2009)
Average number of hours per year of total instruction time in the curriculum for 7–8, 9–11 and 12–14-year-olds



Source: Education at a Glance 2011, OECD

Finnish comprehensive school classes are smaller than the OECD average (figure 8). The smaller average class size can largely be attributed to the fact that there are plenty of small schools in Finland's sparsely populated areas. Just over a quarter of all comprehensive schools have less than 50 pupils. The average class size for grades 1–6 of basic education is 19.8 pupils, while the OECD average is 21.4 pupils. In grades 7–9, the average class size is 20.1 pupils in Finland, while the OECD average is 23.7 pupils.

Figure 10.8. Average class size by level of education (2009)

Source: Education at a Glance 2011, OECD

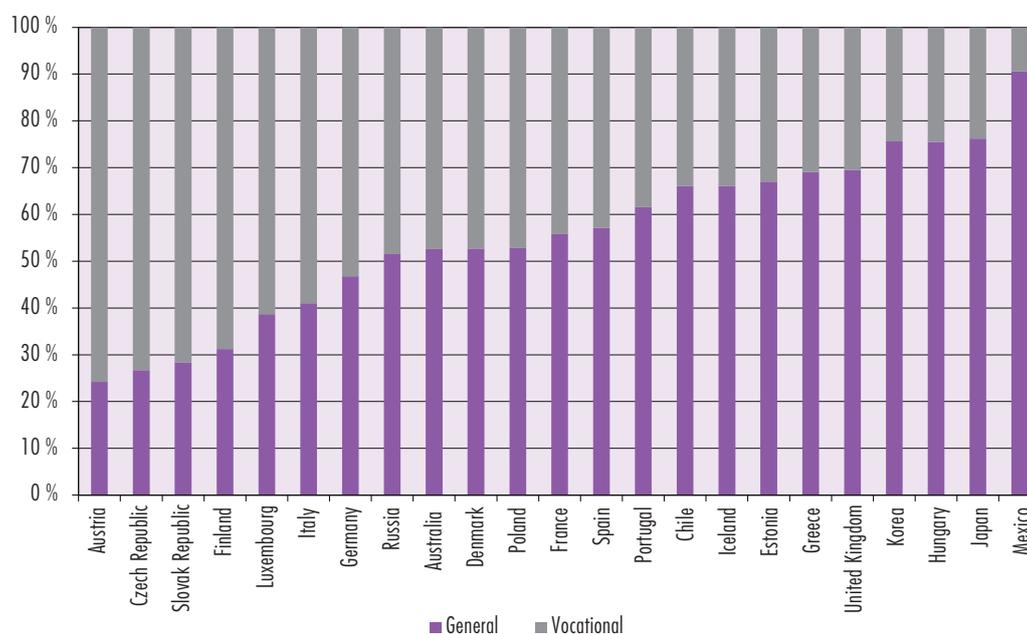
In terms of pay, Finnish teachers are ranked at the OECD average level when compared using purchasing power parity (PPP). The starting salary of Finnish primary education class teachers is more than triple the amount paid to teachers in Poland, but only two thirds of a German teacher's salary.

Vocational education and training is popular

In Finland, upper secondary level is divided into general upper secondary education and vocational education and training. Both types of education have a nominal length of three years and provide eligibility to apply for higher education. In recent years, vocational education and training has become more popular. In 1998, 35% and 54% of those leaving basic education moved immediately to vocational education and training and upper secondary school, respectively, while another 3% continued in voluntary additional basic education and 8% did not continue to the next level immediately after finishing basic education. In 2009, a total of 41% and 50% of those finishing basic education moved on to vocational education and training and upper secondary school, respectively, while 2% continued in voluntary additional basic education and 7% did not continue their studies immediately.

In international terms, the number of vocational students in proportion to those in general education is high in Finland (figure 9.). Two thirds of upper secondary students are in vocational programmes, whereas the proportion in Japan and Mexico is less than one quarter.

Figure 10.9. Upper secondary enrolment patterns (2009)

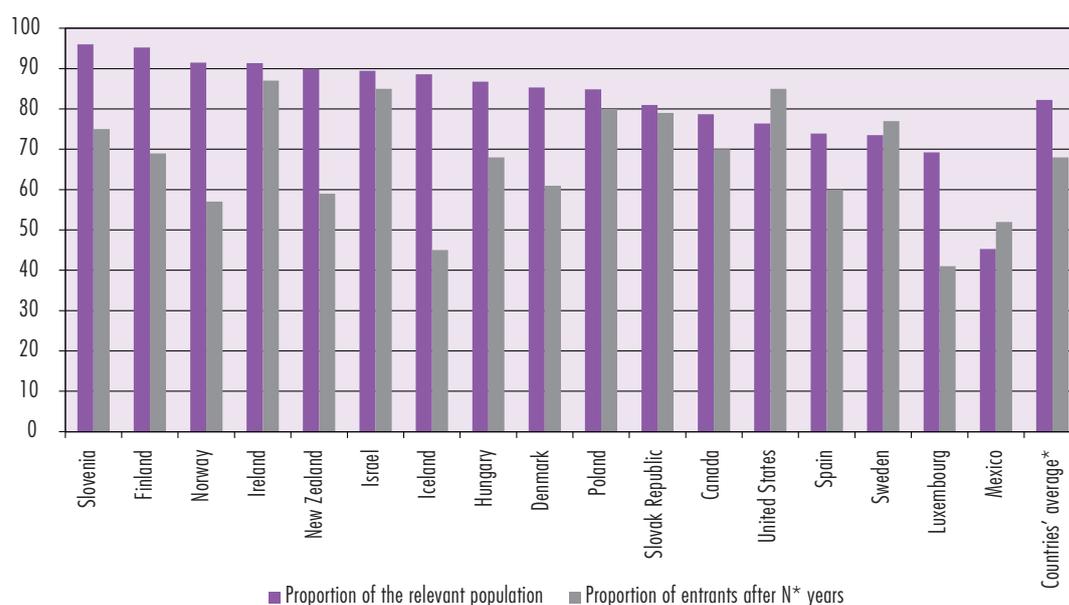


Source: Education at a Glance 2011, OECD

Most young people finish upper secondary education

In Finland, the proportion of young people graduating from upper secondary education during their lifetime is among the highest in OECD countries. As a share of the relevant population (in Finland 19-year olds), 95% of young Finnish people acquire an upper secondary degree. In Sweden and Spain, for example, the proportion is only 74%. It must be noted, however, that although most young people graduate from upper secondary education and training at the age of 18-20 years in Finland and other Nordic countries, more than 10% of upper secondary graduates are over 25 years old.

Of those people entering upper secondary training, the share of graduates is smaller: only 69% of Finnish students graduate within the preferred time (in Finland 3 years), whereas the proportion is 77% in Sweden and 87% in Ireland. However, when extending the observed period by two years, the proportion of graduates climbs to 80%. By contrast, in many countries such as Ireland, Poland and the United States, extending the observation period has no effect on the proportion of graduates (figure 10.).

Figure 10.10. Upper secondary graduation rates in some OECD countries (2009)

*N=the normal time allocated for completing an upper secondary programme

Source: Education at a Glance 2011, OECD

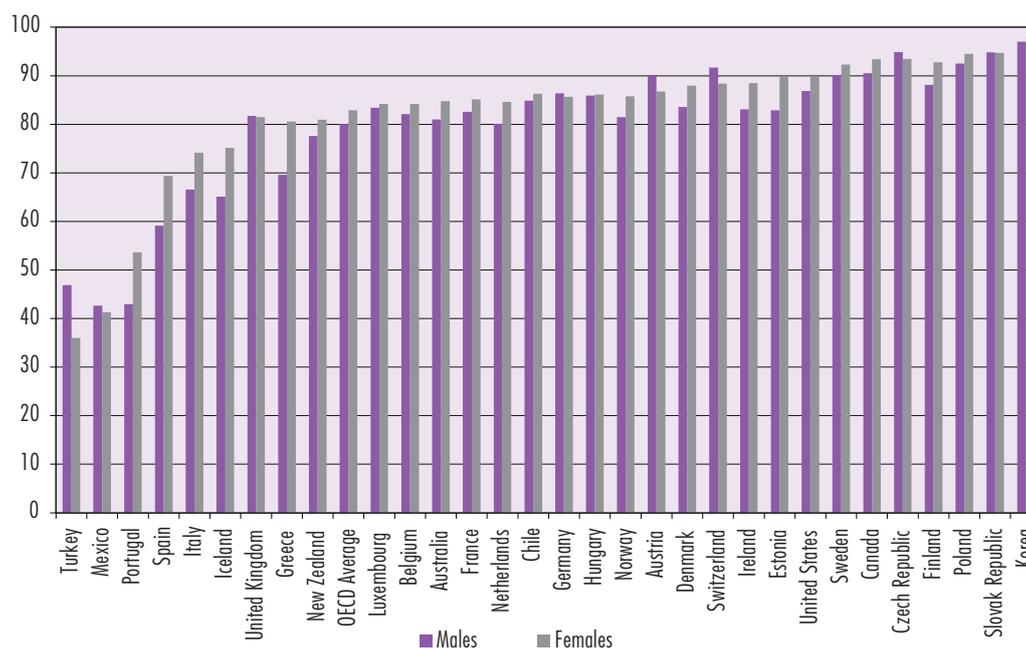
Finnish women receive more education than men

In international terms, Finns participate in formal education very actively. Boys are in the majority at comprehensive school, because virtually all children go to comprehensive school and there are always more boys than girls within the young population. Women account for 57% of upper secondary school students, 51% of students on all types of upper secondary and further vocational programmes and 55% of all polytechnic students. Of all university students, 53% are women, accounting for 55% at Bachelor level, a slight minority or 49.5% at Masters level, and 53% in postgraduate (third-cycle) higher education.

The choices of study fields are, however, relatively traditional in Finland. In the field of health and welfare, 86% of students are women; the OECD average is 75%. In the field of engineering, manufacturing and construction the situation is the opposite. In Finland, 23% of students are women, when the OECD average is 26%.

Finnish women's high level of education is also visible in comparisons of the population's level of education. South Korea, Slovakia and the Czech Republic are the only OECD countries where the proportion of women with post-compulsory qualifications is higher than in Finland, when examining the 25–34 age group. In 2009, nearly 92% of women had completed a post-compulsory qualification in Finland, whereas the figure for men was 88% (figure 11.).

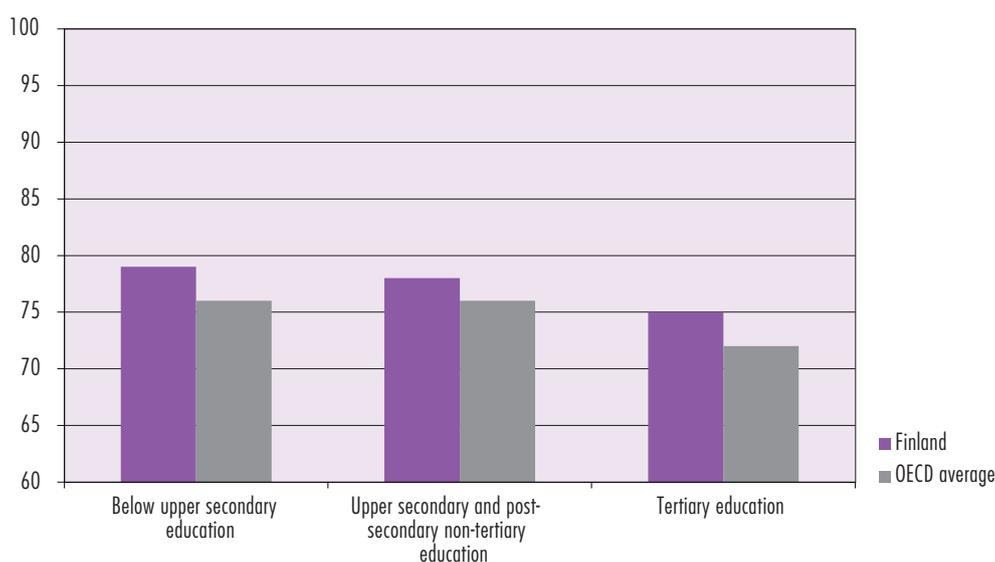
Figure 10.11. Population (25–34 year-olds) with at least upper secondary education (2009) by gender.



Source: OECD INES project, web-table, 2011

The higher education level of Finnish women cannot, however, be seen in their pay levels when compared with men. The higher the level of education, the more women's pay falls behind that of men. On average, women's pay in 2009 accounted for 79% of men's pay among those without any post-compulsory schooling, while the figures for those with upper secondary certificates and higher education degrees were 78 and 75% of men's pay level, respectively (figure 12.).

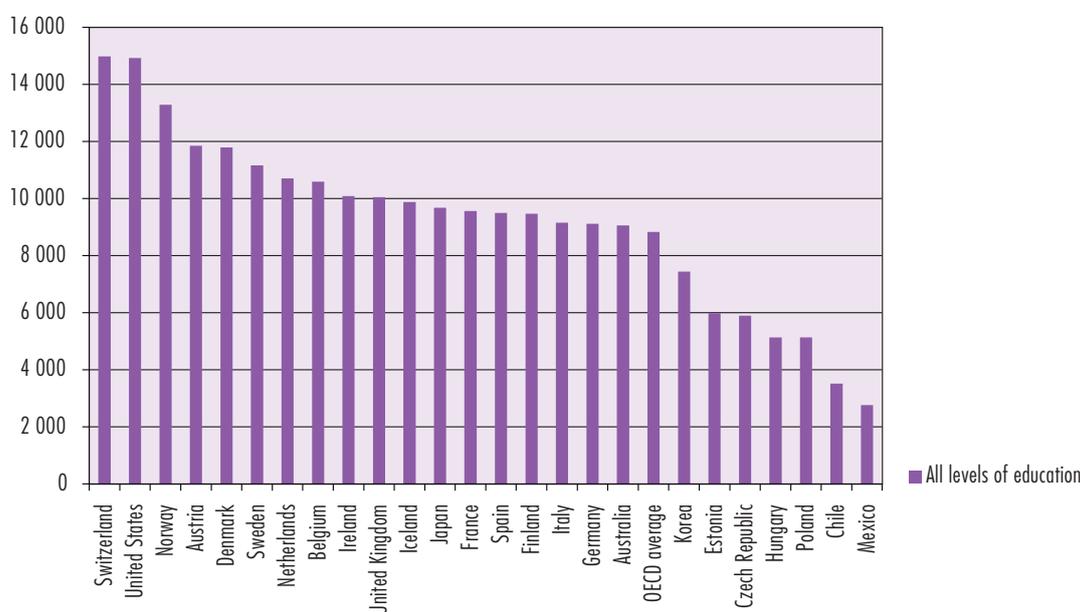
Figure 10.12. Differences in earnings between females and males (2008)
Average annual full-time, full year earnings of females as a percentage of earnings of males by level of education, 25–64 year-olds



Social background does not determine educational performance

The results of PISA 2009 indicate that socio-economic background has a relatively weak link with students' skills in Finland. The relationship between students' reading performance and their socio-economic status was examined by measuring the change in average reading performance points brought about by one unit increase in the index of socio-economic status. The findings show that socio-economic background is associated with reading performance in all countries, but differences are smaller in Finland than in most OECD countries. In Finland, one unit increase in socio-economic status attributes to 31 extra points in reading performance, while the numbers in Sweden, the United Kingdom and France are 43, 44 and 51, respectively (figure 13.). Overall, the countries with the highest reading performance, namely Korea, Finland and Canada are also the countries where the link between background and performance is the weakest.

Figure 10.13. Difference in reading performance between students from different socio-economic backgrounds (score point difference per one unit increase in socio-economic index) (PISA 2009)



Source: Education at a Glance 2011, OECD

In PISA surveys in 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009 Finland has been among the top countries in the overall performance level in all tested subjects. At the same time, the differences between schools have been the smallest among those countries that participated in the surveys. Uniform quality in education irrespective of the location of the school is one of the major characteristics of Finnish education.

An English chapter on international comparisons of some of the features of the Finnish education and training system is also included in the 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2009 publications. These can be downloaded at http://www.opb.fi/tietopalvelut/tilastotiedot/koulujen_maaralliset_indikaattorit.