



Letter from Finland

Words **Jouni Valijarvi**

The Finns hold teachers in high esteem and set great store by classroom assessment, which extends to students assessing themselves in a meaningful way

The Finnish education system is underpinned by the principle that, as a relatively wealthy country with a small population, every child should receive a high-quality education that matches their specific needs and interests.

Schools and teachers therefore have considerable autonomy in organising their work around the core national curriculum.

The shift away from a heavily centralised education system began in the 1980s, and today local authorities are in the main responsible for allocating funds and evaluating the progress of each school.

Pre-school education starts at the age of six and compulsory education is between seven and 16 with the move from primary to secondary school taking place at around 12. Afterwards, students spend up to three years at either a vocational school, which may include apprenticeship training, or at a more academic upper secondary school which offers the main route to university. Fewer than three per cent of students attend private schools. In secondary school, the ratio of teachers to students is around one to 20.

There have never been standard examinations for all students either during or at the end of compulsory education, although some large local authorities organise their own tests.

The whole education system relies very much on the integrity of teachers, their professional skills and ethics. This is why the teaching profession is seen as one of the most important in society with considerable resources invested in teacher training.

The focus on developing assessment techniques has always been at classroom level both to support individual learning and to teach students to assess themselves in a meaningful way. This has meant more investment in teacher education than



FINNISH STUDENTS BENEFIT FROM A PERSONALISED APPROACH TO LEARNING

external evaluation and a master's degree is the minimum requirement for a permanent teaching post.

School performance is assessed nationally in most subjects by sampling between seven and 10 per cent of students' work across the country, using the same testing materials. International comparative studies, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa), are also used to track progress.

Students reaching the end of upper secondary school take a matriculation examination which plays an important part in the university selection process.

The examination is administered and delivered through the Matriculation Examination Board (MEB) whose composition is decided by the Ministry of Education with help from the universities and higher education institutes.

Candidates take at least four tests and one, in the candidate's mother tongue, is compulsory. Three other tests are then chosen from a list that includes another national language such as Swedish, a foreign language, mathematics and general studies which covers science and humanities. Although, strictly speaking, the tests are not standardised, the overall results are compared with those of previous years.

Individual results are determined both by the student's teacher and markers hired by the MEB.

An increasing number of students from vocational schools now take the examination, pushing the annual number of candidates towards 40,000.

Official school inspections were abolished in the early 1990s and legislation in 1999 set guidelines about how schools should be evaluated. The emphasis is on outcomes but these do not determine funding

allocations and there is no ranking of individual schools.

A fundamental principle of Finnish education policy is that the results of evaluation for individual schools are only reported to the schools concerned. This helps ensure mutual trust and co-operation between schools and evaluators as well as high response rates to questionnaires.

In 2003, an independent Education Evaluation Council was created with the aim of reinforcing the role of evaluation in developing education and promoting cooperation and the flow of information between organisations.

The increasing need for information through evaluation is partly the result of decentralisation, which has resulted in a more diverse range of education institutions and an increase in the options they provide.

In some of the larger authorities, evaluation is quite sophisticated. Helsinki, for example, has focused on the learning achievements and related trends of entire age groups, including students' learning-to-learn skills in different schools.

Evaluation guidelines for local authorities and education institutions are provided by the National Board of Education (NBE) which uses various indicators to inform policy-makers about long-term trends and the operational capacity of the education system.

The NBE evaluates both the state of education at national level and the performance of various education sectors, drawing on information provided by provincial and local authorities as well as the institutions themselves.

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