

Speech by Mr. Juha Pyykkö, Ambassador of Finland, at an Education Congress, in Athens, on 1 November 2019

Education System of Finland adapting to a changing world

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking the organizers of this event for inviting me to share my thoughts about the Finnish education system and some of the topical and hopefully relevant aspects of it here in Greece. In the next 20 minutes or so, I will first introduce to you some basic features of the Finnish education system and then address more specifically three dynamic sub-issues, namely, the importance of teacher education, the new Finnish core curriculum and its interactive approach, and finally the increasing significance of vocational education and training. In all of these three sub-themes, I will highlight the need of the education system to adapt to a constantly changing world. Overall, looking into the future and foresight activities in order to be able to adapt to change have a very strong standing in the Finnish society.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Finland celebrated the centenary of its independence in 2017. Greece was among the first countries to recognize the independence of Finland in early January 1918. This year, Finland and Greece are celebrating the centenary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The story of independent Finland from poverty some hundred years ago to today's prosperity is an interesting one especially in view of today's discussions here. The development of our society, economy, nation and welfare has been based on knowledge and expertise – the realization that all citizens need equal learning opportunities irrespective of their domicile, gender, socio-economic status or linguistic and cultural background.

We believe education creates well-being, builds democracy and reduces inequalities between regions and social groups. As we Finns are only 5,5 million, we cannot afford to leave anyone behind. Our excellence in education, as assessed internationally, as well, is based on equality, trust and flexibility. Foresight and development based on research data and benchmarking are key strengths in Finland's educational system.

One of the most notable events in the history of Finland was the introduction of the Finnish comprehensive school system. It is also one of the mainstays of our well-being. In the wake of industrialization in Finland, new types of education were needed, and a consensus agreement was reached in the 1960's to provide high-quality comprehensive school education for the whole population regardless of social background or geographical location. The comprehensive school system has been the foundation on which further reforms of education policies have been carried out throughout the decades.

Finland has a flexible education model. At the general level, this is a relevant and important starting point in view of adapting to a changing world. Learning is tailored to individual needs. Children are not expected to make binding decisions at an early stage about their future careers, for example. Instead, the road is left open all the way up to higher education, with no paths leading to a dead end. Our schools help students grow into citizens with global outlook.

Most education in Finland is publicly funded, and most institutions providing basic and upper secondary level education are maintained by local authorities or joint municipal consortia. Education is free at all levels from pre-primary to tertiary education. Responsibility for educational funding is divided between the State and the local authorities. 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.

Pre-primary and basic education are part of the municipal basic services that receive statutory government transfers which are 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 25 percent of the calculatory costs. To an extent, the funding is used to adapt to new important developments such as digitalization.

Finland's educational administration is firmly grounded in the idea of providing schools with autonomy and support. This is central to the idea of adapting education to a changing world. Centralized steering takes place by means of objectives specified in legislation and based on the national core curriculum which is renewed approximately every ten years. Local authorities, most commonly at the level of municipalities or joint municipal authorities, are responsible for organizing education and implementing the national objectives with a view of developing and renewing it in order to adapt to change in the surrounding reality. They make the decisions on allocation of funding, local curricula and recruitment of personnel.

The municipalities have also the autonomy to delegate the decision-making power to the schools. Beyond that, schools and teachers have wide autonomy in how they provide instruction and what its contents are. 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 are the responsibility of the schools. Typically the principals recruit the staff of their schools. Teachers have pedagogical autonomy. They can decide themselves the methods of teaching as well as textbooks and materials.

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teachers are recognized as keys to quality in education in Finland. Therefore continuous attention is paid to both their pre-service and continuing education. Teachers from pre-primary classes all the way to university level are highly qualified and committed. They are required to have a Master's degree, including pedagogical studies and teaching practice. Since the teaching profession is very popular in Finland, universities can select the most motivated, talented and suitable applicants.

The high level of training is seen as necessary as teachers in Finland are very autonomous professionally. Teachers are highly respected professionals, work independently and enjoy professional autonomy. At most levels of education the teachers are required to participate in continuing training every year as part of their agreement on salaries. Finnish teachers consider continuing training as a privilege and therefore participate actively. Through the development of teacher education and teachers' continuing education during their professional career the education system can be adapted to changing needs in the society. Teacher education is research-based and the teaching profession is very popular and highly respected in Finnish society.

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the new national core curriculum for basic education has been in force since autumn 2016. All relevant stakeholders were included in its development so that various views in the society could be acknowledged. One important starting point in the revision of the foundations for the new national core curriculum was the constant change in the operating environment. Active involvement of pupils, meaningfulness, joy of learning and interaction between pupils and teachers are at the core of the new curriculum in order to have pupils and students assume an active way of life, experiment with different languages and take a proactive role in building the future. No extra tutoring outside school hours is needed.

The fundamental value in the new national core curriculum is that every pupil is unique and has the right to high-quality education. Pupils are heard, valued and encouraged. Teachers are more like couches of learning. Pupils are guided towards a sustainable way of life and understanding the importance of sustainable development. The school culture makes these values concrete.

The aim is a school that functions as a learning organization that takes care of the safety and well-being of each and every member of the community, systematically promotes versatile working approaches as well as cooperation and interaction, is aware of different languages and sees culture as a richness, promotes participation and democracy, promotes equity and equality, and takes responsibility for the environment and focuses on a sustainable future.

The aim is that pupils will understand the relationship and interdependences between different learning contents, be able to combine the knowledge and practical skills provided by different subjects to form meaningful wholes, and be able to adopt and use these in collaborative learning. The seven transversal competences that are aimed at are thinking and learning-to-learn, cultural competence, interaction and expression, taking care of oneself by managing daily life, multiliteracy, ICT competence, working life competence and entrepreneurship, and participation, involvement and building a sustainable future.

Multidisciplinary learning modules are tools for integrating learning and for increasing the dialogue between different subjects. They provide an opportunity of adapting education and learning to topical, emerging themes and changing needs. It is compulsory for the schools to organize one such module at least once every school year. The core curriculum obliges the schools to plan and implement these in cooperation between different subjects and involving pupils in their planning. They contain integrative instruction techniques aimed at giving space for intellectual curiosity, experiences and creativity and challenging pupils to engage in many types of interaction and situations. Apart from these obligations, the municipalities and schools have the freedom to plan the modules according to local needs and interests.

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vocational competences are vital for any country's economic competitiveness and prosperity. Future labour markets demand diverse vocational skills, strong competences, and the continued renewal of these skills. Ensuring high-level quality education so that we can safeguard a competent labour force both in good times and bad times is crucial. Better competencies and education and research that are more international help revamp society.

The mission of vocational education and training (VET) in Finland is to foster the skills required in working life, promote employment and self-employment, develop the world of work and support individuals' lifelong learning. At large, the supply and development of VET are based on long-term national anticipation, involving the quantitative anticipation of labour force and training needs, and the qualitative anticipation of competence needs in a constantly changing environment.

More than 90 percent of each age group moves on to general or vocational upper secondary studies immediately after basic education. Vocational education and training (VET) has been steadily becoming more appealing. At present, half of all comprehensive school leavers apply to VET and half to general upper secondary education. The general public's perception of VET is also very favourable. All those who complete upper secondary education, both general and vocational, become eligible for higher education. In Finland, VET is organized by different types of education providers: municipalities, joint municipal authorities, the State and the private sector. An authorization to provide education is required.

Vocational education and training is planned, implemented and evaluated in collaboration with working life through a demand-driven approach. 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. The basic principles of the VET comprise work-life orientation, focus on learning outcomes, modularity as well as individuality and flexibility.

VET covers many fields of education and hundreds of vocational qualifications. The biggest VET sectors in Finland are technology, communications and transport, social services and health and sports. 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. VET can be completed in the form of school-based training or apprenticeship training. Degree studies at universities of applied sciences 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. Receiving VET or completing a qualification in Finland is mainly cost free.

The recent reform of the vocational education aimed at updating the entire vocational education and training. VET for young people and adults was consolidated, forming a single entity with its own steering and regulation system and financial model with a demand-driven approach. Education is regulated through a single authorization license, and education providers have increased freedom in organizing their activities. Education is competence-based and customer-oriented: Each student is offered the possibility to design an individually appropriate path to finishing an entire qualification or a supplementary skill set. The primary importance is on what the student learns and is able to do. Learning in the workplace is increased.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Finland, for a long time, we have believed in the importance of life-long education and learning. Around half of the adult population in Finland participates in adult education. This is one way of adapting to change around us. Study opportunities are available at all educational levels. Educational institutions catering for liberal adult education offer a wide range of both subject studies and recreational activities. This is the spirit that encapsulates the notion of having education at the heart of society.

Thank you for your attention.