Finland: The global leader in educating for the future

Not content with the status quo, Finland continues to look for ways to innovate in education

It might seem risky for one of the world’s most lauded education systems to experiment with its approach to learning, but Finland launched just such an experiment in 2016, mandating all its schools adopt collaborative teaching methods, with the aim of better preparing students for the challenges they will face in the coming decades. It is one of the reasons why Finland rose from third place in the last iteration to the top position in the 2018 Worldwide Educating For the Future Index, developed by The Economist Intelligence Unit and commissioned by the Yidan Prize Foundation.

Finland’s performance is strong across most of the index, ranking first in policy environment and a very close second in socio-economic environment. A somewhat lower ranking in the teaching environment category points to areas where improvement is called for, including in elements of school administration.

Policy: not resting on laurels

The system-wide shift mentioned above involves the adoption of “phenomenon-based learning”, which is a multi-disciplinary approach to inculcating 21st-century skills. One of its defining elements is a focus on studying practical, real-world phenomena, in place of facts organised around discrete subjects. “The future calls for more broad-based knowledge and the skills to apply this knowledge,” says Sanni Grahn-Laasonen, Finland’s minister of education. “Phenomenon-based learning allows for building bridges between school subjects, learning about how things relate to each other and applying one’s knowledge to an existing phenomenon in the world. It allows for learning both in and outside of the school, exploring different perspectives and applying different individual learning styles.”

Phenomenon-based learning is being implemented as a complement to, rather than substitute for, more traditional subject-based learning in Finnish schools. Subjects such as maths, history and geography, the minister adds, remain core to the education system. With its mandatory nature, however, the new approach represents a break from the past, and its progress is likely to be followed closely by educators in other parts of the world.

Finland’s policy leadership rests as much on its thoroughness of implementation as on its innovative thinking. In the index it earns the highest scores for its attention

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1 See for example Penny Spiller, “Could subjects soon be a thing of the past in Finland?”, BBC News, May 29th 2017
to the curriculum and assessment frameworks that support its future skills strategy. These, along with overall education strategy, have all been reviewed in the past year. The upper-secondary curriculum, for example, is now aligned with the needs of phenomenon-based learning. School assessments conducted by the Finnish National Agency for Education likewise evaluate how phenomenon-based learning is being implemented by administrators and teachers.2

“Everyone must learn to think critically and creatively,” says Ms Grahn-Laasonen. “Our new National Core Curriculum includes cross-cutting, broad-based competences, such as multiliteracy, civic responsibility and taking care of the environment. These must be taken into account in all teaching.”

An important element of a future-skills curriculum is the study of foreign languages. Students must not only be able to work in a globalised economy, but also to engage with peers elsewhere to address pressing cross-border challenges. Multilingualism is now the norm in Finland’s curriculum, with the study of English and one other foreign language mandatory.

Training for tomorrow

Finland’s teaching environment for future-skills education is favourable, although not without weaknesses. The main drawback is a lack of clear guidelines provided to school administrators on delivering feedback to teachers. According to the Finnish National Agency for Education,
the country lacks a nationally regulated framework for teacher evaluation. Training is provided to administrators on appraising teachers, but there are no system-wide guidelines for it.3

Teacher quality, on the other hand, is one of the system’s traditional strengths, with Finland ranked sixth in quality of teacher education. Rigorous and consistent application of teaching standards across schools and mandatory, yearly in-service training for upper-secondary teachers, including in 21st-century skills, all contribute to this. According to Ilkka Turunen, special adviser to the education minister, not all teachers feel confident in their skills, so all schools have “tutor teachers” who help colleagues master the new curriculum and teaching methods, including the use of new technologies.

The future calls for more broad-based knowledge and the skills to apply this knowledge.

SANNI GRAHN-LAASONEN
Minister of education, Finland

Another Finnish strength directly relevant to 21st-century skills is the use of digital technology in the classroom. Broadband access is enshrined as a legal right in Finland, and this extends to its schools. All upper-secondary schools, for example, have access to the internet for pedagogical purposes. This does not mean, however, that teaching and learning revolve around technology: in the phenomenon-based approach, it is up to teachers, and often to students themselves, to determine how to use technology in the learning process.4

Open to progress

Of the seven indicators in the socio-economic domain, Finland ranks within the top five in six, and among these it ranks first in two: economic freedom and absence of corruption. It ranks second only to Norway in progress toward gender equality,5 while tackling climate change benefits from a strong society-wide commitment.6

It is just such an environment in which open, collaborative and civic-minded attitudes can form more easily among young people, and Finland’s education system reflects such attitudes. Guidance on developing global citizenship among students is prominent, for example, in materials regularly provided to teachers and school administrators.7 “Every student must understand what it means to live in a democratic society and what it means to be a responsible citizen,” says Mr Turunen. “They need to learn how to participate in and influence the building of a sustainable future.”

3 See “Teachers and school leaders”, Finnish National Agency for Education website
4 See also Caitlin Emma, “Finland’s low-tech take on education”, Politico, May 27th 2014
5 The Global Gender Gap Report 2017, World Economic Forum (WEF). In the WEF study, Iceland (not included in the EIU index) ranks first, above both Norway and Finland
6 For example, Finland ranks fifth among index economies, and tenth overall, in the 2018 Environmental Performance Index compiled by Yale and Columbia universities
7 For one example, see Schools Reaching Out to a Global World: What Competences Do Global Citizens Need, published by the precursor of the National Agency for Education in 2011

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