From School to University : the Student Admission System in Finland

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Introduction

In recent years Finland has become world-famous for its brilliant achievements in the field of school education and for the rankings in the PISA assessment. These have even triggered what could be called "Pisa tourism", with bus loads of teachers from other European countries or elsewhere in the world coming to see what the recipe of success is. Higher education in Finland, on the other hand, remains quite unknown and if Finland does attract quite a lot of foreign university students, higher education is not the same object of pride, at least outside the country. In this article we shall discuss the transition from the school system to higher education in Finland and how the admission to universities is organised. We shall also address some problems related to the transition from school to university.

The Finnish School System

At first a short presentation of the organisation of national general education in Finland is needed in order to identify the main characteristics that will be relevant for the review of the university student admission system. Until the 1970's there was in Finland a parallel school system with a so-called folk school, free of charge, and a secondary school applying selection of pupils and fees. The new system merged these two schools and the so-called "basic education" system was created (see Fig. 1). The fundamental idea of basic education, enshrined in the Finnish Constitution, is that it is available free of charge for all children. Textbooks and other related materials are provided by the schools, pupils get a free meal and transportation is subsidized for those living far from the school. This could be described as a very egalitarian school system, which is one of the factors explaining the high Finnish ranking in PISA : school gives equal opportunities to all, irrespective of domicile, gender, financial situation or linguistic and cultural background. There is no selection and the entire age-group goes through the same structure. One other key of success is that the prevailing conception of learning in Finnish schools is student-orientated and it focuses on pupils' activities and interactions with teachers and fellow pupils. The acknowledgement that different pupils have different abilities applies also to the fact that different pupils have different points of interest. This is taken into account in the Finnish system : though there are a lot of compulsory classes, pupils are also free to choose what they want to learn the most. A great part of the classes in basic education are optional. On completion of the syllabus, at age 16, pupils get a school-leaving certificate.

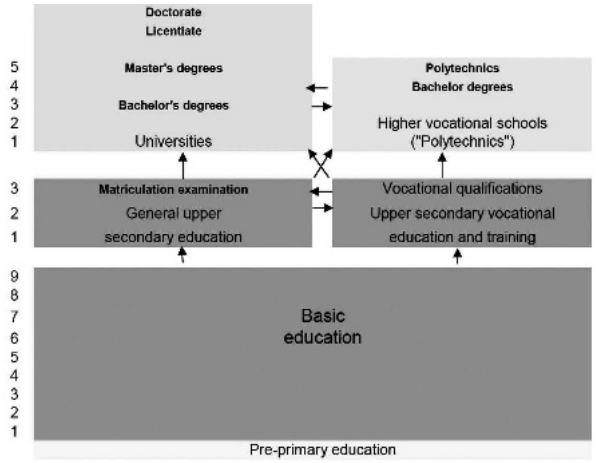

Fig. 1. The Finnish Education system (source : FNBE 2011a)

Finnish General Upper Secondary Education

Students have upper secondary general education from the age of 16 years until 19. The admission requirement is the completion of basic education. Selection occurs mainly on the basis of previous study records. Whereas almost all pupils complete basic education, only a little more than half of each age group chooses to continue towards upper secondary general

education, the rest choosing mainly vocational schools. The proportion of secondary general education decreased steadily in favour of vocational education between 2005 and 2009 (see Fig. 2).

	Year of graduation									
	2009		2008		2007		2006		2005	
		%		%		%		%		%
Completers of 9th grade of basic education	64, 137	100	64, 740	100	65, 235	100	65, 838	100	63, 297	100
Continued studies in upper secondary general education	32, 200	50. 2	32, 743	50. 6	33, 152	50. 8	33, 666	51. 1	33, 706	53. 3
Continued studies in upper secondary vocational education	26, 427	41. 2	27, 100	41. 9	26, 548	40. 7	26, 374	40. 1	24, 925	39. 4
Did not continue in studies leading to a qualification or degree	5, 510	8. 6	4, 897	7. 6	5, 535	8. 5	5, 798	8. 8	4, 666	7. 4

Fig. 2. Entrance to education (source: OSF 2011a)

There are several reasons for this decrease. Upper secondary general education can be said to be primarily aimed at further education at the higher education level, and family background may influence the options for the future. Tuition is free but students must pay for schoolbooks and for transportation. Upper secondary schools are also less numerous and students may have to travel long distances or even to rent a flat in a town. It is also worth mentioning that contrary to basic education, which is open to everyone, upper secondary schools can choose their students. There is an unofficial and subjective ranking of schools and the highest ranked are obviously more popular. The admission criteria as well as the students' level are also higher for popular schools. Students with weaker results in their basic education certificate have to settle for less popular schools. Upper secondary schools in bigger cities attract more potential students than in the countryside. All these factors make general upper secondary education less egalitarian than basic education and, of course, affect downwards the composition of the students applying for higher education. In a way, the process of admission to higher education begins several years before it actually occurs.

While basic education encompasses nine years, in upper secondary general education the syllabus, although planned to cover three years, can be completed between two and four years. Education is mainly organised without division into grades and teaching is not tied to year classes. Progress in studies is very individual, because teaching is organised in modules, called "courses", each one representing 38h, with a total of 75 modules, comprising both compulsory and optional subjects (FNBE 2011b). There is still a greater deal of optionality than in basic education, as each student composes his/her own syllabus and may freely mix the subjects as long as the compulsory subjects are taken. All these characteristics affect the level of students at the entry of the university.

Admission to University

Upper secondary education is validated by the National Matriculation Examination. Students must take at least four subjects, but they can complete the examination in as many as three consecutive sessions, the total time being limited to one and a half years. An upper secondary general education leaving certificate is also issued. The Matriculation Diploma opens access to higher education. Although it is possible to enter higher education without this diploma, it is overwhelmingly the main channel through which school students go to university. However the Matriculation Diploma is far from providing automatic access to universities, because they apply a numerus clausus policy, that is they admit only a number of selected students. The number of students admitted every year in different subjects is supposed to reflect the needs of working life, but numbers also seem to be based on tradition, because universities tend to take the same number from one year to another. But there is a growing political pressure for universities to revise and adjust the admission figures and the new syllabi will have to take into account much more precisely the real needs in real life, sustainable employability being the key word from now on. This will inevitably lead to the suppression of at least some subjects in some universities.

Admission to universities is usually based on an admission examination. This examination is typically a written exam, and may include interviews as well. Ranking is generally based on a total of points taking into account the grades in different subjects at the National Matriculation exam and the grades at the specific admission examination, all these being weighted in different proportions depending on the university or the subject.

Application to universities is made through a nationwide electronic application system established in

2009. Every student may apply and take an admission examination at several universities during the same admission session (each university organizes the examination on a different date). However if the student is admitted at several universities, he/she must choose only one of them and one main subject. During the short time the system has been used, it has already proved to cause widely-spread no-show problems. For instance one department may have admitted 30 new students. Most of them, in order to maximize their chances to be admitted to at least one university, have simultaneously applied for other universities and may indeed be admitted at several of them. As they may chose only one university and one main subject to study, after having received notification from all the universities where they have been admitted they cancel all applications but the one for the university they want. This applies also to students on a waiting list who may have been admitted to other universities. In the end, instead of 30 students, and even after having invited students from the waiting list, the department may see only 24 new students showing up. This causes many logistical problems, such as working plans and classroom sizes. Although the same phenomenon does not apply to very popular subjects such as English (English is by far the most studied language in schools, see OSF 2011 b), where competition is fierce and there is always a reserve of students only too happy to be admitted from the waiting list, in these popular subjects, too, planning and organising an admission examination for 500 persons, when the real number of participants turns out to be half of it, means a waste of time and human resources.

There is also one other reason why the actual level of students does not necessarily correlate with the ranking at the examination level or its supposed difficulty level. For the aforementioned reasons in some less popular subjects university departments have to accept the "leftovers" instead of the best students. School pupils with good school results e. g. in French or German, which are more demanding than English, generally have good results in many other subjects too and they generally apply for several universities. After being successful at several admission exams they eventually choose a subject other than French or German. For the same reason, in some universities subjects such as mathematics admit students without any admission examination. Taking for instance one hundred new students, they let "natural selection" operate during the first or second year of studies. This is actually common practice in some other European countries like France, and it has its advantages : students staying in the same subject after this "trial" period are generally more interested and motivated and more sure about having chosen the right subject.

Even when students have chosen one university and one subject, the logistical problems do not end here. Many students who have a strong desire and motivation to study a specific subject (such as medicine or architecture, for statistics see MEC 2011) but have not been successful at the admission examination because of strong competition will retry the examination, sometimes for several years. Meanwhile they either spend a free year working or travelling or doing nothing. More than one-half, or 60 per cent, of the passers of the matriculation examination in 2009 did not continue studying in their year of graduation (OSF 2011c). Or these students study another subject they are less interested in but where they happened to be admitted to in another university (for instance, chemistry or physics for students having failed at the medicine admission exam), because, as others, they have applied for several universities. When they eventually are admitted through the admission examination in the subject they dreamed of, they drop their current studies and begin a new one, even if it means they have to start from the beginning. Not only will they have wasted their own time and public money, but they will also have taken a place from another potential student who would have been happy to study the subject they resorted to as an alternative. All this variety also causes problems related to the skill level of new applicants. Because of the great number of drop-outs, the actual level of new students cannot be reliably assessed through the entrance examination.

Discrepancies between School Education and University Requirements

Moreover the Matriculation examination does not always reliably reflect or predict the actual competence level. School teaching in languages other than English often relies on outdated methods or contents which are not in accordance with what is expected at higher education level. The Matriculation Examination mainly assesses the skills according to official contents and requirements established by the Finnish National Board

of Education. The problem is that these contents do not necessarily define the best possible way to present e. g. grammatical rules or cultural content. For all the outstanding results Finland has obtained in school education, teaching still very heavily relies on schoolbooks. In Finland there is neither a school teachers' assessment system nor any official continued education system for school teachers. Therefore a teacher's skill level tends to remain static, and schoolbooks play a big role as they actually represent the basic reference source and guideline for teachers. As upper secondary school is based on modules, publishing houses often publish schoolbooks covering a specific number of modules (sometimes only two). This is basically a way of maximizing profits, but for students as well as many teachers, it provides a ready-sliced content which only encourages them to rely even more on the textbook (there are of course exceptions, with teachers showing own activity or creativity).

This is a great problem for some subjects. For instance, schoolbooks in French or German show various methodological flaws (Kalmbach 2005). As there is no official system for assessing schoolbooks, the content and design is mainly the responsibility of publishing houses, whose criteria are often more commercial than scientific. In English, high demand ensures competition between publishing houses, resulting in much better quality. But even in English teaching, not to mention French or Russian, research results obtained in universities in the field of language teaching and learning are very slowly transposed, if at all, into schoolbooks and school teaching methods. As there is no continuous education system for teachers, there are very few opportunities for them to hear about new findings and methods.

All this means that, in order to provide knowledge and skills in accordance with academic level requirements, in some subjects university teaching virtually starts from scratch, because teachers consider it to be a more effective way to fill the gap between scientific requirements and traditional school teaching contents.

Conclusion

After completion of their twelve year school career young Finnish students wanting to enter the higher education system face quite a challenge as they have to struggle through the university admission system. At this point they are far from the well organised basic education system, where everything is ready-made and provided for. Selection for higher education actually begins after basic education when young people have to choose their upper secondary general school, setting the direction for the future. Of course completion of basic and upper secondary general education in itself does not guarantee that every pupil has acquired the same skill level. It is also obviously impossible to provide higher education in one specific field for all those who would be interested in it. In some fields selection is very severe, and there will always be many drop-outs. In an ideal world universities would admit students who are the most skilled for a specific subject. However, because of different factors such as de facto inequalities when entering upper secondary general education, problems partly related to the high degree of optionality in upper secondary general education and discrepancies between schoolbook content and higher education scientific requirements, as well as unequally distributed admission figures at the university admittance examinations, the admission system is rather far from the egalitarian concept and noble principles of Finnish basic education. How can the system ensure that the best students are admitted to the relevant subject? And how would it be possible to obtain a better correlation between the examination results and the actual skills? These are some of the challenges needing to be addressed in the Finnish higher education admission system.

Note

This paper is based on a presentation given at a seminar on the Finnish education system at Ehime University (July 4th, 2011). The part "The Finnish school system" is inspired by a presentation by Mrs. Aija Kalmbach, M. A., teacher at the Jyväskylä University Teacher Training School. All the other parts are by PhD Jean-Michel Kalmbach, adjunct professor in French language and Applied Linguistics at the Language Department of the University of Jyväskylä. His text uses sources from the Finnish National Board of Education and Official Statistics of Finland but relies mainly on his first hand observations and data gathered in the process of student admission which he has been involved in for over two decades. The author wishes to thank his colleague Mrs. Jaana Toomar, Ph. Lic., for her comments.

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