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ENHANCING STUDENT SELECTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLORING FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS TO UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES

S. Heikkilä¹, J. Horelli¹, M. Väänänen²

¹*Häme University of Applied Sciences - HAMK (FINLAND)*

²*Vocational Education Centre JEDU (FINLAND)*

Abstract

The traditional approach to student selection in higher education has focused mainly on admitting students solely based on their academic performance. However, this method often fails to identify the most suitable candidates for specific fields of study, leading to a mismatch between students' abilities and the requirements of the programs they choose. Universities of applied sciences have recognized this challenge and have started to provide flexible pathways for students that are interested in studying in universities of applied sciences. This paper explores the concept of flexible pathways in student selection and its potential to improve the match between students' abilities and the demands of different fields. In order to get the best results from flexible pathways, the secondary education plays a crucial role in identifying students' talents, interests and university readiness. By providing a wide range of educational opportunities and guidance, secondary schools can help students explore their strengths and passions and lay a strong foundation for future academic aspirations. However, the traditional student selection process often overlooks these valuable aspects and focuses primarily on standardized test scores or grades. In addition, the inclusion of secondary education in the student selection process will facilitate a seamless transition between educational levels. It creates continuity in students' learning and allows for a smoother transition from secondary to higher education. This cooperation between upper secondary and vocational schools and universities of applied sciences not only improves the accuracy of student selection, but also strengthens the whole education ecosystem by promoting synergies and cooperation between institutions. This paper explores the importance of recognizing and exploiting the role of secondary education in identifying potential students for higher education. By introducing flexible study pathways that value a comprehensive assessment of students' abilities and interests, universities can ensure a more inclusive and efficient selection process. This change has the potential to improve educational outcomes, promote talent and help students succeed and achieve more in different fields of study.

Keywords: Student selection, higher education, flexible pathways.

1 INTRODUCTION

Finnish education policy has long sought excellence in education, as exemplified by the Finland 100+ vision, which aims to raise the country's level of skills and education. By 2030, the goal is for at least 50% of young adults to have a higher education degree. However, achieving this goal requires taking into account the different life situations of individuals and promoting flexibility in learning paths. [1]

Individuals may follow different educational paths throughout their lives. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously develop alternative learning paths. It is also important to ensure that students are aware of the structure different paths and that every path provides continuity and the opportunity to move forward. Not so long ago, university admissions in Finland relied mainly on entrance exams, which were usually conducted once a year. Although the entrance exam system itself was clear, it was also remarkably rigid.

2 EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FINLAND

The Finnish education system is generally considered to be of a high standard and differences in learning outcomes between schools are small. Education is mostly free of charge. Family income and education levels should not affect access to education. Figure 1 shows the structure of the Finnish education system.

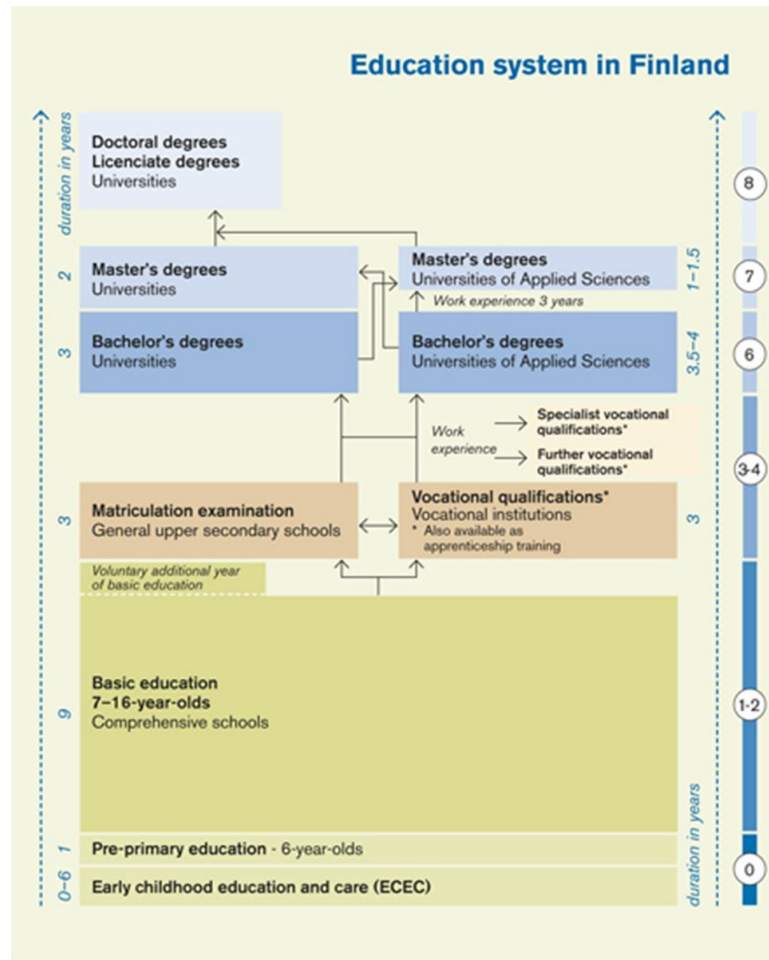


Figure 1. Education System in Finland [2]

All children have the right to early childhood education before school age. In general, pre-primary education starts the year a child turns six and is compulsory for one year before compulsory education begins. Basic education lasts nine years and is compulsory for all permanent residents of Finland. [3]

After comprehensive school, secondary education begins, with the most common options being vocational education and upper secondary education. Upper secondary education is general education and does not prepare students for a profession. Vocational education and training is more practical, learning on the job is essential in vocational education and training. Both upper secondary school and vocational education can lead to university or university of applied sciences.

The Finnish education system follows the principles of Bologna Process [4]. Both in universities of applied sciences (UAS) and universities, studies are divided into two levels, a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. In UAS studies, before applying to master's, bachelor's degree must be followed by two years of work experience. In universities, such work experience is not required, and master's degree is usually studied directly after bachelor's degree. [5]

Both of these pathways provide eligibility for doctoral studies. Depending on the university, those who have graduated from a university of applied sciences may be required to complete additional studies before applying for a doctoral programme. On average, doctoral studies take about four years. [6]

3 PATHWAYS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Pathway studies during upper secondary school, which act as a bridge to universities of applied sciences, have attracted the interest of young people. These studies are based on mutual agreements between sending and receiving institutions. Universities of Applied Sciences also see these programmes as a way to attract more students, as they facilitate the transition from secondary school to higher education.

Pathway courses involve upper secondary or vocational students participating in UAS courses. These studies form part of their upper secondary education and at the same time contribute to their UAS degree. As a result, students can accelerate their UAS degree by around six months, speeding up their entry into the labour market.

Pathway studies generally cover between 15 and 30 credits, equivalent to several months to half a year, with some courses available online. These studies usually focus on sector-specific topics, allowing students to not only study at a UAS but also to immerse themselves in the professional themes of their chosen field. After completing intermediate studies and graduating from secondary level school, students can apply for a degree at the UAS without taking an entrance exam, streamlining the transition to higher education.

A feature of the Finnish education system is its flexibility, which offers many different study paths. For example, it is possible to obtain a doctoral degree without attending upper secondary school. In addition, the system allows individuals to complete a vocational qualification before reaching the age of majority while retaining eligibility for further studies. Many Finns pursue part of their studies through interdisciplinary programmes while working, often using their professional qualifications as the basis for a bachelor's degree. In addition, a significant proportion of UAS degrees are offered in a blended learning format, allowing individuals to work while acquiring the knowledge and skills required for UAS degree programmes.

Open pathways typically comprise 60 credits and often cover the first year of studies. They serve as a popular route to UAS admission. These studies are open to all but with very limited admission. Students are usually admitted to open pathway studies on a first-come, first-served basis, with some courses using motivation letters or interviews as additional selection criteria. The closing date for applications is usually just before the start of the course. These studies offer an alternative for applicants who may have missed the regular application cycle or are reluctant to take selection tests. Generally, no prior knowledge is required for entry, making it possible to apply even without a high school diploma.

Although the open pathways are similar to regular studies in terms of content and progression, the pathways are categorized as open UAS studies, meaning that the students do not get full financial support for their studies and do not initially receive a degree. However, after completing their pathway studies, they can apply for a degree without undergoing a selection test. It is worth noting that pathway students are not entitled to study-related social support, such as study grants, but can explore other support options, such as unemployment benefits or adult education allowances.

Open pathway studies are a good option for admission to UAS degree programmes, especially for applicants who do not meet the conventional application criteria, who want to start their studies earlier or who were unsuccessful in the regular application process.

4 CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS

Finland's higher education landscape is characterised by fierce competition for the limited places in universities and universities of applied sciences. With 38 institutions, including 24 universities of applied sciences and 14 universities, meeting the growing number of eligible applicants is a challenge. The increase in participation in higher education in OECD countries is driven by an increasing share of young people completing upper secondary education and seeking higher education opportunities. [7]

Finland's system is selective, with a limited number of places available in all fields and institutions. Selection of applicants is usually based on criteria such as upper secondary school leaving certificate, university entrance exams, average leaving certificate, interviews and work experience. Finland has a higher rejection rate than other similar countries, and two-thirds of applicants miss out on a university place each year. [7]

It is important to distinguish between selection for access to higher education and subsequent selection stages: in some countries, selection occurs later when students fail intermediate tests or progress too slowly in their studies, leading to academic drop-outs.

5 SMOOTHING THE TRANSITION

In Finland, less than one fifth of new higher education students are upper secondary school graduates or vocational graduates in the same year. Facilitating the transition from upper secondary to higher education is an important goal. For example, electrical and automation engineering requires a deep knowledge of electrical engineering, both in theory and practice, in addition to laboratory work, group work and internships. The versatile nature of the studies, including online options, improves accessibility.

The practice in several countries of allowing virtually all eligible applicants to start in their preferred field of study and then regularly reviewing their place may appear to be a solution to the challenge identified in this document. However, in the Finnish UAS system, which emphasizes practical learning or “hands on” studying, there are challenges in accepting large student groups at the beginning of studies. Such a system could lead to impractical mass lectures and hinder practical learning opportunities. While the idea of open enrolment groups appeals to all applicants, it is therefore important to steer prospective students more purposefully into their chosen fields.

6 STUDENT ADMISSION REFORMS

Higher education admission reforms in Finland since 2020 have prioritized grade selection as the primary route, with over half of all placements awarded based on this method [8]. While these reforms offer many benefits, there are concerns for upper secondary and vocational school age students, especially boys, who may lack the motivation to pursue high grades and may be perceived as underperforming before making higher education choices.

One of the motives for this reform was to promote equal access to education, regardless of students' background. Previously, the Ministry of Education and Culture considered entrance exams to be an unfair selection method, as newcomers were competing with applicants who had plenty of time to prepare for the exams.

Striving for the highest possible grades can lead to prolonged upper secondary education, which delays entry into the labour market. In addition, external factors during matriculation exams can distract students, affecting their ability to concentrate and achieve good grades.

By contrast, in some European countries all students are admitted to universities in the first year, with selection taking place at the beginning of the second year when students have a clearer idea of the profession or field they want to pursue.

7 VALUE OF INTERMEDIATE STUDIES

Intermediate studies have proven beneficial in multiple ways. They provide a pathway to higher education, offering students a realistic preview of degree studies. The transition to degree studies after completing intermediate studies tends to be smooth, and these pathway studies generally motivate individuals to apply for higher education.

There is a continuous demand for pathway studies due to their role in facilitating higher education access, providing insights into degree studies, and encouraging more individuals to pursue higher education.

8 STUDY PLANNING AND COLLABORATION

Effective implementation of pathway studies necessitates collaboration between institutions. Careful study planning and student guidance, both at the secondary school and UAS levels, play a pivotal role in ensuring a seamless educational journey for students. Planning begins by aligning curricula and course content between schools, considering which parts of the qualification can be accessed through bridging studies and integrated into upper secondary vocational qualifications. Timetable coordination at daily, weekly, and yearly levels is crucial. While students typically study the same field as in upper secondary education, they can also pursue intermediate studies in a different field. Intermediate studies are usually designed as a set of courses in the first year of UAS but may also be individual courses.

For this article, a few students in the pathway studies were interviewed. Among the pathway students, the main issues raised were acceleration of studies and flexible admission. They also felt that vocational studies were quite easy and that it was meaningful to be able to study efficiently and be accepted for both a vocational college degree and a UAS degree. Participation in the multi-disciplinary courses provided optionality and helped to speed up the progress of the studies. Previously, for example, there had been concerns about taking entrance examinations, how much preparation was needed beforehand, and whether this would lead to a degree.

For a part time pathway students, almost the same reasons emerged. Go straight to university without waiting too long for eligibility and entrance examination results. It may also have been some time since their previous studies and there was some uncertainty about how their studies would go. Pathway studies seemed a less stressful option to apply for a degree. "The fact that I was able to catch up quickly also helped me to stay motivated as my studies progressed." Some of the interviewees had also missed an entrance exams and then applied for a pathway. The entrance exams were believed to be very difficult and there was little confidence in passing them. Through pathway studies, students were able to demonstrate their skills during their studies without taking the entrance examination and thus become degree students.

9 RESULTS

The optimal match between the student and the place of study - and later the profession - is a challenge for which there is no single solution. The traditional test to move from one level of education to another is a clear and easy-to-understand way for everyone to achieve the qualification they want. However, this method does not take sufficient account of a person's inclinations or aptitude for different fields. Selection methods based on theoretical knowledge or purely academic performance emphasize the ability to pass exams rather than practical skills and application abilities. It is easy to overlook the potential of an applicant that is not reflected in the exams.

Flexible learning pathways are also an ideal way of matching supply and demand for studies, as they make it possible to identify a student's inclinations and preferences over a longer period of time and steer them into an area where they might not otherwise have opportunities. Teachers and guidance counsellors play a key role in this pattern, helping to steer students towards the path that is best and most appropriate for them.

Based on the experience gained so far with flexible pathways, moving away from formulaic student selection creates good conditions for more efficient learning and faster progress towards the optimal degree for the student. In this way, the ultimate winner of the method is not only the student but also society, as students graduate less into "wrong" professions and more quickly achieve their professional identity and thus become part of a productive working life more quickly.

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