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THE FINNISH EDUCATION AND QUALIFICATIONS SYSTEMS (ФИНСКАЯ СИСТЕМА ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ И СИСТЕМЫ КВАЛИФИКАЦИЙ)¹

Abstract. The paper describes the Finnish perspective on introducing the national qualifications framework based on learning outcomes and competences. The issue is analyzed in a broader context of successful history of Finnish education and realization of lifelong training strategy. The author

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demonstrates the education policy development in Finland and the role of different parties in its implementation, as well as a conflict of interests and obstacles that slow down the adoption of the national qualifications framework.

Keywords: national qualifications framework, education, education policy.

Лемпинен Петри

ФИНСКАЯ СИСТЕМА ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ И СИСТЕМЫ КВАЛИФИКАЦИЙ

Аннотация. В статье отражено состояние дел в Финляндии относительно внедрения национальной рамки квалификаций, основанной на результатах обучения и компетенциях. Данная проблема представлена на общем фоне успешного развития финской системы образования и обучения и реализации стратегии обучения в течение всей жизни. Автором описан также процесс формирования и реализации образовательной политики и роль в этом процессе различных заинтересованных сторон. Показан конфликт интересов и другие препятствия, замедляющие принятие в стране национальной рамки квалификаций.

Ключевые слова: национальная система квалификаций, образование, образовательная политика.

Introduction to policy making

Education policies in Finland are based on the idea of continuity. After the general elections, which take place every four years, the political parties forming the coalition agree on a common programme. The Government Programme sets out the main functions and political goals of the government. Naturally this covers also education policies [24].

The new government also agrees on a five-year development plan for education and research which has been detailed and partly technical action plan for the Ministry of Education and Culture. It has the nature of a multi-annual working plan.

Naturally, the development plan is based on the Government Programme, but its preparation starts even before the elections. The idea is to collect and process different development needs and ideas so that they can be fed into the program of the government. This aims at ensuring that policies are characterized more by evolution than by revolution. The Government Programme gets inputs also from the party programmes of the coalition members.

The Development Plan is prepared in cooperation by politicians, civil servants and stakeholders, like social partners, the trade unions and employer organizations.

The Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) is in charge of education policies. (Until First of May 2013 it was Ministry of Education). They prepare legislation which is approved by the Parliament and they prepare lower level degrees and statutes that are approved by the Government of by the Ministry itself. The Ministry is supported by the National Board of Education (NBE) which is the central agency for education development. The NBE is e. g. in charge of preparing the curricula for national qualifications.

Most policies and legislation are prepared through multistakeholder partnership which is an integrated part of policy-making in adult, higher and vocational education. The government cooperates with social partners but they also have a regular consultation with nationwide organizations representing the interests of students, vocational colleges, higher education institutions, parents etc. Teachers and the Trade Union of Education as their representative are among the key players in this cooperation. In practice the cooperation is usually organized through a taskforce of experts with a certain specific task nominated by the ministry.

Education in Finland

The modern education system dates back to 1960's when Finland approved the legislation for development of higher education institutions. The aim of the law was to secure resources for the growing higher education sector. At the same time Finland took the decision to widen the network of universities throughout the country. The second initiative was to create a single 9-year basic education for all children. Both decisions were implemented in the 1970's. The comprehensive school as it was called in the 1970's brought the PISA success to Finland in 2003.

For more than half a century equal opportunities for all citizens to quality education has been the driving ideology behind the Finnish education policies. In Finland education leading to formal qualifications is free of charge for citizens also in higher education. The education is understood as a mean towards economic competitiveness and the well-being of individuals.

The current education system is composed of three levels:

- nine-year basic education (comprehensive school) for the whole age group, preceded by one year of voluntary pre-primary education,
- upper secondary education, comprising general education and vocational education and training (vocational qualifications and further and specialist qualifications),
 - higher education, provided by universities and polytechnics.

The education system in Finland has evolved over the decades which explain complexity of the system. The system is constructed piece by piece. Consequently all sub-sectors have their own legislation, financing and degree structures. Only recently there have been attempts to create common terminology and to create an overarching qualifications framework. However this work is not yet finalized [24].

There are separate laws for basic education, general upper secondary education (lycée, gymnasium), vocational upper secondary education, vocational further training for adults, polytechnics and universities. Until early 1990's there were more than 50 laws regulating education [15].

After completing the basic education students are expected to continue their studies in the upper secondary education even if it is not compulsory yet. They can choose either the academic or the vocational path. Both build upon three year programmes and grant eligibility to higher education.

Basic education and secondary education – both general and vocational – have national core curricula prepared by the National Board of Education. The general upper secondary school ends with the matriculation test, which is the only national test in the Finnish education system. Otherwise vocational qualifications and higher education degrees are awarded by institutions and their rectors [22].

Also higher education is divided into academic and vocational sectors. The academic sector consists of universities which engage in both education and research and have the right to award doctoral degrees. The polytechnics are multi-field institutions of vocational higher education educating mostly bachelors and since 2005 also masters.

Finnish qualifications and their proposed EQF levels [21] are presented below:

EQF level	University, general education	Polytechnics, vocational
8	Doctor	
7	Masters	Masters
6	Bachelor	Bachelor
5	_	Specialist vocational qualification
4	The Matriculation Examination	Vocational qualification
	and completion of the upper se-	Upper secondary vocational qua-
	condary school syllabus	lification
2	Basic Education	

Vocational qualifications

In the 1990's the vocational education and qualifications changed dramatically. The aim was to create a coherent system covering both the content and structures of vocational education and training (VET). The intention was to support workers mobility on the labour market and to open access to further studies to all students completing upper secondary education [15].

The first reform was to create the system of competence-based qualifications for adults in 1994 [1]. Originally, the aim was to create a system for validation of informal and non-formal learning. The motivation was to raise the skill levels of the work force by providing formal qualifications based on skills development during the work career. Candidates are not required to participate in education or training to before applying for skills tests [12]. The birth of this system was a good example of cooperation between the social partners and the education authorities.

From the beginning, the competence-based qualifications have been supported by state funded continuing training. Both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Employment and Economics fund continuing training that can take place at the work place as apprenticeship, or at training center. Adults can also study at VET colleges. In practice, competence-based qualifications have become the system for continuing vocational training (CVT). They are often called vocational training for adults.

In order to complete a competence-based qualification, candidates demonstrate certain skills and competences required in the oc-

cupation and described in the Requirements of Competence-based Qualifications defined by the Finnish National Board of Education [1].

Since 1994 the VET system has included three types of qualifications: vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications. Vocational qualifications can be obtained by studying at a VET school. The idea was that further vocational qualification could be obtained three years later based on three years of work experience and further training. The specialist vocational qualification covers the most demanding tasks of trade or occupation [25].

Since 1999 vocational qualifications have expanded to include also general subjects like mathematics and languages to give their holders eligibility to higher education [5]. Since 1999 these qualifications require three years of studies [8].

In the 1990's, Finland created a coherent VET system that embraced separate competence-based qualifications for adults and the school-based secondary VET qualifications mainly for the youth. There were two separate laws, funding systems and often also different organizations to provide training for the two categories of target groups.

The relationship between different vocational qualifications became an issue and the Ministry of Education wanted to create principles for clarification for the whole VET system. The idea of the relevance of vocational competences and qualifications for the working life gained foothold in the early 2000s [4]. The vocational qualifications varied between the EQF levels 3 and 5 and further vocational qualifications varied from levels 3 to 5. This meant that some of the further vocational qualifications were meant as the next step in the professional growth, but some were the first step to enter the occupation [21].

In August 2004, the Ministry of Education appointed an internal task force to identify the structure of vocational qualifications and their status. However, but they were not able to come to a common decision. One possibility was to divide qualifications for the adults and for the youth according to the target group. Another option was to develop pathways of qualifications starting from VET schools and climbing up in three steps, in way a similar to the cycles of the Bologna process [18]. The working group was appointed before the idea of the European Qualifications Framework was set as a policy goal in the European Union in the late 2004 [14].

After the failure, the Ministry appointed a second working group with multi-stakeholder participation including social partners. They proposed modular structure to support people who have to change occupations or trades. They also proposed to have targeted specializations-based modules. One of the important proposals was to open eligibility to all higher education, including universities for everyone with a competence-based qualification. Also, this taskforce ended with a unanimous report proposing to divide VET for the youth and VET for adults [19]. The modular principle was developed further in the European Credit System for VET – ECVET [3].

In March 2014 the Government submitted a bill to reform VET legislation. Proposals aim at better defining different vocational qualifications, further vocational qualifications and specialist vocational qualifications to reflect continuing development of competences. Based on the new legislation there will be only one Government degree for all vocational qualifications [7].

Clear relations between different types of qualifications are important, but their relevance for the labour market is even more important. Sectors and professions are different and they have different needs. There are also differences in the recruitment of staff for different jobs. Consequently, the bill confirms that in some sectors three levels of VET qualifications are stages of professional development. In the other the further and specialist qualifications are independent from previously gained qualifications. They offer pathways for mobility between occupations and sectors. This is important because occupations and employment opportunities are subject to change in the dynamic economy.

Higher Education

Higher education is offered by the universities and the polytechnics. The dual system means that two parallel sectors have their own profiles, separate institutions, legislation, funding systems and degrees. The polytechnics address more direct needs of labour market and universities are more science oriented [2]. This is reconfirmed in the legislation and in all major policy papers including the Government Programs and Development Plans for Education and Research. The latest confirmation can be found in 2011 [11, 24].

Participation in the Bologna process has changed the qualifications structure in Finland. There was also a growing need to internationally compare degrees and modules. Therefore Finland adopted the three-cycle degrees according to the Bologna model for academic universities. The polytechnics had their own degrees which were recognized on a par with the university bachelors. Also degrees from National Defence University educating military professionals were recognized as higher education degrees [9].

Already in 1999 the Ministry of Education decided that polytechnics could deliver programmes for postgraduate degrees. In the late 1990s universities became aware that they should adopt the learning outcomes approach and define key knowledge and skills for each field of study [4].

In 2005 the Ministry of Education integrated all higher education degrees from universities and polytechnics into a single framework according to the following criteria: the workload, level, learning outcomes, eligibility to further studies and qualification.

The idea was to indicate how the degrees of universities and polytechnics relate to each other. The solution came from the cycles defined under the Bologna process. The first cycle degrees include the lower university degree (Bachelor) and the polytechnic degree. The second cycle degrees include the higher university degree (Master's) and the polytechnic postgraduate degrees. The third cycle degrees include the scientific postgraduate degrees of Licentiate and Doctor. This work was based on the acting regulation and degrees, but was not based on learning outcomes [10].

Since 2005 the polytechnics have offered also master degrees to their graduates. Before continuing for the Master degree in the polytechnic the applicant must have three years of work experience after obtaining the first degree. This is different from the universities where students continue from the bachelor degree to the master degree without any break [10].

The bachelor degree (180 ECTS) from the university is not an independent degree but only a milestone on a pathway towards the master degree (120 ECTS more). The bachelor is expected to take three years of studies. Most of the polytechnic degrees have the duration of 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ years and they vary from 210 to 240 ECTS credits. The polytechnic degree qualifies for the occupation of a nurse or an engineer.

The longer and broader polytechnics programmes were not fully recognized when the Ministry taskforce integrated the degrees into a single framework. This situation has not changed since.

The working group studied the Anglo-Saxon models, which were also used as an example in preparation of the EQF. The working group talked about the expectations placed on the learning outcomes in individual degrees. The learning outcomes were divided into knowledge, which is examined in terms of breadth and depth; skills (language and communication skills); and competencies, comprising cognitive, occupational and ethical competencies [18].

The Draft National Qualifications Framework

The idea of the National Qualifications Framework was approved in December 2007 [7]. This was more a technical than a political decision following national and international discussions around the development of the European Qualifications Framework. The Government Program adopted in April 2007, did not mention the NQF at all [11]. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was officially approved in April 2008. Several European Union member states had started to prepare the national qualifications framework even before the official approval of the EQF [17].

In August 2008 the Ministry of Education appointed a taskforce to prepare the national qualifications framework (NQF) describing qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. The task of this group was to prepare a proposal on the national qualifications framework and to define its levels in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. The taskforce decided that the Finnish levels should be same than in the EQF [22].

The taskforce determined the criteria according to which the existing qualifications could be placed on the different levels of the national and European qualifications frameworks. Finally, the taskforce proposed how to place individual qualifications and degrees on different levels of the framework. The report also makes a strong commitment to promoting recognition and validation of prior learning in all levels of formal education.

The NQF committee included a broad representation of stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education, social partners, teachers, trade unions, different education institutions and other ministries in charge of education and training for their sectors. For example, the Ministry of the Interior is in charge of training manpower for the firefighting and rescue services, the police and the border guards. This shows that formal qualifications are acquired also outside the public education system even when most of the qualifications are acquired via vocational or higher education. This fact was recognized by the taskforce.

After the taskforce had completed its task, the Government submitted two bills to the Parliament. The first expired in spring 2011 when the Parliament was dissolved for the General Elections. The second bill was submitted in May 2012, but the Parliament has not started to process it and it has not been adopted.

According to constitution, the Government can submit decrees only if there is a respective mandate in the legislation approved by the Parliament. As the NQF is not mentioned in any individual law, the taskforce proposed to make a separate law, but as of spring 2014, the process is still pending. The next general election will take place in spring 2015, so it is possible that also the second bill also expires.

The content of both bills was the same. The proposed law was to establish eight levels based on learning outcomes to cover all formal education under the ministry of education. The levels were to cover also qualifications from National Military University, Criminal Sanctions Agency, the Police University College and Emergency Services College.

Despite the delay, the principles outlined in the NQF proposal have already been used in reforms of vocational qualifications. The new VET legislation is based on the same ideas [7]. They are also used by higher education institutions in designing their degrees.

In sum, Finland does not have a single national qualifications framework (NQF). In spring 2012 the government made a legal proposal on NQF, but the parliamentary committee for education and culture has not yet started to deal with the proposal. This is quite exceptional. Despite the delay or even a possible rejection of the NQF legislation, the principles of the NQF proposal are spreading. Currently the ideas of competences and learning outcomes are in the focus when new curricula or degrees are prepared for the vocational or higher education.

Conclusion

This article aims at describing the Finnish debate around vocational qualifications and higher education degrees during the past twenty years. Qualifications and degrees interpret outcomes of the education and training in terms of relevance for the labour markets and the outside world. Besides this technical role, qualifications and systems of qualifications can also be battle fields for different views of different societal interest groups. One sign of these contradictory interests is the fact that the Parliament has not processed the Government Bill on National Qualifications Framework proposed already in spring 2012.

The identification of qualifications and positioning them according to their status or learning outcomes is not only a technical task. The Finnish example shows that there have been strong tensions between VET for the youth and VET for adults, which have affected the development of qualifications in 2004—2007. These tensions were visible also in the divisions inside the Ministry of Education and the National Board of Education. Secondly, they are visible in the legislation, funding and governance of the two parallel VET systems. The division between the systems has been partly confirmed in the Government bill submitted in March 2014. Hence, if adopted, there will be separate laws for two VET sectors in the future, but only one Government degree to regulate qualifications.

The idea of competencies and learning outcomes started to develop long before the establishment of the EQF by the European Commission. This has been accompanied by a need to develop methodologies for validation of learning outcomes also in higher education, not only in VET. Many students enter higher education with various studies or degrees from post-secondary studies. They can also have relevant work experience. Therefore they must be able to make earlier learning visible and to have their competencies or learning recognized [20].

This demonstrates how the lifelong learning thinking has been penetrating into education policies. Lifelong learning is not just a possibility to enter formal studies at different phases of one's life, but it is also a chance to build upon learning achievements from all fields of life when relevant.

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