

# Summary of the Final report

## Background and objectives

The Ministry of Education and Culture has launched a process, in cooperation with universities and polytechnics, to revise their admission procedures with a view to reducing unnecessary gap years and accelerating entry into higher education studies. The need to accelerate the transition from secondary to tertiary education and to shorten study times is primarily related to the Government's objectives to extend working careers. In turn, improving the completion of higher education is essential if the goals set for increasing the share of the highly educated population are to be achieved.

The reform introduced quotas for first-time applicants in the joint application system ([Studyinfo.fi](http://Studyinfo.fi)) and a separate transfer application. Another goal is to make better use of the matriculation examination in the admissions and reducing the role of entrance examinations so that entry into the higher education would not require a paid prep course.

From this point of view, the aim of this project was to find out:

1. How the process of applying for and accessing higher education has changed in 2010-2016. Using official statistics and register data, the key research questions were:

- how the position of first-time applicants has evolved and whether or not their entry has accelerated
- whether the objective of legislation on equal opportunities for non-first-timers has been achieved,
- how the overall goals for accelerating entry into higher education are being achieved, and
- does the admission of transfer students work as intended?

2. To what extent applicants participate in prep courses what is the impact of such participation on access to higher education. Using survey of applicants of four fields of study (medicine, law, economics and education) in the spring 2016 joint application round, the following questions were asked:

- who is attending prep courses and why,
- what is the impact of attending a prep course on access to higher education in general, and
- do different courses (length, form of education, price, etc.) have a different impact in terms of getting admitted?

## Results and conclusions from the statistical survey

Concerning the entry into higher education of first-time applicants, the results of the statistical survey show that, in the circumstances of the current applicant backlog, the acceleration targets are very difficult to achieve. The proportion of first-timers among the applicants will remain high for a long time, as most applicants will not succeed, and new first-time applicants will enter the competition next year. Compared to these groups, the number of people who have received a study place, and are applying in the joint application the following year, is quite small. The key to decoupling the backlog is to increase the number of study places and, on the one hand, to direct the demand for higher education so that study places are more fully targeted to the first-time applicants.

Statistics Finland's data on the application and admission of newly matriculated students indicate that their position has only deteriorated in recent years. [Vipunen's](#) data on the placement of first-timers between 2010 and 2017 also show that, overall, no significant acceleration has taken place. As a general rule, different groups of applicants are placed in education in the proportion they are represented in the pool of applicants. With the vast majority of first-time applicants, quotas are not a very effective way to improve their position. According to the information available, in less than 100 programs quotas have had an impact, and the number of successful applicants is only a few hundred. The setting of effective quotas is therefore a major challenge for the future. On the other hand, with regard to equality in the application process, the degree of acceptance of the various applicant groups suggests that non-first-time applicants are not unduly disadvantaged in the admissions.

There are some differences in the level of acceptance of the first-time applicants in different fields of study. In particular technical and natural sciences should be mentioned, where first-time applicants perform relatively well, and the importance of the use of certificate selection can be seen. In polytechnics, on the other hand, from the first-timers only the newly matriculated are doing well. This is largely because the other first-time applicants mostly have only vocational qualifications, and they are less successful across the board in the admissions.

At the level of individual study programs, of which there are hundreds in the current system, the situation is even more varied. The goal has long been to create larger and clearer study programs in the joint application system. Because the study programs differ in who applies for them and how the selection system treats different groups of applicants, simple one-size-fits-all solutions such as certification selection may not accelerate entry into education. For this reason, it is important that the HEIs and their departments retain a high degree of autonomy in their admissions.

Combining small study programs may not necessarily accelerate entry. More meaningful and clearer programs are, however, an improvement from the point of view of applicants, since the current application system is quite complex, especially for an applicant who does not have a very clear idea of where to apply. One of the functions of the system is to allocate training places as efficiently as possible. The goal is that as many young people as possible gets at least some study place in higher education. However, this can only be partially achieved under the circumstances of the current applicant backlog. On the one hand, there are popular and highly competed fields of study, and on

the other, there are programs for which there are not enough primary applicants. However, the total number of the latter is small. The current system can be considered to work well in the sense that the majority of those admitted receive their primary or secondary program option.

It was difficult to evaluate the impact of the different selection methods on the registry material used. To answer the question of accelerating entry into higher education, one would need information on who are the candidates for the different study programs that will be selected from the various selection queues. Within the limits of the available data, it can be concluded that from the first-timers particularly the newly matriculated are slightly more likely to be selected in the university-level engineering and science courses, which currently use in a significant degree the certificate selection. In these fields, the certificate selection seems to favor male applicants in particular. It is difficult to assess how the increase of certificate selection will affect areas where it has not previously been used. As the reform progresses and the use of certificate selection becomes more widespread, more reliable information will be obtained. The HEIs and their departments, as well as the National Applications Register, provide information on the applicants' selection points and their position in the various selection queues. This information should be used to a greater extent in anticipating and assessing the impact of admissions reform.

The transfer application, which has only been in use for a couple of years, has so far not significantly vacated study places for the regular joint application. The number of transfer students is relatively small, less than a thousand, and compared to transfer applicants, about twice the number of admitted will apply again the following year in the regular joint application. However, transfer application works mainly as intended, i.e. transfer applicants are those who have not received their preferred study place, and who are applying for a transfer to their original preference, if such an opportunity has been provided. Therefore, the volume of the transfer study places should be increased without reducing the number of places in the regular joint application.

Although the share of those with at least 55 credits during the academic year has increased in recent years both at universities and at polytechnics this is not yet reflected in the completion times of the basic degrees. The average age of graduates has also remained relatively high, reflecting the fact that the objectives for accelerated entry have not yet been reached. At the same time as studies have become more effective, more and more older students who have already completed other degrees are entering higher education. As young first-time students accumulate credits faster than others, current policy measures support, in this respect, the goals of accelerating studies.

#### Results and conclusions from the prep course survey

The main results of the prep course survey can be summarized as follows:

Regardless of the field of study, the proportion of applicants taking prep courses is the highest for those applicants with both parents having a higher education degree. Thus, attending this type of private coaching seems to be strongly linked to the applicant's family background.

Regardless of the field of study, the applicants who had taken prep courses were the most successful in getting their primary higher education study place. This overall result was further strengthened if the applicants had participated prep courses also in the past. Furthermore, regardless of the

applicant's family background and perception of his or her previous school achievement, the proportion of students who succeeded in the admissions was significantly higher for applicants who had taken a prep course. In other words, insofar as applicants have different opportunities to take private and sometimes very costly prep courses, this may increase the inequalities already evident in higher education admissions.

On the other hand, many applicants with a weaker family background or poorer school record but taking a prep course appear to be able to prepare themselves for the entrance examination so well that they can succeed in the field of study they are applying for. For some applicants prep courses may thus offer the so-called "second chance" i.e. an opportunity to compensate their past poor school performance. In other words, prep courses may also increase equality to the extent that applicants from a weaker family background have an equal opportunity to participate.

Admission to a study place does not appear to be significantly dependent on the form and cost of the prep course that the applicant has taken.

Central to the main findings of this section of the report, regarding the ongoing reform of university student admissions is, firstly, the intention to abandon the current selection of students based on the cumulative score of the applicant's matriculation examination and entrance examination. Secondly, the intention is to reduce the number of pre-screening material for candidates who are selected using only their success in the entrance examination, or to eliminate it altogether.

Abandoning the cumulative score selection by 2020 will mean a significant extension of the use of direct certificate selection. In 2016, only 15 % of all university study places were filled using certificate selection and 49 % using the cumulative score. Considerable widening of the use of certificate selection could limit the role of paid prep courses. The extent to which the importance of prep courses would actually be reduced is another matter. If increasing admission based on direct certificate selection increases the availability of tailor-made coaching courses for high school students, then it is very likely that attendance at these coaching courses will also be dependent on students' social background. This could easily lead to an emphasis on the importance of family background in the transition from high school to higher education.

Although the finding that prep courses, to a certain extent, may increase equality is a noteworthy result, its true significance is expected to remain relatively small in relation to the overall inequality inherent in prep courses as part of higher education selection. This already results from the fact that those from a weaker family background are still under-represented among higher education applicants. This is particularly the case in the highly competed fields of study. For example, only about one in four of the economics applicants who completed our survey had parents with low level of education. Well below half of these applicants had taken a prep course. In comparison, more than three out of five applicants having both parents with a higher education degree had resorted to prep course. While family-based segregation in education pathways for young people begins already in basic education, it is still important to monitor the effects of the ongoing admissions reform on the selection processes and higher education access of applicants from different family backgrounds, particularly in the highly competed fields of study.