

**Dalma PAP****Entering through the doors of innovation: School visits in Tampere**

Owing to the experience provided by the Budapest University of Technology and Economics (BME for short), a group of Hungarian teachers were given the opportunity to attend TAMK (Tampere University of Applied Sciences) in Finland between 11-15<sup>th</sup> April 2016. As a member of this group, I could visit not only TAMK but also two Finnish schools, which experience drew my attention toward the discrepancy of the Scandinavian and Hungarian systems and school results. In this report I intend to introduce my readers to my observations and opinion which are solely based on some interviews I made there and my personal views.

**1. The university logos of TAMK and BME**

1

First of all, it is generally true that when people travel abroad, they tend to compare their own cultures to the host country's, as well as they try to point out the most obvious differences. From this perspective, Hungary and Finland belong to two well-distinguished worlds.

To start with, as far as I am concerned, teacher tourism is not that prominent in Hungary. Unfortunately, our country has lost its dominance on the stage of education therefore we have become followers who try to adapt new methodology and guidelines. It is really saddening but we must realise that right now we are not the ones who are pioneers in this field. The reason why I am pointing that out is because I firmly believe that Hungarian educators must sit back and accept this fact, and should re-evaluate their methodology and teaching style. I am not suggesting in any way that the Finnish system is perfect, nor am I stating that we should copy it. On the contrary, we have to open our eyes and make a shift in order to be better and more respected. For these reasons, this pilot programme organised by BME seemed like a good starting point.

It is not that the Finnish educators are fully aware of the importance of their great results. When asked, they could really not answer what made them one of the best. However, they were very helpful and open-minded during our stay. Our hosts, including Sisko Mällinen and Jiri Taok Vilppola from TAMK, really made us welcome and tried their best to let us have a glimpse of what the world calls the 'Finnish miracle.' However, when I write 'glimpse' it is really what I mean since it would have been impossible to become an expert of the Finnish

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<sup>1</sup> TAMK logo [Online]. <http://www.tamk.fi/web/tamk/etusivu> | Last downloaded: 11/18/2016.  
BME logo [Online]. <https://www.bme.hu/> | Last downloaded: 11/18/2016.

system within a week. Nonetheless, we could truly understand the framework and guidelines that shape the Scandinavian education system.



2. Sisko Mällinen, TAMK and Jiri Taok Vilppola, TAMK 2

One such framework worth mentioning is the system itself. Imagine a system where you can have choices: you can decide what you want to learn and what you want to become. We have seen this before, you may say, for example one must think about the English-American systems where students have obligatory and elective subjects to choose from. In Finland, however, what really fascinated me was the fact that there were always second opportunities for those who have made a bad decision or who wished to broaden their horizons. This kind of attitude truly amazed me because it means that students are not frustrated and do not live under pressure of their choices, as they sadly do elsewhere in the world.

Let me tell you an example for that in order to prove my point. During our stay we had the chance to visit two Finnish schools: a primary and a secondary vocational school. When entering this latter one, we could see that the age of students range from 14 to 40+. The headmaster of Prisma vocational school told us that this was because education is free and members of the older generations can even earn a monthly state scholarship worth € 1 000. As a result, generally speaking the Finns are well-educated and qualified. They are owners of profession certificates or diplomas provided by state vocational schools or colleges/universities. This also means that they seek positions that require high-level of qualification and if they lack those skills, they can still be accepted with the provision of mastering the required skills later. Therefore in the school one of the classes we visited consisted of 12 students, of which 7 belonged to the high school student age and the rest of them were considered adults. This spectrum of age groups seemed beneficial in the classroom since the older students could teach the younger ones and tell them about their experiences in the field, on top of that, youngsters could gain hands-on experience on what that profession in real life was like. All in all, this policy ensures that fewer students will make bad career decisions and those who do can start a new profession immediately after realising this fact. Not to mention that the number of school-leavers will probably shrink.

<sup>2</sup> Pictures were downloaded from: <https://fi.linkedin.com/in/sisko-m%C3%A4llinen-16395966> and <https://plus.google.com/106893713836757145819> |Last downloaded: 11/18/2016.



### 3. A typical Finnish schoolbuilding with bicycles in front of it and a part of the Hungarian delegation<sup>3</sup>

Connection to the modern world is crucial for them. Not only they were trying to teach real-life skills, but also let the students and teachers discover the field of their profession for real. For time to time, students and teachers alike are required to take part in community work programmes. Students can choose what profession they want to try for some weeks, while vocational school teachers must practise in the field they teach at. As a result, everyone is up-to-date and students can decide on their future career more easily. I find it noteworthy that pupils must do mainly physical labour, and to back this idea up, we were told that the most popular job among the high schoolers were plumbing because in Finland that is one of the best-paid manual jobs. Also, when interviewing the students, they praised this part of the system. One of them told me that he had spent a summer at a chemical laboratory and this experience helped him in choosing a career: the 24-year-old boy wanted to become a brewer.

Experience is important and the Finns know that. That is the reason why they support experience in a field. For example, if a person wants to become an electrician but he has already worked as an assistant to an electrician therefore he has some knowledge of the field, he can choose to be evaluated by a professional committee that can give him credit points for the tasks he can already do. On the one hand, this is beneficial for the person because he has to learn less and needs to prove only his new skills by the end of the course. On the other hand, the government does not have to finance the full sum of the course since the adult student will spend less time in the system. Hence older and more experienced students can get back to work earlier.

No matter their age and skills, everyone was equal in the classroom. Furthermore, equality was not only a trendy cliché: teachers treated everyone with the same respect and manner, and students were given the same opportunities. In general, equality for them means different paths one must go through. In practice we saw that the students could choose the topics they wanted to learn, the skills they wanted to master and when they were ready they

<sup>3</sup> Photo made by Ágnes Judit Presér, published at [http://hvg.hu/itthon/20160415\\_finnország\\_kozoktatas\\_tampere\\_okostabla](http://hvg.hu/itthon/20160415_finnország_kozoktatas_tampere_okostabla) | Last downloaded: 11/18/2016.

showed their products to their teachers. Even at university the students signed up for courses, picked topics and areas for themselves and decided on a deadline for them. If they were successful, they could opt for a new project. However, if their product was not satisfactory, they could spend more time with it and prove that they mastered the skill later. This has led to a democratic, student-centred system where teachers are only facilitators of the learning process and students are motivated enough to participate in it.

Even in Finland sometimes it is very hard to motivate students. However, the main difference between Hungary and the Scandinavian country is that they are not pushing the kids. For instance, we visited a primary school lesson where the 10-year-old kids had to learn in groups of four. There were some boys who did not want to participate in the task and the teachers let them be. Not because they did not wish to deal with the boys, but because they realised that forcing them would lead to nowhere. After around ten minutes, the boys joined the task willingly and finished the materials on time. Later, we asked the teachers what would have happened if the boys had not participated and they told us that the group would not have been punished. If a child is not ready to take the next step, he will not unless he masters the skills on his own before the new stage starts. This lenient attitude was first strange for us but having seen the students working for their own sake made us realise that indeed in Hungary we do not really mean student-centeredness for real because we do not really see the students behind the tasks, nor do we understand their needs.

Every person is different therefore they have different needs. In Finland, they know this and work according to it. However, there are some students who need more attention due to their special needs. These kids are often taught together with the others but get special care from time to time. Kindergarten teachers have to spot these kids and a board later decides what steps are to be taken. Early recognition results in better chances of rehabilitation. When entering the primary school, the students' records and reports are sent to the schools which can take care of the students with special needs.

Every learning group has a teaching assistant who follows the group from lesson to lesson. The subject teachers have their own rooms with the books the students use, their own kitchen and teacher's corner for personal space. In front of each and every room there is a table for the extra skills development sessions. When a group and its assistant enter the classroom, the teacher can decide if some children need special care. For example, if a child has reading difficulties, she or he may decide that the student will spend some of their time in the corridor by the special desk with the assistant. It is important that not the entire lesson is to be spent there therefore the child will not feel isolated from the group. It seemed that kids take turns and the ones who are better at Mathematics were given extra lessons of the English language and vice versa. Due to this measurement, no child is left behind. After all, every child has special needs according to the Finns.



4. A typical corridor, in the foreground the desk for special education sessions, own photo

The obligatory education in Finland ends with primary school. However, elementary school education – unlike in Hungary – is nine years long. After it, students must decide whether to start working without qualification (because they want to achieve it later), or to go to secondary vocational or grammar school. We were told that based on the statistics, half of the students choose secondary vocational education, and 50% opts for grammar schools. Those who cannot make up their minds can stay for a 10<sup>th</sup> year during which general skills development lessons and career guidance take place. There are no entry exams: students only have to apply for a school major and they will be granted it provided they have recorded the proper skills development. Students and teachers do not need to travel long distances given the fact that each and every school has the same quality of education, and each city education board offers almost the same profession palettes.

Another idea worth mentioning is the environment. In Hungary, we can state that most of the school buildings are in average condition, however, most schools are not properly equipped. In Tampere, the schools we visited were very well-equipped. Besides, all equipment was available by the students as well. Free Wi-Fi connection was provided everywhere and the kids were online all the time. Since our Finnish colleagues know this, they have decided to turn this phenomenon to their own advantage: it was not special to ask the kids during the lesson to use their mobile phones or tablets and search for online information. Using the telephone was allowed during the lessons no matter what the students did on their phones. Obviously, we could sense that not every teacher was happy with this policy, however, even them were willing to give online tasks for the pupils. For example, during a lower primary English lesson the teacher used the technology for teaching the group the proper pronunciation of the English alphabet. What is more, the use of digital materials was evident from the beginning and one of the teachers told us that students own only a handful of books because the school provides them with everything, even with tablets full of digital materials.

Technology, however, is not most important thing that got my attention. What I enjoyed the most was the fact that seemingly there was no schedule the teachers or students were holding to. Everything seemed changeable and not fixed. Even the furniture was not only portable but also convertible. The chairs, the desks and even the boards were mobile and

sometimes we could see how easily a teacher changed the environment to fit the needs of the students or the lesson.



**5. A portable classroom<sup>4</sup>**

This mobility also supports the notion that not the material but the people who take part in the learning process should be in the focal point. The classical 'airplane' style of seating arrangement does not fit every lesson and it can happen that a project needs more space.

What is more, who says that learning should take place solely at lessons? While wandering through the corridors, from the windows we could see some students in the schoolyard who were measuring trees. When we asked them what they were doing, they told us that their Mathematics teacher asked them to measure the diameter of the trees because of a project. Later we were informed that every child must finish a school project each and every term. The projects are multidisciplinary and usually take at least a week to complete. For example, when the group enters the Forestry project, they learn about trees in Biology, go to the nearest forest to draw some pictures of trees in Arts, learn and write poems in Literature and create wooden chairs in Crafts. During that period of time, everything is in connection to the theme after which the students must perform or show their skills.



**6. A project on global warming, own photo**

This kind of teaching is similar as of the alternative teaching programmes in Hungary. The difference is that they do not teach in this style all year around therefore when project weeks come, the students are really looking forward to them. They even organise

<sup>4</sup> Photo made by Ágnes Judit Presér, published at [http://hvg.hu/itthon/20160415\\_finnország\\_kozoktatas\\_tampere\\_okostabla](http://hvg.hu/itthon/20160415_finnország_kozoktatas_tampere_okostabla) | Last downloaded: 11/18/2016.

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performances or exhibitions based on their projects to which they invite their parents, the city governor and the members of the local education board. They even appear in the local news.

Students participate because they feel motivated and involved. The teachers know that the students will do their best given the fact that they want to perform well. This system, as we can see, is based on trust which was evident wherever we went. During our talks with the educators, it turned out that in Finland no testing takes place. The first test students encounter is the Matura examination. Of course, students are evaluated – but by themselves. After lessons students have to fill in a short questionnaire and answer some basic question about their performance. Teachers record those notes and add their own suggestions. Students and their parents alike can read the reports so together they can decide on the best way to develop the pupil.

Not only the students are not tested, but the teachers are not evaluated, either. In Finland, the teachers are among the best-educated and most respected people, and the government accepts this fact. There is no supervision and the teachers are given freedom. The national curriculum was written by 300 teachers and contains only 10% of the school curriculum, so the schools and teachers can decide what they want to do. In this respect, the teachers do not feel oppressed or forced to focus on topics just because those are obligatory. Moreover, if a teacher is trusted to choose their own materials, they will teach that with pleasure which is beneficial in long term, given the fact that burning-out might be avoided that way.

The word trust is essential here. In Hungary, we do not trust our students. We test them, we give them daily homework because we do not believe that they were capable of learning on their own, we choose the materials ourselves because we do not feel they could do that. We hardly ever give them freedom because on the one hand, we were socialised that way, and on the other hand, because we are never given freedom, either. Unfortunately, in Central Europe teachers are the slaves of the system in a way that they are oppressed.

However, some questions arise. Is it only freedom that matters? Would the system be better if we were provided with more choices? Could we motivate the students more? These are very hard questions to answer. However, the truth is that based on what I have seen, the answer is maybe. With time, we could get to the point where the participants of education are trusted. Until then we can buy the fanciest equipment, print the most flamboyant books and develop the best digital materials, there will be no changes because in Hungary school is a must and not a great place to be.

Teaching takes at least two: an educator who wants to teach a new skill and a student who wants to master that skill. The whole teaching process should be based on mutual trust and cooperation. In an ideal world, the student would tell us what skill they needed to develop and we would decide together how to do that. We should not teach them as the original sense of the word suggests, but must facilitate and monitor the progress and report back on

the development. However, it is the student only who could decide if she or he has reached the aimed target in skills development. Not the teacher, nor a standardised test. After all, she or he should be the beneficial of our work.

At least this is what this project has taught me, and for this experience and realisation I will forever be thankful for both TAMK and BME.