

Early school leaving in Finland – a problem solved?

Finland belongs in a European perspective to the countries that have low early school leaving, with over 90% of young people obtaining post-compulsory qualifications. Still, Finland belongs to the countries with high youth unemployment rates. The unemployment rate of 20% is 4% higher than that of other EU countries and 10% higher than among the average OECD country. Finland has reduced an already low rate of early school leaving by modernising vocational training, improving access to these and intensifying counselling and co-operation between and within schools. However, early school leaving remains a problem for more vulnerable groups and particularly in the metropolitan area. Practices for preventing dropout from school are being developed and the focus is on individual plans and on intensifying collaboration inside the school and between different sectors in the community.

Key words: early school leaving, unemployment, disadvantaged groups, individual orientation plans

1. Introduction to early school leaving in the Finnish context

1.1 The development of youth unemployment

After a period of strong economic growth, Finland experienced a sharp economic downturn in the beginning of the 1990s, with rapidly rising unemployment rates. The change in Finland was dramatic, as unemployment increased from 3% in 1990 to 17% in 1994. Even if the peak was reached in 1994, unemployment has remained high compared to the situation of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite a small decrease in recent years, unemployment is still substantially higher (see Figure 1) than in the other Scandinavian countries and equal to the average level of unemployment in OECD countries (OECD 2004). The situation among young people has been even more difficult and in 2003 youth unemployment was still 22%, although it has decreased from the peak in 1994, when it was 31% (Malmberg-Heimonen 2005).

Figure 1: Unemployment in Finland and Sweden (15-64), 1990-2003 (OECD 2004)



In 2004 the overall unemployment rate was 8.1% (Statistics Finland 2004). The unemployment rate among young women is higher than among men, but long-term unemployment is more usual among men. Youth unemployment in Finland is more than the double, as high as 20.7% in 2004. Even though the unemployment rate is higher among youth, the long-term unemployment rate is lower. Youth unemployment is 80% comprised of "newcomers", which means that breaking into the labour market is the main problem. In Finland in the 1990s, youth unemployment rose at a higher rate than was average across the EU countries, the OECD countries or Nordic Countries. It has remained at a high level since. The unemployment rate of 20% is 4% higher than that of other EU countries and 10% higher than among the average OECD country. However, long-term unemployment among the youth is, at 11%, lower than the average across Europe.

Young people enter the labour market relatively late in Finland. This is due to delays in beginning studies and to long study times (National Action Plan 2005). The increase in education standards has confirmed the assimilation between the educational degree and labour-market opportunities. During the 1990s and onwards it has been almost impossible to get a job without some sort of education certificate. Gradually we have arrived at a situation where education has become almost inescapable, but it is still, however, not sufficient for what is needed for entry into the labour market (e.g. the need for work experience) – especially among youth. Vanttaja & Järvinen (2004) explain this by means of job competition theory. Firstly, the certificate is a signal of the educability of the individual: the capability to learn new things and information. Secondly, the more of an education the job seeker has, the less the employer needs to educate at their own expense.

Regional differences of health and well-being have always been significant in Finland. The gap is the widest between sparsely-populated areas and urban centres. However studies have found out that young people do not reflect the same area-related urban-rural differences that appear among adult population. Even though children grow up in very different circumstances the school-system prevents exclusion and health disparities among the young, at least to some extent (Paju 2004). Today the unemployment rate in some regions of northern and eastern Finland is more than three times higher than that of growth regions. The regional disparities among youth unemployment (15-24) is almost the same as the overall unemployment.

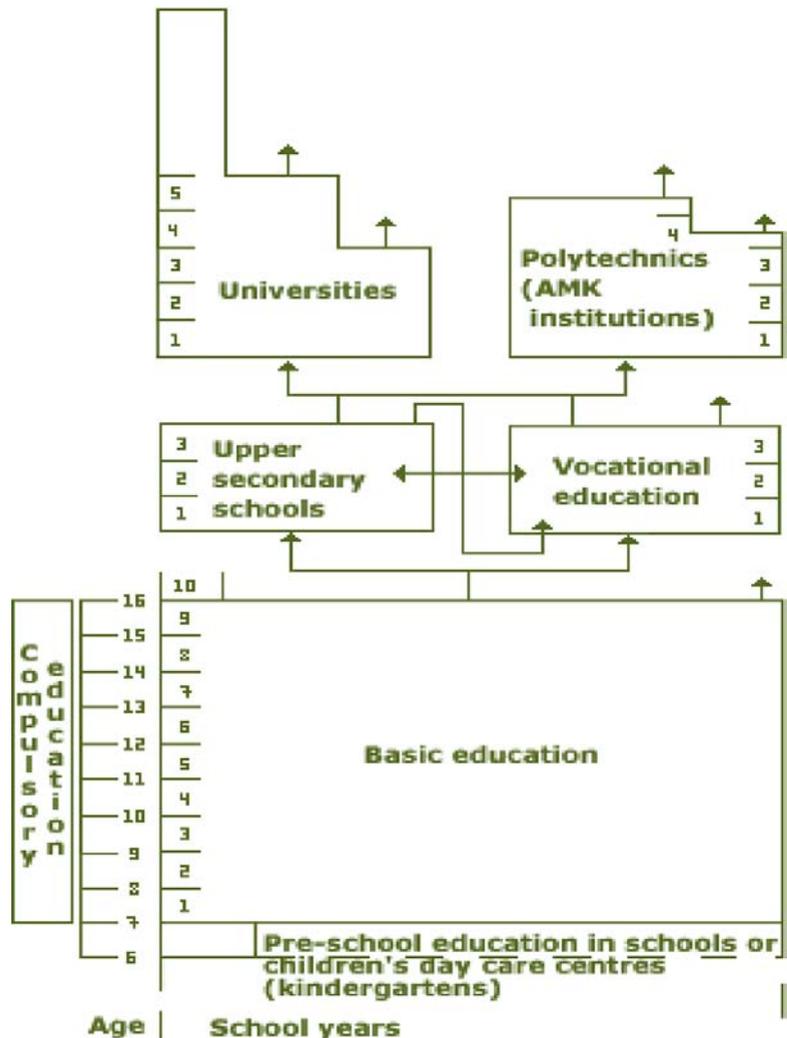
1.2. The early school leaving situation - some background indicators

In a European perspective Finland belongs to the countries that have low early school leaving, with over 90% of young people obtaining post-compulsory qualifications. Finland also has a comprehensive school system, training is mainly based in schools but linked to the labour market and there is only a weak effect from parent's low educational level.

The comprehensive school is a nine-year system providing education for all children of compulsory school age. Every Finnish citizen is required to complete this education. Comprehensive school ends once a young person has completed the curriculum of the comprehensive school or when ten years have passed since the start of their compulsory education. Post-

comprehensive school education is given by general upper secondary schools and vocational schools. The upper secondary schools offer a three-year general education curriculum, at the end of which the pupil takes the national matriculation examination, which is the general eligibility criterion for higher education. The Finnish higher education system is made up of two parallel sectors: universities and polytechnics. The universities rely on the connection between research and teaching. Their basic purpose is to perform scientific research and to provide higher education connected with it. Students at universities may take a lower (Bachelor's) or higher (Master's) academic degree and also academic further education, consisting of licentiate and doctoral degree. Universities also arrange further education and open-university teaching. The polytechnics are usually regional higher education institutions which provide instruction in subjects from several sectors, and which emphasize a connection with working life. The degrees they provide are higher education degrees with a professional emphasis.

Figure 2: The Education System of Finland



In Finland in 2004, 10% of 16-year-olds did not continue with their education. In 1995 the school leaving rate was at its highest, at over 15%. In practice almost everyone finishes compulsory education in Finland, with only about one hundred per year leave before getting the exam. In post-compulsory education some will already leave school in the beginning of the program and some later. About 7-8% does not continue directly after the compulsory education to post-compulsory. The drop-out rate has fallen in both secondary vocational training and at polytechnics.

About 12 per cent of students drop out of secondary vocational education and 7 per cent from polytechnics every year. The drop out rate is lower at upper secondary school and universities. Some of the dropouts go directly to studies in other fields, while some find work and continue their studies at a later date. (National Action Plan 2005).

Low early school leaving correlates with the comprehensive school systems, training is largely school based but also has relevant practical elements taking place in companies; links to the labour market are close or at least becoming closer. Social inequality is relatively low while the connection between the education of the parents and that of the children is less strong compared to other countries. Katja Komonen (2001), one of the foremost researchers on school leavers in Finland, emphasises that dropping out from school has often been seen as being related to educational or social exclusion, or exclusion from the labour market. However it needs to be emphasized that dropping out of post-compulsory education doesn't always mean dropping out from all kinds of education; usually it means a change of path. In fact only a small group of the school leavers will be the real risk group. Many change education, get pregnant, serve in the military etc.

In terms of early school leaving, the problem is greater in the metropolitan areas where new forms of multiple disadvantages are found. The metropolitan areas have typically exhibited problems in collaboration between different sectors and a lack of functional mainstream systems. There also seems to be a tendency to exclude more problematic groups from schools, even though the official aim is to integrate everyone into mainstream schools. Cuts in the welfare system have led to a lack of resources in the education system (e.g. educational support) and excessive class sizes.

Vanttaja & Järvinen (2004) have studied whether dropout from education and work, in the age range of 16-18, is related to future education, socio-economic position, income level, and family life. Their study showed that the connections between family background and dropping out are clear. The young dropouts were mostly from low-income families, less educated, and - from a labour-market perspective - in a weaker position than the population on average. The risk of drop out of children born to higher educated people seems to be much lower. It has also been shown that home and social backgrounds affect on the choice of later careers.

Likewise, gender also has an influence on later career paths. The differences between women and men appear to be very clear after upper secondary schooling, both in terms of the labour-market situation and salary incomes.

Women more often continue their studies after the upper secondary school but men usually get obtain a "higher" position and receive a higher salary further down the career path. Exclusion risks are also more prevalent among men than women (National Action Plan 2005).

What are the key problems in transition from school to work?

In general, dropping out of further education in Finland is not a big problem; it is far more typical of students with special needs (e.g. behavioural problems). Nevertheless, the drop out phenomena and exclusion from the school system is problematic both from the individual and the social perspective (Veijola 2003).

Finland is well-known for the high level of education among the population and the quality of basic education. Finnish students have a good standard of knowledge when you look at the results from the PISA-research. For instance, Finnish 15-years-olds had the best scores in the OECD for reading; as well Finns top level scores in mathematics and science. Geographical differences in performance were relatively small. Differences according to socio-economic background were found, although these were not as marked as in other countries. This is in large part due to a comprehensive and equal school and daycare system, but also to the high qualifications of teachers. According to a recent evaluation (Koulutuksen arviointineuvoston julkaisu 2005) the equality in basic education has strengthened and differences among schools have diminished. Basic education offers the majority a safe learning environment and working conditions are generally good. However, research from the late 1990s claims that the youth in Finland enjoy school less than in other Nordic Countries or in the United States. WHO research from 2004 has paid attention to the negative attitudes among Finnish young 11-15-year-olds compared to other countries (Järvinen & Vanttaja 2004).

Gender differences are evident. The modern school favours girls to some extent and there is a need for different learning methods particularly in regard to boys. There are also criticisms of the compulsory school because it does not sufficiently support young people who have special needs or who need special education or some extra counselling. The transitional stages, such as at the end of the compulsory school, are very critical and there is still a lack of emphasis during these phases.

Young people enter the labour market relatively late in Finland. This is due to delays in beginning studies and to long study times (Finland's National Action Plan 2005). The increase in education standards has confirmed the assimilation between the educational degree and labour-market opportunities. Young people face still enormous problems in entering the labour market. A lack of working experiences makes it harder to find a job. In the labour market during the past 15 years, fixed term contracts have become much more common among young people than among the rest of the population. This is especially a problem among women (Järvinen & Vanttaja 2004, Nyyssölä 2002). In a European perspective Finnish young people aged 18-24 more often work in a non-standard job (Harslöf 2003). The rate of self-employment among 15-24-year-olds is very low (under 2%).

Research points out many of the young people today are satisfied to work part-time for many reasons, such as studying, taking care of children or not wanting a full-time job. According to the study of Järvinen and Vanttaja (2004), quite few work part-time because of the lack of availability of full-time work. At the same time as atypical work can give young people the opportunity of different work experience, there are also several problems with this type of employment, including low pay, non-existent unemployment benefits or health insurance, and dangerous working conditions. These types of employment can be a step towards social exclusion and labour force marginalisation (Hammer 2003). This has been further corroborated in another recent study (Moisio 2005).

Financial problems and poverty are strongly related to unemployment. Only around 25% of the young unemployed receive income-related unemployment benefits. The biggest problem is precarious careers (e.g. fixed-term contracts and part-time work). According to Moisio (2005), poverty among children has grown during the last ten years. This is related to the economic recession and the young age group who entered the labour market in the 1990s. A total of 12% of children is regarded as living in poverty and their proportion has grown more than among the adult population.

Young people can fall off the administrative landscape and are not registered as unemployed or/and do not start any further education. There has been a growing awareness of this hidden unemployment particularly among the young age groups, though there have been no definitive statistical evidence of this phenomenon.

Preventing youth unemployment and early school leaving in Finland

A) Labour market policies

The last decade has been a period of special labour and social measures for young people in Finland. Extensive labour market reforms were carried out in late 1990s and early 2000s. It was argued that present labour-market policy increased passivity among unemployed workers, employment offices dealt only with a small percentage of the workplaces available. A new emphasis was made on individual activation plans, follow-up interviews with unemployed, job search programmes and increased conditionality regarding the receipt of unemployment benefits.

Activation is seen as another form a way to prevent the exclusion of youth (Veijola 2003). Counselling and guidance are part of the public service for unemployed young people. This includes vocational and personal guidance, which involves drawing up of educational and employment plans. Individual action plans are also emphasised in the active rehabilitative work. The unemployed person and the authority will together review the work/education history and then concentrate on the actual current situation. It results in a plan or an agreement with agreement on the aim and actions towards increasing employability. One new aspect with the Act of Rehabilitative Work (2001) is that the unemployed are obliged to participate in an individual service process, not only simply an education- or job-offer as has been the case (Ala-Kauhaluoma et al. 2004). The Act is part of an active social policy reform in which the right to a minimum security is linked more

closely to work. A structural reform of the public employment service was also carried out: the services and resources of those who are most difficult to employ are collected to the new labour force service centres. At the same time, the service models of the employment offices are developed in order to solve the problems regarding the matching and availability of labour, and to organize better employer and jobseeker services.

Figure 3: The structural reform of public employment services



Further measures in order to decrease the overall structural unemployment, especially long-term unemployment and youth unemployment, were introduced as part of the Employment Programme launched by the Government for the period 2003-2007. The programme agreed an educational and social guarantee for young people. According to the guarantee, every unemployed young person is offered a training/trainee work or a workshop place after 3-months of job seeking. The measures provided should focus on individual job-seeking plans. The target of the Ministry of Labour for 2006 is that individual job-seeking plans are being made for 90% of the young unemployed before the 3-month point of unemployment. In 2003, the respective rate was only 13%. The Government has decided to allocate EUR 50 million for the activation of the young unemployed in the context of the State budget for 2006.

B) Education system policies

In relation to early school leaving, Finland has met the overall EU target for 2010, although the male rate remains below it. Finland has reduced an already low rate of early school leaving by modernising vocational training, improving access to these and intensifying counselling and co-operation between and within schools. Furthermore, there has been a focus on intensifying local and regional co-operation and increasing collaboration between administrative bodies. The reduction of school drop-outs has been accelerated as the educational institutions have changed over to performance-based financing in vocational education (Finnish National Action Plan against Poverty and Exclusion 2005)

Currently school leaving is high on the political agenda and there are

different plans on intensifying special support systems in school. The political target is that at least 96% of those leaving comprehensive school in 2008 will begin general upper secondary school, vocational education and training, or voluntary additional basic education during the same year (education guarantee). The figure for 2003 was 94.5%. Measures include increasing remedial teaching, special needs education, guidance counselling and pupil/student welfare services, developing immigrant education and training and realising the education and training guarantee.

There are, however, no comprehensive national policies for practice against early school leaving. Various projects have been tried out and developed during recent years. They are funded either by the European Social Fund (ESF) and/or administrated by the National Board of Education. Their aim is to prevent early school leaving and search for practices that give best results and could therefore become permanent.

The school supports the students in formal learning in many ways. Special education, remedial education, student counselling and student care is provided. However, according to the recent evaluation of basic education (cf. Koulutuksen arviointineuvoston julkaisuja 2005) the need for special education is much greater than the schools have been able to offer. During the period 1997–2004 the number of pupils in special education has doubled. In 2004, altogether 7% of children were in special education, of which 69% were boys. Part-time special education was received by 21% of pupils and remedial education by 15%. There is also a need for more non-formal learning, where practice is more integrated and this concerns particularly boys.

Workshop activities to reduce early school leaving have been very successful. The workshops are cross-sectoral activities, which at their best also cover the grey zones, those areas that fall between administrative sectors. They make use of the special expertise of each sector—youth, education, social affairs and labour—combining them in a new way for the good of the client.

The students have learned to take care of themselves and their studies and to become enthusiastic about their studies and future when regular work and routines have been established. Young people were motivated by the opportunity to concentrate on a profession that interested them (Liimatainen-Lamberg, 1996)

The preventive measures in the employment administration are broader in Finland than in the rest of the Nordic countries. Different forms of guidance services and follow-up services are developed—including individual careers guidance services—as well as web-based information on vocational, educational and training options and support for career decision-making. However, there is a need to intensify collaboration inside the school and between different schools (for example compulsory and vocational education), with the families, with other authorities like child welfare and youth centres (Linnakangas & Suikkanen 2004).

Good practices on preventing youth from dropping out of school

An important means of EU policies to influence national policies is the identification of good practices. This study will try to identify and cluster constellations of disadvantage and corresponding policies to single out factors of success and failures. It needs to be said that with regard to good practice we not only refer to measures that have been operative for some time and are thoroughly evaluated but also more recent examples, even if they have not yet been fully evaluated.

It is of course difficult to single out examples of the many good practices that exist, but we have focused on examples of both preventing youth unemployment as well as school drop-out at the same time that we have focused on more structural long-lasting reforms. Some of these have not yet been evaluated but are in the process of evaluation. Nevertheless, structural reforms are not often mentioned when it comes to good practices even though structural reforms are necessary elements in enabling developments of good practices. In a Finnish context one structural reform needs to be emphasized before going into good practices, namely the Youth Society Guarantee. Examples of good practices are the Early Rehabilitation Trial for Adolescents and the labour force service centres.

The Youth Society Guarantee

The youth society guarantee, which aimed at reducing and preventing youth unemployment, was introduced as part of the Employment Programme launched by the Government for the period 2003–2007. In this intersectoral employment programme, the labour authorities have the principal responsibility for implementing the society guarantee for unemployed young people while the education authorities are responsible for the education and training guarantee.

The Youth Society Guarantee is composed of intensified labour services, intersectoral service co-operation, labour market measures and programmes for young people. The guidelines for the services were approved by the Ministry of Labour in December 2004. The main target group is young people (< 25 years) who have been unemployed for three months. (In 2005 16.8% of young people <20 years had an unemployment that lasted over 3 months, while the equivalent was 35,1% for young in the age of 20-24). The main aim of the guarantee is that every young unemployed person should be offered a place in further education, practical training, or a workshop activity after a period of three months unemployment. It is hoped that the transition to further education will be more effective, the application system will be easier, student- and vocational counselling will be intensified, and more practical information about working life will be made available. The aim is for 96% of those who finish compulsory education to continue in upper secondary education and for the workshop-activities to be permanent, both by 2008.

The society guarantee includes intensified co-operation between education and employment, the school, and the labour market. The educational authorities are responsible for the education and for the transition from education to employment by e.g. developing student and education

counselling. The labour authorities are responsible for the whole youth society guarantee. Young unemployed under 25 are the participants of the project. The youth society guarantee should offer youth services that focus not only on employment but also on multiprofessional services. Employment agencies are meant to employ youth counsellors and establish a youth-team. The measures provided focus on individual job-seeking plans and the target is that individual job-seeking plans are being made for 90% of the young unemployed before the 3-month point of unemployment. In 2003, the respective rate was only 13%. The evaluation of the youth guarantee service will be monitored by the employment agency every third year. In 2006 the Ministry of Labour and different regional offices will evaluate the youth unemployment situation and the implementation of the youth society guarantee.

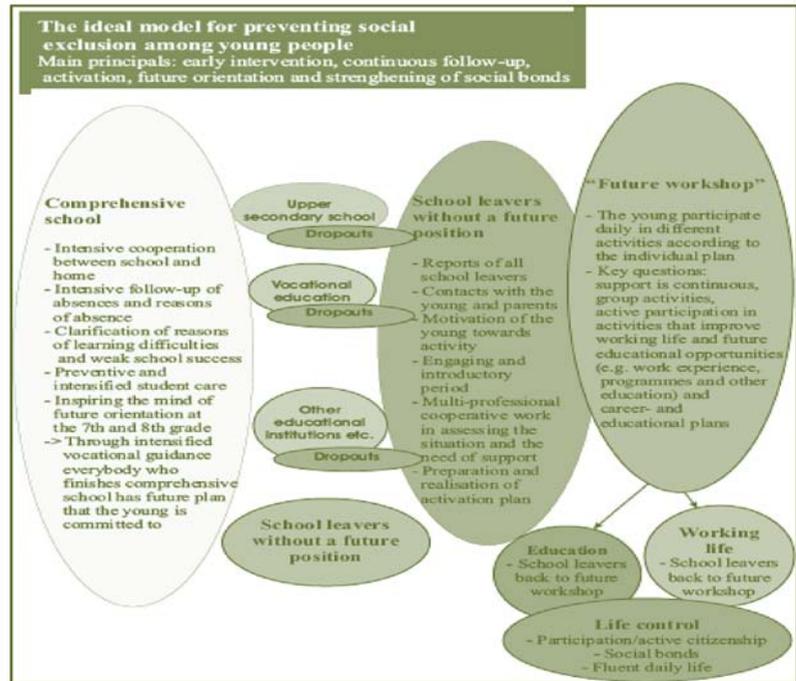
Early rehabilitation trial for adolescents

The Working group on Active Social Policy proposed in its memorandum a three-year trial early rehabilitation for 15-17-year-olds at serious risk of social exclusion. The Social Insurance Institution (SII) working together with municipal education, the employment, social and health, and youth administrations have put the proposal into effect by arranging a rehabilitation trial for adolescents (2001-2003) involving 18 projects. The target group of the trial was young people who had dropped out of comprehensive school or vocational education or who were likely to drop their studies or end their comprehensive school early because of low grades. One objective of the trial was to develop and disseminate good models of co-operation and action. The trial aimed to 1) survey the need for legislative reforms in operations and financing, and 2) to create a permanent service model for young people at risk of social exclusion. The trial showed that there existed professional skills that there exist professional skills and a strong endeavour in municipalities to support young people at risk of exclusion. There were good prerequisites for cross-sectoral co-operation. However, problems were posed by poor co-ordination, by an undeveloped co-operation culture, scarcity of resources and lack of obligations and agreements related to the division of labour and responsibilities. The trial also showed that it is possible to do some preventive work within the framework of existing resources, but full-time employees are needed to co-ordinate the co-operation. In addition, some legislative amendments are needed to eliminate the factors hampering co-operation and to motivate young people to plan their education and work careers (Suikkanen, Martti & Linnakangas, 2004).

This ideal model is based on the experiences of the rehabilitation trial, the memo of the working group on Active Social Policy and the aims of the rehabilitation trial, and also partly on youth research, information from different research projects and practical experience. The basis of the suggested model is that it could be realized and incorporated as part of the existing service system. The model can be adapted to suit the different service systems in the municipalities.

The school has a central position in identifying those young people in need of support. Ongoing conversations with young people are important, as well

Figure 4: The ideal model for preventing social exclusion among young people (Suikkanen, Martti & Linnakangas 2004)



as engaging their enthusiasm and actually accompanying them to a student care group before it is too late. The aim is to prevent social exclusion among the young at an early stage. The employment office is reasonably good at screening unemployed young people but the problem is that those at risk do not sign up as job-seekers. Screening through local networking has given very good results.

In the ideal model, support of the youth should be based on multi-professional work. The central feature of support is to engage the young person, develop a confidential relationship and to get the young motivated. The aim is to make an activation plan and support the young person to make a vocational choice or find an interesting and suitable education. Continuous individual counselling processes are important.

The fundamental problem in the legislation is that young people between 15 and 17 who are in the need of support do not covered sufficiently social benefits. A young person in the transition phase who has completed or left comprehensive school, upper secondary school or vocational education without any future plan will be left alone with no resources. Some structural changes based on the experiences of the rehabilitation trial should be made.

'One-stop-shop' Service Centres and a youth experiment called "the Hoist"

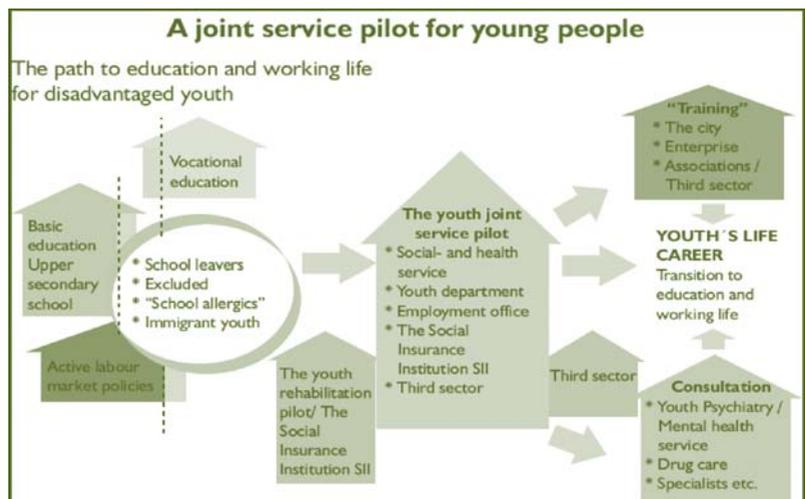
An important development in the strategy to help hard-to-serve job-seekers in Finland has been to collect the relevant authorities together as a one-stop-shop to solve the problems. These kind of joint-service centres have been created by the employment offices, the municipalities, and the Social Insurance Institution together at local level on an experimental basis in 2002

and 2003. The number of one-stop-shop service centres will be increased to 40 by 2006 (currently at 36) and the concept will be developed further and established on a permanent basis. Probably the most important part of this new development is the creation of a new service structure with possibilities for the networking of other public services within an integrated model. The strength of these centres is their large capacities to buy external services and support for their clients. However, these centres have not yet succeeded in reaching young people, as the majority of participants are still over 25. Nevertheless, there are examples of centres which are focussed on young people. According to the Youth Society Guarantee the one-stop-shop service centres are encouraged to establish youth services teams or departments when appropriate. Basic services for unemployed young people are always provided at the Public Employment Service.

The joint service centre Vinssi was one of the Ministry of Labour's joint service experiments for youth in 2002-2003. In January 2004 the activity was established on a permanent basis. Vinssi is a co-operation between the employment, the city of Lappeenranta and the Social Insurance Institution's joint service point for youth. The multi-professional team consists of one-stop-shop instructor/adviser, special one-stop-shop advisers, social workers, social instructors, employees of the social insurance institution, youth instructors, and joint service secretaries.

The Hoist (Vinssi in Finnish) is meant for young people under 25 that need counselling and support in education, working life and building a future. The young people are mostly directed to the pilot by the employment office, the social- and health authorities or by the Social Insurance Institution. Among the young people referred are the unemployed, school leavers, outsiders, "school allergics" and immigrants. There is also a service point that offers services for young people, parents, for organisations and for those who work among the young. From this service point one can receive information about hobbies, studies, living, economy and health.

Figure 5: "The hoist" – a joint service pilot for young people



One aim of the joint service centre is to be accessible where the young can get information, counselling, and support for education, working life and questions about life control. Also of importance is receiving co-operation from different authorities, both active and functional. The client should be the most important thing, not the bureaucracy.

The operation model is based on teamwork by multi-professionals, and the young people together with the authority find the solutions for their problems in relation to education and working life. The process includes four steps: 1. Interview 2. Activation plan 3. Offer of rehabilitation 4. Continuous follow-up and 5. Portfolio. The young person is called for an interview, where the situation is assessed and an activation plan is made up for the future. The purpose is to find adequate work, education, rehabilitation or something else that is suitable for the young client. The basis of the activation plan is the motivation of the young. The plan is followed up and supported individually. The target is that at least 60% of the clients should get a more permanent solution for their situation after the pilot.

During the first period in 2002 there were 153 clients at the service center, with a total number of visits of 1484. The process can be very long depending on the nature of problems and the increase of multi-problems among the clients. For many young people, the path to education or work is very long. The evaluation of the service is monitored according to directions from the Ministry of Labour. This includes following up the young persons portfolios, which contain details on living costs, visits to the one-stop-shop, plans etc. A more thorough evaluation of the outcomes of the services is being performed.

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