

Research on Career Planning Education in Finland

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Abstract: *Since the 1970s, Finland has integrated career planning education into compulsory basic education, establishing a vertically integrated system spanning from basic education to adult education. In the basic education stage, the focus lies on self-awareness, utilizing diversified career exploration activities to achieve career enlightenment. During secondary education, modular courses and a credit system are implemented, emphasizing student autonomy through personalized curricula and diverse guidance systems. In higher education, career orientation is refined through industry-academia-research collaboration and international perspectives. Adult education caters to diverse groups, supporting lifelong development via flexible learning models and a qualification certification framework. The Finnish system, rooted in educational equity, exhibits four key features: systematic early intervention, adaptability to individual differences, practice-oriented relevance, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. This framework has significantly enhanced the appeal of vocational education, optimized resource allocation, clarified individual career goals, and facilitated social mobility. However, challenges persist, including structural shifts in the labor market and societal cognitive biases toward vocational education. Drawing on these insights, China should promote early and lifelong career planning education, strengthen cross-sector collaboration and practical flexibility, integrate information-based resources, and build a modern career planning system tailored to local needs. This approach could alleviate conflicts in academic-vocational streamlining and cultivate interdisciplinary talent.*

Keywords: Career planning, Lifelong education, Finnish career planning education.

1. Introduction

In 2022, China promulgated the Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China, vigorously developing the separation of general education and vocational education, thereby promoting the high-quality development of vocational education and building a strong country in education, human resources and skills-based society. However, this has caused many parents to be anxious about their children's education. A survey on the public's cognition and expectations of vocational education in 2024 showed that 29% of parents said they were unwilling to let their children enter vocational education, and more than 30% of parents chose the option of "entanglement" on this issue [1]. To alleviate the embarrassment and contradiction between policy and reality, the development of career planning education is undoubtedly a bright road. Only by letting children and their parents know what their children are suitable for can we effectively improve the attractiveness of vocational education in China to the public. As early as the 1970s, Finland listed career planning education as a compulsory subject in junior high school, forming a career planning education system that covers all aspects from basic education to adult education. This system has made outstanding contributions to the growth of individual students, the development of vocational education, and the harmony, stability and steady development of the society and the economy. In view of this, we have carried out research on Finland's career planning education to help effectively break through the existing difficulties in China's vocational education and focus on cultivating comprehensive talents with strong career planning awareness and practical ability.

2. Finland's Career Planning Education System

In the 1970s, the Finnish education community realized that inequality in family resources would affect children's career planning abilities. In order to allow all children to have the opportunity to explore their inner treasures and make

reasonable plans for their future development, the Finnish government began to incorporate career planning education into the field of basic education, making it a compulsory course [2]. After years of development and improvement, Finland's career planning education has formed a relatively mature system, which is vertically integrated from basic education, secondary education, higher education to adult education. The unique mapping of educational connotations at each stage of education, in line with the inherent logic of educational development, has led to different characteristics of Finnish career planning education at different stages of education.

2.1 Basic Education: Starting with Self-awareness and Emphasizing Students' Diverse Experiences

Finland values children's ability to understand themselves. They believe that individual career planning should begin with a clear understanding of themselves. Only by empowering students' personal growth and progress can we promote their future career choices and development. Self-awareness is a lifelong endeavor. Therefore, Finland has carried out career planning education from the basic education stage, allowing students to discover, accept, and develop themselves. Through rich and diverse career experience activities, they can achieve career enlightenment and planning. The diversity of its career experience activities is reflected in many dimensions:

First, the experience venues are diversified. Breaking through the limitations of the traditional educational venue of school, the experience space is expanded to parents' workplaces, museums, and various real workplaces. In this way, students can be in a broad and real environment, experience the working atmosphere and actual operation process of different professions, and lay the foundation for a deep understanding of the connotation of the profession. Second, experience the diversity of professions. Finland upholds its trust in students. On the basis of building a scientific and reasonable "scaffolding" for them, students can experience simple labor such as cleaners, chef assistants, waiters, and can also get

involved in complex labor such as interior designers, general managers, and reporters. Third, the activities are diversified. Finnish schools couple simulated experience with real experience, organically combine long-term experience with short-term experience, and connect theory with practice. For example, seventh-grade students have two days of career experience activities, while ninth-grade students have one week of career experience activities [3]. This arrangement creates two time dimensions for students, short-term and long-term, so that they can quickly establish intuitive career feelings and deeply experience the systematicity and complexity of careers, which helps students build a comprehensive and profound career understanding system in the interweaving of time spans. In addition, Finland launched the Me & My City Project. In this project, students will receive 10 hours of theoretical study on society, economy and careers. For example, the purpose of taxation and the reasons for different salaries in different professions are discussed in the course. Students submit resumes, participate in interviews and enter the simulated city. According to the work guide they receive, they complete tasks to earn wages and use the wages to purchase what the company needs to operate. In the whole process, students become producers and consumers at the same time [4]. In the context of coupling theory with practice and integrating virtual reality, knowledge understanding is deeply assisted, rigid rote memorization is abandoned, and students' knowledge mastery and application efficiency are improved, which also paves a fertile ground for the development of innovative thinking. It also builds a bridge for the transition from virtual to real environment, steadily improving students' career confidence and career adaptability, and thus laying a solid foundation for students' smooth career development.

2.2 Secondary Education: Emphasize the Personalization of Career Planning Courses and Implement Diversified Guidance

In the Finnish high school education stage, the personalized characteristics of career planning courses are both an inevitable reflection of the inherent requirements of the education system and a necessary choice that meets the development needs of students. The root of its personalized characteristics lies in the fact that students at this stage are given more autonomy and decision-making power in their studies. Dating back to the mid-1990s, Finnish high school education has undergone profound changes. At the macro level, the traditional class system and grade system were abolished and replaced by a modular curriculum structure and credit system. At the same time, the school system broke away from the shackles of the original fixed three-year system and became a flexible setting of 2 to 4 years. Under this educational framework, students need to choose courses independently based on their own differences in learning foundation, interest preferences, academic arrangements, and learning progress, and then complete and be responsible for their academic plans that are suitable for them [5]. At the micro level, the courses available to students are very rich and diverse. Specifically, students can not only choose from elective courses offered by their own school, but also go beyond the boundaries of their own school and explore elective courses offered by other schools, with the number of elective courses reaching 600 [6]. It is the interweaving and

synergistic effect of these two factors, the flexibility of the school system and the diversity of elective courses, that ultimately determine the personalized characteristics of career planning courses.

In Finland, high school students have a diversified career planning guidance system that complements the personalized career planning curriculum. In terms of guidance targets, it covers universal guidance for all students and targeted guidance for individual students. In terms of guidance forms, in addition to traditional offline guidance, remote online guidance is also included, which effectively breaks through the constraints of guidance activities in the time and space dimensions and can respond to and resolve various problems faced by students more quickly. In terms of guidance subjects, it includes professional guidance consultants, subject teachers and student counselors [7]. Among them, student counselors, as the main body of peer guidance, can carry out career planning in a way that is closer to the students' own perspective, and in the process, their own understanding of future career development and continuing education directions can also be deepened and strengthened. All guidance revolves around supporting students' strengths and development needs as learners, familiarizing themselves with further study planning and application procedures, and providing information on employment, business sectors and entrepreneurship. [8] In general, during the high school education stage, the school relies on the coordinated operation of personalized curriculum settings and diversified guidance systems to enable students to make detailed comparisons of different subsequent learning paths and career plans, clarify the potential impact of different choices in high school on their subsequent learning opportunities and career development, and thus encourage students to internalize the importance of lifelong learning into their own value cognition.

2.3 Higher Education: Based on an International Perspective, Integrating Industry, Academia and Research to Achieve Career Orientation

Since 2011, Finland has officially implemented a new university law. The implementation of this law has gradually introduced a more diversified market mechanism into the field of higher education. As universities are pushed into the market, they have begun to actively explore extensive and in-depth cooperation with various domestic and foreign companies to open up new channels for university funding [9]. In this process, in line with Finland's strategy of internationalizing higher education, the government, industry and universities have gradually built a cooperative network structure that influences and interacts with each other. The effective operation of this structure has strongly promoted students to achieve a wider mobility in employment and greatly improved their adaptability to the diverse labor market environment. As a result, career planning education in higher education has generally shown the characteristics of being guided by an international perspective, combining industry, academia and research as a path, and accurately achieving career orientation. For example, 11 Finnish universities and 15 universities of applied sciences participated in the EDUCase platform, a global pilot program initiated by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture from 2021 to 2024.

The purpose is to carry out practical case cooperation between Finnish and international higher education institutions in education, research, innovation and entrepreneurial skills development, and to develop students' working life and entrepreneurial skills, cross-sector critical thinking and sustainability skills, and the concept of global responsibility through joint guidance of innovative entrepreneurial training, academic and entrepreneurial practice [10].

2.4 Adult Education: Targeting Diverse Groups and Implementing Teaching on Demand

In the context of adult education in Finland, career planning education is carried out through multiple channels, and its implementation entities include adult education centers, higher education institutions, as well as various organizations such as enterprises, trade unions, and industry associations. In terms of the target audience, the scope is quite wide, including low-skilled groups, unemployed people, people on leave, and even individuals from different vulnerable groups (such as immigrants and refugees). In the context of adult education in Finland, career planning education demonstrates its unique inclusiveness and adaptability. For all kinds of subjects, regardless of age, work experience, and educational background, they can build and implement personalized learning plans based on the platform of adult education. The essence of this plan is to systematically plan and implement comprehensive guidance, in-depth consultation, and strong support measures based on the customer-centric concept, and ultimately aim to win competency-based qualifications for individuals, thereby effectively improving the possibility of participants integrating into professional life, or significantly enhancing their competitiveness in professional scenarios [11]. From the perspective of learning methods, participants have the right to make independent choices among multiple modes such as labor training, self-driven learning, and apprenticeship training. The Finnish National Qualifications Framework (FiNQF) defines key elements such as qualification certificates, syllabi, and a variety of competency modules [12]. The eight levels set by the framework, with their wide coverage, extend to a variety of occupational fields and skill requirements, thus effectively responding to the complex and highly personalized needs of different adult learners in their career development process. Career planning education can guide students to select qualification certification paths and learning content that suit them based on their interests, career goals, and ability levels, helping adult learners realize their own value in different occupational fields and promote lifelong learning and career development. At the same time, the Finnish National Qualifications Framework provides a basis and standard for the recognition of adults' previous learning experiences and non-formal education results.

3. Main Features of Finland's Career Planning Education

3.1 Emphasize Self-awareness and Develop Lifelong Learning

Finnish career planning education prioritizes self-awareness as a core component, believing that self-awareness has a starting point, the earlier the better, and no end point.

Cultivating this self-awareness is a long-term process that requires constant questioning and self-reflection. Only by fully understanding oneself can one make accurate career plans. Guided by career planning education, students learn to analyze their interests, abilities, and values, identifying their strengths and weaknesses, and developing personalized learning and career development plans. This self-awareness develops throughout students' lives, helping them make informed choices and continuously adjust their career paths at different stages of life. Finland has developed a career planning education model that integrates the entire education system. This vertically integrated approach ensures that individuals of all ages and educational levels receive appropriate career planning education. Focusing on student growth and development, it goes beyond academic and career guidance to cultivate students' academic and social skills, enabling them to acquire essential knowledge and skills for future life, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and well-rounded development.

3.2 Multiple Subjects Cooperate and Each Performs Its Duties

Finland has established a cross-departmental cooperation and dialogue mechanism between education, economy, culture and other departments related to career planning education. Each department achieves functional complementarity on the basis of fulfilling its own functions and provides various resources for the subjects of career planning education. At the same time, it ensures that resources are allocated reasonably and effectively to avoid the waste of resources caused by duplication of work among departments. Taking the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment as an example, it is responsible for continuously monitoring the dynamics of the employment market, collecting information on occupational demand, industry development trends, salary and benefits, and conducting in-depth analysis and research. It then transmits the above information to the education department and schools, helping schools to adjust the content and direction of career planning education in a timely manner according to the actual employment market situation, so as to enable students' career planning to meet market demand. In addition, the department will also promote cooperation between schools and enterprises and carry out internship practice projects.

3.3 Emphasis on Individual Differences and Career Adaptation

Finnish career planning education focuses on individual differences, takes the individual as the core, respects students' personalized choices, encourages them to choose their educational path and career direction based on their own interests and abilities, and opens up a diversified development model for students so that they can enjoy equal development opportunities and support in both academic and career paths. With individual differences as the cornerstone and cultivating career adaptability as the core, it promotes individual growth and progress. A high-quality career planning education system is guided by career adaptability and focuses on awakening students' career development awareness, exploring career development conditions, improving career decision-making ability, and experiencing the career practice

process. It is committed to cultivating students' career awareness, strong career curiosity, full career autonomy, and firm career self-confidence [13]. Finland's career planning education system uses the "course + activity + guidance" system model to stimulate individual career development awareness, promote students to take the initiative to care about their own career development, deeply reflect on their own personality traits, such as interests, character, ability, values, etc., as well as external environmental factors, such as their original family, social relations, characteristics of the times, national system, economic development, regional characteristics, etc., and clarify their own advantages and disadvantages, resources and opportunities for development. Based on an understanding of their own potential, students are able to independently plan and make decisions, integrating their individual circumstances with their developmental tasks, continuously creating the conditions necessary to achieve their goals, and courageously shouldering the consequences. Ultimately, students develop career confidence through clear self-awareness, external support, successful practice, and positive evaluation.

3.4 Closely Connected to Life, Flexible Practice

Social cognitive career theory points out that the achievement of career goals stems from the interaction between individuals and the environment and the observation of behavioral results, and then the continuous adjustment of their own career cognition and behavior. Finland focuses on integrating real environments into classroom teaching to ensure the consistency of the results of students' interaction with the environment and the long-term effectiveness of experience. For example, in class, teachers and students will pay attention to the summer short-term job recruitment information in the newspaper, screen positions that are suitable for students' age groups and analyze the required skills, so that students can realize that career information is not an abstract concept, but is closely related to real job opportunities, helping them to build a connection between the professional knowledge they have learned and actual employment scenarios. [3] Outside of the curriculum, Finland focuses on carrying out flexible and flexible practical experience activities. In terms of time, in addition to the career experience activities organized by the school, students can plan their own career experience activities according to their own time arrangements and interests. For example, during holidays or after school, they can go to companies or institutions of interest for short-term internships or visits to gain an in-depth understanding of the working environment and processes of different professions. From a location perspective, career experience opportunities aren't limited to the immediate vicinity of the school. Students can leverage online platforms and university partnerships to explore opportunities in other cities and even international companies. This allows them to gain exposure to diverse career fields and cultural backgrounds, broaden their career horizons, and help them explore their interests and potential. Therefore, the organic integration of practical course content and flexible practical experience effectively stimulates students' enthusiasm for proactive career planning.

4. The Achievements and Challenges of Career Planning Education in Finland

4.1 The Effectiveness of Career Planning Education in Finland

4.1.1 Individual: Improve career planning awareness and clarify career goals

A comparative study of career planning surveys conducted on 12,282 high school students in China, the United States, Japan, and South Korea showed that Chinese high school students had the lowest percentage of clear ideas about their future careers, with only a little over 40% of them clearly defining the careers they wanted to pursue in the future. [14] In contrast, Finnish students have been exposed to career planning since elementary school. Through systematic learning and practice, they have a deeper understanding of their own interests, strengths, and values, and have a stronger sense of planning. They can choose a suitable career direction based on their own characteristics and set goals and plans for their future career development in advance. The results of the 2012 PISA survey on the career development level and career competence of students in various countries showed that compared with other countries, Finnish students ranked first in career competence development [7].

4.1.2 Education: Enhance the attractiveness of vocational education and balance general education and vocational education

Compared with general education, vocational education is often at a disadvantage in terms of its attractiveness in educational choices. From a national perspective, ensuring a balance between general education and vocational education is conducive to the stable development of society, and enhancing the attractiveness of vocational education has become a consensus in many countries. Finland uses career planning education to guide students to reflect on and challenge their existing ideas about education and careers, enabling them to make choices based on abandoning prejudice. This has, to a certain extent, eliminated the concept of occupational discrimination and improved the image of vocational education. Surveys show that 90% of Finns recognize that vocational education has advantages such as high-quality teaching, strong orientation for work and life, flexible professional qualifications, and broad employment prospects. In recent years, the number of people applying to vocational and technical colleges in Finland has been steadily increasing. According to data released by Statistics Finland, the number of new students pursuing undergraduate degrees at vocational and technical colleges in 2020 increased by 14% compared to 2019, and the number of new students pursuing master's degrees increased by 25% [15]. In Finland, vocational education has the same status as general education, and its diversified education selection mechanism provides suitable development opportunities for different types of students, which not only improves the utilization rate of educational resources but also promotes the balanced development of the education system.

4.1.3 Society: meet the needs of economic development and promote social mobility

Finland's career planning education program adjusts its content and policies based on national and regional

projections of skills and training needs, aiming to cultivate talent aligned with socioeconomic development. This helps alleviate the imbalance between skills supply and demand in the labor market, improves the efficiency of human resource allocation, and provides strong support for Finland's technological innovation and economic development. Thanks to effective career planning education, Finnish graduates have demonstrated high employment rates after graduation, with over 90% of graduates from vocational colleges and vocational schools finding suitable positions in their respective fields. This not only improves individual quality of life but also contributes to social stability and development. Furthermore, for students with limited family resources, career planning education provides equal opportunities and resources, helping them tap into their potential and achieve upward social mobility through education and career choices. This is crucial for narrowing the wealth gap and promoting social stability and development.

4.2 Challenges of Career Planning Education in Finland

4.2.1 International: Profound structural changes have taken place in the labor market and the work sector

From an international perspective, structural changes such as digitalization, population aging, and green transformation have led to profound structural changes in the labor market and the work sector. First, low-skilled jobs are easily replaced by automation, and new jobs created by digitalization are difficult to directly accept the replaced. Second, population aging prolongs the retention time of the labor force in the market, and the overall age structure shifts upward, which generates a large number of demands for labor skills updates and a strong demand for lifelong learning opportunities. At the same time, it changes the demand for some goods and services, indirectly affecting the demand for skills in the labor market. Finally, as society transforms to a green consumption and production model, the labor market sector and occupational composition and skill content will also change accordingly [16]. The rapid changes in the labor market and the world of work require that career planning education keep pace with them, otherwise it will lead to educational distortion and social imbalance.

4.2.2 Domestic: People have cognitive biases about vocational education

In Finland, although vocational education has a good image in the minds of the public, most people still believe that general education has a better image. Society generally believes that vocational education is the choice of students who do not want to study but prefer practical learning, and the examinations and learning volume are less than those of general high schools [17]. The long-term existence of such misconceptions will exacerbate social discrimination against vocational education, forming a vicious cycle and hindering the diversification and healthy development of the Finnish education system.

5. The Enlightenment of Finland's Career Planning Education to My Country

In today's social context, factors such as labor market changes,

an aging population, and technological innovation are driving the urgent need for individuals to focus on career development and career planning, actively pursue appropriate education, and cultivate new skills. Career planning education, integrated throughout the education system, can help individuals clarify their goals and tasks in a rapidly changing social environment and promote the construction of a resource-efficient society. The core of lifelong learning lies in meeting individuals' inherent needs and identifying appropriate learning and career paths. Therefore, building a modern education system that supports lifelong learning for all should include a lifelong career planning education system. Finland has demonstrated a consistent, professional, and flexible development and practice path for career planning education, providing valuable reference for China.

5.1 Promote Early and Lifelong Career Planning Education and Build a Full-cycle Education Framework

An individual's self-awareness, educational choices, career awareness, and skill acquisition are lifelong processes. Finland has embedded career enlightenment education into basic education, building a career planning framework that covers the entire life cycle. In contrast, in China, career planning education is mostly concentrated in higher education, and there is a general lack of systematic design in basic education, resulting in students' lagging career awareness and weak planning capabilities. In this regard, it is recommended to incorporate career planning education into the compulsory curriculum system of primary and secondary schools, with phased design goals: in primary school, the core is career awareness and interest enlightenment, and exploration awareness is stimulated through activities such as role-playing and visits to career experience bases; in junior high school, self-awareness and career value cultivation are strengthened, and career assessment tools and career profile records are introduced; in high school, modular elective courses are offered in conjunction with the new college entrance examination reform to guide students to choose further education or career paths based on their subject strengths and interests. At the same time, it is necessary to improve the adult vocational re-education mechanism, learn from Finland's "credit bank" system and the National Vocational Qualification Framework (NQF), support the conversion of informal learning outcomes into academic credits, provide flexible and personalized career transition support for employed people and unemployed groups, and build a lifelong career planning education system that "connects all stages of education and covers the entire cycle."

5.2 Deepen Curriculum Reform and Build a "Theory + Practice + Guidance" Trinity Model

Finland's career planning curriculum is characterized by personalization and practical application, focusing on developing skills in real-world situations. Existing courses in my country often rely solely on theoretical instruction, lacking practical support and personalized guidance. Three breakthroughs are needed: first, developing tiered and categorized curriculum resources, such as adding career exploration workshops in K-12 education and embedding cutting-edge industry lectures and innovative entrepreneurship projects in higher education. Second,

improving the career experience network, building career experience centers based on regional industrial resources to provide students with immersive opportunities in fields such as catering, manufacturing, and information technology. Third, strengthening the career guidance service system, including staffing primary and secondary schools with full-time career mentors, establishing career development centers in universities, and engaging with corporate mentors and alumni resources to form a collaborative “school-family-society” guidance network.

5.3 Strengthen Cross-departmental Coordination Mechanisms and Optimize Resource Allocation Efficiency

Finland has achieved a dynamic connection between labor market information and educational content through the collaboration of multiple departments such as education, economy, and human resources and social security. China can establish a collaborative mechanism of “Ministry of Education-led, multi-department linkage” to integrate occupational demand forecasts, school-enterprise cooperation resources and employment service data. For example, the human resources and social security department regularly publishes industry skill gap reports, and the education department adjusts the professional settings of vocational schools accordingly; the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology promotes enterprises to deeply participate in the construction of career experience bases and build a “school-enterprise-community” three-in-one practice platform. In addition, we can learn from the experience of Finland’s “EDUCase” platform and build an industry-university-research collaborative innovation alliance to promote the deep integration of colleges and universities, vocational schools and enterprises in the fields of curriculum development, internships and training, and career guidance. High schools and universities can cooperate, and students can also go to universities to use experimental equipment to conduct research and take university courses in advance. [6]

5.4 Deepen Information Technology Empowerment and Build an Intelligent Guidance System

Faced with the rapid transformation of careers in the digital age, we need to leverage big data and artificial intelligence technologies to enhance the accuracy of career planning. China could develop a national career information database that integrates career profiles, skill maps, and job requirements data to provide students with dynamic career matching recommendations. At the same time, we could build online career guidance platforms that integrate virtual simulation practices, career assessment tools, and expert consultation modules to overcome geographical and resource constraints. For example, we could design an “AI career mentor” system that analyzes student behavioral data and learning trajectories to generate personalized career development reports, assisting them in developing adaptive planning plans.

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