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## THE HOPES AND GOALS OF UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN EDUCATIONAL CHOICES

*During their final spring at upper secondary school, students face many big choices regarding life and becoming independent. One of the most important choices in life has to do with educational choices after secondary school. Sufficient preparedness should thus be offered to this task through secondary level education supporting and promoting individuality. Additional challenges are caused by many of the structural factors of the Finnish educational system relating to further education. Examples of this are mandatory military service for men as well as demanding higher education entrance exams that can require a lot of preparation. Both of these add to extra years between different kinds of education and educational levels. Additionally, the promotion of individuality in upper secondary school choices and life in general further complicates the search for one's own path. Most upper secondary school graduates continue their studies after graduation, most of them after reflecting on it for a year or two. However, most students aim to continue their studies directly after upper secondary school. How, then, do upper secondary school graduates experience educational choices?*

### Upper secondary school students and educational choices

The purpose of this article is to examine what kinds of thoughts upper secondary school students in their final year have about educational choices after graduation. The study is partly based on data I have collected for my Master's thesis. The research data were compiled through group interviews between December 2011 and March 2012 in two different cities and four different upper secondary schools. Two of the upper secondary schools were specialised in arts. A majority of the interviewees were attending their matriculation exams in spring 2012.

In an article by Heidi Kettunen (Kettunen, 2013), the educational choices of upper secondary school students were examined statistically. Atte Vieno's (Vieno 2013) article, on the other hand, discusses educational choices after the choice has been made. In this article, I aim to bring out the voices of individual choosers. Educational choices are choices of the future. What do upper secondary school students aim at in their educational choices in 2012? How certain are they of their choices in this uncertain phase of life? Are their choices really future-oriented? I aim to summarise these dimensions by discussing the answer to the question:

*How do upper secondary school students regard the educational choices they make after graduation?*

I will begin by introducing the current upper secondary education system as well as the statistics of educational choices in brief. After this, I will move on to discussing adolescence and choices made in adolescence. An analysis and the results of it will follow this discussion.

### Upper secondary schools and their students today

The purpose and task of upper secondary education is to offer wide-ranging all-round education and preparedness for further education. (National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools 2003, 12–15.) The freedom for flexible studies has been increased through adding the possibility to attend courses

in other secondary schools and through adding optional courses. The decentralisation of the Matriculation Examination has also helped this cause. In theory it is possible to finish one's studies partly or completely through distance learning. (Klemelä et al. 2007, 12; Järvinen 2003, 12.) According to the national core curriculum, upper secondary school education should be goal-oriented and develop preparedness to make choices in one's own life, such as educational choices. The education offered should improve the self-esteem and self-knowledge of each student. Additionally, education should offer skills for planning one's future. (National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools 2003, 18, 24.)

Educational paths have become more individual but at the same time longer and more complex. This trend does not only concern higher education but it also reaches as far as the modern upper secondary school striving for individuality. According to Järvinen (2003), one of the clearest examples of this new educational thinking is that specialised upper secondary schools became more common in the 1990s. In these specialised schools, individuality, specialisation, supporting talent and competitiveness become concrete. Specialisation in upper secondary education began in the early 1980s through schools specialised in arts and music, and it developed through sports schools in the late 1980s to arranging international baccalaureates in the 1990s. These specialised schools have the possibility to deviate from the national curriculum by replacing courses with specialised ones in the school's own curriculum. Additionally, they are able to choose their students with different methods, usually giving weight to matters such as hobby interests and specialised skills in addition to the usual method of comparing average grades. Student selection is usually carried out through entrance exams or some other method providing the means to select the most talented students from the applicants. This special status undermines the traditional Finnish educational ideology, which is based on equal opportunity. These competitive schools receive more resources to carry out their specialised tasks, and there is a risk for uneven division of resources between schools. This undermines the principle of equal opportunity even further. (Järvinen 2003, 12–14; Klemelä et al. 2007, 13.; Koistinen 2011, 28–29.)

Upper secondary school students taking their final exams in spring 2012 have usually begun their studies in 2009. In that year, 50.2 per cent of the 64,137 ninth-graders finishing primary school begun their studies in upper secondary school, 41.2 per cent begun vocational training, and 8.6 per cent did not continue to education leading to a degree. (Statistics Finland, education statistics 2011, entrance to education.) According to the 2011 educational statistics of Statistics Finland, of the new upper secondary school graduates in 2010, 4.2 per cent entered secondary vocational training, 17.4 per cent entered a polytechnic and 18.1 per cent entered a university. 60.3 per cent of the new upper secondary school graduates did not continue to education leading to a degree. About 77 per cent of the graduates applied for further education but only 41 per cent got in. What is not revealed in the statistics is that most men complete their military or non-military service directly after upper secondary school, which leads to the postponement of studies. According to a survey by the Union of Finnish Upper Secondary School Students (2008), 62 per cent of students in their third or fourth year of upper secondary school studies aimed at university studies after graduation. 38 per cent said that they aimed at polytechnics, and 9 per cent were thinking about vocational training. 7 per cent did not know of their plans for further education, and 11 per cent said they would have a year off "with no particular plans" after upper secondary school. 17 per cent said they would work temporarily and 1 per cent permanently. (The Union of Finnish Upper Secondary School Students 2008, 9–11.)

Thus, a majority of upper secondary school graduates take at least one year off after graduation, although the statistics seem to show that most of them do not do this voluntarily. Many people use their year off to work in more or less interesting professions. Moving out to live alone, becoming independent and thinking about what to study. For many this also means preparation for the various entrance exams to higher education. Entrance exams are one of the structural factors of the Finnish higher education system that make it more difficult to continue to further education, as many fields are competitive and there are a lot of applicants. Many universities publish their application statistics on their websites. A glimpse at the application statistics on the University of Turku website ([www.utu.fi](http://www.utu.fi)) reveals that, for

example, there were 320 places for economic sciences in 2012. 2,339 applicants took part in the entrance exam, 40.4 of which were new upper secondary school graduates. 320 were selected, and 25.9 percent of them were new upper secondary school graduates. A quick calculation reveals that the admission percentage was 13.7 per cent. Thus, it is no wonder that many applicants rely on preparation courses to improve their chances of success. These courses are often held in university cities. One of the major organisers of these courses in Finland is Valmennuskeskus Oy. Their website ([www.valmennuskeskus.fi](http://www.valmennuskeskus.fi)) states as follows: *“Being successful in entrance exams requires good command of the basics and an increasing amount of ability to apply what has been learnt. Success in exams requires commitment and diligent studying. Our courses are planned so that the preparation methods correspond with the changing requirements of the exams. Each student following the course plan of Valmennuskeskus has an excellent chance of receiving the desired study place.”* (Translated from Finnish) According to this message, being successful in exams requires disciplined studying and a will to succeed. These are said to be significant to the applicant, and they are for sale at the preparation course. (Vahtera 2007, 19.)

### **Future choices and adolescence**

The concepts of adolescence and adulthood have been understood differently in different eras and cultures. Ketokivi defines adulthood as a *“process defined by social rules, during which a person moves from the category of adolescence to the category of adulthood, both as a part of the social world as well as their own experiences”*. This can be considered the western definition. (Ketokivi 2005, 108–109, translated from Finnish.) Ketokivi (2005) discusses whether the prolonged adolescence is a result of the requirements that the society places on the individual as well as the individualised society. Individuals are seen to be personally responsible for their own choices. (Ketokivi 2005, 102–104.) In the western society, adolescence has become a multi-dimensional phase that has stretched from both ends; the transition from adolescence to adulthood is an indeterminate phase of life. Adulthood is reached in increments. Traditionally, central conditions of adulthood have included marriage and parenthood. Other conditions can be, for example, graduation, finding a permanent job, steady income, settling down and the stability of life. However, the current society does not support stability and thus settling down. (Aapola 2005, 258., Ketokivi 2005, 101.) When the concept of adolescence becoming increasingly complex is the norm, would there be reason to modify the concept of adulthood?

Upper secondary school students are making their choices in adolescence, which is an uncertain phase of life. Educational choices made in adolescence become a part of the rest of the chooser’s life. However, it is impossible to know anything about the future before it has become the present. Adolescents have difficulty in anchoring their plans in the future, as in uncertain conditions, the future is difficult to predict. Nevertheless, individuals tend to perceive their own future through reflecting on hopes, fears and possibilities related to it. This perception is dependent on the time and place and forms the individual’s living environment. For current upper secondary school students, this constitutes the uncertain phase of adolescence. People are constantly making assumptions, assessments and decisions to ensure control of their own future, as choices made in the present have their consequences in the future, just as choices made in the past have consequences in the present. (Ketonen 1981, 2; Rubin 2006, 15.; Mikkonen 2000 16–17).

According to Kojo (2010), future orientation can be understood to mean thinking about the future: hopes, goals and plans related to it as well as an assessment of the possibilities that the individual has to influence their own future. (Kojo 2010, 23–24.) If the future seems uncertain, this can for its part impede making choices relating to the future. Tommi Hoikkala and Petri Paju have described the generation born in the 80s and 90s as “the generation of individual choice” [1]. This refers to the information society’s growing demands of what one needs to know and be able to do in order to cope in life. The generation of individual choice is better off in many ways than their predecessors: more educational possibilities, better standard of living, possibility to travel and see the world. In the context of education, pupils have the possibility to choose different kinds of focuses at a much younger age than before.

However, this educational freedom of choice also brings the responsibility for one's own choices to much younger people than before. Hoikkala says that the model of individualisation “favours independent, coping, motivated and industrious adolescents” (Hoikkala & Paju 2008, 288–289, translated from Finnish).

Educational choices are decisions that adolescents are expected to make. Choosing means responsibility and obligation. Choices reach into the future and adulthood, which is difficult for the adolescents to anticipate. In addition to the uncertainty of the future, the blurred phases of life and uncertainty of the present are challenges in themselves.

### Research data and analysis

The research data were compiled between December 2011 and March 2012 in two different cities and four different upper secondary schools, two of which were specialised in arts and the other two were general upper secondary schools. Three of the schools used were located in university cities, including both of the specialised schools. One of the schools was located in a small city of about 15,000 inhabitants with no other opportunities for further education than one vocational school. The data consist of six group interviews with a total of 27 participants among third year students, five of whom were planning to continue their upper secondary school studies in the fourth year. The remaining 22 were taking their final exams in spring 2012. Of the interviewees 13 were men and 14 were women. In table 1, the data is presented by school and gender. In order to maintain the anonymity of the interviewees, I have named the participants of each group with the same initial in the reports. These initials are also presented in the following table.

Table 1. Data by city and by gender.

School type:	Women	Men	Total	Initial
Small city, school 1.	1	3	4	L
Small city, school 1.	3	2	5	K
<b>Total, small city</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	-
Large city, school 2.	3	2	5	A
Large city, school 2.	0	5	5	J
<b>Total, large city</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>10</b>	-
Specialised school, school 3.	4	0	4	T
Specialised school, school 4.	3	1	4	O
<b>Total, specialised schools</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	

<b>Total, whole data</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>27</b>	
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A group interview situation has some special characteristics compared to an individual interview. In an individual interview, the interviewer often has control over *what* is discussed in the interview and *how*. The discussion in a group interview is more of a conversation between several people than a dialogue between an interviewer and an interviewee. Thus, control over the situation does not lie solely in the hands of the interviewer, and the situation differs from a dialogue between an interviewer and an interviewee. The interviewer has the possibility to steer the discussion into certain themes, such as in the semi-structured model used in these interviews. However, a group interview contains continuous interruptions and other matters that are not in the control of the interviewer. As a data collection method, group interviews are efficient due to the higher number of participants. (Sulkunen 1992, 264–265.) A group discussion must be interpreted in the context in which it is produced. An individual’s expressions and their content always tell of, for example, what kind of image the participant wants to portray to the other participants or how they want the other participants to see them.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 to 55 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed as research data. The total amount of transcribed text in Calibri font (pt12) was 114.5 pages. The Express Scribe program was used in transcribing. Notes were created by reading through the transcriptions several times, and these notes were coded with the Atlas.ti program. Reaching a meaningful set of data required several attempts of coding. The goal was to find differences and similarities between the interviews. In the following analysis phase, the codes were formed into larger units and themes. Data collection through themed interviews guides as well as simplifies dividing the data into themes, as the themes of the interview provide a ready-made structure to the data. The division was made based on what was said about each theme, and the appearance of different themes in the data was compared. This is a kind of reorganisation of the data. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 93.)

In table 2, the division of the code into different themes is depicted. The themes “further education as a choice” and “further education as a goal” will be examined in more detail in this article. These two themes deal with the experience of educational choice and the goals set to it.

*Table 2. The division of the codes into different themes.*

UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL AS A CHOICE	UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL AS A PATH TO FURTHER EDUCATION	FURTHER EDUCATION AS A CHOICE	FURTHER EDUCATION AS A GOAL
Why upper secondary school?	Course choices / final exams	Why studying?	Educational options
Upper secondary school as an experience	Fourth year in upper secondary school	Where and what to study?	Setting goals
	Support measures	The ease/difficulty of choices	Entrance exams/ preparation course
		Family	Confidence in the future

## Educational choice – towards an unknown goal

According to the data, applying for further education was self-evident to all interviewees. All interviewees named a higher education degree as their primary choice, either in a university or a polytechnic. Only two of the interviewees told that they had even considered applying for vocational training; to all others, higher education was self-evident. One of these two, in addition to higher education degrees in arts, dreamt of the profession of boat building and was currently studying at a specialised upper secondary school. The other was a man from a small city, who only mentioned that the thought had crossed his mind. The others in his group, however, rejected the idea for their own part. This small city does not offer other educational opportunities besides vocational training.

All interviewees were not able to name a specific degree program or subject for which they wish to apply. Despite of this unclarity, their goals were set to higher education. The perception that their place would be in the limited scope of higher education reveals an interesting premise for making choices: limiting one's own interests to fit into the scope of what higher education has to offer.

**Joonas:** Well yeah, I don't have a clear idea of any kind of certain profession, but I was like thinking that I'd try to educate myself as well as possible and then see what jobs I can get and what would be fun and so forth, so I don't really have a clear picture.

**Interviewer:** What would you call being well educated?

**Joonas:** Well I was thinking about a Master's degree. A Master's level degree, at least.

**Interviewer:** In what subject?

**Joonas:** Well, at the moment I feel like economic sciences, but it's really not for sure at this point. Probably.

*(General upper secondary school, large city)*

For its part, a possible unawareness of the whole spectrum of educational options directs the choosers towards higher education. On the other hand, upper secondary school students talk about the upcoming studying as the best part of their lives, and studying is believed to entail freedom. This conclusion had been reached through second hand knowledge from, for example, siblings, parents, friends or teachers. Studying as a phase of life becomes a sort of natural continuum towards which to progress, and contentually, fulfilment is found from higher education, towards which one's interests, which guide choices, are directed.

An interesting observation from this data is the popularity of economic sciences, as already became apparent from the earlier example. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that none of the interviewees in the specialised schools mentioned this as a desired field of study. It must be noted, however, that the students in specialised schools are underrepresented in this data when compared to general schools, and both specialised schools in the data are related to arts. In addition to economic sciences and the profession of economist (five mentions), aspirations were clearly directed at fields providing a professional title. These include professions such as teacher (three mentions), police officer (two mentions) and lawyer (two mentions). Additionally, the professions of artist, graphic designer, architect and photographer were all mentioned once. The motivations for education were invariably defined to stem from one's own interests, which is how student counsellors often advice students to make their choices.

**Anna:** I also had that kind of a process of elimination, but well... It's just that economics is one of those really versatile fields and you would be able to work with other people, and I haven't really been that interested in natural sciences anymore, so...

**Interviewer:** What about languages?

**Anna:** Well, languages, well... I don't know. Swedish is kind of fun, but I don't know. I'm just kind of a little bit interested in everything but not a lot interested in anything... or not especially interested in one thing, you know?

**Interviewer:** What about all these subjects in humanities? Let's say for example literature or Finnish or history or theatre research? Are any of you interested in any of those?

**Aulis:** Well... I have been thinking about history, because I've been studying it a lot here [in upper secondary school], but literature, I don't know... I don't really like to read that much. I'm more for things that are to the point and swift, so I'm not at all interested in that, but history has been one of my options.

**Aliisa:** They are difficult, because you don't know concretely what professions you would be getting, if not teaching, like a teacher in that field or a prof... like a researcher.

*(General upper secondary school, large city)*

Of the general academic fields, so called generalist fields, only one person named French philology and another one history. Other fields in the humanities were not mentioned. When asked directly, the interviewees said their experience to be that by studying for example comparative literature, you will not graduate to any specific profession and thus will not know for certain what you would do after graduation. One of the interviewees had decided to apply for French philology, because they had good command of the language and believed in their chances of getting in. In other words, they were not applying because of particular interest in philology, as the interviewee had a strong perception that one is not able to know anything about educational choices before having experience of studying in the field.

**Oona:** I don't know. I was first thinking... I have no clue... I want into a university. But I have no clue of what it's [studying] like, even though people are trying to tell me. But I kind of have a feeling that you can't really know without being there. I was thinking about studying French, French philology, because I think I could get in. Then I could just hang around a bit for a year and change majors [laughter].

*(Specialised upper secondary school, large city)*

Educational goals varied in quality. They vary along the axis of determination and uncertainty as well as in relation to how long the dream has existed. Some might have had knowledge of their own field in their childhood. The perception of a desirable field of study also enables the students to put emphasis on certain subjects during their upper secondary school studies with this goal in mind. Interest in a certain field of study might have also arisen or become stronger during upper secondary school. On the other hand, there were many who could not say anything about their own field yet. Even if one could name a field where they would be applying, it does not guarantee the chooser's certainty of what a desirable field would be. The metaphor of the process of elimination in making educational choices also surfaced repeatedly, as became apparent in the previous example.

### **Requirements set by educational choices and tactical choices**

An upper secondary school student thinking about educational choices faces two major challenges. The first challenge has to do with identifying one's own goals for further education. If this goal leads to higher education, as it would appear based on the data in question, the other challenge faced is passing entrance exams. If there is no certainty of educational choice, identifying one's own goals appears as an

insurmountable hurdle, but at the same time there is a feeling of necessity to cross that hurdle and find one's own way. The sense of challenge rises from uncertainty and the experience of educational choices as demanding. As became clear earlier, applying for further education is justified by one's own interests, but when there are multiple interests, it becomes difficult to limit one's choices. The fear of making a wrong choice is also present in the process, even when the actual goal is not clear.

**Kerttu:** Well, I at least am... I feel really stressed about this education thing, because I don't know what I want. So I've been thinking for like a year of all the options, searched online for all these universities and everything, because I don't... I just don't know what I want.

**Interviewer:** What makes it stressful?

**Kerttu:** Well I don't want to just go somewhere and then find myself somewhere I really don't want to be or that I can't get a job or do something I don't like, you know...

**Kasper:** ...yeah, that.

**Kerttu:** ...yeah. I want to know what I want. I just want to know what I want to do or know what I will become.

*(General upper secondary school, small city)*

On the other hand, thinking about one's future was seen as fun and exciting among the students of the specialised schools.

For fields of study with a written entrance exam, the students felt that getting in was just a matter of giving it all. One could also go and try one's luck in exams, but this is not a sensible starting point. All interviewees had the perception that preparing for an entrance exam required more studying than what they were used to in upper secondary school. Tactical choices for entrance exams are also possible, for example applying for Swedish-speaking programs, where the number of points needed is smaller. Preparation courses were considered to promote the goals and motivate in studying for exams. The applicants felt that there were some fields where it was actually impossible to get in without a preparation course, and thus it became a necessity in order to reach the goal.

**Interviewer:** ... So how are you planning to reach these goals?

**Jussi:** Just by reading a lot. Getting the books in time and reading.

**Joonas:** Yeah. Reading a lot and then trying to get to a preparation course. They [preparation courses] are pretty important is you're applying for the school of economics, for example.

**Jaakko:** Yeah. You just need to work hard, all there is to it. It's this Finnish mentality to work hard.

**Jarkko:** Land of hard work.

**Juho:** Yeah. I agree.

**Interviewer:** So there is no shortcut?

**Interviewees:** No.

*(General upper secondary school, large city)*

Students in the specialised schools were a bit more analytical in their reflections on reaching goals. Where the other two groups unanimously stated that reaching goals required giving your all, the stu-



dents in the specialised schools thought about the matter more from their own starting point and less deterministically.

**Terhi:** I think the obstacle is maybe that I don't know yet if I have enough brain for this whole thing, I haven't thought of it for long enough, but... well, maybe it's just that if I'm not smart enough, but then I can practice and then if I just get lazy at some point. But I don't really think. I'm not really a pessimist in all this, so I do think that I'll get in at least on the second try if I don't get an L in physics. (laughs)

**Interviewer:** What about everyone else? Can you think of any concrete obstacles for reaching these goals... not fulfilling your dreams for further education?

**Tiina:** Well I do think about the interviews, that if they're just looking for a different kind of person. If I've just thought that a police officer should be something different. Because I've been thinking a lot that I'm annoyed by those kind of arrogant policemen and I'd want to be really honest and good. So if they... if they think I'm a wussy or something. You just can't know.

*(Specialised upper secondary school, large city)*

The interviewees experienced thinking about the future as challenging, because predicting the future was impossible. Both positive and negative attitudes towards the future were found. These attitudes varied so that almost always all interviewees agreed: either the future can be trusted or not. Causes of concern included for example entrance exams and passing them. Even if the interviewees did not necessarily trust the future, they almost invariably trusted education. On the other hand, for example the "field of cultural studies" was often mentioned with regard to graduation not guaranteeing employment. Thinking about the working life in general was not seen particularly important. As I mentioned earlier, educational choices are made based on one's own interests, but the working life appears separate from this choice. The future was only planned as far as the matriculation exams or the entrance exams for the next place of study.

## Conclusion

According to the data, upper secondary school students see further education as self-evident. Whether this means that choice is necessary remains open to interpretation. Upper secondary school students seem to have adopted a determined attitude, where one's own educational path is seen most clearly to lead to higher education. Studying is seen as a phase of life into which one automatically enters after upper secondary school. However, the future is not planned from the point of view of working life, even though, for example, education in culture is avoided based on knowledge of poor employment.

It is also clear that the students wish to continue straight to further education without having a year off. A year off is seen as a necessity and not a choice. This is the case even if one's goals are still unorganised during the final year of upper secondary school studies. Thus, the educational choice potentially determining the rest of one's life can be made in a very short period of time, less than one semester. Unawareness and uncertainty in one's own choice cause anxiety, and thinking about options is seen as challenging. Obstacles for getting in to further education are seen to be related to oneself, not the environment. This interpretation is supported by the interviewees' discussion on not bothering to study enough for exams or the schools not looking for people like them. Reaching goals is considered to require hard work and commitment. The students also expressed that they make their own choices based on their own interests. According to the data, these interests seem to be somewhat limited, for example ruling out almost completely any vocational training or subjects in humanities. In other words, a majority of the students in this data aimed at the school of economics. Is this a sign of a successful brand from the part of the economic sciences, interest arisen from the economic crisis or a generation interested in

economics? Timewise the students seem to view their educational choices on a short term basis. Adulthood or growing up is not seen as a part of educational choice, and working life is seen as distant. Not to mention the rest of the life. It would seem that finding one's own path from this starting point is challenging, and attitudes towards educational choices are complex, especially when there is no certainty of one's own direction. In any case, the direction is to move swiftly forward.

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