

Japan-Nordic Symposium:
On the Frontier of University Education
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"Nordic Success" - the case of Finland

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1. University evaluation for the improvement of education and research

FINHEEC (www.kka.fi) is a national evaluation agency for higher education institutions (HEIs) and its tasks have been defined by governmental decree. The Universities Act and the Polytechnics Act, stipulate the obligations of the HEIs to participate in evaluation. The results of such evaluations and the reports are public. FINHEEC is responsible for the evaluation of education. The Academy of Finland (www.aka.fi) is responsible for the evaluation of research. The HEIs also implement external evaluations of themselves – their education and research. It is important to note that all Finnish HEIs are funded by public money. The universities derive their legality through the universities Act and the polytechnics through charters granted by the Council of State. This has had its effect on FINHEEC's evaluation paradigm and more of implementation. In countries in which private institutions are established calling themselves HEIs the situation is different. Obviously, the basis for their evaluation or accreditation will be different.

FINHEEC's evaluations can be classified as follows:

1) institutional evaluations; 2) programme evaluations; 3) education policy and other thematic evaluations; 4) evaluations focusing on centres of excellence and 5) evaluation and accreditation of professional courses.

FINHEEC adheres to the operating principles of enhancement-led evaluation. This means that the purpose of evaluation is to *support* the HEIs in their endeavour to improve the education they offer. The information FINHEEC generates is of the type which the HEIs can utilise in the further development of their own operations. Public evaluation reports also provide the Ministry of Education and other interest groups with information on the quality of education and quality assurance of the HEIs. Another aim is to disseminate the good practices emerging in the evaluations to other HEIs, which constitutes a part of the efficacy of evaluation for the entire HEI institution. Without exception the evaluation reports include proposals for further development.

The basic idea of evaluations is not to ascertain if the education offered by the universities meets minimum standards, nor does evaluation seek to achieve a ranking list of institutions. The responsibility for the utilisation and application of evaluation information rests ultimately with the institutions themselves. FINHEEC monitors the implementation of the development proposals in follow-up evaluations and the Ministry of Education refers to the FINHEEC evaluations in its annual performance negotiations with the HEIs. Evaluations as centres of excellence are accompanied by additional funding from the Ministry of Education for those who do well in the evaluations.

Enhancement-led evaluation is based on dialogue with the HEIs. There are various forums in which there is discussion of evaluation policy and the modes of implementing evaluations – planning groups and extensive seminars arranged for the HEIs. The HEIs also have an option to have a say in evaluation policy and evaluation criteria. The aim of this, which has apparently been achieved, is to secure the trust of the HEIs in the enhancement-led evaluation paradigm, in which there is respect for the autonomy of the HEIs. Evaluation is arranged by FINHEEC. Its members or staff do not carry out evaluation; the actual evaluation is accomplished by peer review – external evaluators from HEIs and working life. What is of the essence is that students participate in the evaluations (as council members, in planning groups, as interviewees and members of evaluation groups on site visits).

One might claim that FINHEEC evaluations are an application of sustainable development. Efforts are made to minimise the workload of the HEIs – where possible - and to arrive at impulses for the HEIs' own constant improvement of quality - thus to introduce new blood. The main thing is not control or evaluation and accountability as a value in themselves, but benefit for the development of the operations of the HEI and the production of the HEIs' own activities, which is in the nature of generating, not consuming, energy.

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) has been developing the auditing procedure focusing on the quality assurance systems of Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) in order to show the international community that Finland has a valid and competent quality assurance practice. This procedure is a response to the development principles prevailing in the European Higher Education Area where quality assurance within the HEI is one of the priorities. The FINHEEC auditing model has been designed with the quality assurance standards and guidelines issued by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in mind.

The commonest quality assurance methods in European higher education are the accreditation of programmes and institutional audit. Some countries have opted for a national solution using the two methods in parallel. Audits of the quality assurance systems of higher education institutions are compatible with FINHEEC's enhancement-led principle. Auditing is a method respecting the autonomy of the HEIs, based on the conviction that they are ultimately responsible for the quality of the education they provide. In practical auditing, the enhancement-led principle is manifested in the interaction and dialogue between FINHEEC and the HEIs. The aim is to generate information that the HEIs can use to develop their own operations. The results of the audits also highlight good practices to be disseminated and exploited by the entire HEI sector. The audit reports always include recommendations to support the HEI in the further development of its quality assurance system.

2. Effects of the evaluation

FINHEEC monitors the effectiveness of its evaluations through follow-up evaluations, questionnaires and follow-up seminars. The Ministry of Education also utilises FINHEEC's evaluations in its discussions with the HEIs on targets and results. The follow-up evaluations are conducted three years after the evaluations proper. The HEIs are under no obligation to implement all the development proposals made. However, they are addressed in the HEIs' strategy work, personnel meetings and in joint seminars for personnel and students. The results of questionnaires show that the proposals are generally found to be useful and that they open up new perspectives and provide development impulses. As a reason why development proposals are not taken up the HEIs have evinced lack of resources or that the proposals are not sufficiently specific, or then that implementation is a time-consuming business and that it has not been completed in the anticipated time.

It is frequently difficult to be sure of the effectiveness of the evaluations because in addition to the evaluations and the development proposals they contain, many other factors and interposing variables influence the development processes. FINHEEC has no decision-making power by virtue of its evaluations *vis à vis* the structural development of the HEIs, the establishment or discontinuation of faculties, departments or degree programmes.

However, evaluations do have an obvious guiding effect, as can be illustrated in the following examples.

1) The FINHEEC evaluations of centres of excellence in teaching and learning in higher education have drawn attention to improving pedagogy in HEI teaching among other things. As the evaluations are repeated the improvement in pedagogical expertise and pedagogical innovation is clearly seen. It would also appear obvious that their evaluations have developed a wave in the HEIs in which teachers' pedagogical skills have been improved through systematic training, establishing units for the further development of teaching and creating tenured posts for pedagogical university lecturers, also outside the faculties of education. The

guiding effect of the evaluations of centres of excellence entails not only the status of a centre of excellence but also the additional funding provided for them by the Ministry of Education.

2) In addition to providing for teaching and research, the legislation prescribes exerting an influence in societal and regional development as a third task for the HEIs. The centres of excellence evaluations of the effects of the polytechnics on regional development have served to increase the interest of the HEIs in the ways of implementing and the quality of this third task. It is more difficult to evaluate how much this has influenced the development of economic life in the region. However, certain conclusions may be drawn from the fact that the subregions are keen to have HEI units and that the role of the HEIs in the regional strategies is prominent.

3) The nominations of quality universities in adult education, in which the successful applicants likewise have the option of results funding granted by the Ministry of Education, have served to attract the attention of the universities to the role of lifelong learning in their operations. Lifelong learning has been given a place in the universities' strategies. The evaluations have paid attention to the connection between strategy and practical implementation. It would appear that here, too, evaluation has served as a tool of educational policy, or at least has been a tool significant among others in bringing out the importance of lifelong learning.

4) The auditing of quality assurance systems launched by FINHEEC has caused the entire Finnish higher education institution to construct its quality assurance on a systematic basis. They have also taken on board European standards and guidelines. Here we can see the marked effects of evaluation and evaluation policy on the further development of HEIs and the preconditions of the formation of the European Higher Education Area. In addition to auditing FINHEEC has supported the quality assurance of the HEIs through seminars and training. One might take the view that through evaluation policy it is possible to direct the entire development of the higher education system, and without sanctions.

In the experience of FINHEEC evaluation guides the operations of the HEIs in a significant manner without resorting to the "silent compulsion" of control and accountability. A positive, rewarding mode of guidance has been proved to work.