Evaluating the state of the Finnish education system:
Results of the Finnish education evaluation
The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is an independent agency responsible for the evaluation of education in Finland. FINEEC operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education. It carries out evaluations related to education including the operations of education providers from early childhood education to higher education. FINEEC also actively takes part in international evaluation activities as well as international cooperation.

**FINEEC’S DUTIES**

FINEEC implements evaluations related to education, education providers and higher education institutions (HEIs).

In addition, FINEEC implements assessment of learning outcomes for basic and upper secondary educations.

FINEEC’s duties also include supporting education providers and HEIs in issues related to evaluation and quality assurance, as well as to develop education evaluation.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATIONS**

The aim of the evaluations is to develop education and to support learning while ensuring the quality of education.

The evaluations also produce information for local, regional and national decision-making on education as well as development work and international comparison.

**USE OF INFORMATION PRODUCED BY EVALUATIONS**

All evaluation reports are public and can be downloaded from FINEEC’s website.

FINEEC organises seminars related to evaluation and quality assurance as well as evaluation forums. FINEEC aims for active interaction and dialogue with both education and training providers and other parties using the evaluation information.
Core values of evaluation

**Trustworthy**
We base our evaluation activities on strong expertise and systematically collected data.

**Independent**
We act independently, and our outcomes and conclusions are free from a third-party influence.

**Open**
We work in an interactive manner, and our principles, criteria and processes are made known.

**Bold**
We tackle difficult matters, take stand and participate in public debate.
Strengths and development needs of our education system – four key themes derived from evaluations in 2014–2018

1 Trust
The Finnish education evaluation system is based on trust, openness and interaction.

The duty of external education evaluation operations is to support the education system in achieving its objectives. Evaluating the prerequisites for educational equality and inclusion is one of the key areas of FINEEC’s evaluation operations.

2 Equality
According to the evaluation results, differences between pupils in basic education are reflected in their parents’ educational background, appreciation of education and support. There are also differences in learning outcomes between genders, and the competence of boys is becoming particularly polarised.

The realisation of educational equality is not altogether sufficiently supported by the education system and education providers.

3 Inclusion and well-being
The impact of the education system on the Finnish educational level and high competence as well as the support for preventing marginalisation depends on

• the functionality of the education system as a whole
• the structural flexibility of transitional stages and the learner’s path
• measures for the integration of immigrants
• the support of the learner

4 Society renewed by competence
The education system plays a key role as the producer of information and competence that is able to renew society and as the cooperative partner of working life.

According to the evaluation results, the reform of vocational education and training has enhanced its relevance to working life and the contents of the education and training are now more in line with the needs of working life.

In higher education institutions, the development of quality management has resulted in better prerequisites for effective education and research and for operating as reformers of society.
Trust

The Finnish national education evaluation system is based on trust, openness and interaction. The quality and impact of education can be supported with consistent themes of evaluation spanning from early childhood education to higher education, such as evaluations of quality systems. The solutions of early childhood education have a long-term impact on the learner’s path, and change is, by nature, systemic. The evaluations provide a factual foundation for the comprehensive and long-term review of the education system.

Shared evaluation operations of the education system and other elements of society across administrative sectors are an important area of development for national evaluation operations.
The responsibility of education providers and higher education institutions for the quality and development of their operations is the premise of the Finnish education system and the national evaluation system supporting it. FINEEC, an operator of external education evaluations, defines trust, openness and interaction as its principles in sustainable evaluation. The systematic method of producing evaluation data is based on a long-term vision of the education system (even across terms of government). Longitudinal evaluations provide a factual foundation for the long-term review of the sustainability and impact of education alongside changes in society.

In order for the evaluation operations to have impact the evaluation operator has to be reliable. Due to reliability and trust, the evaluation operations must be independent. The courage to evaluate and produce accurate, up-to-date and predictive evaluation data is also important. Impact requires cooperation between the evaluation producers, research data, and the placement of the evaluation data in relation to other research and evaluation data produced in Finland and abroad.

The evaluation data produced by FINEEC is a cross-section of the education system and covers the entire educational path from early childhood education to doctoral education and liberal adult education. This enables the evaluation data to support the comprehensive development of the education system. The quality and impact of education can be supported with consistent themes of evaluation spanning from early childhood education to higher education, such as evaluations of quality systems. The solutions of early childhood education have a long-term impact on the learner's path, and change is, by nature, systemic. That is why the development of education in this time challenges operators to interact even more in guiding and decision-making and with the education providers.

Shared evaluation operations across administrative sectors is a key area for future development. The simultaneous inspection of the education system and other key elements of society is important in connection with, for example, the social welfare and healthcare reform. Reform needs in the evaluation of basic services, so far only carried out by Regional State Administrative Agencies, can also be mentioned as an example. Development-oriented evaluation operations can act as a foundation, and sector-unifying evaluation data can support systematic thinking and cooperation between operators. In the future, it will also be important to enable shared evaluations between Regional State Administrative Agencies and FINEEC.
Quality management as the premise for effective and sustainable education

The quality system of Finnish education consists of three elements: the responsibility of education providers for the quality and development of education, the steering and financing systems of education and external, independent evaluation of education. The evaluations of FINEEC show that higher education institutions and the providers of vocational education and training have successfully developed their quality systems. Providers of basic and general upper secondary education have the highest need for development in terms of quality management. Most of the early childhood education providers plan to renew their quality management and evaluation policies in the near future.

Nearly all higher education institutions have a quality system that encompasses the basic tasks, fulfils European requirements, and has been verified to support operational development, as well as a valid quality label granted by FINEEC. The quality systems of higher education institutions support the strategic management of higher education institutions and the fulfilment of strategic objectives better than before. The quality culture promotes openness and the involvement of the employees, students and external stakeholders in the operational development. In proportion to the various subsections of auditing, the social interaction of higher education institutions is, more often than on average, considered in need of development, this is particularly evident in audits performed by international groups. One of the focal points in the third auditing round of higher education institutions (starting in 2018) will be the social impact of higher education institutions and promotion thereof.

The majority of the vocational education and training providers (70%) also have a functional quality management system. The quality management of vocational education and training shows differences between providers in terms of types of owner and educational institution as well as the duration of the development of the quality management. Large, multidisciplinary providers of vocational education and training that have engaged in systematic quality management for a long time are showing the most progress.

Key strengths of quality management systems include control of the strategic process, utilisation of monitoring data in decision-making, network cooperation and policies of learning from others. Areas in need of further development include enhancing evaluation competence and utilising information systems, standardising the procedures of different operating units and involving the employees and students in quality management. Consistent evaluation competence and practices will be emphasised when higher education institutions begin to increasingly base their selection processes on the school certificate. Quality assurance requires education providers to carry out constant monitoring and comparison of evaluation both internally and between educational institutions in order to enable fair and equal student admission.
Among the operators in the education system, the providers of basic and general upper secondary education and early childhood education show the greatest need for development. A large share of basic and general upper secondary education providers lack a functional self-assessment system and a systematic evaluation culture as part of their quality management. Therefore, the evaluations of some of the providers do not fulfil the requirements and trust-based expectations specified in the education legislation reform of 1998. In other words, the current guidance mechanism has not been sufficiently efficient in ensuring the functionality of quality management and related self-assessment nor encouraging the constant improvement of operations and results.3

Well over half of the education providers consider themselves at a beginners’ level in quality management. They specify the prerequisites and resources of quality management and self-assessment as well as evaluation competence as areas with the highest need for development. Providers of general upper secondary education also state a need for networking, in other words, peer information and cooperation.3

Most of the early childhood education providers plan to renew their evaluation policies in the near future. According to an analysis conducted by FINNEC, there is still a wide range of various self-assessment methods and the concepts of evaluation are unclear. The selection of the methods has mostly been guided by old habits and ease of use. Consistent evaluation models are used very little in, for example, basic education. At the moment, the systematic collection of quality assessment data is mostly targeted at structural quality and its quantitative, easily comparable key indicators, such as degrees of utilisation and admission. Providers of early childhood education have evaluated interaction, the general atmosphere, and impacts of early childhood education very little.4
Equality

According to the evaluation results, differences between pupils in basic education are reflected in their parents’ educational background, appreciation of education and support. The correlation between the pupil’s background and learning outcomes has increased in the 2010s.

There are also differences in learning outcomes between genders, and the competence of boys is becoming particularly polarised. Promoting equality challenges education providers to develop more structures to support learners and learning. Teachers are facing increasingly high and changing competence needs throughout the levels of education due to the diversification of learning and learners.
The parents’ educational background, appreciation of education and support create considerable and alarming differences in the competence of pupils. The difference generated by these factors in, for example, mathematical skills can be measured in years, and they have also been observed to influence skills of first language and literature in basic education⁵.

The evaluations also bring up differences in skills between genders. The results of the synthesis analysis of learning outcomes in vocational education and training show that the competence produced by qualifications is stronger among women⁶.

There is no significant difference between girls and boys in mathematical skills at the final stages of basic education, but the mathematical skills of boys showed polarisation, in other words, distribution of the results at the extreme ends of the scale. Boys are more likely than girls to receive both low and high grades. What is interesting is that, according to the evaluations, boys have a considerably higher opinion than girls of their own mathematical skills, both at the final stages of basic education and at the end of general upper secondary education. A similar result was observed in the evaluation of learning outcomes in first language and literature. Girls showed stronger competence than boys at the final stages of basic education, yet the boys with lower results trusted their own competence more than girls.⁷

Finnish and Swedish are official languages of Finland. In addition to the two official languages, in Finland there are several minority languages, such as Sámi, Romani and Finnish sign language. These three minority languages were evaluated for the first time in 2015.⁹

In Finnish and Swedish speaking schools, it is possible to achieve an equal level of competence by the final stages of basic education. However, the differences between language groups increase considerably if the language spoken at home is something other than Finnish or Swedish. Regional equality appears to be realised, even though there is some unaccountable variation between regions. For a long time, Finland has been one of the OECD countries with the lowest differences between schools providing basic education. The evaluation results of FINEEC are in line with these results⁹.

The achievement of learning targets in minority languages, such as Sámi, Romani and sign language is difficult due to the educational background of the teachers, the number of teaching hours and the quality and scarcity of learning materials. Great variation was observed in the competence levels of those studying Sámi as their first language. Only slightly more than half of the teachers teaching Sámi as a first language have the qualification to teach Sámi. Since the 1990s, the preservation of Sámi has been supported with, among other things, teaching provided at schools as well as language nest activities. However, more measures are required to revitalise the languages. The educational background of teachers of Romani vary from basic education to a higher education degree, and nearly 90% of the teachers feel that they need more education. The number of Romani lessons varies considerably and there are great differences in the competence levels of the students. About a quarter of students studying sign language as their first language achieve at least a good level of competence. Very few sign language teachers have the qualification to teach sign language as a subject teacher. Teachers of sign language are not offered further or additional training on, for example, the use of the structures or contents of sign language or how a deaf person absorbs information. The results of boys are better than those of girls.
Conflicting evaluation practices are an alarming factor in the realisation of equality, not only in the final stages of basic education but in further education as well. The evaluation of learning outcomes in mathematics indicated that assessment appears fair within schools but not necessarily between them. In terms of selections for further education, it is problematic that the evaluation practices of schools differ from each other. The same final grade requires considerably more competence in educational institutions with better results than those with weaker results. The phenomenon is especially apparent in general upper secondary schools but can also be detected in vocational education and training.10

The realisation of educational rights as well as the actual and equal opportunities of young people to receive an education have been assessed in an evaluation of the impacts of funding cuts in education. According to the evaluation, the overall funding and resources allocated by municipalities and other providers to early childhood education and general education have not decreased in line with the cuts in national economy. In proportion to the actual costs, the computational costs used as the basis for state subsidy have been in a constant downward trend. The education providers who have produced these savings have utilised working hours and annual leave planning to, for example, save personnel expenses in early childhood education. Some of the providers of basic and general upper secondary education, basic education in the arts and liberal adult education have reduced the number of teaching hours. On the other hand, the substitute policies of most pre-primary, basic and general upper secondary education providers have not changed and, according to the most recent evaluation, the participation of teachers in continuing education has increased slightly.11

While the Government has been implementing cuts, the costs per pupil in pre-primary, basic and general upper secondary education have, on average, either remained unchanged or increased in 2006–2015. However, there are differences in the development of costs per pupil between providers; for large providers, the costs have decreased, whereas the costs of smaller providers have increased. The differences in resources are also reflected in the organisation of the operations. In the first few years of basic education, for example, the average group size in rural municipalities is two pupils smaller than in urban municipalities.12
Inclusion and well-being

The ability of the education system to impact the Finnish educational level, high competence, and the support for preventing marginalisation depends on the functionality of the system as a whole, the structural flexibility of the learner's path, the immigrant integration measures, and the learner's support and student welfare's support.

The availability of student welfare services varies throughout the levels of education, and the equality of pupils and students is not always realised. The development needs of student welfare include enhancing communal student welfare, securing the availability of pupil and student welfare services and the sufficiency of employees, enhancing cross-administrative cooperation, and shifting the focal point more efficiently towards early intervention and preventive work. In schools and educational institutions creating an atmosphere of the common good and caring is also one of the areas in need of development.

The education of immigrants and integration measures must have a strong will and vision of each learner belonging in their learning environment. This prevents the special service systems and forms of education directed at immigrants from becoming separate islands of learning and support and makes them a consistent part of the learner's path. An inclusive premise that emphasises the involvement of the operators is a common denominator for successful integration into education.

Immigrants are a heterogeneous group with great variation in terms of the individuals' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Individual support solutions, knowledge of the cultural background and cooperation with homes are emphasised.
According to the evaluation results, the key needs for development in the smoothness of the learner's path are the systematicness of the guiding processes and timeliness, equality of guiding offered to those studying in different forms of education, the quality of guiding and the cooperation between education providers. The results of the evaluations show that the guiding processes are not systematic enough and guiding towards further education is not offered sufficiently early.13

In order to develop the transitions of students and the smoothness of the study path, FINEEC will produce an extensive evaluation project between 2018 and 2021, aimed at generating an overall picture of the flows of students and the education system's ability to support the life management skills and choices of students. The functionality of the system will be examined from the perspective of education operations as well as the employment and economy administration and the youth services.

The Pupil and Student Welfare Act has enhanced student welfare in many respects and improved the overall state of student welfare in pre-primary and basic education, general upper secondary education and vocational education and training. Student welfare has become a more systematic and multidisciplinary service and the responsibilities of different operators have been clarified. The Pupil and Student Welfare Act created clear structures and principles in student welfare, which has enabled more consistent welfare operations.14

The availability of student welfare services as a whole is moderate and varies. The availability of physician's and psychologist's services is lowest. The availability of curator and psychologist's services showed the most improvement in vocational education and training and pre-primary education. Communal student welfare was considered important and the act was seen to further increase its importance. The functionality and practices of communal student welfare have not yet been permanently established. In some schools, communal student welfare is implemented efficiently, while other schools are taking the first steps towards said services. In some schools and educational institutions, the availability of the services decreased after the act entered into force. The influencing opportunities and inclusion have increased. However, they still need a great deal of improvement.14
FINEEC has evaluated the possibilities of education providers to offer pupils and students with immigrant background the chance to take part in mainstream education. In addition, education organised by universities of applied sciences for immigrants to prepare them for studies in higher education institution has been evaluated, and an evaluation project on immigrants engaged in higher education studies will be launched in 2018. Good national and international practices have also been investigated for supporting the integration of young immigrants into education.15

The transitional stage between basic and secondary education, the school path of those who have arrived in the country late and have surpassed the compulsory school age, integration training and the leadership policies of the school/educational institution were observed as the key challenges in terms of integration. The number of good practices related to transitional stages and leadership has been particularly low nationally, compared to the other challenges of integration. International good practices show that education and integration measures must have a strong will and vision of each learner belonging in their learning environment. This prevents the special service systems and forms of education directed at immigrants from becoming separate islands of learning and support and makes them a consistent part of the learner’s path. Inclusiveness and an inclusive premise that emphasises the involvement of the operators can be seen as a key common denominator for successful integration into education.16

The transitional stage after basic education is challenging for young people with immigrant backgrounds as they may not have sufficient Finnish/Swedish skills and studying skills to continue their studies. Teachers rated the quality of responding to the individual support needs of students with immigrant backgrounds only as ‘satisfactory’. Supporting students in everyday life usually depends on the activity, motivation or energy levels of individual teachers. Teachers and principals considered the competence and attitudes of the employees the key targets for development. Nearly 80% of providers reported offering continuing education related to linguistic awareness and cultural diversity, but only about half of the teachers reported that they had the opportunity to participate in such training. The need for continuing education has increased as the number of students with immigrant backgrounds has increased.17

The success of training designed to prepare immigrants for studies in higher education institution requires consistent policies, recommendations related to content and cooperation between higher education institutions. Individualising the studies and strong student counselling are essential factors in the success of education.18

Out of 23 universities of applied sciences, 13 organised preparatory training between 2010 and 2017. About 700 immigrants have participated in the preparatory training and one third of them have been accepted into a higher education institution after the training. The majority (90%) of the students were accepted into universities of applied sciences, the most common fields being social services, health care, and the technical field. Insufficient language skills is the largest obstacle for being accepted into higher education institutions; the applicants with the weakest Finnish skills are less likely to pass the entrance tests. Some students use their studies as a language course and do not aim for studies in a higher education institution.19
Society renewed by competence

According to the evaluation results, the reform of vocational education and training has enhanced its relevance to working life and the contents of the education and training are now more in line with the needs of working life. In addition to a working life-oriented approach, the education and training services have emphasised a student-oriented mindset, such as flexible and individualised studies.

In terms of the social interaction of higher education institutions, the characteristics of advanced social interaction include the clarity of the social objectives set by the higher education institution for its operations, the connection between said objectives, research and the educational mission, the sophistication of the cooperation and the network-type operations, trust and the appreciation of dialogue. Inclusion and the shift in operating cultures enhance the fulfilment of impact-related objectives.
According to the evaluations of competence-based vocational education and training, customer-orientatedness and efficiency of operations, the competence-based approach enhances vocational education’s relevance to working life. The cooperation between education providers and working life has become closer. In pedagogics, the working life-oriented approach has been increased by utilising working places as learning environments more often, designing modules to be more consistent with working life, increasing or expanding training at the workplace and transitioning more into team, phenomenon and project learning and larger competence entities in teaching. According to operators of working life, the contents of education are more in line with the needs of working life and businesses than before. The working life-oriented approach has also been increased in assessing the student’s competence. In addition to the working life-oriented approach, the education and training services have emphasised a student-oriented mindset, such as flexible and individualised studies. The competence-based approach has had a positive impact on the completion of modules without contact teaching, the number of completed modules, the passing of courses, finding employment and the level of student satisfaction. The evaluation also highlighted a number of challenges and development needs. From the working life-oriented approach, one of the key challenges is ensuring the availability working places and workplace instructors as well as ensuring the competence of the instructors and offering the support needed by the instructors. 

Information on the competence produced by vocational education and training has been produced in evaluations of learning outcomes based on vocational skills demonstrations (since 2007). A meta evaluation has been implemented in order to develop the learning outcomes evaluation system of vocational education and training and to examine its impact and usefulness. Competence evaluation development work will be launched on the basis of the results of the meta evaluation by analysing the shifts in the operating environment of vocational education and training, particularly the impacts of the reform and the shift towards a competence-based approach on evaluation and quality assurance thereof.

The impact-related factors of higher education, research, and innovation operations include the high quality of operations and results, interaction and cooperation. In order to support the development of the range of educational services in higher education institutions, the competence-based approach of education, its relevance to working life and cooperation between higher education institutions, FINEEC will implement an evaluation of four fields of education in universities and universities of applied sciences (2018–2019).

Higher education institutions have carried out systematic quality system development work covering all the basic tasks for more than 15 years. Therefore, we can evaluate that the development of quality management in higher education institutions has resulted in better prerequisites for effective education and research as well as for operating as reformers of society. The characteristics of advanced social interaction of higher education institutions include

- the clarity of the social objectives set by the higher education institution for its operations;
- the connection between said objectives, research, and the educational mission;
- the sophistication of the cooperation and the network-type operations; and
- trust and appreciation.

Inclusion and the shift in operating cultures enhance the fulfilment of impact-related objectives.
References


8 cf. footnote 7


12 cf. footnote 7


cf. reference 11.


Maahanmuuttajien integroituminen suomalaiseen koulutusjärjestelmään Best Practices website: https://hyvatkaytannot.oph.fi/karvi/


cf. reference 15

cf. reference 15


