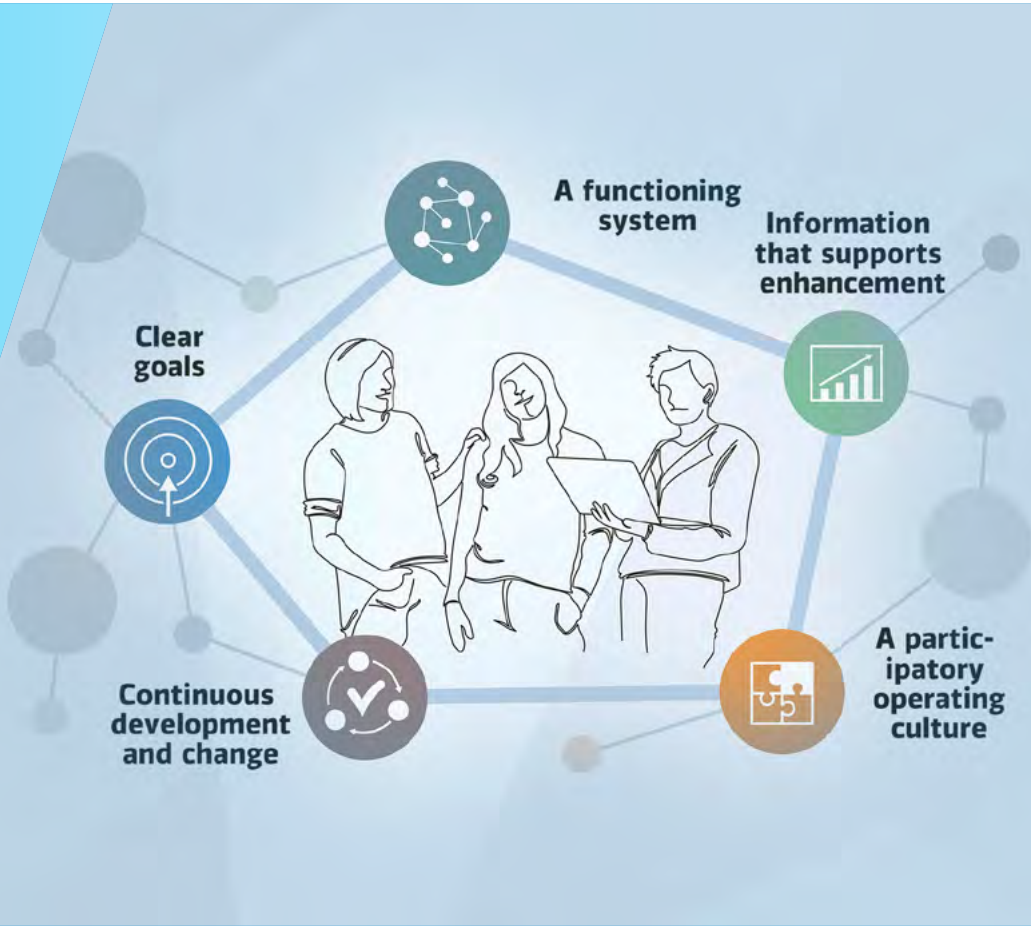
FINNISH EDUCATION EVALUATION CENTRE

MAIN ELEMENTS OF QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN THE EDUCATION AND ECEC SECTOR



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1 Shared and appropriate goals are the basis of effective quality work

Well-planned quality management structures and operating models make it possible to evaluate how the educational organisation has achieved its goals. Legislation[1] also obligates all educational levels and early childhood education and care (ECEC) to develop and evaluate the quality of their operations.

High-quality activities aim at jointly defined goals and are systematic and appropriate. Effective quality management as a whole is an entity that

- ensures the consistency and fairness of the activities by combining the practices of different people into shared, open operating models and responsibilities
- improves the ability of the educational organisation to monitor the realisation of the goals, and develop the activities
- with the help of open feedback practices, creates ways for all members of the organisation to have an opportunity to influence matters and be heard
- ensures that the organisation has agreed responsibilities and procedures for implementing jointly agreed matters and monitoring the effects of changes
- facilitates managing by making it possible to examine the overall situation in the educational organisation on the basis of feedback and information
- supports the building of an operating culture based on transparency and dialogue

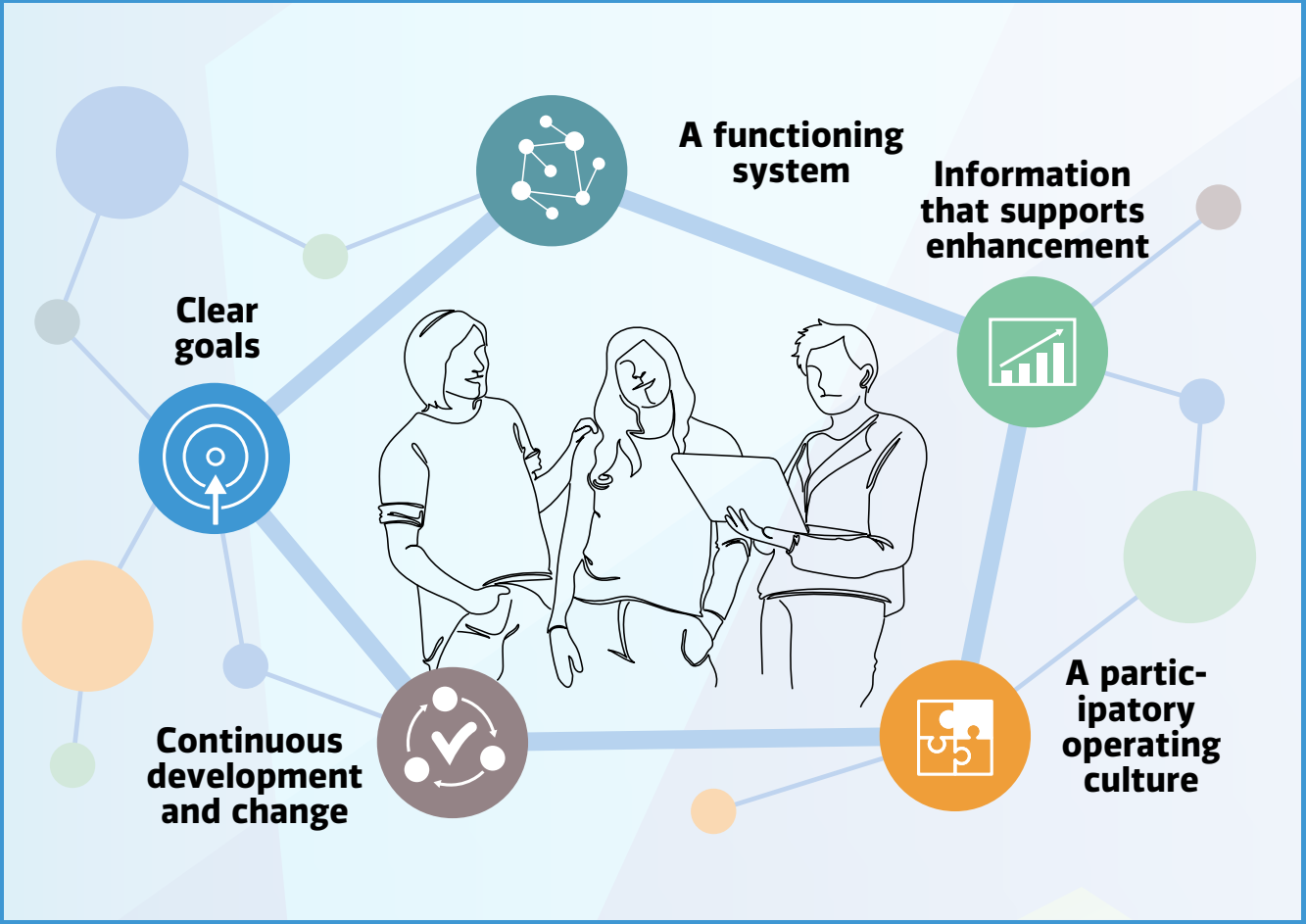
1 See *More on the subject* at the end of the publication.

- promotes the systematic and organised nature of the operation of the education provider, educational institution or higher education institution
- strengthens the functioning of the whole education system

The purpose of the publication is to facilitate quality management in the education and ECEC sector. In this publication, the diverse quality management concepts have been condensed into five main elements that can be used to structure quality management and improve its effectiveness. They also ensure that the statutory obligations are fulfilled. In addition, the national quality management actors and their different roles are described in the publication at each level of education and in ECEC.

The publication is intended as support for the planning and implementation for everyone working or managing work in educational organisations. It deals with all levels of education. With the help of the key elements of quality management, managers and principals of kindergartens, schools or educational institutions can also examine how quality work is carried out on an everyday level.

2 Main elements of quality management



1. Clear goals

The clear goals set for the operation of the educational organisation and everyone's commitment to them are the starting point of quality management.

Defining the goals for quality management begins with the definition of high-quality operations. **The educational organisation should crystallise its basic task, the underlying values and the aim of the operations to the whole organisation.** The management is responsible for initiating this discussion and ensuring that all the key actors participate in it. It is important that national goals and obligations and the organisation's own strategy and its implementation plan are combined when defining the goals. The identification of the key risk factors affecting the operation and an analysis of changes in the operating environment are also essential when setting the goals. The results of FINEEC's evaluations have shown that concrete measures and actions can be deduced from clear goals to serve as a basis for the development work.

The goals should be comprehensible and meaningful both to the personnel and to stakeholders

Setting clear and appropriate goals for the organisation and for the quality of its key functions may be challenging, but it is necessary for quality management. **Without a shared aim, the activities cannot be developed in the desired direction.** It is important that personnel and the key stakeholders participate in the definition of the quality goals, so that they will also commit themselves to striving for them. The goals need to be as concrete as possible and sufficiently challenging. It must also be possible to assess how they have been achieved. The definition of the goals should make the strengths of the operations visible and help identify areas that require development. Reaching the

goals requires resourcing, a goal-oriented and systematic approach, and scheduling. Goals defined for the different levels of the organisation promote recognition of the goals and commitment to them by different personnel groups in their daily work.

Quality management and the setting of goals are governed by national and international principles

ECEC, basic education and general upper secondary education are governed by national legislation and curricula. They lay the basis for the education activities and quality management by setting content-related goals and several obligating structural conditions. Vocational education (VET) and the development of its quality management are governed not only by national guidelines but also by the European quality assurance network EQAVET[2]. Quality management in Finnish higher education institutions and its external evaluation in turn are governed by the European principles of quality management (ESG 2015[3]).

The international and national guidelines and obligations described above are filtered to the level of the educational organisation through local decision-making and the organisation's own emphases. Higher education institutions have strong autonomy in deciding on their curricula, whereas at other levels of education, the objectives concerning the content of education and teaching are determined nationally. National guidance reflects the views and values prevailing in society and it also reacts to changes in society, such as the economic situation, the increasing diversity of the population or the dwindling network of educational institutions and schools. These in turn affect the direction in which the education system is guided and to what kind of goals local providers should set for their quality management and development work.

2 European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (ESG 2015).
3 The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EQAVET 2009).

2. A functioning management system

One of the most important preconditions for successful quality work in the education organisation is the management's commitment to the creation, utilisation and development of quality management as a whole. **Effective quality management is an important management tool that helps the management respond to the question "how are we doing".** The management can use the information produced by the quality management system to set goals, guide the personnel and direct the resources. The management can promote the creation of the quality culture with its own example.

Clear division of responsibilities and task descriptions make enhancement part of the daily work

Quality management as a whole is built through a meaningful division of responsibilities, planned on the basis of the goals. The different personnel groups and individuals have their own roles in the organisation's quality management.

Quality management that serves the management and the personnel is based on clear responsibilities and task descriptions. In some education sectors, this has led to the creation of new professional groups, such as quality managers. Regardless of the title, the main tasks of persons responsible for quality work include

- the maintenance and development of the parts of quality management, such as process descriptions, instructions and document templates
- responsibility for system-specific measures, such as management reviews, feedback summaries, development days and external evaluations

- training of other personnel in matters related to quality work
- ensuring that development projects are followed through
- cooperation with the internal and external network

To make enhancement part of the organisation's operating culture, it is sensible to distribute responsibilities for quality work to different levels of the organisation. When defining the responsibilities and task descriptions, it is important to identify the different needs, ways of organisation and personnel structures of the different levels of education. Effective quality work also requires financial investments in personnel resources and development of the competence related to quality work. In addition to the management, persons such as contact persons for quality work, the members of quality groups or contact persons for evaluations may act as internal partners of persons responsible for quality work. Alongside their own work, their task is to advance quality matters in their reference groups and, for example, organise the collection and processing of feedback. Participation in quality groups is a way of influencing the operation of one's own organisation. A frequently mentioned goal for quality work is to make measures aimed at improving the quality part of the daily work of all the members of the community.

Description of operating practices is a step towards their development

Quality work concerns all members of the educational organisation. Quality management must not remain dependent on the activity of an individual person. Instead, permanent structures and clear process descriptions must be created. Established operating models include different quality groups convening on a regular basis, feedback and development forums, parents' nights and similar. Already existing structures can often be used in the promotion of quality matters. To make the activities regular, it is a good idea to describe quality matters in a cyclically repeating year clock, for example.

Process descriptions, instructions and similar documents ensure that the most important matters are done in a sufficiently similar way. Over time, learned practices become established in organisations even if they have not necessarily been planned intentionally. **Describing the process is one step towards developing the process and securing the continuity of the operation.** When an operating practice is put into a visible form, it is easier to perceive the points that require enhancing. Process description is risk management and making the operating practices visible for all parties. Up-to-date process descriptions are also useful when changes take place in the personnel or new employees are familiarised. They explain how things are done in the organisation, what is done in a consistent manner and where variation is allowed.

3. Information that supports enhancement

Towards relevant and up-to-date development measures with information

The monitoring, evaluation and development of the quality of education and ECEC need to be supported by a knowledge base. To ensure that the assessments of the quality of education and ECEC and the measures taken for their development are up-to-date and relevant, information should be collected regularly. The required knowledge base typically consists of quantitative data, self-evaluation data, feedback data, anticipation data and learning-related data and is obtained from several different sources. The required information varies by the level of education. There may also be variation between actors in education and ECEC for reasons related to fields of education and regional factors, for example. Regional factors may be background factors related to the children participating in ECEC and to the pupils in basic education or the industrial structure of the region. In higher education institutions, international information needs related to education, research, RDI activities and the labour market are also emphasised alongside national and regional factors.

Self-evaluation adapted to the main tasks and goals of the level of education in question can be conducted at all levels of education. The aim of self-evaluation is usually process-like development of the organisation and production of versatile information on the strengths and development areas in own activities. Self-evaluation can be targeted at the whole educational organisation or at its units, such as ECEC centres, schools, educational institutions or the units and faculties of higher education institutions. At best, a diverse range of actors from the educational organisation and stakeholders participate in self-evaluation.

Already existing information and material is often sufficiently available – it is important to select the most important ones and work on them

A lot of quantitative data is produced on education and ECEC as part of administrative guidance, financial administration and different areas of education and teaching. Typical information includes the number of study places for new students, applicants, and those who have completed the education or qualification and the number of students who participate in studies or have interrupted their studies. In upper secondary education and higher education, the number of completed credits is monitored. As for personnel, it is possible to monitor the number of employees belonging to different professional groups, their level of education and their participation in continuing education. In finances, it is possible to monitor matters such as the resources used for different functions in the educational organisations or the relationship between public and external funding.

It is essential to select the most significant information for each educational organisation to be used in quality management and in enhancement of quality. The production of information may tie up the personnel resources of educational and ECEC organisations to a considerable extent. In that case, it is important to critically examine the usability of the produced information on a regular basis and, where necessary, reduce it. It is also important to remember that, for their part, the information sources selected reflect each organisation's understanding of the desirable quality.

Many actors – such as the ministries, centres for economic development, transport and the environment, municipalities, regional councils and the Finnish National Agency for Education – produce foresight data for actors in ECEC and education to use. Selecting and finding the most appropriate information for each actor is also emphasised in the use of foresight data.

Feedback is needed – the definition of target groups is the key

All parties that provide education, participate in it and use its results should have an opportunity to give feedback and contribute to the quality of education. Feedback can be collected, for example, from pupils, students and the guardians of the children participating in education and ECEC. The information collected through feedback should be information that cannot be obtained from already existing statistics or similar material, or such that it supplements and deepens the picture given by them. In ECEC, it is possible to use methods that take into account the children's age and development stage and strengthen their participation and opportunities to influence matters. In vocational upper secondary education and in higher education, the emphasis is on feedback collected from stakeholders and employee partners.

Feedback makes it possible to collect information on several matters used to develop the educational organisation. When the collection of feedback is planned, the matters on which information is needed as a basis for the development are outlined for each target group. For example, feedback can be collected on the following matters:

- satisfaction of guardians, pupils and students with ECEC services, teaching and education
- the effectiveness of the entire learning process and guidance services at different stages of the studies
- quality of teaching and assessment.

In VET and higher education, feedback on working life cooperation, workplace education and training, and placements is collected from workplaces. In addition, feedback may be requested more widely on matters such as the up-to-dateness of the curricula and the content of teaching. Feedback can be collected with surveys, by consulting employers

in the different bodies of the educational organisation or as part of joint development projects. In addition, educational institutions can take advantage of appraisals of personnel in collecting feedback when the personnel's duties include cooperation with employer partners.

In basic education and upper secondary education, the importance of stakeholder partners is increasingly essential. Feedback can be collected, for example, from the partners of youth and sports services, organisations and religious and other communities working with schools and educational institutions, and ECEC actors.

Further processing of feedback is an essential part of quality management. With regard to the amount of feedback, it must be taken into account that the collected feedback must also be processed and it must be possible to draw up summaries of it for determining the development measures. Stakeholders may also be engaged in the processing of feedback and in outlining the development measures. It is important to communicate to pupils, students, guardians, employer partners and other stakeholders about the development measures taken on the basis of the feedback so that the effectiveness of the feedback is visible and also encourages them to give feedback in future.

4. Operating culture with an emphasis on participation

The quality culture is based on participation

An operating culture that encourages participation can be used to promote the effectiveness of quality management and smooth cooperation. When the educational organisation distributes the responsibilities for quality work and provides different parties with opportunities for influencing matters, it also strengthens commitment to the implementation, results and development of quality management. In an operating culture that emphasises participation, children, pupils and students, personnel and the management can contribute to what their ECEC centre, school or educational institution is like.

All the parties of the educational organisation, from pupils and students, teachers and principals and the other personnel of educational institutions to guardians, education providers and municipal decision-makers and other external stakeholders are needed in the development of quality management. The promotion of participation is a value in itself and promotes the wellbeing, sense of community and sense of responsibility for shared matters in the whole educational organisation. **Even just discussing matters together already develops the participants' understanding of the goals of the activities and the opportunities to develop them.** The feedback on the strengths, good practices and development needs of the activities, collected from different parties, forms one essential and constantly updated basic material for self-evaluation. From the point of view of the development of quality management, qualitative data collected using methods emphasising participation (e.g. surveys, self-assessment discussions, workshops) is as important as the quantitative data collected on the activities as they help to bring up previously unidentified development measures or internal information on the causes of different development trends.

An operating culture that emphasises participation is based on openness and trust

The whole school community and the community of the educational institution are required to build a safe atmosphere that encourages development. The head of the ECEC centre, the principal or other management of the educational organisation plays a particularly important role in the building of an operating and quality culture that emphasises participation. Internal and external stakeholders (such as students, personnel, parents and the board) must be able to trust that there is a desire to hear their different and even critical views on the successes, development needs and shortcomings related to quality management and use these to enhance the activities.

From the point of view of quality management in education, it is also essential to ensure the utilisation of the feedback collected using operating methods that strengthen participation. Because the consultation methods also cause extra work to the persons consulted, the appropriateness of engaging the different parties must also be considered. **An effective quality culture often means the same as an operating culture that emphasises participation.** For the development of both, it is important that, based on the collected feedback, changes or action plans are made where necessary and their effectiveness, results and further measures are also communicated about systematically.

5. Continuous development and change

Quality work aims at the future by creating something new

In quality management, development aimed at making a change is typically seen as a continuous process, in which planning, activities, evaluation and development follow each other. The purpose of this so-called model of continuous improvement of activities is to help the organisation to create an operating culture in which the development of the activities is controlled and systematic. When the plans are recorded (plan), it is easier to begin to implement something new (do). After some time, it is a good idea to stop to examine whether the development measures have produced the desired changes and taken the educational organisation any closer to the jointly defined goals (check). On the basis of this, it is possible to do the required changes (act).

Quality work aims at the future. Continuous improvement often means a change and creating something new, as consolidating the quality of the services or the current state of the activities is only very seldom enough. Self-regulating evaluation of quality that is based on the educational and ECEC organisation's own quality management is transformative. Transformative quality assessment is part of the management system and produces fast situation analyses, identifies the service users' needs and reinforces the participation of personnel, pupils and students, and partners. It is also possible to apply its results to local conditions and changing operating environments.

A well-functioning process of continuous improvement is ultimately about building and maintaining a development-oriented operating culture in the daily work. Quality management provides the whole personnel with tools for sharing tried and tested practices. It also provides the tools for addressing shortcomings and the routes for communicating and finding solutions together. Effective processes and practices that everyone is aware of create trust and a sense of being able to control the situation even in the middle of crises.

Systematic processes support operation during changes

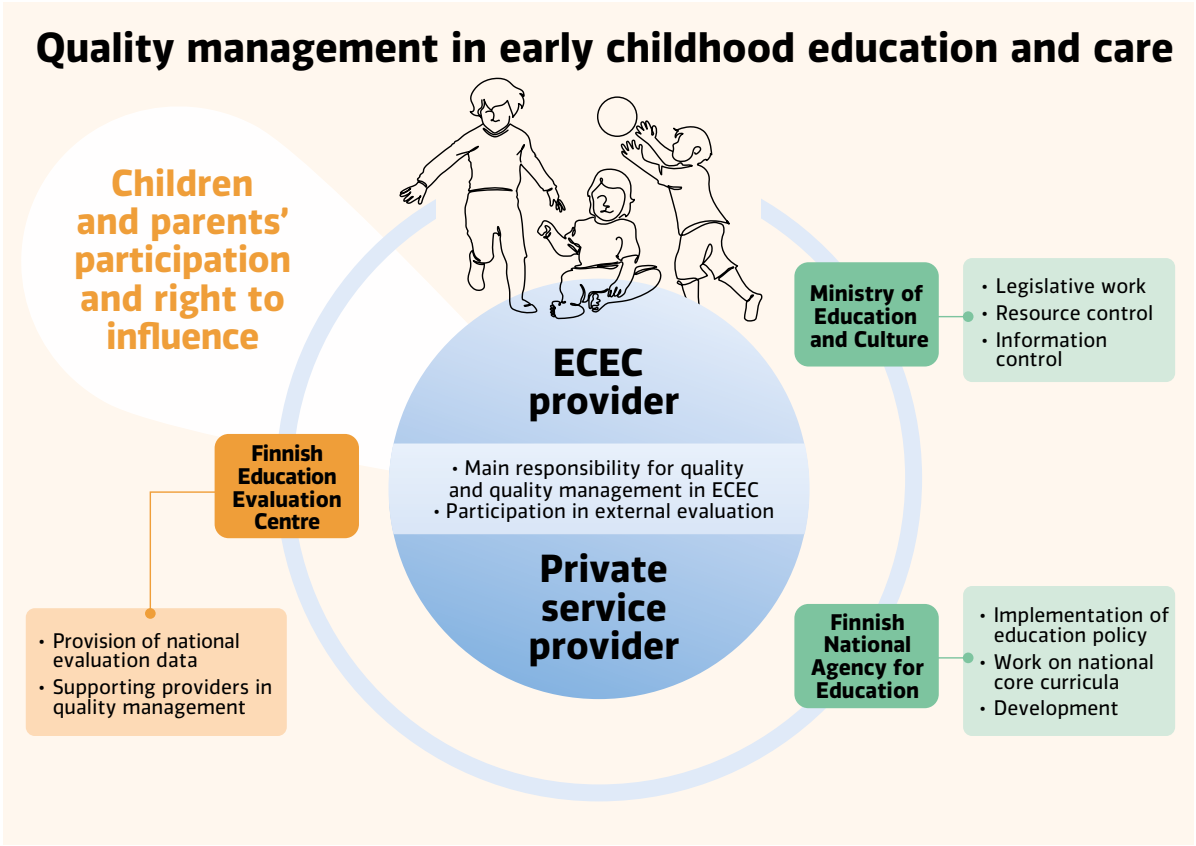
Quality thinking is based on a systemic view of the diversity and interdependency of phenomena. As a rule, there are also many perspectives in quality management. Quality management that has been planned, implemented and managed well takes into account many different alternative futures and impacts. It is an essential part of strategic decision-making and organisational learning. Quality management helps to produce real-time information, which strengthens the adaptability of educational organisations.

The systemic nature is not related only to the versatile information produced by quality management as a whole, but also to the educational organisation's ability to utilise the information. External evaluation is one way of preparing for the future and enhancing functional capacity. External evaluation is a method of ensuring that the systems, structures and ways of the educational and ECEC organisation to cooperate work from the point of view of both the community itself and the organisation's regional and national task. It produces information on the effectiveness of quality management as a whole and the strengths, development areas and good practices related to quality management.

As a rule, the purpose of quality management is to develop. It supports education and ECEC in achieving their targets, helps to identify strengths, good practices and development areas and to plan appropriate development measures. It also encourages to systematic production and documentation of information, which in turn ensures that the targets of quality management can also be evaluated in the future.

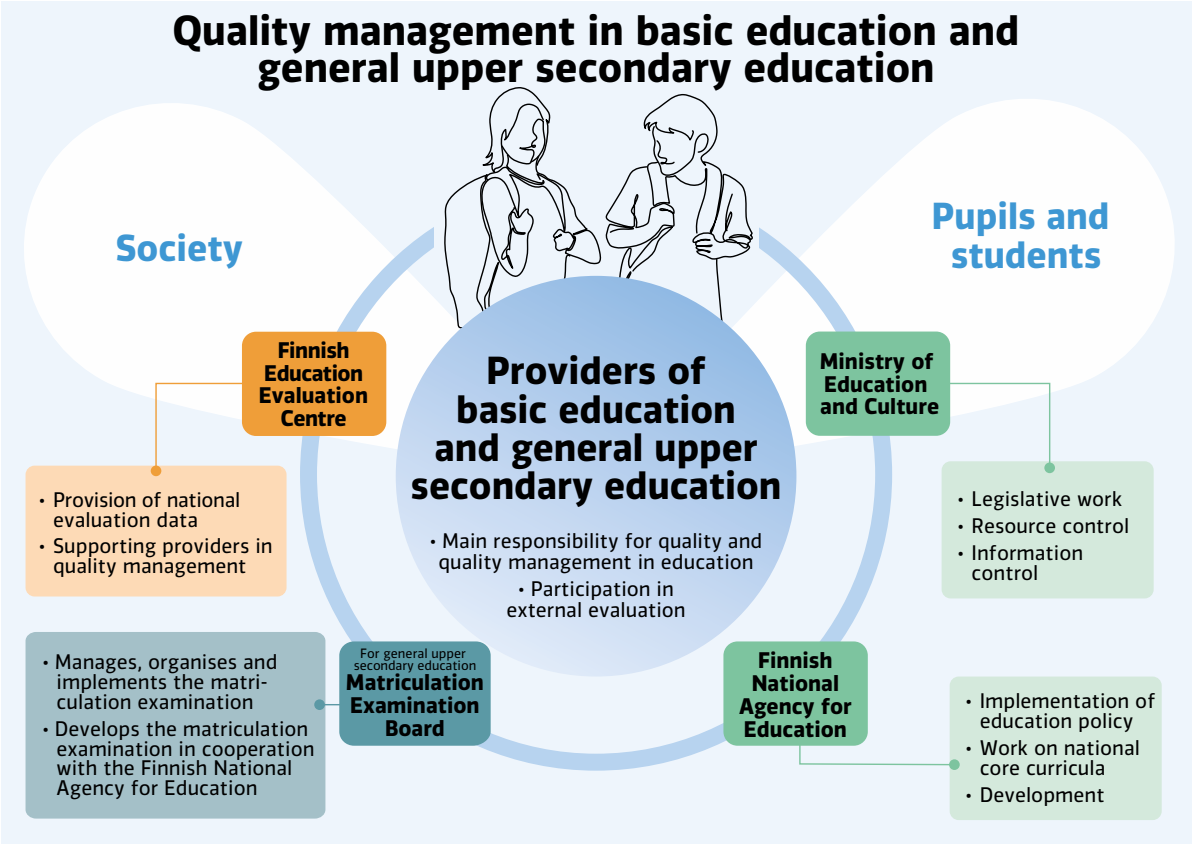
3 Responsibilities in quality management

This chapter describes the division of quality management responsibilities between education and ECEC providers, higher education institutions and national and international actors. The division of responsibilities is clarified in an education level-specific figure describing the actors and their roles.



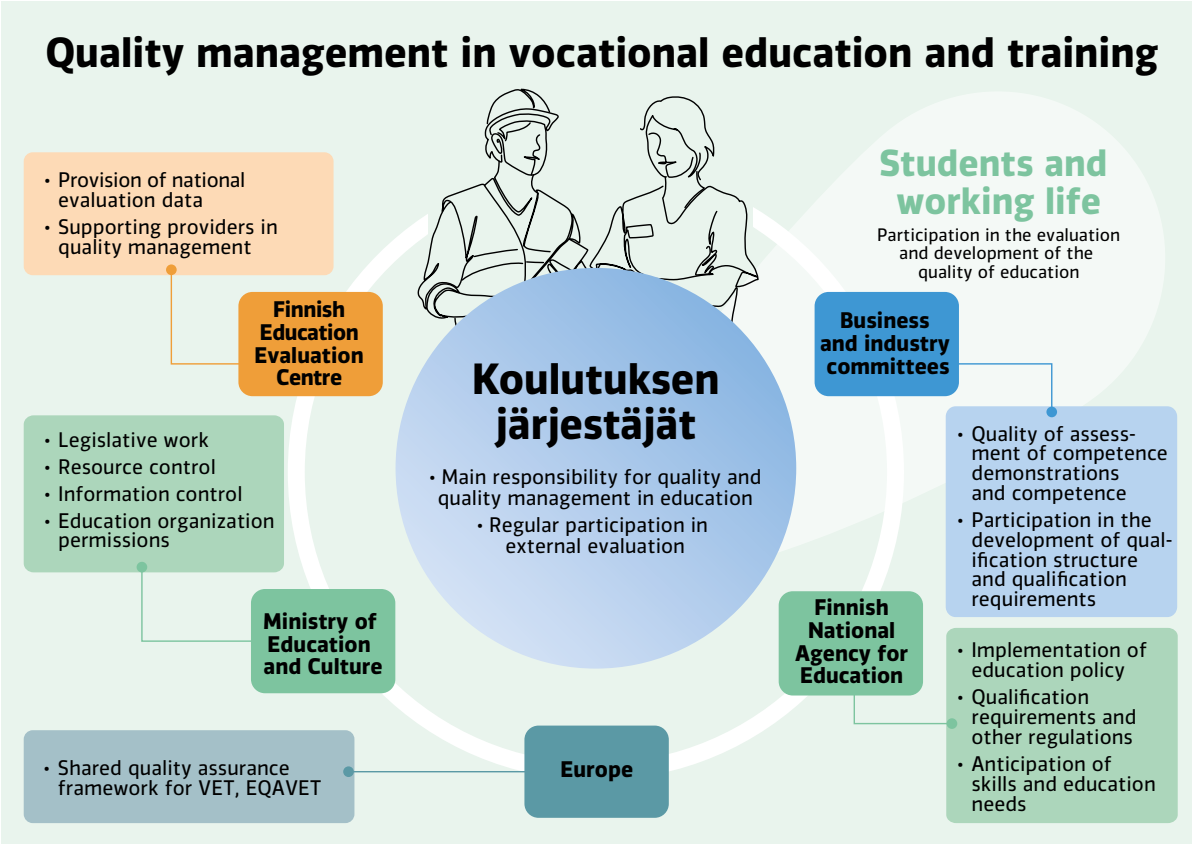
Quality management in ECEC

Every child in Finland has the right to participate in ECEC, which municipalities must provide according to families' needs. The municipality also has the main responsibility for the guidance, advising and supervision of the private service providers operating in its area. Each municipal and private actor is responsible for the high-quality implementation of ECEC and for ensuring compliance of the activities with both the Act on early childhood education and care and the National core curriculum for early childhood education and care, drawn up by the Finnish National Agency for Education. FINEEC's task is to support ECEC providers and service providers in their quality management. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Culture, FINEEC has produced Valssi, a quality evaluation system for ECEC, which providers and service providers can make part of their quality management. Valssi contains research-based tools that ECEC actors can use to evaluate and enhance the pedagogy and the operating culture in ECEC as well as the structures that support the activities.



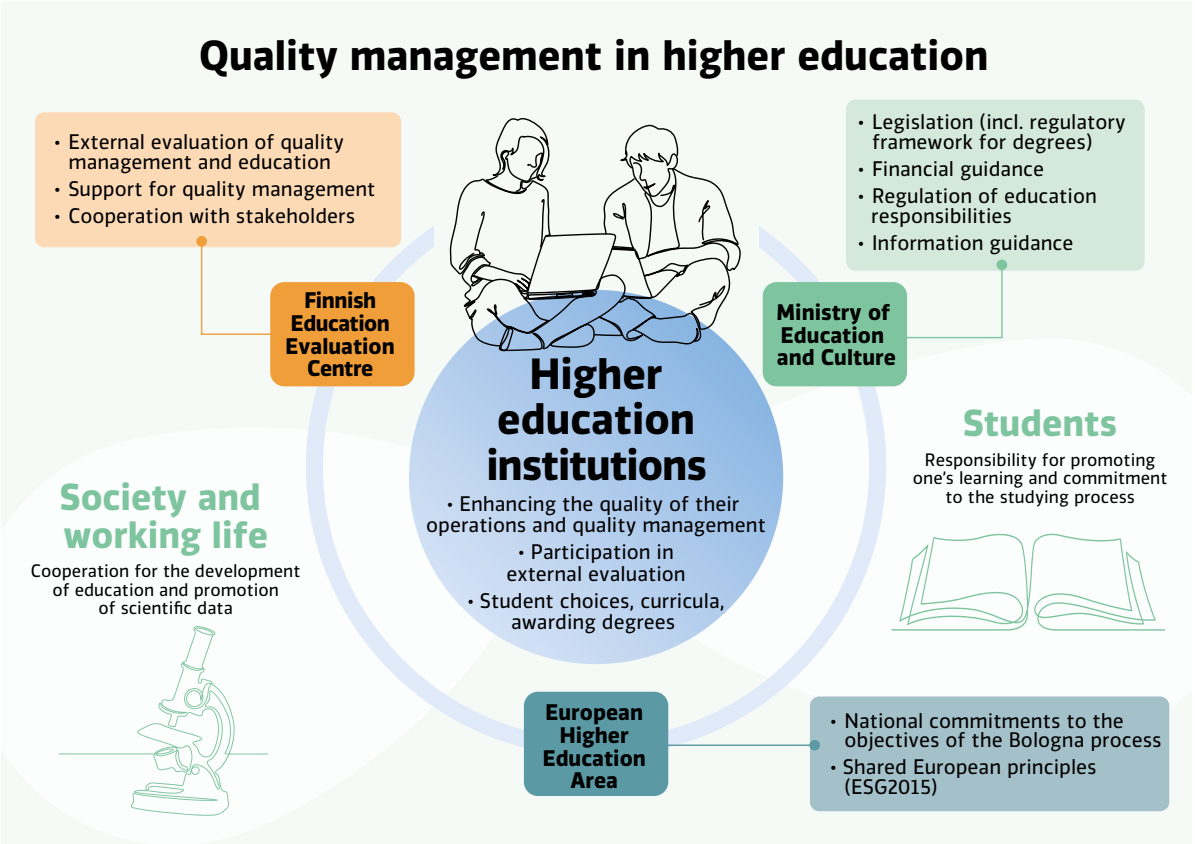
Quality management in basic education and general upper secondary education

The providers of basic education and general upper secondary education have an obligation to take responsibility for the evaluation and quality management of their activities. It is essential that the providers can themselves select their evaluation methods and the areas to be evaluated. The quality management of providers of basic education and general upper secondary education is guided and supported at the national level by FINEEC, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish National Agency for Education and the Matriculation Examination Board, which has a clear role of its own in ensuring the quality of general upper secondary education and in producing statistical information. At the national level, the key tools for developing quality management include various development programmes and publications produced by working groups, the quality strategy for general upper secondary education (Ministry of Education and Culture 2022) and the national quality criteria for basic education (Ministry of Education and Culture 2012), which have been used to support the possibilities of education providers to identify the strengths and development areas of their activities. FINEEC also produces information for the needs of development and decision-making. FINEEC assesses the learning outcomes of basic education and carries out thematic and system evaluations of basic education and general upper secondary education as well as external evaluations of quality management systems.



Quality management in VET

VET providers have the main responsibility for the quality and quality management of the qualifications, education and training and other activities. Education providers have an obligation to participate in external evaluation of the activities and quality management. It is important to strengthen the participation of students and working life in the development and evaluation of education. The Ministry of Education and Culture draws up strategic guidelines for quality management, provides guidance and funding and is responsible for drafting legislation. The VET quality strategy (Ministry of Education and Culture 2019) outlines quality management comprehensively in all VET and its different forms of implementation. The Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for the qualification requirements, develops the education and supports the education providers in quality management. Business and industry committees ensure the quality of competence demonstrations and competence assessment. FINEEC evaluates the learning outcomes and quality systems of VET and implements thematic and system evaluations.



Quality management in higher education

The key actors in the evaluation of quality management in Finnish higher education are the higher education institutions, which are responsible for the quality of their operation and their curricula, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and FINEEC, whose task is external evaluation of higher education institutions. Finland is an active part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which affects the way higher education institutions, FINEEC and the Ministry of Education and Culture understand the requirements of quality management in higher education. The shared European principles that Finland complies with have been recorded in the ESG document[4]. For FINEEC to be able to maintain its status as a reliable European external evaluator of higher education, it must pass an audit in accordance with the ESG every five years. In addition, the content, qualification requirements and professional rights are also regulated by other ministries and authorities in Finland. The recognition of qualifications is the responsibility of the Finnish National Agency for Education and the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health Valvira.

4 The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area

4 Summary

Good quality management is based on need, has diverse perspectives and arises from and lives in the daily work. It is then easy for every employee to recognise the benefits of effective quality management in their own work and promote the quality of education and ECEC in their daily work.

Regardless of the special features of different levels of education, the legislation concerning the self-evaluation of providers and higher education institutions is mainly based on the same principles. However, evaluation and quality management are guided by the specific starting points of each level of education.

When quality work has been planned and implemented well, it supports the realisation of the core activities and also releases resources for something new. Quality management and quality assessment in Finnish education and ECEC improve the functioning of the education system and its preparedness for change as well as promoting the equality of learners and the realisation of equality in education. The aim is to have quality management and evaluation linked to the operations of educational organisations in an appropriate manner and support the development of education and continuous improvement of quality in the best possible way. The quality culture in ECEC centres, schools, educational institutions and higher education institutions does not emerge automatically, but as a result of work that encourages participation.

FINEEC's support and evaluation of quality management are aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the Finnish ECEC and education system, support the development of the activities and promote the equality of learners. High-quality education and ECEC are key to securing the ability of our society to change. For this reason, quality management and the evaluation of quality assessment at all levels of education should be implemented systematically, in a sufficiently uniform manner and using the principles of enhancement-led evaluation.

5 Key concepts in the publication

Quality management

Quality management refers to the practices, processes or systems the educational organisation uses to plan, implement, maintain, evaluate and develop the quality of its operation. Quality management can be understood as a general concept that includes quality assurance, development, management and control.

Quality management as a whole

Quality management as a whole (cf. quality system) refers to the systematic whole formed by the organisation, procedures and resources of quality management and the division of responsibilities related to it. Each educational organisation decides on the objectives, structure, operating principles, methods used and development of its quality management.

Quality culture

Quality culture is part of the organisation's operating culture. Quality culture reflects the way in which the quality of operation is understood in the organisation, how it is maintained and developed, and how quality is visible in everyday activities. Quality culture is born from and develops through activity, and it is the outcome of an open, communal and participatory process. The educational organisation defines in more concrete terms what quality culture means in its operating context.

The attributes of a mature quality culture include openness, broad-based participation, an ability to identify the organisation's strengths and development areas as well as the individual's and the community's commitment to the quality of activities and its development.

Quality work

Quality work refers to the concrete actions an organisation takes to maintain and improve the quality of its activities. Quality work is quality management in action.

Enhancement-led evaluation

Enhancement-led evaluation is a key operating practice at FINEEC and also has a legislative basis.

Enhancement-led evaluation is based on trust between the implementer of the evaluation and the evaluation participant and on the educational organisation's responsibility to develop its activities. The methods of enhancement-led evaluation are tailored on a case-by-case basis to support the effectiveness of the evaluations and the enhancement of the activities while the evaluation is still in progress.

Enhancement-led evaluation produces a current state analysis, conclusions and recommendations that can be used by actors at the national, regional and local level and by education and training providers, higher education institutions and stakeholders alike. As a result of the evaluations, the participants receive external feedback on their activities with regard to the areas requiring development, best practices and strengths.

6 More on the subject

Supporting continuous development is one of the focus areas of FINEEC's evaluation activities. More information on the focus areas of FINEEC's activities: https://karvi.fi/en/fineec/information-production-on-focus-areas/ .

Supporting the development of quality management is FINEEC's task. Evaluations related to quality management are available on FINEEC's website: https://karvi.fi/en/fineec/information-production-on-focus-areas/ .

The principles and methods of enhancement-led evaluation are described in the publication *Enhancement-led evaluation at the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre:* https://karvi.fi/en/2020/04/21/enhancement-led-evaluation-promotes-inclusion-produces-learning-and-strives-to-influence-read-the-new-publication/ .

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