

Publisher

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)

Name of publication

Ability of the education system to respond to challenges of continuous learning in sudden structural changes

Authors

Frisk, T., Isoaho, K., Hietala, R., Kotiranta, L., Hirsjärvi, I., Huttula, T., Kankare, P., Löytänen, O., Myllykangas, P., Mäki, M., Stenbacka, Å. & Suomala, P.

Between 2020 and 2022, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) implemented an evaluation examining the ability of the education system to respond to the challenges of continuous learning in situations in which sudden structural changes occur. The evaluation was part of FINEEC's National education evaluation plan for the period 2020–2023 and it focused on vocational education and training (VET) and higher education. The focus of the evaluation was on both positive and negative sudden structural changes.

In the planning stage of the evaluation, authorities and stakeholders associated with continuous learning were consulted. In the implementation stage, an evaluation team was appointed whose members had expertise in both levels of education, labour administration, regional development, continuous learning as an education and training service for the working-age population and special issues concerning unemployed jobseekers. Students were also represented in the evaluation team.

Two extensive collections of information were carried out in the evaluation. A self-evaluation survey targeted at all of the educational institutions was used to create a national overview of the activities of VET providers and higher education institutions. To obtain more specific information on the activities of educational institutions in situations where sudden structural changes occur, two example cases were selected and the relevant actors were interviewed. The example cases selected were sudden structural changes in the wood processing industry and sudden structural changes in the battery industry.

The key evaluation results were the following:

- The ability of VET providers and higher education institutions to respond to the challenges sudden structural changes pose on continuous learning is on average good. However, there is variation in this ability between the levels of education and the different functions of educational institutions. There is also variation between the areas of the regional state administrative agencies.

- The ability of the education system to respond to the challenges negative structural changes pose to continuous learning is fairly good.
- The ability of the education system to respond to the challenges positive structural changes pose to continuous learning is satisfactory.

Areas in need of development in the entire education system included anticipation, financing of small competence modules and cooperation models related to sudden structural changes. New national and regional operating models are required especially for situations in which sudden positive structural changes occur.

VET providers and higher education institutions already have proven education and training models that have been tested in situations in which rapid changes have taken place in the world of work. Established national and regional cooperation models involving educational institutions already exist especially for situations in which sudden negative structural changes occur.

In many cases, experience already acquired in implementing education and training services in sudden structural changes in the world of work is linked to the educational institutions' ability to prepare for sudden structural changes and act in them as one of the parties involved in regional and industry-specific development work. The link between experience and the results of the self-evaluation is slightly more clearly visible in VET than in higher education.

At the national level, the key areas in need of development in the operation of VET providers are related to the amount of cooperation with stakeholders at the implementation stage of the education and training and the ability to develop education and training services targeted at the working-age adult population. In higher education, the key areas in need of development are related to the availability and competence of staff in situations in which rapid changes occur in the world of work. In addition, there are areas in need of development in the cooperation with other actors, especially in the implementation stage of the education and training. It is difficult to obtain teaching staff from sectors that suffer from a shortage of workforce and in which educational institutions and companies compete for the same people. The same phenomenon is visible in VET, for example, in the fields of technology.

In the evaluation, a separate examination was conducted on how the education system responds to the needs of employers and individuals in sudden structural changes. Based on the results, the education system in its current state responds better to the needs of individuals than to those of employers.

The evaluation report contains a separate chapter describing the characteristics of an educational institution that is well prepared for changes in the world of work and the characteristics of a well-functioning education and training service. The characteristics of a well-functioning education and training service are described from the perspective of both employers and individuals.

In the evaluation, development recommendations were also given to the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Service Centre for Continuous Learning and Employment, ELY Centres (centres for economic development, transport and the environment), TE Offices (public employment and business services), regional councils, VET providers and higher education institutions.

In the development recommendations given to the Ministry of Education and Culture, the evaluation team emphasised matters such as ensuring that sufficient attention will be paid to the perspectives of continuous learning and sudden structural changes in future reforms of VET and higher education. The recommendations to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment included the development of regional and national operating models for situations in which positive structural changes occur.

In its recommendations to VET providers and higher education institutions, the team proposed that the educational institutions should evaluate the special features of their organisation and operating environment and define what kind of preparedness and enhancement measures acting in sudden structural changes requires of them. It is recommended that the preparation for sudden structural changes and the development of education and training services aimed at the working-age adult population be linked to the strategies and quality systems of the educational institutions. In addition, the recommendations pay attention to the need for VET providers and higher education institutions to have functioning internal structures and processes for acting with the different collaboration partners in sudden structural changes. It is important that those VET providers and higher education institutions that have implemented education and training services during sudden changes in the world of work share their proven operating models for the planning, implementation and development of the education and training with other educational institutions.

Keywords: continuous learning, sudden structural change, VET provider, higher education institution, negative structural change, positive structural change, education and training service, employment, working-age population, anticipation