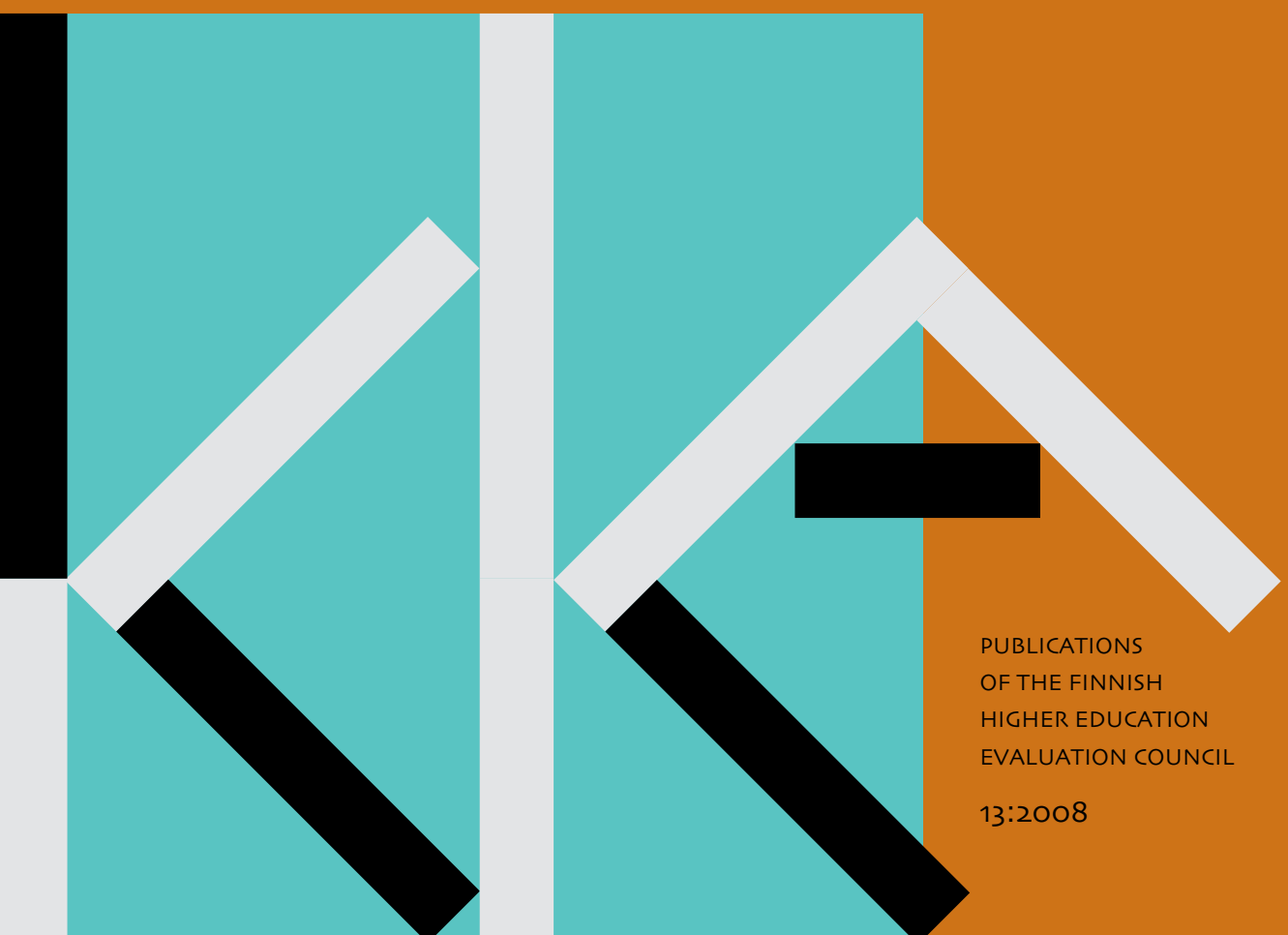


Finnish Higher Education
Evaluation Council

Plan of action
2008–2009



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1 Introduction

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) draws up a plan of action at the beginning of each term of office. This plan for the term 2008–2009 was adopted by FINHEEC at its meeting on 28 April 2008.

2 Objectives and principles of operation

The main statutory task of FINHEEC is to assist higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education in matters relating to evaluation. The aim is to develop Finnish universities and polytechnics and their international competitiveness by means of evaluations, support to quality assurance, supply of comparative data, recommendations for development, and diffusion of good practices. FINHEEC produces up-to-date information for the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders in support of evidence-based decision-making and development.

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council is:

An independent operator

FINHEEC makes decisions independently, and the content of evaluations is objective. Despite its close cooperation with stakeholders and Ministry of Education financing, FINHEEC makes its decisions on evaluations independently, according to predetermined evaluation criteria. This makes FINHEEC a credible evaluation organisation both nationally and internationally.

An enhancement-led evaluator

FINHEEC goes by the principle of enhancement-led evaluation. The purpose of all evaluations is above all to assist universities and polytechnics in developing their own provision and operations. The aim is to apply evaluation methods and carry out all the stages of the evaluation process in accordance with the principle of enhancement-led evaluation. FINHEEC interacts closely with higher education institutions and operates transparently.

An international bridge-builder

FINHEEC participates actively in international, especially European, co-operation, maintaining and developing contacts with evaluation organisations in different countries. FINHEEC works as a bridge-builder between the European Higher Education Area and the Finnish higher education sector especially concerning evaluation.

A proactive force

In its activities, FINHEEC seeks to anticipate changes in national and international needs. It wants to make a strong Finnish contribution to the construction of the European Higher Education Area and work as a trail-blazer in the development of evaluation together with the Finnish higher education community.

3 Operational environment

National setting

The Finnish higher education system is in transition and, in many ways, at a turning point. There is an ongoing process of structural development, in which higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education are seeking new solutions to the enhancement of R&D, the quality and impact of education and international competitiveness. Institutional profiles and priorities are being reviewed and developed, and higher education units are being combined into larger units through cooperation and mergers. Correspondingly, the Universities Act, the steering and financing models and internal administrative structures are being overhauled. The backdrop to these changes is the current modernisation trend in European higher education and recommendations put forward in an OECD thematic review. The Government has recorded the structural development of higher education in its Programme, and the main policy lines are set forth in the development plan *Education and Research 2008–2012* adopted by the Government in 2007.

Unlike the previous plan of action, this plan only covers two years, since FINHEEC and its Secretariat were appointed for a two-year term (2008–2009). FINHEEC's operative conditions and models of action are linked to the reforms in this period of transition. The new Universities Act, which is currently being drafted, will possibly outline national evaluation policy and provide for external evaluations of higher education institutions. The evaluation architecture of the European higher education area is in the process of being constructed, since the operation of the European register of evaluation organisations is only being launched and its role vis-à-vis national evaluations has not yet been determined. The two-year period covered by the plan of action is critical because of the ongoing developments.

Evaluation is a tool for evidence-based decision-making and steering. The structural reform of the university system will bring new challenges to the use of evaluation and quality assurance in higher education policy steering. The change in the ownership base of universities will not lessen the need of the main provider of funding, the Ministry of Education, to obtain comprehensive and comparable evaluation data. The transforming set-up will also increase universities' and polytechnics' need for information as they develop

their operations in the increasingly competed higher education field. When operational, the ongoing reform will mean growing demand for comprehensive university-specific and national evaluation data and other researched data as a management tool for universities. The FINHEEC audit programme, which covers all higher education institutions, is one example of data production for management purposes. Students' need for comparable evaluation data will likewise grow as the mobility principle inherent in the three-cycle degree structure is realised. National policy-based steering demands impact, stability and predictability from evaluation.

International setting

The frame of reference in higher education evaluation is international. It is motivated by quality enhancement in higher education and development of international competitiveness. At the heart are the Bologna process and the creation of the European higher education and research area. FINHEEC built its auditing model according to the European quality assurance principles and started to conduct audits in spring 2005. FINHEEC has agreed with universities and polytechnics on the overall timetable of the audits; according to it every university and polytechnic will participate in an external audit by 2011. The timetable will accommodate the mergers being effected in the institutional network. It is important for the consistency of the Bologna process that the present round of audits is completed as planned and auditing is made a permanent process in keeping with national policy lines.

Growing internationalisation in higher education will gradually pose new challenges to evaluation. Apart from the implementation of the European quality assurance recommendations and the launch of the European register, there is, notably in Central Europe, a process aiming at mutual recognition of evaluation findings. The number of evaluations jointly carried out by (national) evaluation bodies will grow, and FINHEEC must seek to free resources for participation in joint European evaluation projects. FINHEEC takes part in a mobility-related joint Nordic project NOQA¹, which is preparing a model for assuring quality in joint and double degree programmes. Within NOQA, it will also be possible to develop accreditation practices relating to degree programmes because the other Nordic countries need to develop a model for evaluating quality assurance in joint and double degrees

¹ Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education

which can replace mandatory national accreditation of degree programmes, where necessary. Although mandatory accreditation of degree programmes is not a national quality assurance practice in Finland, there may be demand for voluntary accreditation in international cooperation between higher education institutions in the future.

FINHEEC will have to look into the effect of the European Qualifications Framework on evaluation policy during the 2008–2009 term. The Finnish development plan for education and research provides for the creation of a National Qualifications Framework based on descriptions of competencies provided by degrees and other competencies. In terms of evaluation policy, this means that learning outcome will be made an object of evaluation. FINHEEC is involved in the NOQA project which looks into the evaluation aspect in the Qualifications Framework. It would be possible to support the creation and piloting of the Framework by means of a project which reviews the situation in and provides an overall picture of generic knowledge and skills provided by higher education. The implementation of the university reform as a whole will be evaluated during FINHEEC's next term in 2010.

Growing internationalisation and student mobility also entail enhancing opportunities for students with immigrant backgrounds and removing barriers to studies, which are also recorded in the development plan. The Government has set aims for national immigration policy in its Programme. Growing multiculturalism also increases need for multicultural skills. In view of this, it would be warranted to review internationalisation and multicultural skills in both higher education sectors. Further, an evaluation of international activities in universities and polytechnics would provide a knowledge base for the monitoring of the strategy for the internationalisation of higher education and research, which is currently under preparation.

4 Evaluations to be conducted during the 2008–2009 term

Audits of quality assurance systems

During the previous term, FINHEEC started to conduct audits of the quality assurance systems of universities and polytechnics. They will also be a pivotal form of evaluation during the term 2008–2009. According to plans, 19 higher education institutions will be audited during this term, and preparations will be made for audits to be conducted in 2010. The principles and procedures governing the audits have been compiled into a manual 2008–2011, which also includes a description of re-audits.

The 15 audit reports published so far will be analysed for a summation report during 2008. FINHEEC will arrange follow-up seminars to support higher education institutions in developing their quality assurance systems. The purpose of the seminars is to give feedback on QA development to higher education institutions which have been audited approximately three years previously. Feedback on the auditing model will continue to be collected from higher education institutions and auditors as a basis for further development of the model during the next term.

Evaluation of university centres

From 2004 onwards university centres have been operating in six regions which have no university of their own. The centres are located in Kajaani, Kokkola, Lahti, Mikkeli, Pori and Seinäjoki. During past decades, various university units were established in the current university centre regions for different needs and purposes; in early 2004 they were compiled into networked university centres. Owing to their history and form of organisation, the university centres differ greatly amongst themselves.

According to the university centres, they implement the third mission of universities by enhancing the impact of education and research. The impact comes from research that supports regional development and from master's,

adult education and continuing education programmes that raise the level of education in the region.

FINHEEC evaluation also has to do with the need for information at the Ministry of Education relating to the amendment of the Universities Act. The evaluation will be timed to make the data available to the Ministry in November 2008.

Students transferable skills

Apart from subject-specific knowledge, students develop so-called transferable skills in higher education institutions. These play a key role when the students put their subject competencies into practice in working life and in society at large. In surveys conducted by university recruitment offices, employers have rated transferrable skills even higher than subject knowledge. Transferrable skills include communication, cognitive, internationalisation and development skills, skills in information acquisition and processing, and critical thinking. In the European education area, transferrable skills are highlighted in many current projects.

The topic is also to the fore in both the Finnish higher education sectors. By means of a pilot project, FINHEEC could ascertain to what extent and by means of which courses, services etc. provided by the higher education institutions students develop these skills. This would enable good practices to be shared amongst higher education institutions, fields of education and sectors. This project may be initiated during 2009.

Follow-up evaluation of doctoral education

Doctoral education was evaluated from 2005 to 2006 by an international team. Follow-up evaluations are usually conducted in about three years from the actual evaluation. The follow-up evaluation gauges the implementation of the recommendations in higher education institutions and assesses what other development has occurred since the evaluation. The follow-up evaluation will be topical in autumn 2009.

Evaluation of centres of excellence in education

In the performance agreement period beginning in 2010, the focus will be on the quality and impact of education. In the evaluation of centres of excellence in education, attention will be paid to retention, employment, internationalisation, development of teaching, the realisation of lifelong learning, student feedback, and the number and development opportunities of the teaching staff.

In the polytechnic sector, centres of excellence in education are being evaluated in 2008 and 2009, mostly in autumn 2008, and the period of performance-based funding will start at the beginning of 2009. The evaluation will have especially focus on results obtained by the units. The new approach will probably generate new information about the methods developed by the polytechnics for assessing the effectiveness of their educational activities. Evaluations for the designation of centres of excellence in education and in regional impact were previously commissioned by the Ministry of Education in alternate years.

The ongoing evaluation of centres of excellence will be the last of its kind, because the Ministry has commissioned a more extensive evaluation of education, in which the centres will be designated for the three-year performance agreement period starting in 2010. In the opinion of the Ministry, a suitable number of centres of excellence in the polytechnic sector is 8–10, instead of the current 4–6. The new evaluation will pay particular attention to the quality and impact of education and teaching and in the case of polytechnics to working life contacts. The planning of the evaluation of centres of excellence in education to be conducted in 2010–2012 will start in autumn 2008 and be finished for all intents and purposes in 2009.

According to the group planning the evaluation of centres of excellence in university education, evaluations should be international rather than domestic as is currently the case. The evaluation informing the performance agreement period 2010–2012 will be carried out as a two-phase international peer evaluation. The 8–10 units considered by the Ministry of Education as a suitable number may be faculties or departments. Following the evaluation, there will be an international seminar in early 2009, where the designated centres of excellence will be presented. The purpose of the seminar is to highlight high-standard Finnish university education and make visible the evaluation process.

Fee-charging services

The audits of the National Defence College and Åland University of Applied Sciences will be fee-charging services because their steering and funding are not in the remit of the Ministry of Education. FINHEEC participates in certain applications for EU funding concerning the development of quality assurance in Asia, e.g. in Mongolia. If the funding comes through, FINHEEC will participate in the project as a partner. Similar requests have come to FINHEEC also in the form of competitive bidding, but so far there has not been resources for drawing up full-scale applications.

5 Development of activities

As the European education area takes form and the European register of evaluation units is compiled, the evaluation scene will internationalise further and the evaluation organisations will find themselves in an increasingly competitive setting. FINHEEC must further develop its activities in a more international direction and its preparedness for participating in evaluations conducted abroad together with its counterparts in other countries. More internationalisation is also needed in the evaluations of Finnish higher education institutions. FINHEEC will contribute to the creation of the European evaluation architecture and development of evaluation methods within ENQA². FINHEEC will seek to get a representative on the ENQA Board.

FINHEEC will prepare for an external review of its operations with a view to developing its activities and submitting an application for inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) by finalising its quality assurance system and conducting a self-evaluation. The international external evaluation will be organised by the Ministry of Education. The visit of the external review group could take place in early 2009.

According to relevant statutes, one of the tasks for FINHEEC is to promote research into evaluation of higher education institutions. To date, FINHEEC has not had resources for fulfilling this duty. Auditing has produced data on quality assurance in higher education institutions and in FINHEEC. It would be possible to target some of the funding intended for supporting higher education institutions in evaluation to research on evaluation, which would help gain more researched data from the audits.

FINHEEC is a learning organisation and continually develops its methodological competencies and takes care of its personnel's welfare and training. During the 2008–2009 term of operations, FINHEEC will improve its external communications by reforming its web site.

² European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education