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New Directions in Educational Evaluation as part of Quality Assurance in Finland

Abstract

When the Education Evaluation Council's was founded, turned a new page in the history of educational evaluation in Finland. Evaluation is shifting increasingly into expert work carried out externally to educational administration. This enables evaluations on education policy, as well.

Local evaluation activities have an important role in the new system. External evaluations are to support local educational development while also providing evaluative feedback about the functioning of the whole education system.

The new evaluation system is unique also internationally. It is characterised by independence, programme orientation, network-based practices, promotion of evaluation research, and comprehensive management of evaluation activities. Evaluation programme emphasizes the role of evaluation in guiding the development of the education system. The aim is that evaluation findings would guide educational policy-making, development and goal-setting.

Key words: evaluation system, quality assurance, network-based evaluation, independent external evaluation, developmental evaluation

A short history and the present situation

National evaluation

The National Board of Education (NBE) launched national educational evaluations and related development work in the early 1990s already, but evaluation gained greater emphasis only after the more recent changes in educational legislation. In this legislation the responsibility for developing evaluation on general education, vocational education, and adult education as well as for implementing external evaluations were assigned to the NBE. The Ministry of Education guided the implementation of external evaluations by its ruling issued in 1998. The NBE-driven evaluation activities were based on the results agreement negotiated with the Ministry of Education.

Educational evaluations by the National Board of Education have taken place at the national, local and international levels. National level projects have produced educational indicators as well as system, thematic, and situation evaluations and reviews on learning outcomes. The reviews of learning outcomes have focused

mainly on basic and vocational education. In addition, the efforts have included development of evaluation models, methods, and criteria. Education providers and schools have been offered various training, consulting, and material services through broad networked co-operation. There are approximately 80 evaluation reports and another 20 reports on student achievement published since 1993.

Swedish-speaking schooling has been evaluated by the same fashion as the Finnish-speaking sector. Out of the NBE evaluation reports in years 1994–2003, 21 were in Swedish. In addition, the Swedish-speaking sector has carried out some projects of their own in co-operation with other parties.

Regional evaluation

The Provincial Government Act orders the provincial governments to evaluate the accessibility of basic services within their region. According to the law, such evaluations should be carried out co-operatively, consistently, and drawing primarily on existing statistics and department-specific databases. Evaluation reports are to be published annually.

The Ministry of the Interior and other ministries define shared evaluation targets for a number of years (i.e. the term of government). Respective evaluation targets for different departments are specified annually by a results agreement. Evaluation targets for the period 2004–2007 included, for instance, entrance into further education after the comprehensive and upper secondary school, dropping out, and the employment and further study careers among those with a vocational qualification. Furthermore, different departments also have shared evaluation targets.

Other evaluation

Evaluation concerning polytechnics and universities belongs to the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council is an independent expert body to assist universities and other higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education in the evaluation of higher education. The FINHEEC works in connection with the Ministry of Education, in four-year terms. The Minister of Education appoints the 12 members of the Council separately for each four-year term. They represent universities, polytechnics, students, and working life organisations.

In the beginning of its term, the FINHEEC defines its own strategy and general guidelines. The Action Plan is revised annually, in addition to which there is also an annual work plan. The work of the FINHEEC is guided by a specific decree. There is a full-time Secretariat to carry out the Council's decisions.

The FINHEEC aims at long-term development of higher education institutions by means of evaluation and independent expert knowledge. Therefore the FINHEEC supports these institutions in their efforts to construct quality and evaluation systems of their own and also produces national, internationally comparable information on their functioning for the needs of higher education policy-makers, students, and the working and business life organisations. Evaluations also seek to improve learners' legal protection.

The FINHEEC-driven evaluation projects can be divided roughly into four groups: institution-specific evaluations (overall assessments, licensing evaluations of polytechnics and quality audits), study programme evaluations, thematic evaluations and accreditments for specialist study components in higher education. In addition, the FINHEEC has made, as agreed with and commissioned by the Ministry of Education, evaluations on educational quality units and units of excellence in terms of regional development.

Also the State Audit Office has evaluative tasks. As regards the international level, the most significant efforts relate to participation in assessment projects within the OECD and in co-operation within the EU.

The Institute for Educational Research, in the University of Jyväskylä, has been in charge of the OECD assessments, especially PISA studies, by commission of the Ministry of Education. The Institute has played a central role in national and international evaluation schemes since the 1960s already. This work has focused especially on the assessment of student achievement.

Nation-wide and thematic evaluations have been administered by the Ministry of Education and the NBE. These have covered both the Finnish-speaking and the Swedish-speaking sector. Besides the University of Jyväskylä, also other universities and institutes of higher education have been engaged in diverse educational evaluation activities. In addition, foreign experts have been involved in national assessments, as well. Studies by individual researchers and research projects have also contributed to the evaluation-related knowledge base in our country. The largest project commissioned by the Ministry of Education under the revised educational legislation, so far, concerned evaluation of educational administration. In this case, the evaluation on the administration itself was assigned to an external assessor independent of the Ministry.

Local evaluation

According to the Municipality Act each municipality should have an audit board appointed by the municipal council in order to assess the realisation of the operational and economic objectives set by the council. According to the school legislation introduced in 1999, the education provider, such as a municipality or a municipal consortium, must evaluate the education provided and also its effectiveness. The education provider is also obliged to participate in possible external evaluation concerning its activities. When the education provider is a municipality, the various parties involved in the evaluation in practice, i.e. the council, the audit board, the education board and education authorities make up an integrated whole. There is no standard obligatory model for such evaluation activities but practices vary and can be decided locally. However, the education provider's own evaluation should be systematic and regular, and it needs to cover school-based assessment as well. Education providers may choose their own evaluation models and methods and, when needed, also seek support from various sources for their evaluation activities.

A new direction of education evaluation

In recent decades the aims, tasks, functioning, and policies guiding Finland's education system have changed. Possibilities for spontaneous educational development that take local circumstances into account have been increased by the devolution of decision-making power to the local level. Educational demands for quality and competence, increasing needs for development, the speed of changes, the diversification of educational services and outcomes as well as emphasis on transparency, accountability, and customer orientation have all contributed to the need for evaluating the functioning of the entire education system and the activities of schools and educational institutes. It is important, especially with regard to education providers and schools, that evaluation is consistent, predictable and in line with the developmental objectives.

The Council, together with the Ministry of Education, is responsible for educational evaluation and its development and serves as a feedback mechanism for the national education system with respect to primary and secondary general education, vocational education and vocational adult education as well as independent civic education. The body responsible for the preparation and implementation of the issues dealt with in the Council is the Education Evaluation Secretariat, which works as a separate institute within the University of Jyväskylä.

By setting up the Council the aim is a better basis for independent educational evaluation as well as for coordinated evaluation activities and related networked development. In composition, the Council is an organisation of education providers and educational institutes, educational administration, teacher and student organisations as well as working-life and other stake-holders' groups. The fourteen members of the Council also include experts on educational evaluation and research.

The Council's work is based on programmed evaluation and diverse expertise in national and international evaluation. development activities., thematic, and situation evaluations as well as evaluations on student achievement. In addition, resting on the development objectives of the knowledge society, emphasis is placed on the development of technology-aided evaluation environments, on supporting education providers and educational institutes in their evaluative efforts as well as on making use of local evaluation work in national evaluations. Further, the programme emphasises the development of an evaluation culture and the promotion of good practices as well as enhancement of the quality of evaluations through evaluation research.

The evaluation programme and the development of evaluation are based, on legislation, on the Development Plan for Education and Research for as well as on sector-specific analyses of the operational context. The development of the evaluation system is also guided by the aspects highlighted in the legislative reform: *independence, apt targeting, efficiency and economy as well as the effectiveness of evaluation.*

Fundamental values and principles in the Council's evaluation practice

The development of evaluation is promoted by building supportive working culture and by adhering to adopted values and derivative principles. In so doing, attention is paid to the quality of evaluation and to its material and human resources. Those participating in the evaluation network are expected to commit themselves to these same values and principles.

Values

Equality

Equality in evaluation is related to the social function of education; to high-quality competence and equal opportunities in future society. Economic and social well-being in Finnish society is largely attributable to the equal public education system, the purpose of which is to guarantee adequate educational opportunities and right to education and personal development for all, in accordance with each one's potential and special needs, irrespective of their gender, place of residence, age, language and socio-economic status. The realisation of pupils' and students' rights, accessibility and equality of education, and full use of human capital should be fostered by means of evaluation.

Equality also refers to the notion that evaluation targets and the parties involved in the evaluation activities are equal partners in the dialogue and the development of evaluation contents and methods.

Fairness

Fairness means establishing an ethically sound basis for evaluation. It entails that those to be evaluated are treated as equal players under same rules; that the evaluation practice is sustainable, consistent and predictable; that evaluation is fair and objective so that individual evaluations are proportioned to relevant operation contexts, and refrain from such comparisons that could damage the target. Fairness calls for independence in relation to educational administration and developers.

Truthfulness

Evaluation must produce reliable information, and the conclusions and suggestions for improvement need to be justified. This requires that the evaluation methods used are reliable, diverse and versatile. Data collection needs to be comprehensive enough, and evaluations should rely on approved scientific methods and principles. Truthfulness also concerns meta-evaluation, i.e. evaluation of the evaluation activities.

Principles

Evaluation is independent

Evaluation is primarily a tool for the development of education and instruction. In order to make evaluation effective, there must be mutual trust between the evaluator and evaluation targets, contributing to a credible evaluation culture. This requires that the evaluator is independent in relation to educational administration (policy-makers) and the various parties and social structures involved in educational development. It is very important that the evaluator has a recognised status and position as an expert body that organises and conducts evaluations. Independence needs to be ensured through sufficient financial resources.

Evaluation involves active participation

Involvement refers to such evaluation practices that enable exchange of views and experiences and help develop evaluation co-operation. The purpose is that evaluation is apt and timely. Involvement means that the various evaluation parties and agents conduct the evaluations as an expert network. It also refers to schools' and education providers' active participation in evaluation and to their commitment to open interaction as communities.

Evaluation aims at quality

Planning and implementation of evaluations is based on continuous quality assurance. Its central elements include expertise as well as the aptness and efficiency of evaluation. Essential points in quality assurance include the clarity of aims and principles, availability of material and human resources, smooth operation, and external review of evaluation results. The quality of the practical implementation of evaluations is ensured by selecting from among the expert network the best forces for each particular job.

Evaluation is based on openness

Open evaluation builds on truthfulness, fairness and transparency. The programme, principles, and criteria of evaluation are made transparent so that everybody involved would know how the different targets and activities are to be evaluated. Openness also refers to the dialogic and interactive evaluation culture created by the network-based course of action. Evaluative findings will be brought to public debate, which is only one example of wider active participation in the social debate on education and related evaluation.

Evaluation promotes development

Evaluation provides schools, education providers, policy-makers and other interest groups with relevant information about processes that promote personal and organisational learning. Evaluation also yields recommendations for

development and promotes joint dialogue and value discussion in educational organisations and in society in general. Evaluation is developed and extended through evaluation research.

Evaluation is efficient and economic

As far as evaluation arrangements are concerned, a prime emphasis is on keeping the evaluation process streamlined and flexible. The efficiency and economy of the process are fostered by paying attention to the pacing and volume of evaluation projects in terms of content and time as well as to their methods of data collection and analysis, reporting, use of the network, alternative ways of organisation, and utilisation of existing knowledge.

Evaluation process of the new directions in practice

The next figure illustrates the phases of the evaluation project from the commission and funding of the Ministry of Education until to the report delivered to the Ministry of Education and education providers. The Education Evaluation Council appoints the independent planning and evaluation groups. The council also makes decisions to publish the evaluation results. A evaluation group is independent regarding the evaluation process, results and recommendations. The council can't change f. ex. the recommendations of evaluation group. The evaluation group brings all information together, describes the state of affairs, defines the criteria, evaluates the state of affairs, points out the needs of development, makes some general recommendations and takes part in the distribution of the results. The central principles in the evaluation groups are as follows: neutrality, quality and credibility of evaluation and the trinity of science, administration and teaching.

During the last five the Education Evaluation has published about 40 reports. A part of the reports are methodological and a part empirical evaluation reports.

As examples on the evaluation topics commissioned by the Ministry of Education can be mentioned as follows: basic security in education, realisation of special education, remedial education and student welfare services, pedagogy in basic education, co-operation for organising education in upper secondary education and vocational education and training, social and communicative competencies in vocational basic education and the regional development impact of vocational basic education.

