

***International Seminar on Higher Education  
Novi Sad, 28-30 October 2005***

**Ossi V. Lindqvist: HE Buffer Institutions: Case Finland**

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (*FINHEEC*) was established in 1996, and it is appointed by the Ministry of Education, for four-year periods. It has representatives (total of 12) from the universities and polytechnics, the industry and public organisations, as well as students. FINHEEC has a secretariat of ca. 12 persons.

The Council is an independent expert body assisting the universities (20), the polytechnics (29), and the Ministry of Education, in matters relating to evaluations and quality assurance. The Universities Act calls for evaluations of the HEI's, and the results should be open and public.

The Council organizes audits of quality work and institutional, programme, and thematic evaluations. Furthermore, it provides advisory and consultancy services in the implementation of evaluations, it develops evaluation methodologies, and it also disseminates good national and international practices to higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education. Its role has been heightened especially in the context of the ongoing Bologna process and in the building up the national quality assurance evaluation system for the Finnish HEI's. FINHEEC is a member of the ENQA.

Thus the FINHEEC serves as a buffer organization between the HEI's and the Ministry, and its main aim is an advisory role in the promotion of quality in higher education. The other route between the Ministry and each HEI is the system of contract negotiations whereby the rector/university signs up a contract that stipulates the performance of the HEI and the financing from the Ministry. For most part the contract constitutes a three-year rolling plan. The basic financing of the universities is based on the numbers of Master's and PhD graduates produced, though weighted by the

academic fields. This financing system is thus heavily based on outputs. Most of the R&D financing for the universities, and also polytechnics, is competitive money from different national and international sources, and in some universities it may constitute up to 50% of their total annual expenditure.

In its evaluations FINHEEC is emphasizing the supportive and developmental approach, with no rankings; usually no money is involved (as a possible penalty!), which also calls for open and transparent approach to evaluations;

Representatives of the HEIs, students, and commonly also stakeholders are integrated in the planning and implementation of the evaluations;

FINHEEC organizes a number of evaluation seminars in order to maintain transparency and to receive feedback; also, the evaluators are invited to attend training sessions and seminars;

FINHEEC has also tailored evaluation methods to respond to the character of each evaluation and the specific needs of HEIs.

As a part of the Bologna process, the Finnish Quality Assurance for HEI's system has been developed, though it is also 'maturing' when the process itself is supposed to be a 'learning' process. The structure of the national quality system has thus three levels:

- 1) Publicly funded HEI's are steered by the Ministry of Education;
- 2) The FINHEEC is responsible for evaluating the quality of education and other activities in HEI's;
- 3) The HEI's bear the main responsibility for the quality of all their activities.

Some observations from the evaluations of FINHEEC can be summarised as follows:

The importance of strategic work in HEIs has been strengthened;

The contents and core elements have been analysed during the transition process to the Bachelor/Master degree structure;

Profile building and networking by the HEIs have been encouraged;

In several cases, active pedagogical development and cooperation with the employers/labour market has been initiated;

The HEIs have improved their student guidance services, and improved their support for individual study plans;

There has been an increased attention to the development of the student selection procedures;

The role of students in the educational planning process has been strengthened in situ;

Feedback from students and stakeholders at large is being collected in the HEIs, but its practical utilisation must still be improved.

The process of student selection towards PhD studies and the student guidance need to be improved, but this is now also a subject in an ongoing international evaluation of PhD training.

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