

Conclusions and recommendations of the National Audit Office

Vocational education development projects – study completion programme for 2011–2014 as an example

During the audit, the organisation of the development of vocational education and the implementation, supervision and monitoring of development projects were assessed. In addition, the practical implementation and monitoring of one example programme, a study completion programme funded in 2011–2014, was assessed in more detail. The impact of the programme on students completing their studies within the target schedule and any students cancelling their studies was assessed using extensive register data.

The development of vocational education is based on guidelines defined in the government programme. These are implemented by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Finnish Board of Education is responsible for practical development. It prepares application processes for funding allocated to it and distributes development subsidies by rating funding applications. The use of assets is supervised systematically on the basis of interim and final reports. Monitoring is based on reporting information and attached documents, such as extracts from general ledgers, provided by development projects. In general, it can be assumed that any risks associated with the misuse of subsidies are relatively low.

The majority of vocational education development projects funded by the Finnish Board of Education are fairly small and of a short duration, and financial support is applied for on an annual basis. On the basis of the audit, it should be considered whether larger projects of a longer duration should be used for the development of vocational education. For example, a period between elections or the term of government could be a natural period. Similarly, focus should be placed on specific pre-defined activities and limit them to more closely defined groups of students. This would ensure that the input per student is sufficiently high in order to produce the targeted impact.

When planning development projects, more attention should be paid to ex-post assessments. The best starting point of an assessment is when an intervention group is established in a project at which activities are directed, as well as an as identical a reference group as possible at which no activities are directed. Impact assessments should be conducted by an independent external auditor.

The programme to improve the completion of studies assessed in more detail in the audit was a long-term development project, the goal of which was to have students complete their studies within the target schedule of three years. The project was exceptional in that it was not only longer, but also more extensive than any previous development programmes. More than 80 per cent of students within the scope of vocational education studied at institutions that took part in the programme.

On the basis of the audit, the example programme has had no impact, at least in the short term, on completing studies within the target schedule or any cancelled studies. There has been positive development in both of these aspects over the past ten years, but it results from factors other than the development programme. Even though the programme was one of the largest programmes ever carried out, its calculated input per student was very low. As a result, the risk is that no significant results

can be achieved, as activities are divided between a large group of students.

The financial crisis which started in 2008 and the resulting euro crisis increased the unemployment rate in all age groups and particularly among young people. Changes in economic trends did not encourage students to cancel their studies and to seek employment. Furthermore, the terms and conditions of unemployment security became stricter in the 2010s. No unemployment benefit is paid if a student cancels their upper secondary level studies without any weighty reason or does not apply for studies. Therefore, financial incentives have been established for the completion of studies. Completing studies has become a more attractive option. In addition, results may have been affected by factors related to the organisation of education and the private life of students. On the basis of the results, impact cannot, however, be assessed in the long term, and the assessment results of a single project cannot be extended to apply to all development of vocational education.

Recommendations of the National Audit Office:

The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish Board of Education should:

1. continue to carry out vocational education development projects as sufficiently large projects of a long duration, and aim to set standard goals and activities for development programmes and application processes before opening project applications.
2. pay special attention, in application instructions for development projects, to ex-post assessment of impact and to ensuring that the results, cost-efficiency and employment effect of projects can be assessed after the completion of these projects.