

Foresight analysis and the dimensioning and targeting of education - focusing on vocational education for young people

Section 29.20 of the 2008 state budget earmarks 600,240,000 euros for vocational education, with central government transfers and subsidies for vocational education operating costs accounting for about 94% of the total. Local authorities cover about 58% of the total computational costs of basic vocational education for young people. Local authorities are mainly responsible for arranging education. Vocational education has far-reaching impacts on the economy and maintaining and developing the industrial structure.

The national dimensioning of education supply requires anticipating education and labour needs in the future. Foresight analysis and the dimensioning and targeting of education should ensure that the supply of education corresponds optimally to the quantitative and qualitative requirements of the working world. In recent years foresight activities have gained new significance in society as a result of accelerating environmental change and population trends deviating from the norm. Greater expectations must therefore be placed on foresight and the dimensioning of education in the state administration and the entire public sector.

Foresight analysis and the dimensioning of education have been closely linked at the national level to the education and research development plan that is approved by the Government every four years, which lays out key qualitative, quantitative and structural policies for education. The plan sets entrant targets in different stages of education. The main question in the audit that was performed by the National Audit Office was: How well have foresight analysis and the dimensioning and targeting of vocational education for young people, which is syllabus-based and quantitatively regulated, helped match education and the needs of the working world as a functional whole? To answer this question the audit examined

problems and risks associated with this functional whole. National foresight analysis of vocational education for young people takes place along with education at polytechnics and universities. Vocational schools and upper secondary schools (high schools), which are not quantitatively regulated, together form the upper secondary level of education. For these reasons the results of the audit have broader significance for the entire education system.

With regard to education supply and the setting of entrant targets, the process of drafting the development plan is very extensive, covering the entire nation in a multi-level and multi-stage process. In the final result of this process, i.e. the quantitative entrant targets in the development plan together with background information and reasons, the description of different stages has been quite skimpy and narrow in relation to the whole process. The entrant targets in the development plan cannot be considered transparent. The development of foresight activities also receives scant attention in the plan.

One general shortcoming in the development plan process is that it does not include the monitoring of the quantitative entrant targets that are presented in the plan. Monitoring should provide information on how well foresight activities have succeeded. Furthermore the supervising of foresight activities at the regional level has been inadequate. The plan does not provide information concerning how the coordination of activities should be arranged nationally and regionally.

The legislative basis for foresight analysis and the dimensioning and targeting of vocational education for young people is quite meagre and open to interpretation. The administration of foresight activities is also largely unregulated. The drafting of the development plan takes place periodically and activities lack continuity.

The development plan should also state how it is linked to and coordinated with other Government and ministerial-level plans and programmes that deal with education or closely related issues. The risk is that different plans and programmes will steer activities in different directions.

It is the opinion of the National Audit Office that in order to strengthen the management and administration of foresight in education, the Government should develop a foresight strategy specifying objectives, timetables and administrative duties.

Foresight in education has an essential bearing on the availability of labour and the match between supply and demand. Problems in this area have been studied quite thoroughly, but one shortcoming is that studies have not been able to link foresight analysis and the dimensioning and targeting of education.

From an economic and financial viewpoint the quantitative information in the development plan has remained quite detached from the Government's spending limits decision and the health and social services programme included in it. If the information in the development plan is not purposefully coordinated with the operational and financial plan, the plan's steering influence will remain weak. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, with regard to the quantitative supply of education the education and research development plan approved by the Government should at least be linked to the following programmes and decisions: the Government Programme, the Government's policy programmes, the four-year regional programmes and their implementation plans, the regional development objective programme, the health and social services programme and budget between the state and local authorities, state spending limits, the state budget, the four-year operational and financial plan for the Ministry of Education's administrative sector and authorisations to provide education.

The development plan has lost its significance as a quantitative steering tool in this whole. According to the audit there is presently a risk that the broad-reaching and long-term national foresight and dimensioning work that goes into drafting the plan will not be put to good use.