

SUPPORTING YOUTH ACTIVITIES

The practice of providing State grants to support youth work and youth activities began in Finland in the 1940s. “Youth work” has traditionally been understood as meaning the provision of the prerequisites for youth activities. The most central of these prerequisites has been support for youth work done by municipalities. “Youth activities”, in turn, is the phrase that has been used to describe voluntary civic activities on the part of young people, with organisations playing a central role. The dividing line between youth work and youth activities has become increasingly difficult to define in recent years. Also civic organisations have assumed tasks associated with putting in place the prerequisites for youth activities.

The first separate pieces of legislation with a bearing on the sector were enacted in the early 1970s. The legislation applying to youth work and youth activities has been revised every decade or so. The present Youth Work Act dates from 1995. A new Youth Work Act is planned to come into force at the beginning of 2006.

The Ministry of Education provides both general and special grants to support national youth organisations, service organisations operating in the field of youth work as well as organisations with youth work on their programmes. Grants intended to support youth activities totalled €10.5 million in 2004. Slightly under €2 million has been appropriated for use as special grants in recent years. The general grants distributed by the Ministry of Education in 2004 went to 68 youth organisations and service organisations operating in the field of youth work. In addition to them, 34 organisations engaged in youth work received grants.

The aim with the audit was to evaluate whether the present system of grants promotes civic engagement on the part of young people and the creation of the prerequisites for this. The aspects looked at in the course of the audit

were the kinds of goals set for the grants system and in what way the goals set have been striven towards. According to the evaluation criteria applied, the grants system should be consistent, transparent and predictable from the perspective of the grant recipient. The audit was based on written material relating to the grants process, a written questionnaire addressed to organisations as well as interviews with representatives of authorities and organisations.

On the basis of the audit it appears that the main problems associated with supporting youth activities have remained relatively unchanged from one decade to the next. The performance-related character of general grants provided under the 1995 Youth Work Act to youth organisations and service organisations operating in the field of youth work have changed the grants system relatively little. The performance criteria which the Act requires relate to the quality, scope and economic efficiency of operations. However, observations made in the course of the audit indicate that the organisations' result has been defined in such general terms as to make it impossible to apply a comprehensive result assessment and thereby a clear linkage between the general grant received by the organisations and the results of their activities. According to the State Audit Office, the Ministry of Education and the Youth Organisations' Grants Committee should develop their system for appraising the organisations' activities. The expressed evaluation criteria and clearer reporting in accordance with these criteria than is currently done would improve the transparency of the grants system from the organisations' point of view. The ongoing discussion of the organisations' effectiveness is taking place mainly within the Grants Committee and the organisations are receiving only a very limited amount of information on it.

It has been noted in the course of the audit that the information to be collected from the organisations has remained unchanged in its principal features for several decades. The information which the organisations supply in relation to performance goals and self-assessment of how well these goals have been achieved have failed to meet the

expectations set with regard to the performance expected in return for receipt of general grants. Although reporting can be of a considerably high quality in the cases of individual organisations, a wide fluctuation in the quality of performance-related information mitigates against effective comparison between organisations.

It appears on the basis of observations made in the course of the audit that the division of labour between the Ministry of Education and the committee that processes applications for general grants has been a partial reason for neither instance assuming clear responsibility for correcting the shortcomings of the grants system and evaluating the organisations' performance. The partially unclear division of labour has also lessened the transparency of the grants system.

The State Audit Office has taken the view that grouping organisations into categories is a precondition for comparison between them. The categories used when grant applications are being processed has remained unchanged since the beginning of the 1980s. In its present form, the method of categorisation is not based on the Youth Work Act or its explicatory decree. On the basis of the audit, however, it appears that the categorisation method currently in use guides the distribution of general grants, because the shares received by organisations belonging to the various categories have remained relatively unchanged also since the entry into force of the current Youth Work Act. The State Audit Office has taken the view that a genuine assessment of the organisations' performance presupposes also a reassessment of the manner in which they are grouped into categories.

The importance of State grants and other public subsidies in organisations' overall funding varies considerably from organisation to organisation. The audit indicates that organisations' financial situation should be appraised more systematically than is currently being done, and in a way that takes their varying opportunities for self-financing of activities into account. When State subsidies account for a considerable share of an organisation's financing, this may have a passivating effect on civic

engagement, with grants being used to maintain structures rather than to support activities.