

## THE FOLK HIGH SCHOOL SYSTEM

Finland has 91 folk high schools in different parts of the country. The first folk high school was established in 1888. Folk high schools, most of which are private, have managed to preserve their position in the Finnish education system for decades. They have always tried to adjust to changes in the education system, even though their activities are still based partly on their original goals.

Folk high schools fall within the category of adult education and are governed by the Adult Education Act (632/1998). This Act governs a little over half of the education provided by folk high schools. Much of this is part of the Open University. Since the education provided by folk high schools is linked nowadays to practically every part of the education system, the folk high schools' activities and financing are also governed by other legislation. According to the information collected in the audit, the folk high schools' turnover totalled about 130 million euros in 2002, with the state accounting for an estimated 74 million euros or 57 per cent. This figure describes direct state funding for the folk high schools.

The main question in the audit was to evaluate the folk high schools' activities, objectives and steering as well as the primary effects and results of steering. The guiding idea was the basic purpose of activities: folk high schools' voluntary tasks. Since the state funds such a large part of folk high schools' activities, voluntary tasks have been approached from the viewpoint of state steering. The audit was not confined to the adult education provided by folk high schools but covered the entire folk high school system. Obtaining information on the folk high schools' finances and their development was a key aspect of the audit. Appended to the audit report is a 257-page report that contains detailed observations on which the audit results are based.

The general conclusion was that the steering of folk high schools' activities should in many respects be reformed and made clearer and stronger. Changes also require the amendment of legislation governing activities in many respects.

One shortcoming observed in the audit is that legislative reforms have not assigned a position and tasks to folk high schools. Instead they have remained detached from the rest of the education system. On the basis of the audit, the fundamental question for the external steering of folk high schools is whether the state wants to steer and develop them more purposefully as part of the national education system in such a way that they can preserve their own operating profile and goals within the system. If the state wants to ensure the availability of the education services produced by folk high schools throughout the nation, the operating conditions of folk high schools in sparsely populated areas should be secured with the help of special measures. On the other hand there are presently pressures to reduce the number of folk high schools and to merge folk high schools with other adult education bodies.

Another shortcoming observed in the audit is that adult education bodies do not have a coherent strategy in which different bodies, including folk high schools, are assigned positions in relation to one another. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the Ministry of Education should investigate possibilities to start this kind of strategy work. Special attention should be paid to possibilities to merge adult education centres and folk high schools. These were established in different periods and for different purposes, which have largely lost their meaning nowadays. Some mergers have already taken place and experience has been positive.

The audit indicated that folk high schools' tasks are expressed in general terms. In order for folk high schools to maintain their own profile in future, their position and tasks should be outlined more clearly in legislation. The concept of a boarding school, which has traditionally been linked to folk high schools, particularly needs to be more clearly defined in legislation.

The Adult Education Act allows folk high schools to place emphasis on their own values, ideologies and educational goals. The audit indicated that some schools have on the basis of their operating licences wanted to limit their activities to people with similar values and ideologies. This no doubt goes beyond the intention of the Act. This question apparently needs to be addressed by legislation.

As a result of the folk high schools' multiple objectives and the fact that performance criteria have not been defined, in the present situation it is very difficult to evaluate what makes a good and effective folk high school. In order to make such an evaluation it is necessary to formulate criteria that can be used to assess the performance of individual folk high schools. This would also make it possible to introduce performance-based funding.

The audit indicated that the present state grant system does not take into consideration different folk high schools' special features. The broader scaling of unit prices could be used to make the system more flexible. Different aids are also used to fund folk high schools, though their share of total funding is presently quite small. Raising aids' share of funding could also reduce the inflexibility and red tape of the state grant system.

In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the decline in folk high schools' basic activity of providing adult education cannot be considered in the right direction. The profitability of this education should be investigated. The folk high schools also face a problem situation with regard to refurbishing projects. Means should be found to resolve this problem.

The unit prices on which government grants depend are higher at some folk high schools than at others. The grounds for calculating unit prices at these schools should be investigated. The Adult Education Decree, which contains provisions concerning the calculation of unit prices and deductions for credits, should be studied and reevaluated in its entirety.

The state grant system covering short courses at folk high schools should also be reevaluated. A clearer distinction should also be drawn between short courses and paid service courses.

As a result of differences in the legislation governing activities, student fees at folk high schools vary. The audit indicated that fee policies have a guiding effect on folk high schools' activities. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, charging fees or waiving fees in part or in full should always be based on uniform objectives for the folk high schools.

Transfer credits for studies at folk high schools are presently a key problem related to the folk high schools' strategic position. In the opinion of the State Audit Office, the question of transfer credits should be considered from the viewpoint of the folk high schools' basic objectives. If a key task of the adult education provided by the folk high schools should be to prepare students for further studies, which is presently strongly emphasized, this task should also be assigned more clearly to the folk high schools in terms of objectives. This also requires that the folk high schools should be linked more closely to other parts of the education system. This would unavoidably result in the weakening of the folk high schools' traditional independent profile, however.