

Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council      7 Nov. 2003  
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## ACCREDITATION MODELS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN FINLAND: EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES

### *Abstract*

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) is an independent expert body assisting universities, polytechnics and the Ministry of Education in matters relating to evaluation. FINHEEC is appointed by the Ministry of Education for a four-year period.

The accreditation of higher education in Finland is one element of the national quality assurance system. However, enhancement and assessment of the quality of education has so far seen as more important than accreditation in Finland.

This paper aims to describe the objectives, processes, methods, criteria and experiences of two Finnish accreditation models, accreditation of professional courses in higher education institutions and accreditation of polytechnic operating licences. Another aim of the paper is to describe how the developmental point of view is integrated into these two accreditation types.

### *1. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council*

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) is an independent expert body assisting universities, polytechnics and the Ministry of Education in matters relating to evaluation. The scope of the activities covers 20 university level institutions and 29 polytechnics.

The main objective of FINHEEC is a long-term development of higher education through evaluation. The main duty of the Council is to assist higher education institutions and the Ministry of Education in evaluations, and to develop evaluation procedures in higher education institutions nationwide. Consequently, the Council strongly emphasizes the role of the higher education institutions in evaluations as well as a communicative evaluation approach in its evaluation projects.

FINHEEC is appointed by the Ministry of Education for a four-year period. The Council has two permanent subcommittees, the Accreditation Board of Professional Courses and the Special Section for Accreditation of Polytechnics, whose members are appointed by the Ministry of Education for the same time period as the Council.

The duties of FINHEEC are based on a Decree (1320/1995), which stipulates the duties to council:

- Assisting institutions of higher education and the Ministry of Education.
- Conducting evaluation for the accreditation of the polytechnics.
- Organising evaluations of the activities of higher education institutions and evaluations related to higher education policy.
- Initiating evaluations of higher education and promote their development.
- Engaging in international co-operation in evaluation.
- Promoting research on evaluation of higher education, and
- Evaluation and acceptance of professional courses offered by higher education institutions, entering of courses into a register stipulated in Article 14 of the Decree on the Higher Education System and maintaining such a register (Decree 456/98).

The types of evaluations conducted by FINHEEC can be categorised as follows:

1. Evaluations of official nature
  - accreditation of polytechnic operating licences
  - accreditation of professional courses offered by higher education institutions

- evaluation of applications to award polytechnic post-graduate degrees
- 2. Evaluations initiated by FINHEEC
  - evaluations of higher education institutions: institutional evaluations, audits of quality work
  - programme and thematic evaluations
- 3. Evaluations commissioned by the Ministry of Education
  - selection of the Centres of Excellence in Education and Adult Education in the university sector and Centres of excellence in Education and Regional Impact in the polytechnic sector to be used in performance-based appropriations.

The introduction of accreditation into the higher education sector in Finland is one element in the national quality assurance system. However, enhancement and assessment of the quality of education has so far seen as more important than accreditation. Two models, illustrating how FINHEEC is involved in accreditation-like practices, will be discussed in the text below.

## *2. Accreditation of Professional Courses in Higher Education Institutions*

In 1998, FINHEEC was assigned the task of assessing and registering professional courses organized by higher education institutions. The term "accreditation of professional courses" is commonly used about this type of evaluation. The Ministry of Education appointed a subsection, the Accreditation Board of Professional Courses, whose task is to assess professional courses (in continuing education) of at least 20 credits by volume and make the decisions of accreditation. The Board consists of 12 members. The members represent universities, polytechnics, working life and student unions, of both the university and polytechnic sectors.

Accreditation of professional courses is a process that gives public recognition or registering to professional, non-degree courses that meet certain standards/criteria. The accreditation process includes a review of relevant documentation (application), a visit to the university/polytechnic and the immediate feedback after the site visit. The Board has seen it necessary to also use external experts in the process. However, the final decision is done by the Board. When accrediting professional courses, the Board has set the criteria for good practices (Appendix 1). The decision is

usually done on a yes/no (registered/not registered) basis. Sometimes the decision for registration can also be conditional. In this case, the applicants are given a certain time period (1-2 years), during which the needed additions or amendments have to be carried out. Evaluated studies are always assessed in terms of the criteria, not for example of other studies of the same field. Feedback and recommendations for the course are provided after the registration decision is made.

Accreditation of Professional Courses includes the following steps:

- An application form, designed for accreditation purposes, is available on the Internet for the applicants (higher education institutions) on FINHEEC's website (<http://www.kka.fi/erikoistumisopinnot>). The institution fills the application and applies for the accreditation on a voluntary basis.
- After receiving the application, the Accreditation Board appoints two (or three) external experts to conduct a site visit to the higher education institution. During the visit they discuss with different groups, such as the rector/director of the university/unit, coordinators of the professional course, main teachers, students and representatives of the working life. Typically the team consists of two members, an expert on the contents of the professional course and a senior adviser from FINHEEC, acting as a pedagogical expert. The experts meet prior to the visit to discuss the evaluation report and preparations for the visit. The items to be covered and the questions for the interviews are identified in this meeting. The issues on which the application does not provide information will be listed and additional information requested.
- During the site-visit to the organizer of the course, the following aspects are analyzed:
  - Basic requirements
  - Course contents and objectives
  - Educational process
  - Educational arrangements
  - Practical arrangements
  - Cooperation with the working life
  - Quality assurance

- After the site visit the experts make a proposal for acceptance (yes/no) to the Accreditation Board.
- The Board uses the criteria, it has prepared for evaluation purposes to make the final pass/fail decision. The main groups of the criteria are: requirements, work-orientation, contents and objectives, the educational process, pedagogical arrangements, practical arrangements and quality assurance. Special criteria are used for the professional courses taught in a foreign language.
- Higher education institutions receive the decision within four months of the delivery of the application. Together with the decision a written feedback with strengths and developmental aspects of the professional course is given to the applicant.
- Registration of accredited courses is valid for 4 years. The register is available on FINHEEC's web-site.
- A separate form should be filled for each professional course applying for re-registration.
- The decision by the Board costs 1005 € for the organizer of the course.

There are 72 courses/applications that have been evaluated by the Board in the years 1998-2003 and three applications are currently under evaluation. 22 applications are from the universities and 53 from the polytechnics. More than 50 % (N= 41) of the applications were from the field of health care and social services. Eight applications were from the field of business economics (for example MBA-programmes) and 5 from management. 21 applications were from different fields of studies, such as education and engineering.

About 66 % of the professional courses have been approved to be registered. The number of applications is very low compared to the amount of the professional courses organized by the universities and polytechnics. For example, in 2002 there were more than 300 professional courses going on at the Finnish universities.

### *3. Accreditation of Polytechnic Operating Licences*

In 1995 the Finnish Government defined the strategy for carrying out the polytechnic reform with the aim to establish the polytechnic system by 2000. The goal of the reform was to establish a new kind of degree with practical orientation to

educating professionals for expert and development posts, while the basic mission of universities is to carry out research and provide education based on it. The polytechnics were formed on the basis of post-secondary vocational institutions by raising their standards and by merging several institutions to create multi-field polytechnics. In creating the polytechnic system, emphasis was laid on multidisciplinary, regional institutions, which give particular weight to contacts with business and industry.

The polytechnic reform was based on an experimental phase of 1991-1994. Each new polytechnic had to be preceded by an experimental and developmental stage. The basic assumption was that licences for permanent polytechnics would only be granted after they could demonstrate high quality and good performance during this experimental stage. The core of the strategy would thus be constant development, and gradual attainment of permanent status.

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council assisted the Government in the accreditation of the polytechnics. FINHEEC evaluated applications made by the polytechnics for accreditation and establishment. A separate Accreditation Subcommittee was established. The Members of the Accreditation Subcommittee consist of the representatives of polytechnics, teachers working in the polytechnic, students and representatives of working life.

Operating licence evaluations were made to ensure that new polytechnics and the education they provide, meet the quality criteria for higher education. Each evaluation incorporated proposals for measures to develop the particular polytechnic's operations. If an experimental project failed to meet FINHEEC's criteria, a new application had to be submitted the following year. This meant that evaluation of operating licence applications comprised a process of great significance for educational development throughout the sector.

In 1995 and 1996, the accreditation and extension of polytechnics were evaluated on the basis of applications. Since 1997, site visits have been added to the procedure. The Accreditation Subcommittee has compiled public reports of each evaluation and, since 1998, these reports have been published in the FINHEEC publication series.

The criteria used in the accreditation of permanent polytechnics mainly include proven excellence in experimental and development work. The criteria were set by an independent adviser for the Ministry of Education, who had developed the criteria in mutual discussions involving various partners from the

polytechnics, regional authorities, students and representatives of industry and commerce.

The following framework for criteria was used in the assessment, of which 1-12 are mentioned in the Polytechnics Act:

- The operating principle (mission)
- The topicality and need for the planned degree programmes
- How well the sectors of study fit together
- The main area of strength
- Adequate size relative to educational function
- The qualifications of the teaching staff
- Library and information services
- Relations with the working life
- Cooperation with universities/other polytechnics, and with other educational institutions
- International cooperation
- Educational and service function in the region
- Arrangement of evaluation
- The learning environment
- The working environment

Some of the granted licenses in 1998-1999 included special development obligations. These were the cases when the Government approved a polytechnic's licence, although according to the evaluation made by FINHEEC's Board, it didn't measure up to the demanded quality. Accordingly, the license was granted, but the set obligations had to be fulfilled and later evaluated by FINHEEC's Board.

This evaluation task formed a major part of the work of the Accreditation Subcommittee in 2000-2003. Polytechnics with special development obligations had to give a report on the results of their development work, separately of each dimension of given development tasks. In other respects the evaluation process followed mainly same phases and principles as that of the previous evaluation of the permanent operating licences.

Furthermore, the Accreditation Subcommittee has implemented evaluations when there has been a change in the scope of activities of an accredited polytechnic, or in the event new educational establishments (former independent institutions) have been incorporated with it.

Throughout the second half of the 1990s the Government continued to grant new polytechnics operating licences every year, based on assessment by FINHEEC. Since August 2000, all 29 Finnish polytechnics have been permanent.

#### *4. Discussion*

Accreditation is seen as one of several complementary measures in the Finnish quality assurance system, whose starting point is to support higher education institutions in the development of good quality. One special character in FINHEEC's evaluations is that accreditation has related only to the evaluations of official nature: accreditation of professional courses in higher education institutions and accreditation of operating licences of the polytechnics. The other feature common in accreditations applied by FINHEEC has been the integration of a developmental aspect, which is in accordance with the FINHEEC principles. There is evidence that combining accreditation with developmental approach is useful to the higher education institutions when developing their activities.

The accreditation of professional courses is voluntary to the universities and polytechnics. The volume of the applications has been very low compared to the total number of courses at the universities and polytechnics. However, the evaluation, accreditation and registration of professional courses serve the universities, polytechnics, students, the working life and the society in general, by aiming to ensure that the registered studies have a certain, generally approved level of quality, a "quality label". At its best, the accreditation process can be important tool in developing the quality of the continuing education.

In 2003 the Accreditation Board has done a survey on the impact of the accreditation processes to the development of professional courses at the higher education institutions. The questionnaires were sent to all those universities and polytechnics (N = 64) whose professional courses were evaluated in 1999-2002. 75 % of the institutions replied. According to the survey, the evaluation process and the written feedback has been an important tool especially in the development of the planning process and structure, objectives and contents of the curriculum of the professional course. There also seems to be a positive transfer impact to the development process of the other professional courses in the institution than simply to those been accredited. Additionally, according to the survey the polytechnic sector has

used the accreditation of professional courses to strengthen the experimentation of polytechnic post-graduate degrees. The professional courses can be partly integrated to the post-graduate degrees of polytechnics. The registration period (4 years) of the professional courses that were accredited in 1999 will end in 2003. It is now time for a re-accreditation process. This process is quite similar to the first-phase accreditation.

The type of accreditation applied in the evaluations for the accreditation of the polytechnics represents quality assurance that is implemented *ex ante*, that is, before the start of the polytechnic's educational activities. Developmental aspect in this process was realised in two ways: the institutions applying for a polytechnic operating license received a feedback consisting of strengths and areas to be developed. Then a follow-up was organised. Many institutions worked for 2-3 years to reach the standards set for a polytechnic status. Now that this unique accreditation process is completed and the polytechnic sector is established, it can be estimated that the process has been useful to the polytechnics. Two very important results of the accreditation of polytechnic operating licences, the culture of quality assurance and a strive to continuing development, have been emerged in the polytechnics.

#### AUTHORS

Sirpa Moitus studied Education at the University of Helsinki, where she took her MEd in 1991. Since 1996, she has been Project Manager at the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, where her tasks have covered a variety of evaluation projects and development of FINHEEC activities; e.g. selection of centres of excellence in the university sector, international evaluation of research and education in Slavonic and Baltic Studies, evaluation of student guidance services at the Finnish HEIs, and evaluation of student selection procedures of the universities. Additionally, she participated as the Finnish representative in the Nordic project "Student Involvement in Quality Assessments of Higher Education in the Nordic Countries". Recently, she has been involved in the documentation and development of FINHEEC's quality assessments methods.

Kirsi Mustonen studied Education at the University of Helsinki, where she took her MEd in 1986. In 1985-1988 she worked as Student Affairs Officer and Amanuensis at the Faculty of

Education of the University of Helsinki. In 1988-2001 she worked at the Continuing Education Centre of the University of Helsinki as Project Coordinator and Head of the Unit. Since 2001, she has been Project Manager and Senior Adviser at the FINHEEC, where her tasks have covered two national evaluation projects. Since 2003 she has been working as Senior Adviser and Secretary of the Accreditation Board of Professional Courses. Additionally, she has participated in the ATEE (Association of Teacher Education in Europe) activities, e.g. in a working group of in-service training of teachers. Recently, she has been a member of a working group writing the European section to the UNESCO report "Standards, criteria and indicators used in programme evaluation and accreditation in Western Europe".

## APPENDIX 1

## CRITERIA FOR THE EVALUATION OF PROFESSIONAL COURSES

*Requirements*

- The professional course deepens, expands and upgrades the knowledge, skills and capabilities gained in first-degree studies.
- The professional course has a distinctive profile as compared to other continuing professional and award-winning education.
- The course matches with the basic mission of the university in the Finnish higher education system.
- Professional studies implement the adult education strategy of the university.
- The designation of the course is congruent with the level and content of studies.
- Marketing, brochures, the certificate issued and other material and information are factual.

*Work-orientation*

- National and regional considerations are taken into account, and labour market partners have contributed to the planning of the professional course.
- The professional course develops the participants' professional or other labour-market competencies.
- Work practice, a project etc. included in the studies is designed to provide new professional competencies, and the means of achieving them are described and the guidance procedures have been determined.
- Practice is primarily carried out in a unit other than the student's own work unit.

*Contents and objectives*

- The professional course has clearly expressed objectives, which are also recorded in the form of the core competencies and relevant knowledge and skills to be gained by the student.
- The objectives are appropriate with regard to the background of the institution, resources and the students' and employers' needs.
- The content contributes to the achievement of the objectives.
- The extent of studies is realistic in view of the time allotted and the objectives set for them.

#### *The educational process*

- The education provider has a clearly stated procedure for selecting the students.
- Students know in advance what kind of studies they are undertaking as regards methods, such as contact teaching, independent work etc.; in other words, what kind of an entity the course forms and what they will be required to do.
- The content and most of the literature to be used are known in advance.

#### *Pedagogical arrangements*

- The teachers are suitably proficient at arranging professional courses.
- The responsible teacher has a natural connection with the providing institution of higher education.
- The teaching and study methods used support adult learning.
- The course develops competencies needed in modern learning and in modern work communities, such as interaction and cooperation skills.
- Learning is systematically assessed, and students are also guided in self-assessment.
- Sufficient resources have been reserved for guiding the formulation of individual study plans and monitoring their implementation.

- Teaching, guidance and assessment methods constitute an integrated whole.

*Practical arrangements*

- Study facilities and the timing of studies are appropriate.
- There are sufficient library and ict services, and their use in studies must be verifiable.
- The institution has sufficient resources for assuring the quality and continuity of the professional course and the services.

*Quality assurance*

- The teachers have a viable procedure for organising, guiding and supporting the course.
- The institution has documented procedures for the continuous development of the professional course based on current research and progress in the relevant field and in education.

*Special criteria for professional courses taught through a foreign language*

- The use of a foreign language must be justified.
- Teaching given in a foreign language must constitute at least half of the course.
- The teachers' and the students' proficiency in the language of instruction has been verified in advance.
- Support is available to both teachers and students in the use of the foreign language.
- The language learning objectives have been stated if one of the aims of the course is to improve language skills.