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Assessment in Higher Education (Finland)

by Jani Ursin

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FULL ARTICLE

Faculty member evaluation

In Finnish higher education there are no systematic ways to evaluate faculty members. Each higher education institution (HEI) can decide its own processes. Nonetheless, all faculty members typically have development discussions with their superiors once a year or every second year. The purpose of these discussions is to look at how well the aims set in the previous discussion have been achieved and to define new targets for future years. In practice, however, the role of the development discussions as a means to evaluate faculty members varies greatly even within the same department. All faculty members will have salary negotiations at least once every five years with their superior in which research outputs and indicators (such as number of peer-reviewed publications and external funding), and teaching outputs (such as number of supervised students) usually play a crucial role in the assessment of remuneration. Typically, if a faculty member wants to be promoted, a part of the process involves external evaluation usually by at least two peers, and the candidate is asked for a teaching portfolio including student feedback (see Pietilä 2018). In terms of collecting student feedback, HEIs differ from each other. While some institutions have more centralized ways of collecting student feedback, in others the responsibility for collecting such feedback may rest on individual faculty members wishing to be evaluated by their students.

HE assessment procedures

The main feature of evaluation in Finnish higher education is that it is enhancement-oriented so that the focus is on providing support and information to further enhance the quality of the programs and institutions. Consequently, the evaluation of Finnish higher education favors more formative evaluation methods as opposed to summative evaluation focusing on the achievement of specified targets. In line with this approach, HEIs are responsible for the evaluation of their own operations and outcomes. Such evaluation is supported by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). FINEEC's role is to conduct evaluations on HEIs and fields of study and assist HEIs in their own evaluation activities, while respecting the autonomy of HEIs to develop their quality systems according to their own needs and goals (Ursin 2019). FINEEC carries out audits of quality systems, where the aim is to support HEIs in the continuous development of their operations and to encourage internationalization, experimentation, and a creative atmosphere at HEIs (FINEEC 2017).

In contrast, one of the main challenges of the assessment of Finnish HEIs is that the funding model by which the government allocates funds to HEIs has become a strong steering mechanism and evaluation instrument as well. Through this model, for example, scientific publications (as divided into four categories reflecting the quality of the publication) account for 13 percent of the total funding that the government allocates to a university. Consequently, universities naturally tend to

support such efforts—such as writing articles to top-tier journals—that are in line with the criteria of this funding model. This has gradually started to bring more summative methods of evaluation into the Finnish HE system.

Promotion and tenure system

Over recent years a “four-stage research career model” has been introduced in Finnish universities. The first stage usually encompasses young researchers working on their doctoral dissertation, the second stage is the career-building phase of researchers who have recently completed their doctorate, the third stage comprises independent research by education professionals capable of academic leadership, and the fourth stage is that of professorship (OPM 2008). In an evaluation of this career model it was observed, however, that the four-level model has not been implemented systematically, and there is variation both between and within individual universities (Välímáa et al. 2016). In fact, many universities use a different path for permanent positions for professors toward the latter end of the path of recruitment, namely the tenure-track system. In a handful of universities all postdoctoral positions are tenure-track posts, with the possibility of advancing to a professorship. One of the problems is that both the four-level model for researchers and the tenure-track system cover only a part of all academic staff in universities. There are researchers, especially at the first and second level of the career path, whose advancement is very insecure because funding is fragmented and job contracts are precarious (Välímáa et al. 2016). Furthermore, although the work performance of academics typically is well monitored, an unambiguous evaluation process for promotion is often unestablished (Pietilä 2018).

Learning assessment

Each HEI has its own methods of assessing how students learn. Typically, HEIs have defined the expected learning outcomes at the level of individual courses, programs, and degrees. Therefore, the curricula of Finnish HEIs are typically labeled as competence-based. There are various methods of assessing student learning in Finnish HEIs: teacher-centered ways (such as examinations with grades or oral feedback), student-centered ways (various forms of self-assessment), peer assessment (such as mentoring), and any combination of these. At the time of writing this article (year 2019) eighteen Finnish HEIs are participating in the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+) international project in which the generic skills (such as critical-thinking, problem-solving, argumentative writing) of Finnish undergraduate students are to be measured. It will also be assessed whether such a standardized test would be a feasible instrument to measure the generic skills of Finnish undergraduate students in the future.

Assessment, performance, and the workforce

Each HEI in Finland follows how well their graduates are employed as it is part of the funding model of the government. For that purpose there is a nationwide employment survey in Finland that follows the employability of undergraduates and graduates. Additionally, HEIs also monitor issues related to the quality and appropriateness of academic employment with career surveys. This also helps forecast the needs of the labor market and enhance the relevance to working life of study programs.

Impact of assessment on faculty

Student assessment is a crucial part of the professional development of faculty. The Finnish Bachelor's Graduate Survey is a national student feedback survey that examines students' satisfaction with their university and study experiences. The findings of this survey are used by institutions to

improve education and learning and nationally to inform performance-based monitoring and guidance. Furthermore, in Finnish higher education it is typical to engage students in the development of study programs and degrees and thereby develop teaching in an interactive way.

Key challenges

The following key challenges of assessment in Finnish higher education have been discussed for the past ten years. First, as a consequence of the Bologna Process, institution-wide quality systems were implemented in the Finnish higher education and an audit model was developed to assess these quality systems. At the beginning, HEIs were struggling in developing their quality systems and there was some resistance among the faculty members. Currently, the challenges relative to the quality systems are not so much about how to build up such systems but rather about how to update them to meet the current needs and how to maintain the systems in economic terms. Second, another consequence of the Bologna Process in Finland has been an introduction of competence-based curricula in which the expected learning outcomes have been defined for Finnish HEIs. This was debated especially among the faculty members as competence-based curricula challenged the traditional notion of specific disciplinary curricula. This debate is still on going as HEIs are developing larger and more multidisciplinary study modules that also require new forms of assessment. Third, although the enhancement-led assessment culture is still strong in Finnish higher education, there are more and more indications of assessment becoming more outcome-oriented (Lomas and Ursin 2009). This is partly due to the funding model by which the government allocates basic funding to HEIs. The model sets certain desirable academic outcomes, which are also reflected in the various assessment practices of HEIs, including promotion.

Further reading and online resources

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Glossary terms

Audit

An assessment of the functionality and effectiveness of the quality systems of HEIs. The focus of the audit is on the procedures used by the HEI to maintain and enhance the quality of its operations.

Enhancement-led evaluation

A form of evaluation that is based on participation and interaction. Its purpose is to help HEIs recognize strengths, good practices, and areas for development in their operations, thus enabling continuous development of HEIs.

Formative evaluation

An evaluation focusing on the processes and seeking to foster development and improvement within an ongoing activity.

Learning outcome

As an objective, learning outcomes describe what students are expected to know, understand, or be able to do by the end of a learning period. Desired learning outcomes are often expressed in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Summative evaluation

An evaluation focusing on the outcomes and used to assess whether the results of the object being evaluated meet the stated goals.