Quality assurance in vocational education and training in Finland – education providers key players

In Finland the quality of education and training is seen as a key factor related to the efficiency of education and training as well as the equality of individuals. In vocational education and training quality is also a factor influencing the attractiveness of training.

Local autonomy in education is extensive. Education providers are responsible for implementing national guidelines, practical teaching arrangements as well as the effectiveness and quality of the education provided. Therefore also quality assurance is mainly the responsibility of the education providers.

Quality assurance builds on self-evaluation, external evaluation and steering

The evolution towards today’s system started already in the early 1990s when the education administration was decentralised. Until the early 1990s, quality assurance was largely based on norms and inspections.

The focus today is on strengthening quality assurance at all levels. At national level the responsibility regarding quality management is to set the objectives and ensure that they are reached. Quality assurance in Finland comprises the quality management of education providers, the national steering of VET and external evaluation. Quality assurance in vocational education and training is also developed on the basis of common European guidelines and tools to increase comparability and transparency.

The legislation obliges the providers to evaluate their performance and its effectiveness, participate in external evaluations as well as publicise their results. The education providers decide on the methods used and the frequency of the quality assurance measures.

External evaluation comprises the evaluations of learning outcomes and thematic evaluations. For external evaluation of education there is an independent evaluation body under the Ministry of Education and Culture. External evaluations are used to provide evidence for development, not ranking institutions.

The statutes that govern education and training and its funding are also important steering mechanisms. The funding mechanisms that aim at raising the quality of training include the performance-based funding model and quality prizes introduced in the 2000s. The quality prize is awarded to education providers who have systematically developed their provision in line with education policy.

In addition to these, quality in VET is steered by the Development plan for education and research, authorisation to provide education granted by the Ministry of Education as well as the requirements of qualifications issued by the Finnish National Board of Education.
The national quality assurance strategy strengthens the focus on quality in education and training.

Quality assurance is based on the ideology of continuous development, peer support and exchange of good practice.

Cooperation with the world of work – the core of improving quality

A vital part of QA is the cooperation between the education providers and the world of work. The providers are responsible for reaching the objectives set in the national qualification requirements in collaboration with the enterprises. In addition, the representatives of the world of work participate in the national steering and qualification committees. These committees participate in ensuring that the quality of the training matches the needs of the labour market and the national objectives set.

To promote the dialogue between the labour market and the institutions, skills demonstrations were introduced into all vocational qualifications in 2006. The skills demonstrations tie up with the VET reform in 1998, in which the biggest change was the introduction of systematic work-based learning and enhancing the collaboration and dialogue with the world of work.

The primary objective has been to ensure and develop the quality of vocational training and to improve the quality of student assessment. The reform aimed at bringing the world of work and the education institutions closer to each other and to ensure that the education fulfils the objectives set and that the education and training is relevant concerning the needs of the labour market.

The joint assessment of the skills demonstrations by the teachers, representatives from enterprises and the student aim at ensuring the validity and reliability of the tests in relation to the set objectives and the level of proficiency required by the labour market.

The learners’ performance in the skills demonstrations provides an indicator of the quality of learning outcomes at national level. The results from these assessments are analysed and published. The analysis is not sample-based, but based on the outcomes of all students. These are complemented by thematic evaluations by the external evaluation body.

VET providers use the information as a benchmark for their own performance. They are also required to collect data from the skills demonstrations for the Finnish National Board of Education for the national assessment of learning outcomes. Thus national authorities can evaluate learning outcomes and identify areas for improvement.
