

OPENING THE OPEN
The Experience of Evaluating the Finnish Open University
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OPENING THE OPEN. The Experience of Evaluating the Finnish Open University

Kari Seppälä

Lifelong learning initiatives at European universities are not frequently evaluated at the national level. In 2001-2002 the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) realised *an extensive evaluation of open university activities in Finland*. The project carried on the intensive orientation for development that is typical of the work of FINHEEC. In the article the project coordinator pieces together the recent trends and topics in the Finnish open university and university evaluation. The core of the article is the report of the purpose, implementation and results of the evaluation project. The writer concludes with some tentative estimates of the effects of the project. The experience confirms the relevance of tailored, communicative and “embedded” evaluation.

Recent topics of the open university in Finland

The main purpose of the open university in Finland is to *enhance educational equality*. The gist of the openness is that no preconditions for participation exist. A national committee formulated the enduring principles of the activity as early as 1976:¹

1. Openness in relation to access: the (lacking) formal education of the applicant must not constitute an insuperable hindrance to participation.
2. Reachable service: taking part in university studies must be independent of the student's place of residence, the time of studying and other similar circumstances.
3. Versatile and flexible provision: individual needs must also be taken into account in the curriculum and the study modules that constitute the degrees; also non-degree studies must be possible.
4. Diverse teaching methods: the full range of distance teaching and self-studies should be put to use; the new teaching technologies should be exploited. Part-time studies and the alternation of work and studies should be made possible.
5. Flexible ensemble of organisations: credit transfer between providing organisations should be seamless and prior learning both in studies and in work should be recognised.
6. Preference given to part-time studies: the way to part-time studies should be facilitated through the arrangement of studies in the evening, at the weekend and during holiday periods.

Organisational decentralisation is a typical feature of the Finnish open university. Instead of one open university, open university education is the shared responsibility of nineteen universities. Most universities offer courses both on their own and in cooperation with a network of adult study centres. The institutional context reflects the major challenge of striking a balance between academic standards and educational equality.

The possibilities of taking a degree in open university are limited. The right to study a course does not open a direct channel *to a degree*. In 2000 only 0.7% of the open university

¹ Avoin ... 1976 p. 3

students used the “open university channel” to degree studies. The open university syllabi are either equivalent to those of a university or, at least, approved by the faculty concerned. Still, 22% of the degree students could not include any part of their open university studies in their degree.² Recently, the universities have opened their degrees to new publics, but more with a motivation of recruiting new students than serving the needs of open university students.

At the millennium, the open university was facing fundamental changes in quantity, quality and context. The question of *extending the university* concerns not only open university, but also various other aspects of education, such as continuing professional development, school - work relations and regional development projects. Furthermore, the financing and organisation of research are more and more often based on networked constellations of public and private partners. The borderline between the university and society is teeming with various providers, projects and programmes. Activities labelled ‘open university’ only constitute a small part of the plethora of activities.

International debate³ and the European political agenda speak for a new role for universities as institutions of *lifelong learning*. The principle of lifelong learning⁴ calls for an approach “that is not limited to a purely economic outlook or just to learning for adults”. European consultation has also highlighted the objectives of learning, including active citizenship, personal fulfilment and social inclusion, as well as employment-related aspects. The key role of lifelong learning at universities was highlighted in the Bologna process.⁵ As to the open university, the learner-centred approach, the importance of equal opportunities and the quality and relevance of learning opportunities are of the utmost importance.

In the late 1990’s the *growth in the volume* of the open university in Finland slowed down, as the overall provision increased in other educational institutions (e.g. the newly established polytechnics). Nonetheless, annually over 80,000 students take courses equivalent to university degree courses.⁶ Emerging challenges are the invasion of foreign universities and the growing competition for people’s time. The most popular fields of study are educational science, the humanities and social sciences, together accounting for just over 50% of the students. However, the selection of subjects has been diversifying.⁷

Up to the 1990’s open university students were employed adults, who studied either for professional purposes or for personal development. In the mid 1990’s the age limits in the open university were abolished so as to help the difficult youth unemployment. A large investment in the activity opened the way for *extensive participation of people under 25 years of age*. The number of younger students has grown considerable compared to older students. Still, some universities are highly active organising specialized courses within the ‘university of the old age’.

2 Piesanen 2001 p. 168

3 Cf. Education ... 2001 p. 4

4 Making a ... 2001, p. 3

5 Towards ... 2001 p.3

6 KOTA –database <http://www.esc.fi/kota/kota.html>

7 Cf. Seppälä 1994 p. 29

The increase in the number of young people in the open university has brought its student composition closer to that of the “traditional” university. On the other hand, the mainstream university is facing a situation where undergraduate entrants will have completed a large part of the studies. Some universities have already incorporated the open university into their student recruitment strategy.⁸ On the whole, the role of the open university in general and its strategic role in particular have grown in universities.

From the mid 1980’s the open university was mostly organised into the university centres for continuing education. Towards the end of the 1990’s the universities also launched *new modes of organisation* either as special units or as parts of student affairs in the central administration.

The open university has had a particular role in the *development of new teaching methods* and construction of new learning environments. However, in 2000 two in three students were in face-to-face teaching, one in three had opted for a combination of face-to-face and distance teaching and only 4% of the students participated in a course that only used data networks. That is, the core mission of studying independent of time and place will remain.

Public financing for the open university quadrupled in a decade up to 18 million €. The income from the participation fees by the students increased, but not as quickly as the appropriations. As the earmarked financing from the Ministry of Education increased, the universities cut back their own investments in the open university. From 2001 to 2003, the Ministry is applying *a new financing model*⁹, where the only indicator determining the open university appropriation for a given university is the number of calculated all-year students. As the universities are generally struggling with dwindling resources, they have started to explore the possibility of arranging joint courses and other forms of coordination. While the objectives and resources of both open and mainstream university are agreed in annual negotiations between the universities and the Ministry of Education, other regulation has diminished.

Finnish trends in the evaluation of higher education

The legislation governing Finnish higher education institutions provides that the institutions evaluate their operations, participate in external evaluations, and publish the results. Higher education is steered on the basis of the performance, and government regulation has been relaxed. Similarly, the budgeting system has strengthened university autonomy. All these trends, together with a demand for excellent quality, *increased the need for a highly developed evaluation system*. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) was founded in 1995. The aim of the FINHEEC, operating under the Ministry of Education, is to:¹⁰

- assist institutions of higher education and the Ministry of Education in issues relating to evaluation;

⁸ The self- evaluation reports by the universities. 2000

⁹ Yliopistojen ... 2000 p. 4

¹⁰ Finnish ... 2000 p.6

- evaluate polytechnics for accreditation and establishment on a permanent basis;
- organise evaluations of the operations and policies of institutions of higher education;
- initiate evaluations of higher education and promote its development;
- engage in international cooperation in evaluation;
- promote research on higher education evaluation; and
- evaluate and approve professional courses offered by higher education institutions and maintain a register of the accredited courses.

What distinguishes Finnish evaluation of higher education from that of other countries is *the wide range of activities*, comprising institutional, programme and thematic evaluations. The mandate is also to reward institutions for high quality in teaching and adult education and accredit continuing professional courses. This diversity of tasks reflects the idea that evaluation is seen as a strategic tool for achieving stated aims. Since evaluation is not an end in itself, the question in decision-making is “Where can we use evaluation appropriately?” rather than “Which discipline is next in line for evaluation?” More and more institutions use evaluation projects as methods of improvement.

The FINHEEC approach is geared for *development rather than control*. The universities and stakeholders have a say in the selection of the areas to be evaluated, although the FINHEEC makes the final decision. The tone of the FINHEEC action plan springs from the need to support the universities and polytechnics in improving their procedures and activities. The university and the FINHEEC negotiate the themes of an institutional evaluation and the method of implementation. The universities are responsible for implementing the recommendations of the evaluation reports. Thus, the overall role of the university is not that of a controlled object but a target-oriented subject.

The cultivation of *evaluation excellence* and the cooperation with *a network of experts* have been very high on the FINHEEC’s agenda from the outset. At the European level, this has taken the form of active participation in the construction of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). In recent years, FINHEEC has been focusing on the development of evaluation methods. The principles of the FINHEEC (independence, expertise, diversity, interaction, transparency, impact)¹¹ will be discussed below in the context of the open university evaluation.

One part of the FINHEEC's international activities was to participate in *a pilot project on mutual recognition* between Nordic Evaluation Agencies in 2001 and 2002. The main aim was to gain experience from methods relevant to mutual recognition. In the project the agencies carried out a joint evaluation exercise consisting of a self-study, site-visits and a report by an expert team. The analysis dealt with topics like ownership and the purpose of evaluation, evaluation method, documentation, reporting and quality assurance in agency procedures.¹² In addition to being a fruitful learning experience, the project highlighted certain interesting features in the Finnish evaluation practices.

¹¹ Finnish ... 2000, p. 8

¹² Guidelines ... 2001

The expert team reported that the most striking positive elements in the work of FINHEEC were the close relationship with the higher education institutions, the commitment to a developmental approach and the active role in the internationalisation process. The reverse side of the coin is evident: close cooperation with the universities raises the question of independence, the intensive project-based development orientation tends to lead to insufficient documentation, and activity in various areas at the same time may cause difficulties in keeping a sharp focus.¹³

The evaluation of the Finnish open university

The task

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council carried out an evaluation of the open university system in 2001–2002. The Ministry of Education *commissioned* the evaluation in October 2000. The reason for the request was substantive changes in the conditions and context of the open university.¹⁴ Before the official decision on the evaluation, the universities and the Ministry discussed the matter at the annual meeting of the open university units. The project was launched in January 2001, and the evaluation report was published in April 2002. The universities manifested their strong commitment to the project by starting to implement the recommendations with a national seminar already in May 2002.

The brief for the evaluation from the Ministry of Education provided a convenient template for the whole project. It determined *the scope of the evaluation* by listing four main features to be addressed:¹⁵

1. implementation of the open university as a system of adult education,
2. whose main purpose is educational equality
3. and whose two main principles are open access
4. and equivalence to degree syllabi.

FINHEEC appointed *a steering group* for the project composed of Finnish experts on academic and adult education. The Vice-Rector of the University of Helsinki chaired the group and the members were either academics or practitioners. The National Union of Students and the Ministry of Education were also represented. The project coordinator contributed with expertise on university adult education and, to a lesser degree, on evaluation.

The steering group defined *the general aims of the evaluation*. The project was to support the development of the open university as an integral part of the university by:

- describing how the principle of lifelong learning was realised in the open university as a whole;
- sharpening the focus of development and showing the paths to follow;
- offering a forum for quality enhancement through the sharing of good practices; and

¹³ Feedback ... 2002

¹⁴ In 2001 the Ministry of Education set in motion a research project of the profile of the open university students that will complement the general view.

¹⁵ Letter of commission by the Ministry of Education to the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council. 23.10.2000

- sharpening the profile of the open university

The steering group based its project plan on the Ministry of Education brief, which defined the main content and themes of the evaluation. The group formulated the key targets in more specific terms. The group decided to address the question of equality in the *context of lifelong learning*, although the wide use of the term 'lifelong learning' has made it fuzzy. The evaluation drew on various sources, such as discussion within the European Union and the OECD, benefiting especially from the critical thinking of the Socrates project "Making It Work". This report, which discussed the gradual transition of universities to lifelong learning institutions, states that: 16

The definition of lifelong learning is often general and fuzzy. Political rhetoric and daily decisions do not necessarily go hand in hand. The concept is used to foster different ideological aims.

Lifelong learning is only starting to affect the policy and culture of the universities, which consider research their first priority.

The boundary between full-time and part-time students is breaking, but the status of adult students is weak and they are not in the mainstream of activities.

Curricula, pedagogy and learning environments call for flexibility and fresh solutions, because the homogeneous student body is replaced by a diversity of student cohorts.

Lifelong learning and tightening competition for students are emphasising the importance of quality enhancement.

Generally, although the significance of lifelong learning is growing, it has not yet advanced to be an integral part of the university aims, structures or processes.

The question of *open access* has its roots and context in university extension. The "openness" of open university could have been analysed in the wider context of university and its region, but the steering group decided to concentrate on the concrete question of how easy it is to take part in the open university courses. According to the approved basic principles, everybody interested should have a genuine opportunity for participating, irrespective of their reasons for studying, basic education or life situation. Concern has especially been aired that the close linkage of the open university with undergraduate education may put off the traditional clientele.

The traditional challenge for the open university has been to ensure that both the open access and the *equivalence to the degree studies* are realised throughout the activity. This was scrutinised carefully in the evaluation. However, the steering group wanted a broader concept of quality. Although equivalence is at the core of the open university, the idea of quality is lacking unless the needs of the adult student are heeded in the quality

enhancement of the service. Thus, the construction of modern learning environments and the innovation structures were considered crucial.

The choice of *the whole system as the main target* guided the evaluation in various ways. Apart from the educational provision of the universities, the roles and the contribution of the cooperation partners were examined. The steering role of the Ministry of Education was also analysed. The analysis of the national entirety took precedence over the comparison and ranking of the universities. Here the project followed the typical Finnish evaluation approach. Several neighbouring activities were excluded, e.g. continuing academic education and open university education in the polytechnics.

The performance of the open university system involves two main sectors, one being *the structures within the universities* and the other *the networks throughout the delivery system*. Both areas appeared worth addressing. Ever since they adopted management by results, the universities have sought to work their way to the efficient organisation of the open university. Information about the organisational arrangements at the universities has not been available. On the other hand, the complex network of partners, although reaching a great variety of students, is difficult to steer and conflicts have not been avoided.

Performance

The main element of the evaluation was *a peer review*, but the method and various details were tailored to the working culture of the open university. True to the FINHEEC tradition, the evaluation project homed in on the practitioners of open university from the outset. The consultation with adult education and evaluation experts helped to design the project plan. The implementation of the evaluation benefited greatly from cooperation with the forum of open university providers at the universities. This cooperation helped to tailor the structure and process of evaluation and enabled the evaluation to be "embedded" into the actual context. As a result of this cooperation, the universities were strongly committed and the workload in the collection of the data remained reasonable.

The FINHEEC approved the project plan in March 2001 and nominated a peer review team to act as the *expert panel* in April. Two of the members were university professors, one of them a vice rector of his university, the other a quality specialist. Two members were administrators, one in student affairs, the other in the open university. Two members were rectors of adult education centres, representing the cooperation partners in different parts of the country. Having a close contact with the students and being responsible for making practical decisions on university courses, they could also be seen to represent indirectly the students.

The universities received the guidelines for the *self-study* at the end of April. All the universities prepared a self-study of their open university provision. In addition to the extensive data collection, the universities were to gauge the opinions and impressions of the stakeholders. The universities had contact persons appointed to make sure, together with the university leadership, that the evaluation was carried out in an appropriate manner from the university's point of view. Most universities set up working groups with their key stakeholders, while the open university units collected most of the data. The universities

were requested to present both their strategies concerning the open university and concrete evidence of how they implemented the principles in practice. The evidence could be concrete results (statistics, research reports etc.) or ongoing actions (quality work, projects, other development etc.). The themes of the self-study were:

- Strategic decisions
- Student body
- Access
- Cooperation between the open university and the mainstream university
- Context outside the university
- Quality of teaching and learning
- Research and development
- Equivalence
- Organisation and decision-making

The universities also collected background data not available in the database maintained by the Ministry of Education. This included data about students, student selection, admission to degree studies, teaching and its development, the staff, and finances.

After the self-study, the universities carried out *a limited benchmarking exercise*, where each university analysed the self-study report of another university, which was discussed at an intensive benchmarking event. Each university both evaluated and was evaluated. The universities prepared a short report comprising a short description and assessment of an open university and a documentation of the similarities and differences between the two universities, outlining the main problems and best practices. Each member of the peer review team took part in one benchmarking session. This phase used the tools and methods produced in the Socrates project EQUAL.¹⁷

Instead of traditional site-visits to individual universities, the peer review team decided to organise *national hearings*, where the different universities and their stakeholders could share their views. The aim was to gain an all-round view of the system of open university. The list of invitees was gathered on the basis of the different roles and tasks of the organisations, the volume of activity and regional representation. Sixty-three of the sixty-five invited stakeholders attended the meetings. At the end of November the team organised three one-day-hearings around three different themes:

- Open university and the universities (23 stakeholders)
- Open university and the operational environment (21)
- Teaching and learning in the open university (19)

The interactive discussion *confirmed* the findings of the previous evaluation phases but also *highlighted* matters that had not come up earlier. The experts, who were divided into small homogeneous groups, discussed the specific theme in the morning. The afternoon was spent discussing ways to develop open university activities, this time by heterogeneous groups. Each member of the peer review team chaired a half-day session, which constituted an important part of his or her contribution to the evaluation report.

¹⁷ In search ... 2001

On the basis of the background material, self-study reports, mutual evaluation reports and the national hearings, the team compiled an evaluation report, which was published at a *national seminar* in April 2002. The last item in the project plan is a follow-up seminar to be arranged in 2004.

The findings and recommendations by the Peer Review Team

The peer review team presented its findings in a *report* consisting of four sections: the target of evaluation, the evaluation project, the open university profile and recommendations. The first chapter summarises the tradition and context of the open university, and the second describes the implementation of the evaluation. The third and fourth chapters present the main findings: the third sketches the profile of the activity, complemented by the opinions of the expert panel, and the fourth chapter puts forward recommendations for the future. The evaluation report is available in Finnish on the FINHEEC website.¹⁸ The self-study reports of the universities and the applicable part of the collected data can be found on the national open university website.

It is not possible to go into the *profile of the open university* in detail here. Therefore, only the key observations by the expert panel are listed. The external expert panel reports that:

- The university strategies follow the national policy statements, but *there is a need to sharpen the open university profile of each university*. The intensive commitment to the development of teaching and learning has produced excellent outcomes that should be disseminated to wider audiences.
- *Prerequisites for participation do not and should not exist*. The open university can make a good offer to different groups of students and this should not be prevented. The “regular” degree students make widely use of the open university courses, but their share in the open university courses should not increase. The universities have not given much weight to open university studies in student recruitment.¹⁹
- *Open access has been more important than educational equality in the working practice*.²⁰ Especially the actions in support of openness have impeded the quest for equality. The prices of the courses are a barrier to participation for some people. The difficulty in taking whole degrees is still a major problem.²¹ The quantitative objectives set for the open university channel have not been reached.
- *Academic quality is assured by curriculum approval systems and extensive development*. The development has taken the form of projects rather than the construction of quality systems. The differences between the mainstream university and open university are greater in distance teaching than in evening courses, which

¹⁸ Kess ... 2002, <http://www.kka.fi/index.lasso?cont=english.lasso>

¹⁹ Quite recently the Rector of the University of Helsinki expressed that successful studies in the open university are a better indication of suitability for university studies than the traditional entrance examination. Raivio ... 2002

²⁰ The Thematic Review on Adult Learning highlights the same problem in the Finnish adult education in general, cf. Thematic ... 2001 p. 49

²¹ In February 2002 the Parliamentary Committee proposed that the open university should be developed also as a channel to degree studies, *Parlamentaarisen ... 2002* p. 44

are more and more closely linked to degree courses. Accreditation of prior learning has not proceeded in line with the rhetoric of lifelong learning.

- *Central coordination of the open university and its close contacts with the faculties are essential within universities.* The most typical organisation structure is an open university unit within a centre for continuing education. It is necessary that there is one single unit to serve the adult student. Linking the development and course production with the mainstream university is more important than organisational amendments. The decision-making systems are clear, but the status of the open university in the target outcome agreements varies. The working culture of the open university differs from that of the faculties and the central administration in many ways. Confidential cooperation and commitment to shared goals have evolved, but they require constant maintenance.
- *The versatility of the cooperation system is both good and bad.* The various organisations reach the great variety of adult students effectively, but the system is difficult to piece together. The universities see each other as competitors rather than collaborating partners. The financial structure does not back up their cooperation sufficiently.

Making the most of the wide material and its own expertise, the Peer Review Team composed *a set of recommendations* that were collected under four headings:

OPEN UNIVERSITY STRATEGY

The participating institutions should devise *(1) a national open university strategy*. The universities have formulated strategies of their own, but the national system lacks practical coordination, which should be embedded in the processes of the open university through collective preparation. The strategy should outline the implementation of the guiding principles, the key client groups, and the relationship with other academic activities as well as the principles of national and regional cooperation and specialisation. The Ministry of Education should set in motion the process, for which the universities could then carry the main responsibility.

THE FINNISH OPEN UNIVERSITY

The activities should be networked into *(2) a Finnish Open University*. The open university is organised into a network that is both extensive and diversified. Although the extensive supply opens the doors of the open university to different client groups, it also makes finding information about and one's way into studies unnecessarily complicated. A particular feature is that, despite the political will for cooperation, the practical market conditions have forced both the universities and adult education institutions to compete fiercely for students and resources. The vision is a Finnish open university. The aim is not to reduce the number of providers, but to clarify their roles as partners and to make the cooperation more effective.

The aim is to be reached through the aforementioned strategy process, where *a new forum of cooperation* will take the coordinating role. The forum will act in close cooperation with

the practitioners of the open university. In addition to national cooperation, the Peer Review Team recommends that individual universities sharpen their profiles and forge strategic coalitions so as to assemble concentrations of expertise. The coalitions will develop new improved services, quality enhancement and staff expertise. The aim is not to create new organisational structures and the universities should not found new regional institutes unless absolutely necessary for reasons of equality.

(3) The universities should organise themselves in favour of the adult student. The organisational structures and decision-making systems are not the critical problems of the open university, although they will require constant reform.²² The universities should take advantage of structures that best promote their strategic aims. Although good working relations with the mainstream university are indispensable for the enduring success of the open university, the impetus for development should be the needs of the adult student. The traditional structures within the university are strong enough to ensure efficiency, but the arguments of flexibility, guidance and client-based quality should guide structural modifications.

OPEN UNIVERSITY FOR ALL

The open university has lately taken the shape of an open system of studies, where both full-time and part-time studies are achievable. On the other hand, within the university system it is distinctively a function promoting educational equality. Opening the courses and advancing equality do not necessarily go hand in hand. In recent years we have faced phenomena that raise the question of the status of equality in the open university. Especially the invasion of degree students into open university courses runs the risk that courses are opened to those who are already educationally privileged. Also, the marketing of the courses does not make a distinction between the different niches. The prices of the courses are significant and the study possibilities of the unemployed are limited. In the years to come, *(4) enhancing equality should direct all the activities.*

The means of promoting equality include strategy building, curriculum design, student participation in curriculum development, a client-oriented organisation, use of new learning environments, reform of financial models, definition of quality criteria, etc. The Peer Review Team particularly recommends innovation in marketing. The openness of the university should be appraised on the basis of the whole open university provision in one university. In this way the individual courses could be targeted at certain client groups. The concept of equality has a multiplicity of dimensions: e.g. gender, age, place of residence, life situation, employment, race and nationality, capability to pay, learning capacity and basic skills. Pricing, guidance and liberal accreditation are examples of the tools to be used.

(5) Opportunities to take a degree after open university studies should be widened. In most of the educational fields the open university channel to degree studies does not function well for the student. The problem lies both in the difficulty to find information and in the limited chances to actually earn a right to study. It is obviously one of the most troublesome challenges for the open universities. On the other hand, the channel through the open

22 Cf. the necessity to review the approval processes of new courses and programmes in the Open University in the UK, Open ... 1999 Point 65

university functions well for the universities, as a growing number of the degree students report of previous open university studies²³. As the competition for students grows, the open university will be an integral element of student recruitment. The Peer Review Team proposes that the right to degree studies be given to all the open university students who have taken the determined courses. No new degrees will be launched, but the faculties will be competitive in giving the degree. The students should have the information of the required studies well in advance. Thus, the universities should inform them about the requirements already in marketing their provision. The provision should include courses that are necessary for the right to take a degree and the financial model should support arranging them.

ACADEMIC QUALITY

Academic quality in open university is mainly determined in terms of equivalence with the degree courses. The evaluation did not reveal any major differences in the standard. On the contrary, universities provided a great deal of evidence of functional principles and arrangements that ensure quality, including sound decision-making systems. Also, the universities were able to produce an impressive register of innovative actions, especially in the area of open and distance learning. Although the development of teaching is a fundamental task in the open university units, dynamic improvement is not always sustained and its outcomes have not been disseminated either within the university or nationwide. Consequently, (6) *quality enhancement should be systematic and networked*. Evaluation, including self-evaluation, is a prerequisite of enduring academic quality. Another important element is staff development.

The existing financial model ensures the existence of the open university through earmarking, which should continue. However, it favours courses for large audiences and precludes expensive and risky education. Consequently, it also tends to narrow the channel to degree studies. A structural problem of the market-based financing in a small market is that the appropriations are broken into fairly small allotments. We have to remember, however, that the decentralized organisation has greatly boosted the extension of the universities. The Peer Review Team proposed that (7) *the funding system should support quality and concentrations of expertise*. This is linked to the recommendation of strategic alliances above. Allocation of resources into joint ventures would promote cooperation, the design of common curricula and the formulation of international networks.

Profiling the project

The characteristics of the project

It is important to see *the role of evaluation* as part of the system of politics and administration: it cannot replace other elements of development and steering. We should not load evaluation with excessive expectations. Evaluation optimism easily gives the illusion that evaluation could replace planning, visioning or policy formulation. At its best

23 15 % of all the new degree students in 2000. In the most popular open university subjects about ½ of the students had studied roughly 30 study weeks in the open university. The self-evaluation reports by the universities 2001.

evaluation can bring out facts, viewpoints and challenge for discourse – at its worst it can end up in administrative toing and froing.²⁴

Although not specifically designed to follow the principles of “*communicative*” evaluation, the project proved to have remarkable similarities with it and the general spirit of it. The typical features are:²⁵

- The need to consolidate the various needs and aims of the parties
- The values of the parties and the activity are an important part of the analysis
- The interests of the parties have a bearing on the criteria and implementation
- The activity includes features of compromising and negotiations.
- The evaluator acts as adviser and negotiator during the evaluation process.
- The parties are important users of the knowledge produced.

The approach also emphasises the consideration of the stakeholders as well as conceptualisation of the target of the evaluation.²⁶

The evaluation of the open university followed *the principles of FINHEEC*. The question of *independence* is by no means easy, especially if the aim is to execute the project in close cooperation with the units of open universities. In the project the independence was not based on cutting the links to the working parties and stakeholders but on bridging the process to the many different parties and stakeholders: the practice of the open university in its different units, its cooperation partners as well as the Ministry of Education. The steering group and the peer review team were especially conscious of the challenge of striking a balance between independence and cooperation. In consequence the members of the expert panel participated in the mutual evaluations. Also the invitations to the national hearings aimed at an objective and impartial collection of knowledge.

The FINHEEC aspires to use the best possible Finnish and foreign *experts* in all evaluations. The decision to use national experts in this evaluation was due to the extensive material, wide approach and limited financial and time resources. The knowledge of the Finnish context could be ascertained, but an international expert panel would naturally have brought a variety of viewpoints and fundamentally challenging queries. It was clear from the beginning that the professionals outside the universities belonged to the concentration of expertise assembled for the project. All the experts who were invited were willing to join the work.

As a part of the approach of *shared expertise*, open access to the materials, methods and procedures ensured their diverse use. FINHEEC is committed to using “a definition of quality that is determined with a view to different disciplines and training sectors”²⁷. The project did not make use of any international, universally legitimate quality approach, but relied on the essence of the Finnish open university as the foundation for the criteria and content of the evaluation.

24 Laukkanen 1996 p. 30

25 Jakku-Sihvonen ... 2001 p. 152

26 For the pros and cons of “collaborative approach”, see Patton ... 1982 chapter 3 p. 55-98

27 Finnish ... 2000 p.8

The mutual Nordic evaluation of national quality assurance agencies highlighted the fruitful *interaction* with the institutions of higher education in the Finnish evaluation system. In this context it is worth noting that the senior representatives of the FINHEEC Secretariat discovered the exceptionally communicative manner of implementation in the evaluation of the open university. The dialogue was sustained from the start, through planning, implementation to further development of the recommendations. This interaction particularly benefited the design of the working plan and timetable and the content of the self-study. The mutual evaluation could not have been carried out without the commitment, expertise and resources of the open university units. Again, a point has to be made that the responsibility for leadership and decisions continued to rest with the steering group and the peer review team.

The core of the *transparency* in the project was the publicity of all the information. The active use of e-mail and internet as tools of communication further promoted the availability of the material. The active interaction of the parties turned transparency from a dead letter to a serviceable resource. The parties frequently requested the evaluation material and findings for their internal use during the project. The main principle of the FINHEEC is to offer information, but not valuations before the publication of the report.

An earlier project report stated the axiom that "evaluation information is good, when it is useful. At its best the information will be used in the development of the units under evaluation."²⁸ The simple statement captures the fundamental mission of the developmental evaluation, the *impact or effect* on the evaluated activity. The FINHEEC aims at providing "institutions of higher evaluation and decision makers in education policies with tools to understand and improve their policies".²⁹ In the open university evaluation again, the linkage to the practitioners is the structural choice to ensure the effectiveness.

Peer review is basically a universal model of evaluation that can be applied to various contexts with fundamentally the same methods. The school of realistic evaluation challenges the universality, emphasising the essence and special features of the evaluated activity and its context.³⁰ Certain activity or programme may produce results in compliance with the use of methods and tools in certain circumstances. In the evaluation the axiom was realised through *utilising the features of the working culture of the open university*. The project took advantage of the typical approaches and procedures in the open university:

1. The pedagogical foundation of the open university in Finland is constructivism. The new learning will be constructed on the previous learning and other experience. The expertise of staff includes construction, maintaining and development of new learning environments, especially with the help of new information technology. From this viewpoint the evaluation was designed to be *a learning process*. The approach was an essential part of the commitment process in the preparatory phase.

28 Ponkala ... 2001 Foreword

29 Finnish ... 2000 p.9

30 Pawson & Tilley 1997 p. 218

2. Compared to the mainstream university, the open university is a new function that is typically active *in search of new and innovative operations models*. So as to create a generally positive atmosphere for the evaluation, the “reformist” attitude was taken, as the working modes were tailored from the most traditional ones. The new elements included e.g. the mutual evaluations and national hearings.
3. In its up-to-date versions, especially open and distance learning, the open university requires the assembly of scientific, professional and technical experts into project-based teams. As a part of the project, a number of expertise *forums* were set up in support of the evaluation. These ad hoc –groups were in action from the beginning till the end of the project. In fact, the practitioners had organised groups that were the embryos of the forums already before the evaluation and some of them continued their work after the project.

In short, the project profile was a mixture of *tailoring, communication and embedding*. Instead of using universal methods and tools as such, they were adapted to the particular context of the Finnish open university. The project also challenged the principle of independence and made practical use of the experience of those involved in the work of the open university both in the preparation, implementation and interpretation. Additionally, the evaluation project was closely linked to the strategic processes of the university system, benefiting from the previous steps of activity and giving benefit for the future development. In conclusion, a look at the concrete actions taken seven months after the evaluation project.

The potential effects

The consultations during and after the project revealed that it was an educational but demanding exercise, although no scientific analysis of the opinions was made. Although the project and the data collection were designed in cooperation with the practitioners, the workload of the self-study turned out to be quite heavy. The intention to construct *a learning environment* came true, and all the parties involved - the universities, their stakeholders and the evaluators (steering group and expert panel) - considered that it was genuinely achieved. The frequent requests for information about the results during the project are indications of the usefulness of the process.

The quest for effectiveness is exceedingly challenging in establishments such as universities. They are knowledge-intensive institutions, where the departments and faculties have extensive autonomy and where decision-making is decentralised.³¹ In this context, it was encouraging that one month after the publication of the report, the open university practitioners organised *an enforcement seminar*, whose main aim was to examine the outcomes of the evaluation and to consider the further development of the recommendations. The preparation of the seminar included a virtual discussion about the findings and recommendations, where the number of contributions was - unsurprisingly - low. The participation in the two-day-seminar was, however, broad and also the stakeholders gave their contribution to the future development.

31 Cf. Clark 1997 in Quality ... pp. 90–92

The production of a national open university strategy will be the first priority. At the seminar representatives of the universities volunteered to draft a strategy in cooperation with a network of universities and other partners. The evaluation liaisons have devised *a plan for the strategic process* geared to achieve a written strategy by March 2003. The Ministry of Education will finance a part of the preparations. A wide participation in the process is needed to ensure the feasibility of the strategic definitions, but the true impact of the process can only be estimated later.

The proposition to appoint a board for the Finnish open university was not approved as such, but the Ministry of Education nominated a member of the Peer Review Team to study the feasibility of *a consultative committee*, which would deal with the whole field of open university and continuing education and related regional outreach activities. The upgrading of the recommendations of the open university evaluation was part of the brief.³² The key proposition of the report is to constitute a fixed-term working group under the Council of the Finnish Council of University Rectors. Emphasizing the role of the university leadership also in the development of the open university is a concrete example of the tendency to mainstream the lifelong learning activities within the universities.³³

The peer review team emphasised equality as the main purpose of the open university. Opening the university to all the citizens is not a task to be fulfilled in few months. The Ministry of Education had previously organised a working group that dealt with the *university degree structure* as a vital step in the Bologna process. Obviously, the two-phase-structure will open up new possibilities for lifelong learners. The group report does not make major concrete moves in the area of university adult education, but it includes the idea of the open university as a channel to degree studies that has to be developed.³⁴

The allocation of resources through the three-year agreements is at the core of the open university steering. A national working group examined the allocation system and its application throughout the university sector. The group's agenda included the specification of target outcome for the open university as from the autumn of 2002. The group put forward a suggestion *to add a quality factor into the resource allocation of the open university*.³⁵ The Ministry of Education has started the preparations taking into account the recommendations by the Peer Review Team. In short term, this reform appears to be the most impressive effect of the evaluation project.

The project capitalised on the outcomes of some previous European projects. In view of the difficulties generally encountered in *disseminating the best practices*,³⁶ the results obtained in the evaluation of the Finnish open university will be presented at a European forum, namely in the conference of the European Universities Continuing Education Network EUCEN in May 2003. The true long-time effects of the project will naturally be examined later, starting with the follow-up seminar in 2004.

32 The Letter to the Administrator by the Ministry of Education 3.6.2002

33 Pohjolainen 2002 p. 14

34 Yliopistojen kaksiportaisen... 2002 p. 8

35 Yliopistojen tulosoajauksen ... 2002 p. 35

36 Adult ... 1999 p. 73

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