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## **Self-Evaluation Reports of Finnish Universities – Development Work and Identity Formation**

In the last few decades, the evaluation and quality assurance of higher education have been constant themes in European discussion on higher education policies. The Bologna process in particular has further animated the debate, making different institutions consider ways of finding shared tools for quality assurance. In Finland there has been a steady increase in institutional evaluations of universities since the early 1990s. Every Finnish university has conducted an evaluation of its operations and activities, usually involving a total evaluation where self-evaluation plays a central role.

Evaluation is a central factor in the functioning of universities and in the formation of their value priorities (Høstmark-Tarrou 1999; Maassen 1997). Thus, evaluation is no new phenomenon at university, but evaluation practices have changed over the last decade. Various content evaluations are a part of all operations and activities in universities. They have become institutionalised as an element of appointment processes, publication practices, the assessment of theses and dissertations and, in the 1990s, of formal systems for evaluating education and research. (Henkel 1998, 291.) The evaluation practices applied in Finnish universities follow international approaches and methods such as peer evaluation, self-evaluation, student feedback systems, and performance indicators (Becher & Kogan 1992, 159–164). Most recently, Finnish universities have adopted evaluation based on benchmarking. However, while the field of evaluation is a global one, grounded on common concepts and a common political rationale, every country has its distinctive evaluation processes shaped by particular historical and cultural contexts.

It has been maintained that the evaluations undertaken by Finnish universities follow the Dutch model, particularly as regards self-evaluation. However, Finnish approaches to evaluation are organised differently because in the Netherlands, self-evaluation is a discipline-specific activity. Under the Dutch national steering system, evaluations target degree programmes rather than the universities that organise these programmes (Vroeijenstijn 1994, 96). The Bologna process and

intensifying competition on the educational marketplace have made accreditation another increasingly common element of quality assurance in the university systems of many countries of Europe. Finland has chosen the total evaluation of universities as the national method of evaluating higher education institutions. At the same time, the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) arranges also evaluations of individual study fields, audits of quality work in universities, evaluations of high-quality units and centres of excellence, and various thematic evaluations, such as assessments of guidance and counselling, student selection, and higher education policy. Research is evaluated by the Academy of Finland.

When analysing self-evaluation, a top-down or bottom-up perspective is an unsuitable starting point because such evaluations impinge on the university institution in a wide range of ways. A more relevant way of looking at such processes is offered by the concept, suggested by Bleiklie and others (2000, 15-16; see also Bourdieu 1995), of fields of social action where agents from different levels of a system struggle over things that they find essential and important in a certain position. Thus, there is no need to consider self-evaluations as either top-down or bottom-up processes. Instead, they can be seen as taking place in fields where every agent active there is brought in, at least in an ideal case. Even though the guidelines seem to come from above, practical evaluation activities proceed in the various fields without being constrained by any direct hierarchical chain of command.

The Finnish higher education system comprises universities (20) and polytechnics (31). I concentrate on the university system, consisting in Finland of 10 multidisciplinary universities, three universities of technology, three schools of economics and business administration, and four art universities (Välímää 2001). Saarinen (1995) has studied the launching of experimental evaluation projects in Finnish universities and university departments' experiences of evaluations. Välímää and others (1998) have focused on an examination of the effects of quality evaluation in one university. Saari (2000) has, rather, focused on self-evaluations; he has concentrated on the evaluation and development discourses associated with evaluations of teacher education. In Finland, FINHEEC is the only body to undertake more broad-based investigations of university evaluation practices.

According to Saari (2002), the discourse of self-evaluation is framed by the power position of the institution or group producing an evaluation and by the educational and evaluation policy context. The written outcomes of self-evaluation are often conventional, with the result that their publicly expressed developmental function remains in many cases unclear or is never put into effect.

Accordingly, self-evaluations often confuse various functions and aims: rendering an account, development efforts, the relationship between institutional self-sufficiency and external evaluations, persuading outsiders and demonstrating the excellence of the own institution.

## Research questions and data

The research questions addressed in the present study, of self-evaluation in Finnish universities, are:

- How do the self-evaluation reports produced by Finnish universities describe the functioning of Finnish universities?
- How are the self-evaluations conducted by Finnish universities perceived by department-level agents?

The research materials consist of the self-evaluation reports prepared in Finnish universities in 1993-2002 and questionnaire data from department heads or leaders of department-level evaluations. Most self-evaluation reports have been published as a part of a university's total evaluation or as a separate self-evaluation statement. The reports were obtained in June 2002 from the leaders of the university evaluations. From among the 74 reports thus collected I selected 38 for a more detailed examination. The materials comprise 19 university-level self-evaluation reports and 4 total evaluations incorporating a self-evaluation. Further, there are 11 reports by external evaluation teams assessing a university's self-evaluation process and 4 further reports concerned with self-evaluation. Apart from Åbo Akademi University, the materials include at least one report from each Finnish university. Since the total evaluation proper, several universities have also conducted follow-up evaluations or a new evaluation round. The reports on these have also been examined.

The evaluation reports were read through and summaries of 1-10 pages were prepared. During reading I concentrated on the following themes: 1) the aims set for the self-evaluation; 2) the progress of the self-evaluation process; 3) the content of the self-evaluation; 4) the reasons stated in the report for conducting the self-evaluation; 5) who conducted the evaluation and whose was the perspective adopted; 6) how, according to the report, will the evaluation findings be utilised; and 7) the overall tone prevailing in the report. Attention was paid to meaning units that reveal essential features of the theme under scrutiny. Each theme was examined for common and distinguishing factors that make it possible to describe and categorise it. In further analyses, the meaning units

identified will be used to construct qualitatively different categories of description. The aim is to pinpoint, in the data, structural distinctions that cast light on differences internal to the phenomenon being studied. The description categories link up with other categories as a part of a broader category system. (Marton 1986, 1997.)

The second set of research materials derive from a survey of department heads and leaders of department-level evaluations, conducted early in the winter of 2004. Four universities (the Universities of Jyväskylä, Oulu and Tampere and the University of Art and Design Helsinki UIAH) were selected on the basis of the self-evaluation reports. A questionnaire of open-ended questions was sent to 112 departments, of which 53 returned a completed questionnaire. The questionnaire focused on the advantages and disadvantages of departmental self-evaluations, the self-evaluation method used, the people who carried the evaluation through, the forms it took, and the changes taking place in ways of implementing self-evaluation. So far, a more detailed analysis has been made of the self-evaluation materials. The discussion of the materials will start with a time-line description based mainly on the self-evaluation reports, the development of university evaluation in Finland over the last ten years.

## **A time line of university self-evaluation – What has happened in ten years?**

In Finland, systematic higher education policy planning starts in the 1960s. The first development plan for higher education teaching and research was formulated for the years 1967-1986. Evaluation began to emerge as a distinct element in higher education planning after the middle of the 1980s when there was a wish to improve the quality of teaching and research and effectiveness criteria became a part of the ideas underpinning university evaluation. The mid-1980s saw also the establishment of the KOTA data base of central resources and outcomes data. The data were brought together because there was a need for information about the condition and functioning of universities collected on the basis of consistent criteria.

The first experimental total evaluation projects in Finland were launched in 1991 in the Universities of Jyväskylä and Oulu. This was also the year of the first experiments with study field-specific evaluations of the humanities and the natural sciences. These evaluation processes were completed in 1993. That year the University of Helsinki organised the Universitas Renovata evaluation, an undertaking that clearly reflected the economic depression then afflicting Finland. At this point there emerged, in Finland as elsewhere, particularly in the UK and the Netherlands, the first demands that the operations of higher education establishments should be made distinctly more efficient. In Finland this trend was boosted by a further deterioration of the economic situation.

In the wake of the pioneers, other universities began undertaking total evaluations, among them the Universities of Lapland and Vaasa and, as the first art university, Sibelius Academy. In 1995 the University of Tampere decided to evaluate its teaching, thus launching the first evaluation process in Finland focusing on the teaching provision of a university. The figure below covers the evaluation processes implemented in 1991-2003 and the general trends in Finnish higher education policy that affected evaluations in this period. The figure displays also the evaluation reports that have been used as research data.

**Self- and Total Evaluations****Higher Education Policy Events**

**Figure 1.** Self and total evaluations of Finnish universities and changing definitions of evaluation policy, 1991-2003.

Total university evaluations became more frequent as a result of the new development plan and the establishment of FINHEEC. The Development Plan For Education and Research for 1995-2000 extended evaluation activities to all Finnish universities by requiring that "all higher education establishments be evaluated once by the end of the planning period" (VnP 1995). FINHEEC, which began its operations early in 1996, was founded to coordinate evaluations. It conducts and commissions evaluations of higher education institutions and study fields, and supports higher education institutions' own evaluation activities. Moreover, the Universities Act that came into force in 1997 (Act 645/97) made university evaluation a statutory duty:

Universities must evaluate their educational provision, research, and artistic activities and their effectiveness. Universities must also take part in external evaluations of their operations. A university must publish the findings of an evaluation organised by it. (Act 645/97, 5 section.)

Once the evaluation of higher education establishments had been institutionalised in Finland through the foundation of FINHEEC and the passing of the new Universities Act, European winds of change gained increased strength as factors in the functioning of Finnish universities. In 1998 the ministers of education of four countries signed what is known as the Declaration of Sorbonne, establishing the aim of harmonising qualification structures. In 1999 a total of 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration, defined more closely through the Prague Communiqué in 2001. The process continued in September 2003 in Berlin with a declaration focusing on the construction of comparable degrees and joint quality assurance systems. The Berlin Declaration was signed by 40 countries altogether.

The more recent social developments and the Bologna process are yet to be reflected in Finnish self-evaluation reports. By contrast, neo-liberal ideas of education and efficiency do affect also evaluations, as the evaluation report of the University of Kuopio (1998, 16) makes clear:

Neo-liberal policies, the increasing dominance of profit- and efficiency-oriented thinking, the principles of management by results, dwindling resources and focus-oriented thinking in teaching and research have created a need for more frequent and more many-sided university evaluations. From the perspective of the overall evaluation and monitoring of the public sector, higher education establishments are no exception in this respect.

At the same time, as the number of completed evaluations grew the evaluation reports began increasingly often to discuss the evaluation of learning, the construction of quality systems, and regional or external impact. This is clearly visible also in the objectives set for university evaluations. Learning outcomes are another theme raised in recent discussion about evaluation. Evaluations are increasingly being used to look at learning, with attention paid to learning outcomes and the learning process rather than to teaching and education provision as such. On the other hand,

different universities have adopted also external quality evaluation practices, such as Total Quality Management, the Balanced Scorecard and ISO systems.

## **Implementing self-evaluations – a continuous process or a separate project?**

The processes of implementing self-evaluations formed one of the themes. The total evaluations incorporating a self-evaluation exercise had been carried through using a nearly identical structure. Jordell and others (1994, 211-212), who read self-evaluation reports by Norwegian universities, arrived at the same result: what is surprising is not that the reports are different but, on the contrary, that despite external differences they resemble each other. Brennan and Shah (2000) have formulated a general model of self-evaluation followed also in Finland in total university evaluations. The system includes a national body (in Finland FINHEEC), institutional self-evaluation exercises, an evaluation by an external evaluation team, and a published report. (Brennan & Shah 2000.)

According to the most common formula used in Finnish universities, FINHEEC (or, in evaluations carried out before 1996, the Ministry of Education) contacts a university. However, FINHEEC does not issue guidelines for university evaluations:

As the evaluation objects and methods vary from university to university, FINHEEC finds it unnecessary to impose a universal model on all university evaluations. Each university can choose an evaluation model as well as the matters to be emphasised in the evaluation to best suit its needs. (Turun kauppakorkeakoulu 1999, 5.)

An university can also make the first move and suggest the initiation of an evaluation process, as the University of Tampere did before its 1995 evaluation of teaching. The university rector or vice rector sets up a university evaluation steering group to plan and supervise the implementation of the evaluation exercise. Often, the university administration appoints a project leader or project secretary or several such people to coordinate the implementation process. Those planning the process often draw on evaluations carried out in other universities and consult outside experts. National-level cooperation is seen at the planning stage also in other ways: other universities are used as sources of tips and their staff are asked to talk in opening seminars. Before the evaluation proper is launched the rector, the evaluation leader or an evaluation working group may talk with representatives of departments and faculties.

Typically, university evaluations start with an all-university opening seminar, information meeting or training event where the central ideas underpinning the evaluation exercise are presented to the staff and students. Information about the evaluation is disseminated by e-mail, internal bulletins and at various meetings. Following the guidelines of the steering group, working groups assembled on a sub-departmental, departmental, faculty or thematic basis carry out the actual self-evaluation task. The evaluation steering group may provide the working groups with guidelines in the form of themes or predefined questions and background materials. In other cases units are allowed to freely select the objects and methods of their self-evaluation. Sometimes self-evaluation is combined with an evaluation of future prospects, the construction of a vision and target definition and the formulation of future scenarios. Often the guidelines urge those involved to conduct a self-evaluation as open and honest as possible (cf. Vroeijenstijn 1995, 51), which is also in keeping with the ideal of self-evaluation (Saari 2002). Thus, the University of Oulu report (1993) observes: "It is clear that despite a quite tight schedule, the process led to a substantial amount of self-examination at all levels of the university."

The actual evaluation exercise lasts between three and six months. The teams can perform their task by discussing among themselves, arranging open discussions, conducting interviews and surveys, gathering information from first-degree and advanced students and from graduates on a departmental or faculty basis. Student data systems can also be exploited as sources of study flow statistics. In many universities, the student union and the subject associations take an active part in evaluation projects. Students describe how they themselves see the condition of teaching and studying, their representatives are included in working groups and they are surveyed using different methods:

Essentially, the work involved a self-evaluation by departments and disciplines where these sought to look critically at teaching and learning in their department. The students' active role as "younger colleagues" of the departmental teaching staff was a crucial precondition of success. (Tampereen yliopisto 1995, 8.)

Some universities have also involved, through surveys or discussions, their stakeholders, outside partners and representatives of working life in the evaluation process.

The steering group, a teaching development working group or an individual combines the self-evaluations into a summary covering the whole university, called the university self-evaluation. In many universities, the self-evaluations conducted by faculty-level working groups are incorporated, nearly unchanged or in an edited form, in the final report, or in some cases they might be issued also as separate publications. Apart from self-evaluation, a total evaluation process includes also an

evaluation visit by an international evaluation team, based on the data provided in the self-evaluations, sometimes also on statistical materials and cash-flow analyses. FINHEEC or, in evaluations carried through before 1996, the Ministry of Evaluation is responsible for finding an external evaluation team and handling the practical arrangements. In CRE evaluations, however, the evaluators are supplied by the Association of European Universities (CRE). The self-evaluation findings and the feedback from the international evaluation team are published as a report or several reports containing recommendations or suggestions for development measures. Such a report can also include a suggestion about a quality assurance system for the university. The evaluation process concludes with an all-university seminar where the findings of the self-evaluations are discussed and further measures considered with departmental teaching staff, students and other personnel.

Kogan (1994, 353) points out that the character of a university as a whole affects the character of its self-evaluation. As a result, the construction of a general evaluation formula can mean ignoring the distinctive characteristics of universities. The relationship between administration and the basic units affects the ways in which evaluations are implemented and the degree of success achieved. According to Brennan and Shah (2000), an evaluation system is linked also with the power systems of a university. Such conclusions are difficult to draw on the basis of the Finnish self-evaluation reports even if differences do emerge between different universities despite the similarity of their self-evaluation processes. The differences among the reports stem from the different objectives set to a given evaluation and from the way in which evaluations were planned. There were differences also in how well the schedules held up and in how the guidelines were prepared and how clear the final instructions were. Even though the reports and the evaluation processes follow a uniform implementation model, departments and universities differ sometimes greatly in how they carry out the evaluations and in how evaluation is discussed.

Self-evaluations conducted as a part of total evaluations are often implemented as separate projects, which may prevent the formation of links with continuous evaluation processes such as gathering student feedback and the activities of teaching development working groups. If evaluation projects are unconnected with other activities, university staff can easily feel that they are an additional burden in the midst of everyday routines already time-consuming enough. Writing a self-evaluation report for the eyes of an external evaluation team is always different from preparing a text purely to serve the needs of developing a university's or basic unit's own activities. It is possible to write honest accounts of both types, but the purpose of a text affects the perspectives used for self-evaluation.

## The Varied aims of self-evaluation

The reports were read to identify the aims set for the self-evaluation or total evaluation. With the exception of three evaluation reports, the universities had set their evaluation activities aims reflected in various ways in the implemented evaluations. The aims were classified into eight categories: development work, quality assurance systems, decision-making and administration, impact, funding, relations with stakeholders, and the infrastructure. A category of those reports that specified no evaluation aims was also created.

Self-evaluation is often defined as the critical examination by the object of evaluation of its own operations and activities, intended to serve the conscious development of those activities and operations. In Finland, FINHEEC has adopted development work as an evaluation policy. This approach was visible also in the aims of the analysed total and self-evaluations. The broader *development* of teaching and training of the university was the largest category of self-evaluation aims. The evaluation process was seen as a means of developing teaching and learning, degrees, the organisation, the "quality", research, and the services offered by the university. In the 1993 evaluation of the University of Oulu, the stated aim was "analysing, developing and assuring the quality of operations and activities".

Development work targeted the organisation as a whole or some part of it. Aims connected with desired changes and development work were one aspect of overall development aims. Self-evaluation was seen also as a means of analysing changes, willingness to change and the organisation's own activities in relation to social change. Follow-up evaluations, focused on changes and development that had taken place after the total evaluation.

A second category of self-evaluation aims subsumed *developing an evaluation system and consolidating a culture of evaluation*. The total evaluations of the Universities of Jyväskylä and Oulu in 1993 and the evaluation of teaching at the University of Tampere and the total evaluation of the University of Vaasa in 1995 were set the target of developing and constructing an evaluation system suitable for Finnish higher education institutions. Later total evaluations concentrated on the construction of university-specific evaluation and quality assurance systems and on efforts to spread the culture of evaluation to departments and faculties. Universities wish to construct either, for example, systems for assuring the quality of their degree programmes or systems covering all their educational and other activities. The construction of self-regulating mechanisms was a further self-evaluation aim (cf. Birnbaum 1988).

The third of my categories deals with *decision-making, administration, strategic planning and target definition*. An evaluation was intended to look at how a university formulated and implemented its strategies and defined and achieved its targets and how it clarified the main tasks of university. Evaluation was meant to promote the university's operational ideas and the processes through which it defined its tasks and operational foci and designed its strategies.

The fourth category of evaluation aims relates to *impact*. In 1998 the universities of eastern Finland – the Universities of Kuopio and Joensuu and Lappeenranta University of Technology – decided to concentrate, in their evaluation process, on their regional impact. Similarly, the University of Turku focused on its external impact in its 2000 evaluation. Such foci are reflected also in the objectives set to these evaluation exercises. The theme of impact was present also in other evaluation processes: for example, the University of Art and Design Helsinki UIAH (1998) adopted, as the aim of its total evaluation, taking a close look particularly at the quality, impact and effectiveness of its activities. While the first total evaluations that centred around impact were carried out in 1998, as early as in 1995 attention had been paid to the social impact of, for example, the University of Oulu, even if this did not represent actual university evaluation activities.

Universities set their evaluation exercises also aims connected with *funding*. An emphasis on funding or, rather, on the shrinking of resources, emerged as a central evaluation aim particularly in the years of the economic depression, for example in the Universitas Renovata of 1993 and the Universitas Renovata Continuata of 1994 evaluations of the University of Helsinki. The definition of resource distribution policies was an associated goal. The University of Vaasa (1995) hoped to use evaluation to influence the trend in budgetary and other funding. Similarly, the 1995 evaluation of Sibelius Academy had the aim of allocating the available resources as rationally as possible. The University of Turku undertook its 2000 evaluation with the aim of generating results that would also help to prepare for performance negotiations with the Ministry of Education.

The category connected with a university's *relations with the environment and public image* was another interesting group of target definitions. Here, total evaluation was seen as something that would "improve the overall quality of the university, which will affect also the university's public image". Another expectation was that evaluation would reveal ways of "cooperating fruitfully with outside parties important from the point of view of the university's activities". Analysing the university's relations with the environment and receiving feedback from the surrounding society was a further evaluation aim. The evaluation of Sibelius Academy (1995) was intended to "produce knowledge about the academy's international standing and attractiveness and about alternative

avenues of developing it as an international-level higher education institution". Thus, the production of knowledge about a university's relations with its region and about its relative position among peer universities was one evaluation aim.

*Infrastructural aims* were defined as a separate category. Here, evaluation offered an opportunity to consider how well the university's infrastructure served the needs of teaching and research or assess its structure and administration and how well adapted they were to its basic functions. However, no university adopted infrastructural objectives as its only evaluation aims. The evaluation reports did not always explicitly define the aims to be achieved through a self-evaluation or total evaluation; instead, some reports start immediately with a description of the functions of university as an institution.

There have been some changes in self-evaluation aims over the last ten years even if they are not very drastic or dramatic. Gathering information as a basis for developing various parts of the university seemed to be an underlying element in the aims of many of the reports. An evaluation might have been an internal or external exercise, involved aims that were administrative or general or which had been defined around a certain theme; a developmental orientation surfaced in any case, at least in the subordinate clauses. Thus, it is not for nothing that Finnish universities are said to be guided by the idea of development-oriented evaluation, seeking to apply it in their evaluations and supported in their efforts by FINHEEC.

An examination of evaluation aims reveals also changes in universities' position and modes of action. In the first half of the 1980s, little attention was paid to strategic planning, impact and regional relations. The ideology of university development is similarly a product of today's university: everyone pays obeisance to development work, and self-evaluation has been adopted as its central method. The administration and the decision-making processes in universities, faculties and university departments are another set of factors that is given more attention, considered important elements of the overall functioning of a university.

## **The content areas cover all university activity**

The contents of the self-evaluation reports were among the main themes involved in the classification of the reports. I was interested in examining what things a university discusses in its

evaluation report and what themes different universities cover in their evaluations. The contents of the self-evaluation reports varied depending on the foci of each report. The contents of reports with an explicit theme, such as impact, naturally mirrored this theme. Every report was a distinctive entity with themes selected to suit the given university's operations and activities and operational environment. It was equally natural that the aims set to each evaluation played a part in shaping the contents of the evaluation report. As a general rule, the report contents were determined by the evaluation aims. The contents of a report reflected the objects chosen for evaluation.

After reading the reports I constructed the following content areas as central categories: 1) issues connected with the implementation of the evaluation; 2) the university's organisation, operational environment and history; 3) its visions, values and strategies; 4) its effectiveness and impact; 5) teaching and education provision; 6) research and artistic activities; 7) quality and quality culture; 8) relations with its region and society; 9) evaluation of the faculties, central administration and services; 10) resources; 11) internationalisation; 12) further measures and development suggestions.

The reports first presented the evaluation process and its aims and principles. It was these considerations linked with implementing an evaluation that were placed in the first category. Apart from the aims of and principles underpinning the evaluation process in includes planning the evaluation, the implementation methods, and an assessment of how successful the evaluation was. Nearly all the reports incorporated such an account of varying comprehensiveness. Several reports also discussed, at some length, the theoretical background to and starting points of the evaluation exercise and the people who had carried it out, such as the working groups and evaluation leaders. The schedule and the implementation process were also described, as was the progress of the evaluation task. There might also be a more detailed examination of evaluation as a method of university steering. If an evaluation was based on a specific approach, it was detailed in this context, usually accompanied by an explanation why it had been decided to use this particular method to carry out an evaluation. The choices made as a part of undertaking the evaluation were often explained in as full detail as possible, though in this respect the reports varied greatly.

After describing the evaluation process the reports gave a brief account of the university as a whole, such as the numbers of its staff and students and the university's origins. Such description of the university and its operational environment also in the light of its history forms the second of the categories constructed. The universities had often included in their reports a short history covering their foundation and various stages of development. A university's regional, social, societal and global operational environment was also described as an element of its activities and position. This

category covers also the regulations guiding those activities, the organisational structures of the university, and descriptions and assessments of the functionality of its infrastructure.

The third category deals with the university's visions, missions, values and strategies. There might be quite extensive descriptions of a university's task fields and objectives. Such a central role accorded to an account of the university's history, core activities and objectives led me to reflect on the aims that this is intended to achieve. The universities are using the reports in an attempt to construct a picture of themselves, both as a form of self-knowledge and as a representation meant for the outside world. By describing themselves and setting themselves apart from other universities they are constructing an organisational identity. Narratives of "This is what we are like" distinguishes a university, at least in its own opinion, from other universities.

A university's impact and effectiveness were defined as an independent category because some of the reports paid it what might be quite a great deal of attention while other reports barely touched on the subject or covered it only briefly. The universities wrote about internal effectiveness, a dynamic approach to effectiveness, and social and cultural effectiveness. Impact was discussed in terms of economy and cultural effectiveness. Regional and external impacts were also considered, as was direct and indirect economic impact.

One of the most central themes in all the reports was a description, often also an assessment, of the university's teaching and education provision. This perspective included also descriptions of the university from the point of view of the students and learning, as well as evaluations of individual study fields and degree programmes if they had been discussed at the level of the university as a whole. The reports paid closer attention to such matters as selection arrangements; degree systems; degree programmes and the organisation of education provision; knowledge systems used to monitor teaching and studying; guidance and counselling; the condition of student selection; development needs and plans; the support provided for basic instruction; and student perceptions of the teaching provision if these had been reviewed. The evaluation of the University of Turku discussed also the functions of education, such as socialisation, reproduction and selection. The purpose of the follow-up evaluation of the University of Vaasa was to describe the improvements achieved in teaching and learning. Continuing education and Open University education were also looked at in the reports in the context of basic instruction or in separate sections. Adult education and the idea of lifelong learning were similarly dealt with in this connection. Many self-evaluation reports focused exclusively on assessing teaching and education provision; in such cases other functions of universities were naturally ignored.

It might have been expected that an appraisal of research and/or artistic activities would have been a nearly equally central theme in the reports. However, only a little less than ten of them included the category of research and artistic activity. This is explained by the position of the Academy of Finland in the evaluation of research and scientific and scholarly activity. Universities play a more prominent role in the evaluation of teaching and education provision even if they are helped and stimulated in this field by FINHEEC. Research might be considered when looking at, for example, knowledge formation and methods for evaluating it, in the context of continuing education and, of course, also as an independent object of evaluation. Sibelius Academy, the University of Art and Design Helsinki UIAH and the Theatre Academy evaluated also their artistic activities, even if the Theatre Academy did this as a part of a discussion of basic instruction.

Quality and a university's quality culture, elements that are or that at least should be linked in many ways with the basic tasks of universities, were another subject treated separately from education and research. Themes and contents describing quality assessment were also placed into this category. Personnel policy and the development of university staff as a community are another area that can be considered as aspects of quality culture. The work community is involved also in activities related to and training in higher education pedagogy, discussed in the reports. A university as a community and the achievement of equality in the treatment of different genders and various language minorities were further considerations in the reports.

A university's relations with the surrounding community, society, and trade and industry were a well-defined theme of their own, forming a distinct separate content category. The universities described those of their functions that combine academic expertise and regional activities, and talked about universities' third task and role, cooperation with their home region, their regional identity, the impact of regional development, the needs of working life, and their stakeholders. Stakeholders' assessments of a university's activities were also put into this group. Further, the universities discussed methods for assessing impact and universities' social impact, a higher education establishment's relationship with its region, and its ability to respond to the needs of this region. The universities wished also to build a learning region and saw their environment as a contributory factor in the evaluation process. It may be that an analysis of all the reports overemphasises the role played by the region and by regional activities and impact because this theme is the centre of attention in the evaluations carried out by the universities of eastern Finland and the University of Turku. The east Finnish universities focused on the theme also in their follow-up evaluation.

Several evaluation reports incorporated evaluations of faculties, departments and independent institutes as separate sections. These had their own summaries or had been included in the overall university evaluation report in some other way. The University of Helsinki decided in its evaluation (2002) that each study field-specific thematic team (16 teams) would publish its own report of predefined length and contents. In the University of Tampere evaluation of teaching (AUDIT 99), the faculty-specific evaluations were never issued as a joint publication.

Evaluations and descriptions of central administration were also provided separately. These considered decision-making processes, administration and information dissemination or both administration and the organisation and the university's steering system. Internal services, such as library services and the computer and language centres were also evaluated either all together or separately. Many reports also reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the university as a whole or of a certain subdivision or activity area. In some evaluation reports, such SWOT analyses did not seem fully integrated into the rest of the evaluation exercise and its themes.

The theme of resources and funding as dealt with in the reports was established as a separate category of its own. It covered also a university's financial and human resources and operational preconditions. Further, the reports reviewed internationalisation and internationalisation policies, but such discussions were quite brief.

The reports contained also assessments of the evaluation process itself and suggestions for the future and proposals for further measures. There were statements by the universities about the uses to which the evaluation report would be put and about the perceived benefits of the evaluation for the future and for development work. Topical development issues, potential avenues of future development, the conclusions drawn from the evaluation and, more broadly, the university's future prospects were discussed.

Many self-evaluation reports offered mainly descriptions of the given university's different subdivisions and activity areas even if explicit evaluations were also given. The Sibelius Academy report (1995, 9) put it thus: "It also seems that the purpose of evaluation was sometimes not understood. Rather, self-evaluation has been seen as an opportunity for 'PR work'. As an analytical and self-critical evaluation of the academy's operations and activities the exercise was less than wholly successful." Vroeijenstijn (1995, 53) observes that readers of evaluation reports should give thought to whether the self-evaluation provided is analytical and critical enough to serve as a

starting-point for action or whether the report is, instead, a manifestation of strategic behaviour and a document prepared to help a university maintain its relations with the region.

It may be assumed that the contents of the self-evaluation reports tell us a great deal about the Finnish university system. At least they indicate what are the subdivisions and spheres of activity within a university that are considered worth evaluating or paying attention to. In addition to a university's basic tasks (education, research and the societal service task), a substantial range of other areas of university activities were also subjected to evaluation. Many reports left their reader wondering why the report is characterised as an evaluation. Texts describing a university's activities and organisation left their reader wishing for a more evaluative and development-oriented approach, which would make it more meaningful to talk about evaluation reports.

## **Explaining why a self-evaluation was conducted**

Another theme that was explored more closely while reading the self-evaluation reports embraced the reasons given in the reports for initiating and implementing the self-evaluation or total evaluation processes. I was interested in the universities' expressed purposes in evaluating their operations and activities. Evaluations were undertaken for three reasons:

- 1) on the initiative of the Ministry of Education or FINHEEC and in accordance with the relevant government decision (VnP 1995);
- 2) as a part of a broader evaluation project or as a follow-up on an earlier evaluation project;
- 3) because evaluation is seen as a development project that will benefit the university as a whole.

The first group includes evaluation reports stating explicitly that the Ministry of Education or FINHEEC had made the first move or contacted the university, leading to a decision to conduct an evaluation. Agreements with the Ministry of Education and evaluation processes financed by it are also discussed in this context. Several self-evaluation reports mention the government development plan for 1995-2000 stipulating that all universities must evaluate their operations and activities by 2000 (VnP 1995). The reports see government guidelines as one reason or explanation for implementing a self-evaluation or for the evaluation process as a whole. According to Saari (2002, 106), initiators seek to legitimise evaluations through an appeal to an external authority. Because every university was required carry out an evaluation, the universities set themselves to do it – to be sure, in many cases only after having been contacted by FINHEEC. Accordingly, it can be said that

the state has played an active background role in the implementation of university evaluations in Finland.

An earlier evaluation needing a follow-up was a second stated reason why an evaluation was undertaken. A report might also describe a broader evaluation project, such as the one launched by the east Finnish universities, where individual universities assessed their operations as a part of it. Because the follow-up evaluations were prepared as clear-cut continuations to earlier projects, less need was felt to justify their existence at length or give detailed reasons for their implementation as such.

Seeing the implementation of an evaluation as a learning experience or development tool can be considered a third explanatory category. The evaluation of teaching and training at the University of Helsinki (2002) for example foregrounded an evaluation discourse where the emphasis was on learning. It was believed that an evaluation of the university's teaching and education provision would increase evaluation expertise. It was thought that the experiences would benefit and improve existing practices. It was expected that a successful evaluation would enhance the status of teaching within the academic community. An evaluation was presented as necessary because an assessment of the current situation lays the foundations for future planning activities and is thus a central tool for developing university operations.

Other reasons were also given – and justifications were particularly detailed when a university was planning to conduct a thematic total evaluation of some kind, such as an evaluation of regional or external impact. The nature of evaluation as an activity was also used as an argument for organising an evaluation. Evaluation was seen as something more than compiling statistics on the past. Hence the desire, in the first total evaluation exercises, to develop evaluation models suitable for Finnish universities.

Finnish universities evaluated their activities because that was what the government and FINHEEC wanted. At the same time, the universities wish to use evaluation to develop their own operations and focus attention on their different activities. However, this does not yet explain why self-evaluation has been adopted as a standard approach in the evaluation practices of Finnish universities. Of course, it is possible to appeal to economic reasons: it is cheaper to conduct a self-evaluation than pay for an external evaluation.

Even if the self-evaluation reports do not spell it out, the aims set for the evaluation exercises and the outward appearance of the reports allows the conclusion that apart from authentic reflection on the universities' own operations and activities and a desire to develop them, there are also other reasons for preparing self-evaluation reports. They are also an element in a university's efforts to create a distinctive image and a means of convincing its stakeholders and external fund providers of the high standard of its operations. There is the risk here that we shall have an evaluation system that generates a culture of compliance and image management instead of achieving the ideal aim of self-evaluation (see Henkel 1998, 295). The tone of the reports is often such that while there is a wish, in the name of honesty, to acknowledge shortcomings, otherwise the objective is to demonstrate that the operations of the university are top-class. While faults are candidly laid bare in many reports, there is no attempt to ask whether the university's activities can be justified; rather, the goal is to convince other people of their uniqueness.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the paper was to describe the general picture of the self-evaluation processes of Finnish universities that emerges from a reading of the reports written on them. The paper concentrated on an examination of the aims set for the evaluation processes, their progress, the themes covered in the reports, and the stated reasons for undertaking a self-evaluation. An investigation of the reports alone does not provide any very profound understanding of the phenomenon of self-evaluation in Finnish universities even if they do provide a general picture and a starting point for a fuller exploration.

I intend to include also the viewpoint of the university departments in the examination by drawing on a departmental survey. Because in university self-evaluation reports the individual departments play a minimal role or department-specific information disappears among all the other data, I considered it important to look also at the departments' experiences of the phenomenon. An analysis of the surveys should provide an interpretation of self-evaluation that is closer to the perceptions of the teachers and students involved.

It seems that evaluations are becoming increasingly regular practices in universities. Evaluation seems to be present at least as an underlying element in research, teaching and the discharge of universities' societal service task alike. Seen as a component of strengthened university

administration, evaluation is considered a necessary precondition for universities' successful functioning. There is an endeavour to integrate evaluations into existing administrative and decision-making structures, with evaluation exercises understood as indicators of the viability of evaluation and quality assurance systems.

Today, discussions about the evaluation of Finnish universities are more preoccupied with a consideration of how to construct quality and evaluation systems. This trend stems also from the Bologna process and the foci of FINHEEC. Self-evaluations continue to play a central part in the evaluation systems of different universities. Universities wish to encourage their faculties and departments to create a culture of continuous self-evaluation and "quality work". According to the self-evaluation reports, the construction of evaluation systems has been one of the aims since the first experimental evaluation projects. Several reports stated also that the evaluation process would be used to consolidate an evaluation culture and establish a university-, faculty- and department-level quality assurance system. FINHEEC has requested Finnish universities to provide descriptions of their quality systems, which has at least to some degree made universities more interested in updating or initiating such systems.

FINHEEC occupies an incontestable position in the field of university evaluation in Finland. It provides financial support for higher education establishments' evaluation activities and publishes various evaluations, particularly findings of external evaluations and accounts of different experimental evaluation processes. It also contacts universities before a total evaluation or self-evaluation process is launched. Further, it helps universities with many practical arrangements, such as those involved in assembling an external evaluation team. In the future, universities will be increasingly able to become active agents in the field of evaluation, for example by applying for international quality label for their operations and activities.

What is interesting about self-evaluations is how "self" is defined as a part of the process and how it is manifested. That is, the evaluation exercise proper is carried through by the departmental staff, teachers and researchers, and the students. However, the evaluation guidelines come from the steering group or committee set up to oversee the evaluation, which often also attempts to direct the implementation and completion of the evaluations. The request itself, however, that evaluations should be undertaken comes from outside the university altogether, being made by FINHEEC. Thus, who is the "self" in self-evaluations? Or will a better description of the process emerge through a more dynamic approach to human action where the focus is less on agents than on social fields (Bleiklie et al. 2000) within which everyone acts in accordance with the rules of their field?

From this perspective, "self" might be defined as comprising a certain field of agents playing the evaluation game under the rules of their own field.

Universities and university departments use self-evaluation exercises to construct a self-narrative of their own, thus creating an organisational identity. The descriptions they provide are attempts to make themselves stand out from among other universities and departments and demonstrate their distinctiveness. Self-evaluations enable a university or department to compose their own narratives, based on their own starting points, deciding what they want to tell outsiders and what they wish to keep inside knowledge.

While Finnish universities evaluate themselves as entire organisations, at the institutional level, working groups representing individual departments and faculties and particular themes make it easier to pay attention to differences between disciplines and study fields. The closer evaluations come to the individual agent within the university, the more they benefit efforts to develop its operations and activities. Simply reading an evaluation report that describes their own university rarely changes an academic's approach to everyday teaching and research.

The self-evaluation reports revealed changes over a period of ten years both in the operations and activities of universities and in how these were evaluated. The evaluation foci had shifted and concepts were used in new ways. Evaluation has become an institutionalised practice, and universities are expected to take it seriously. However, this does not mean an uncritical attitude. While evaluations do involve various games at different levels of action (cf. Bleiklie et al. 2000), few agents within a university can afford to shrug them off. The Bologna process in particular is likely to make different universities pay increased attention to the feasibility of their evaluation and quality assurance system.

Has the evaluation reform become a part of university practices? Because it can be argued that any changes in university systems take place relatively slowly, one may wonder whether ten years is enough to establish anything as a regular procedure. FINHEEC is in the process of carrying out an audit of the quality systems of Finnish universities, which alone may recast the debate on the subject underway in universities and university departments.

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