

## Structural arrangements in secondary education

Changes in the skills needed in working life and the ageing of the population place growing demands on the quality of vocational education services and their customer-orientation, correspondence to working life and preconditions for arranging them. Ensuring the appeal and quality of upper secondary school education throughout the country will also be a key focus of development in the coming years. Structural measures related to developing the school network have been guided nationally in vocational education, but the practical implementation of measures has depended on those maintaining schools. The upper secondary school and vocational education have been developed as separate education channels, with upper secondary schools mainly being maintained by local authorities while vocational education is provided mainly by federations of municipalities established for this purpose.

The Ministry of Education and Culture has encouraged the consolidation of the network of vocational education providers with an acceleration project that has followed the ministry's vocational school strategy: the number of providers of vocational basic education has fallen from 175 at the beginning of 2006 to 139 at the beginning of 2011. In 2011 the state spent about 686 million euros on funding for vocational education in school form and 273 million euros on funding for upper secondary schools. Local authorities spent 929 million euros on vocational education and about 400 million euros on upper secondary schools.

The objective of the audit was to examine whether the consolidation of the network of secondary vocational education providers has proceeded according to the objectives that were set for the acceleration project and what effects the implementation of the vocational school strategy has had on education providers. The number of vocational education providers has declined, but the decline in the number of education providers by itself does not say a lot about the

extent to which consolidation has achieved the objectives concerning the quality of education for which the reform was started.

The consolidation of the network of vocational education providers has resulted in both desirable and undesirable effects: instead of cooperation in some cases it has led to competition, which is visible in negative attitudes towards cooperation. Many education providers have focused resources on resisting change and maintaining their independence rather than engaging in cooperation. National guidance has not been viewed as sufficiently supporting cooperation between vocational education and upper secondary schools. Similar competition can also be observed between upper secondary schools. These fight for their existence using every means, and local authorities have a great need to keep their upper secondary schools alive.

The National Audit Office considers that the structural arrangements carried out during the acceleration project have been in line with objectives. Recommendation-type information guidance has not achieved an education provider structure that can efficiently and economically meet the demand for education and the needs of working life, however. Forming a regionally strong education provider structure requires more obligatory guidance of education providers on the part of the Ministry of Education and Culture. Structural arrangements should continue to ensure the activities of highly specialised units, however. The National Audit Office considers that the Ministry of Education and Culture should ensure the transparency of guidance in its procedures. Unclarities regarding the obligatory nature of recommendations have created suspicions that, although the objectives set out by the ministry are formally recommendations, failure to comply with them may result in indirect sanctions, for example in the form of unissued licences or resources.

One problem that was observed in the audit is that starting places in secondary vocational basic education are not there where they are most needed: some young people finishing the comprehensive school do not get into vocational education. An attempt has been made to respond to this problem by increasing the number of student places. The skewed distribution of places in vocational education has also led to a situation in which some young people go to upper secondary school simply because they cannot get a place in vocational education. Connections with working life and universi-

ties could be utilised much more, particularly in upper secondary schools.

In the opinion of the National Audit Office, the Ministry of Education and Culture should investigate whether the administrative consolidation of secondary education can achieve synergies that can be put to use in developing secondary education as a whole. The matriculation examination and vocational examinations will continue to be developed separately, but administrative consolidation could promote the objective set out in the Government Programme to increase flexible opportunities to complete parts of examinations across examination divisions. Funding for secondary education should support the prevention of social exclusion and the objective of educating the entire age group.

In Finland students generally live at home while attending upper secondary school but may travel far from home for vocational education. In developing the education provider network and reforming the municipal structure, the National Audit Office believes that attention should be paid to strengthening the service capacity of the education system rather than seeing that every municipality has its own secondary school.