

Foresight analysis and the dimensioning and targeting of education

The shrinking of the working-age population will have an impact on economic growth prospects. In this situation the education system must support labour market needs more efficiently. Foresight, dimensioning and allocation are means to ensure that appropriations for education are applied so as to meet the needs of working life. Public spending on vocationally oriented education totals about 4.1 billion euros a year.

Foresight, dimensioning and allocation in education do not have a legislative basis set out in acts or decrees. The purpose of this audit was to determine whether foresight, dimensioning and allocation form a whole that can respond to labour needs and changes in them. The question was whether proper conditions exist for foresight, dimensioning and allocation to function effectively. Foresight, dimensioning and allocation do not form a clear whole or system with a legislative basis set out in acts or decrees.

The need for foresight in education is obvious, but the audit found shortcomings and inconsistencies in the defining of objectives regarding foresight. No target level has been set, but objectives mainly describe what foresight is or is meant to be. The National Audit Office considers that clearly defined and measurable objectives should be set for foresight regarding education and labour needs and that responsibility should be assigned for implementing these objectives. The achievement of objectives should be monitored systematically and reporting should be properly arranged.

The audit found that foresight and decision-making regarding the number of places are not transparent. Decision-making regarding the dimensioning of education utilises the results of foresight but can also be based on other information or assumptions and may be influenced more by other social or regional objectives than by the match between labour and education needs.

Dimensioning and allocation decisions cannot be made on the basis of foresight calculations alone. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, to increase transparency and comprehensibility regarding the relation between foresight and decision-making, it would be good to explain the grounds on which decisions have been made. The monitoring of subsequent activities in relation to foresight results and dimensioning decisions should also be increased.

The audit revealed that foresight is not adequately linked to steering. The national steering of the foresight system should be centralised to the extent that foresight in central administration has a more direct steering effect on foresight at the regional and institutional level. To improve coordination, cooperation must be strengthened among ministries' different units as well as ministries. The National Audit Office considers that the education committee system should be evaluated and developed following the reform that entered into force at the beginning of 2011.

The National Audit Office considers the goal of increasing internal financing a worthwhile aim for secondary vocational schools, universities of applied sciences and universities. Financing primarily on the basis of the number of students does not provide encouragement to match labour and education needs but is liable to cause costly over-education in fields with low employment potential, forcing graduates to seek retraining later on.

The use of foresight information should be promoted by concentrating information in more easily accessible databanks, for example. The usability and accessibility of information are factors that substantially increase the effectiveness of foresight, and they should be improved by drawing attention particularly to the way in which information is organised and analysed. The timeliness and adequacy of the information produced by Statistics Finland should be ensured.

An effective division of labour between foresight and decision-making will not necessarily guide young people or adults to fields of study following which they can count on finding jobs. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, there are significant shortcomings in the general guidance and vocational guidance provided by comprehensive and senior secondary schools. Comprehensive and senior secondary schools should offer young people realistic and impartial information to help them make choices concerning working life.