FINLAND

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Introduction

As a starting point one should keep in mind the context, i.e. in this case the Finnish education system and its special features. Local autonomy plays a key role. Strong emphasis on local accountability and local/school level responsibility and ownership for the development of education are part of the system. This means that the development of learning environments is also to a great extent a local or school level issue. Finnish teachers are highly qualified, motivated and enjoy a far-reaching autonomy in their work. This means that a lot of innovation takes place at classroom or school level in everyday school life without specific national level initiatives to promote it.

The task of national authorities is to support the development of education by means of financing and steering by both information and norms. As regards the last mentioned, a main instrument are the national core curricula which are issued by the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) but developed through an extensive cooperation and consultation process involving a wide range of stakeholders.

The essential background information in relation to funding is that education is primarily co-financed by the government and local authorities and that the main form of state funding is non-earmarked government transfers. Pre-primary and basic education is part of the municipal basic services that receive statutory government transfers. The statutory government transfer is based on the number of 6-15 year olds living in the municipality and the special conditions of the municipality. This funding is not ear-marked and the municipality can decide for itself how it allocates this funding. The statutory government transfer for municipal basic services is approximately a third of the calculatory costs.

This system note will focus primarily on one financial instrument, the special state subsidies for the development and diversification of learning environments. This is a logical choice considering that the Finnish ILE cases stem from that background.

1. Aims

The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) is a national expert agency subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Culture. The FNBE has a wide range of tasks related to the development of education all through pre-primary and basic education, general and vocational upper secondary education and training, adult education and basic education in the arts.

The FNBE has awarded since 2007 annually state subsidies for learning environments based on applications. The decision was taken by the FNBE leaders of the time with the support of the Ministry of Education (now Ministry of Education and Culture). The goal was to support teaching and learning by encouraging the development of new and diverse methods, approaches and ways of working, which could be applied in different learning environments. The same year, a report called *Environments that support learning. Introduction to Learning Environments approach* was published in the FNBE publication series. This report written by a group of Finnish researchers was connected to this increased focus on learning environments within the FNBE.

The FNBE coordinates and steers the projects. The aim has been that the results and outputs of the development projects, the models and experiences generated by them, are disseminated nationwide. Innovation has been a central criterion when selecting the applications that qualify for support.

2. Leadership and Partners

The leadership/coordinators of the coordination projects are education providers, usually local authorities. There is research component in the coordination projects, which means that also universities or other research institutes are involved. Business organisations are not among main partners, but may be involved as subcontractors. The FNBE is the funding and coordinating agency.

Only education providers, either local authorities or private providers, can apply for state subsidies for development of learning environments. The partners however involve other actors such as research institutes, the Finnish Science Centre etc.

3. Strategies and activities

Communication and feedback is an integrated part of the FNBE project funding.

The strategies and activities are discussed under the item 6) developments over time. In addition to the activities directly connected with the learning environment funding there are other channels through which the FNBE can support the spread of ideas and practices gained in the learning environment projects.

The FNBE maintains a portal (www.edu.fi) to support the development of teaching and learning. Although the portal is not particularly focusing on learning environments, it also includes articles describing the

learning environment projects. Some of the final reports of the successful learning environment projects have been published and disseminated as publications.

In December 2012, the FNBE launched a new portal to facilitate the spread of innovation and good practices. Learning environments is one of the themes included in the portal.

The new portal is described as follows:

> *Best Practices is an open service maintained by the Finnish National Board of Education. Anyone working in the world of education may propose a best practice for publication on the service. Proposals may be made by teachers, instructors, counselors, developers, project workers, principals – anyone who wishes to share a best practice they have developed on their own or working with other people. A best practice may be a method or a procedure that has been developed to support teaching and learning, to enhance co-operation, to plan and organise operations, or for networking, training teaching staff or assessment – in other words, virtually any working method suitable for any level of education from pre-primary to liberal adult education and for continuing professional development of educational staff.* (Source: https://hyvatkaytannot.oph.fi/)

A central task of the FNBE is the development of the national core curricula. This means a huge potential for spreading and elaborating the ideas gained in the learning environment projects. The good practices and lessons learned can provide input to the curricular reform process and they can also inform and inspire the development of curricular support material.

4. Context

The Finnish National Board of Education is an expert agency working for the development of education. It is part of its mission to support local education providers in their work to improve the quality of learning and teaching. The state subsidies for the development of learning environments are related to this context.

Gradually the main emphasis shifted from a wider spectrum of learning environments to the utlisation of ICT in learning. The formal context and framework for this new emphasis was the national knowledge society strategy, *"Renewing, human-centric and competitive Finland"*, drawn up by the Finnish Government in 2006 for the years 2007-2015. Other national-level policy documents supporting this focus was the *Ubiquitous Information Society Action Programme* and the *National Plan for Educational Use of Information and Communications Technology* as part of it.

5. Resources

The state grants for the development and diversification of learning environments allocated by the FNBE have been:

2.5 million euros in 2012; 5.6 M€ in 2011; 4.4 M€ in 2010.

In addition to the state subsidies, the total budget also involves the contribution of project partners, which is at least 5 % in the coordination projects and 20 % in the learning environment projects.

6. Development over Time

Originally the financial support was divided between a large number of small projects but gradually it was targeted to larger entities. In 2007 and 2008 a total of 445 projects received funding, and in 2009, about one hundred.

In the first year, the support to learning environments was divided into six categories:

- The cultural and surrounding environment
- The physical learning environment
- Arts and Music Technology
- e-Learning
- Sense of community, networking and peer support
- The school's operational culture.

The Finnish ILE cases were among the learning environment projects that received funding based on the 2007 call for proposals.

In the 2008 call for proposals, there were 4 categories of learning environments that were supported: local learning environments, social learning environments, technical learning environments and physical learning environments.

In 2009, the purpose of the funding was described as follows: The learning environment approach aims to develop approaches and ways of working that better support learning both within and outside schools. This year, the FNBE has issued 3 886 000 € for the development of learning environments in basic education and general upper secondary education and 961 000 euros for learning environment projects in VET. The focus of the learning environment projects is on innovative, sustainable and nationally significant approaches as well as on utilization of ICT for educational purposes.

The 2009 projects were grouped by 10 different themes ranging from virtual learning environments to media education or working life cooperation & entrepreneurship, but a project could belong to more than one group.

In the 2010 call for proposals the focus was clear: the development of educational use of ICT. Otherwise, the funding differed significantly from previous years. Instead of supporting a big number of new projects, the major part of the funding was allocated to national coordination projects. They were like umbrellas that grouped together the existing individual projects.

The coordination projects focused on the following areas of development:

- Equipment and software for educational use
- Space and furniture solutions
- Social Media
- Learning games and virtual environments
- Distance teaching

The main tasks of the co-ordination projects were:

- Putting together a network of the development projects and other actors involved in the development work within the coordination area.
- Gathering and modeling good practices, as well as disseminating them both nationally and internationally.
- Cooperation with other coordination projects, FNBE and other partners.
- Internal and external communication (web, brochures etc.) within the coordination area.
- Organising training, seminars etc., as well as participating in similar events in Finland and abroad.
- Monitoring and producing studies and/or evaluations relating to the development work within the coordination area
- Monitoring and applying the national ICT strategy and policies in the development work

Or to put it shortly: The aim of the coordination projects is to create networks and enhance collaboration among the different projects, gather good practices and distribute them both nationally and internationally.

There were several motives behind this change of strategy, i.e. funding of coordination projects instead of individual projects. First of all, it was a pragmatic solution to the problems arising from the steering and monitoring of a large number of separate projects. It was easier for the FNBE to manage larger entities. On the other hand, at the education provider level there was both vision and experience of dissemination work. The coordination projects also enhanced peer-to-peer communication and learning. The strengths of the coordination projects include that they help to identify common features of the projects, facilitate dissemination and include a research component. The model also promotes exchange of ideas and experiences between projects.

In practice the operations of the coordination projects have varied. The success of a coordination project is to a great extent dependent on the quality of the projects belonging to the network.

The funding of the coordination projects ends in 2013. It is too early to make a final judgment of their success. There is, however, one area of activity which has already proven to be a success. The coordination projects have been very active in organizing training events. These events, often taking a form of very concrete workshops, have attracted a large number of participants. The coordination projects have taken seriously their national role and organized training also in regions which usually are not well represented among the learning environment projects.

The coordinators in cooperation with the FNBE will prepare a handbook that brings together the good models, practices and working methods of the projects. The handbook, to be published in 2013, will provide guidance to practitioners. Another report, to be finalized by the end of 2012 by the researchers involved in the coordination projects, will analyse and synthetize the developments in the coordination areas. The coordination projects have a common website to enable and enhance exchange and communication during the project period: www.oppiminen.fi. In addition, coordination projects and sub-projects may have their own websites.

The 2011 call for proposals included further funding for coordination projects. Additional resources were allocated to new tasks. Emphasis was on modeling and spreading of good practices with the help of diverse methods and tools. The projects were expected to produce concrete outcomes such as guides, models of good practices, training programmes and materials that can be used to disseminate and sustain the outcomes to different target groups outside the projects and after the project period. The main outputs were expected to be published in Finnish and Swedish, and the most essential information also in other appropriate languages. Expanding and deepening of the research component was another aim when appropriate for achieving the aims.

In the 2012 call for proposals the focus was again on individual projects. According to the guidelines of the 2012 round, the learning environment projects should concentrate on the development of large-scale learning environments as part of the overall pedagogical planning, learning and teaching. The projects should develop new models or implement models developed in earlier projects. The focus is on comprehensive approaches to teaching and learning covering working methods, practices, facilities and equipment. Information and communication technology enables flexible and efficient acquisition, production, processing and distribution of information. ICT can be used for diversifying and combining different learning environments.

The future of the FNBE funding for learning environments is unclear. The issue is part of a wider question of how the state development funding in the education sector should be organized. The Director General of the FNBE, Mr Aulis Pitkälä, has proposed that the local authorities should formulate their own development plans for education on the basis of the local priorities and needs. . The model for this proposal is the Finnish Government's five-year development plan for education and research which forms the cornerstone for education policy in Finland. The development funding could at least partly be connected to these local plans instead of current fragmented project funding. In that case the support to the development of learning environments could be an integrated part of a wider development funding. For the time being, it is too early to say, whether the funding model will be reformed, and if so, when and how. But at least the topic is currently discussed.

7. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

The recipients of state grants are obligated to report back to the FNBE on the use of the grant. The report covers both financial aspects and project activities. The projects are also asked to report about how the outcomes and effects were evaluated and how the results were disseminated and made use of. The

reporting procedure, however, has not been very thorough or demanding in this regard, and the results have not been systematically analysed. It is justified to say that the system has not paid very much attention on the evidence of effectiveness and efficiency.

The FNBE is currently conducting an investigation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the state development funding in the education sector. The learning environment projects are within the scope of the analysis, although it is not limited to them. The findings and conclusions of this analysis have not yet been dealt with internally, let alone made public. It can be anticipated that the evaluation will be quite critical. When available, this analysis will provide useful and interesting information on the effectiveness of the system, on its successes and failures.

8. Success Factors

The above mentioned evaluation of the effectiveness of the FNBE development funding may bring new insights to this question, but the work has not been finalized yet.

The launch of the coordination projects was actively discussed and debated. Reservations were related in particular on the following aspects:

The state subsidy covers a large proportion (max 95%) of the total funding of the coordination projects, which is a risk factor. In learning environment projects the applicant's own contribution must be at least 20 % of the total cost. Altogether the funding of the coordination projects was substantial and took most of the state subsidies reserved for development and diversification of learning environments. Another risk was related to the quality of the coordination projects. In some cases, the FNBE had to reopen the tender for the coordination responsibility due to the lack of applications of good quality. In the end, the success of the coordination projects is closely linked to the quality of the sub-projects within the coordination area.

Case study: The Innolukio case

One example of the learning environment projects funded by the FNBE that has gradually grown from a small local initiative to a nationwide venture is Innolukio, which could be translated as innovative general upper secondary school. The project will officially end of 2013 but the work is expected to continue after that.

The main focus of Innolukio is on entrepreneurship.
Or as the project website (http://innolukio.fi/fi/english/) describes it:

> "*Innolukio learning environment encourages upper secondary school students towards creative thinking and provides them with the knowledge and skills that are required in future work tasks. The essential goal of the project is to create a connection between upper secondary school students, businesses and universities, while utilising the creativity of the students as a national resource. The Innolukio concept encompasses, for example, inspirational videos, weekly exercises, the Innolukio competition and other learning materials that support creativity. The learning environment is free-of-charge to*

upper secondary schools and their students. Students are primarily intended to engage in the activities during their free-time, but teachers can freely use the materials for teaching purposes."

The project got started in Ylievieska Upper Secondary School in a small town in the Northern Finland. A few years later, in the beginning of the autumn term 2012, the network included 320 upper secondary schools and 110,000 students. Innolukio has already started to generate new local solutions, and the long-term goal is to get all Finnish upper secondary schools involved.

The partners involved in the development of Innolukio include e.g. the FNBE, the Ministry of Employment and Economy, the Trade Union of Education in Finland, the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, Aalto University, University of Oulu, the Federation of Finnish Technology Industries, the Economic Information Office, Nokia Corporation and Microsoft Corporation.

There are several factors contributing to the success of Innolukio, and not all of them are related to the learning environment itself. The focus, entrepreneurship education, is topical in Finland and has helped Innolukio to gain supporters among policy makers. The strengths also include active advocates and successful management of publicity.

9. Tensions and impediments

The FNBE funding has supported the creation of a rich variety of innovative approaches to learning at local level. The downside of this is that the focus has perhaps been more on initiating new projects than on sustaining and spreading existing innovation and good models. This is partly explained by the lack of human resources within the FNBE in the time of the so-called productivity program of state administration. A thorough and comprehensive analysis of the successes and failures and the efficiency of the projects has been missing. There are however new developments and considerations in this regard as explained above.

One clear barrier to the spread of the innovative practices has been the fact that many of the development projects have been carried out with considerable extra funding. This means that they cannot be applied to other schools or municipalities without similar resource. Another question mark relates to the sustainability after the project funding period. One potential solution to overcome this challenge is to retarget the development subsidies for the dissemination of existing models instead of supporting new projects.

Another weakness has been the lack of a clear vision or theory on the spread of innovation in education in general and in a decentralized context in particular.

The creation of coordination projects was an attempt to address some of the challenges. One potential weakness in the model was that the creation of the networks was a top-down approach. One point that was not addressed in the model was the potential link to the in-service training of teachers. The FNBE also provides funding for in-service training, and the providers of training are selected on the basis of a tender just like they are in the case of learning environment projects. However, the priorities and criteria are different from the learning environment funding.

10. Sources

The Finnish National Board of Education webpages:

https://hyvatkaytannot.oph.fi/

http://www.oph.fi/kehittamishankkeet/oppimisymparistojen_kehittaminen [Development of learning environments, in Finnish only]

http://www.oph.fi/rahoitus/valtionavustukset/yleissivistava_koulutus/oppimisymparistot [State grants for learning environments, in Finnish only]

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Manninen, J., Burman, A., Koivunen, A., Kuittinen, E., Luukannel, S., Passi, S. & Särkkä, H. 2007. Environments that support learning. Introduction to Learning Environments approach. Helsinki: National Board of Education.

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