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Impacts of the exceptional teaching arrangements on the realisation of equality and equity at different levels of education. – Part III of the evaluation project: Summary and recommendations of the national evaluation

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Almost the entire Finnish education system switched to distance learning, based on the use of digital tools, due to the coronavirus epidemic. The exceptional teaching arrangements have affected the equality and equity of learning in many ways. New methods of teaching and student guidance have been developed at all levels of education. However, many learners have not had the capabilities required for distance learning, and support for learning has been inadequate. The situation has had an impact on learners' wellbeing and their need for support for learning. It has brought to light the importance of learning capabilities in the changing learning environments and challenged both national steering and the management of educational institutions. The need for support has increased the most among those who already have challenges with learning and progressing in their studies.

In the future, digital pedagogy should be developed at all levels of education, ensuring that the needs of different learners, including special groups and those facing difficult circumstances, are addressed.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre FINEEC carried out an evaluation investigating the impact of the emergency conditions on equal and equitable preconditions for learning at different levels of education. The evaluation was carried out between 1 March 2020 and 31 January 2021. The purpose of the evaluation was to provide information for assessing the impacts of the exceptional teaching arrangements. The aim was to also identify any good practises or viable operating models created in the emergency conditions, following the principles of enhancement-led evaluation. The data for the evaluation was collected from basic and upper secondary education providers, higher education institutions, principals, teaching and guidance staff, and pupils and students during the spring and autumn of 2020. In addition, statistics related to the progress of studies in higher education were used in the evaluation.

## The strain experienced by learners and the need for learning support increased during the emergency conditions

A significant part of learners at all levels of education have experienced study-related stress and problems related to their study capabilities during the emergency conditions. The support for distance learning they have received has not been sufficient in all respects. There have also been challenges in the provision of student wellbeing services in basic education, upper secondary schools, and vocational institutions.

When pupils and students relied on distance learning, the support given at home gained importance in basic education and upper secondary education. According to the results, the varying levels of support received by learners at home created inequality between them. For higher education students, the impact of the student's home environment became evident in the possibility of studying remotely at home.

The lack of immediate teacher contact was found to increase the need for support especially among learners who encounter problems with progressing in their studies more often than their peers. The needs of those who require more support, such as learners who are not Finnish or Swedish speakers, should be identified and met more efficiently at all levels of education.

The increased need for support was evident at all levels of education, but the forms in which it manifested itself varied. Cooperation between the home and the school is important for recognising the pupils' need for support, especially in basic education. Assessment and monitoring of the students' situation are required in vocational education and training. In addition, student guidance and support are required to support the development of vocational competences, which was halted by the emergency conditions. In higher education, it is important to determine which student groups need support the most and improve the services available to them.

## Distance learning requires good learning and study capabilities, not possessed by all

The results concerning basic education, general upper secondary education and vocational education and training show that distance teaching challenged the self-regulation and study skills of the learners. According to the views of basic education pupils, maintaining self-motivation was the most difficult part of distance learning.

Experiences of the exceptional teaching arrangements also divide learners' opinions at all levels of education. Some have found distance learning suitable for them and benefited from asynchronous teaching and learning arrangements. Many students and learners have also actively sought support and guidance. However, the emphasis on self-regulation skills creates inequality between the learners. In emergency conditions, problems with life skills, learning difficulties and the study conditions at home increase the differences between the learners.

The coronavirus epidemic has also complicated work-based learning, which is essential in vocational studies, and the completion of compulsory training periods. More diverse ways of implementing

demonstrations of knowledge and skills, also outside the workplace context, have been developed in vocational education and training. Opportunities to complete the compulsory traineeships in higher education should be ensured in similar situations in the future.

## Recommendations for the promotion of equality and equity

- *Identification of the learners' needs and the delivery of individual support should be made possible at all levels of education.* Operating models that support students' wellbeing and reduce their mental strain should be developed. Higher education institutions should identify the students who belong to special groups and direct the support and guidance services according to their needs.
- *Learning capabilities and self-regulation skills of the learners should be recognised and developed at all levels of education.* Building the self-regulation and study capabilities prepares the learners not only for similar emergency conditions but also for the increasingly common hybrid teaching which combines contact and online teaching at different levels of education.
- *The digital and pedagogical competences of teaching and guidance staff should be built at all levels of education, and equal access to devices and software must be ensured.* The development of digital teaching solutions and learning materials carried out during the emergency conditions forms the basis for their further development.
- *More attention should be paid to the needs of different learners and special groups in pedagogical development.* The emergency conditions have shown that, because of the diversification of learning environments, more attention should be paid especially to interaction and support for learning.
- *National steering should be systematic, concrete and timely.* According to education and training providers and principals, the provision of information and instructions at the national level was only moderately successful during the emergency conditions.
- In local-level management, more attention should also be paid to the coping and wellbeing of the personnel and to supporting the work of the teaching and guidance staff. Both monitoring and evaluation may help the management to take the acute measures demanded by the emergency conditions.

FINEEC has previously published the following documents related to evaluating the impacts of the emergency conditions:

Part I: Background report, synthesis and situation assessment based on completed data material (FINEEC 2020a) (in Finnish)

Part II: Results of the national evaluation (FINEEC 2020b) (in Finnish)

Keywords: emergency conditions, distance learning, equality, equity, pre-primary and basic education, vocational education and training (VET), general upper secondary education, higher education