Evaluation brief: *Impact evaluation of Finnish Programmes for Centres of Excellence in Research 2000-2005 and 2002-2007* (Finland)

Key words: Ex-post evaluation; strategic evaluation; operational effectiveness; innovation system; basic research funding; Centres of Excellence; research networks; societal impact

1. Introductory information

- The Programmes for Centres of Excellence (CoE) in Research are a national measure in Finland, designed to implement the National Strategy for Centres of Excellence in Research.
- The purpose of the measure is to support basic research by providing funding over fixed six-year programming periods, to foster collaboration between individual researchers or research groups, and to improve researcher training.
- The evaluation is presented in an English-language report with the title *Impact Evaluation of Finnish Programmes for Centres of Excellence in Research 2000-2005 and 2002-2007*.
- This is an ex-post evaluation of the first two programming periods of this initiative.
- The central objective of the ex-post evaluation is to examine the programmes' **impact** (the extent to which the programmes succeeded in promoting the *societal objectives* laid down in the National Strategy for CoE).[1] In addition, the evaluation aims to assess the appropriateness and **strategic relevance** of the National Strategy for CoE (which provides the basis for the six-year CoE programmes). The evaluation also makes a limited assessment of the **operational effectiveness** of the programme setup. It includes an assessment of the programmes' external **coherence** in relation to Finland's innovation system.
- The evaluation was commissioned by The Academy of Finland as the programme owner and had a budget ceiling of €95,000[2].
- It was carried out by a team of external evaluators (*Gaia Consulting Ltd*) over a period of seven months, from June to December 2008.

2. Summary

The CoE Programmes were designed to stimulate the development of high-level basic research through increased interaction among research units and researcher groups. This would result in more stimulating research environments and improved researcher training.

The evaluation focused on the 'societal' impacts of the programmes as defined in the National Strategy for CoE – i.e. behavioural changes that occurred at the level of

[1] In the context of the evaluation, societal impact is defined broadly as the effect that the CoE Programmes have had on the research taking place within the units, on collaboration between different research units/ groups and on society at large.

[2] The Academy of Finland is one of the two main governmental funding bodies for scientific research in Finland (the other one being Tekes) and operates under the administrative supervision of the Ministry of Education.

research units and host organisations, as well as effects on researcher collaboration – rather than the effect of the programmes on the quality of scientific outputs produced in the units, or the economic impacts of the measure. The evaluation also sought to explore how well researchers trained at the units have been integrated into the labour market (effects on researchers' employability), and to what extent the CoE programme funding has influenced the formulation of strategy at host institutions (impact on the formulation of research strategies).

The evaluation used a mix of (primarily qualitative) data gathering tools and analytical methods, including desk research (analysis of programme documentation), case studies on a selection of Centres of Excellence, a survey of host organisations and researchers at Centres of Excellence, an international benchmarking exercise (comparison of the Finnish CoE Programme with similar schemes abroad), and interviews with relevant stakeholders. This was followed up by workshops with relevant stakeholders from the science and research institutions in order to review and discuss the central observations made by the study team prior to the finalisation of conclusions.

The evaluation concludes that the two programmes achieved their primary objectives, namely to support the development of stimulating research environments and high quality researcher training. However, the evaluators suggest that the overall programme funds are spread out too thinly and that the number of research units should be reduced in future CoE programmes in order to enable units to create more permanent structures.

The evaluators used an innovative approach to tackle an unusual subject area, namely the 'societal impact' of a funding programme targeted at basic research units. The combination of a broad range of qualitative data collection methods provided a solid evidence base on which the evaluators could draw for conclusions and recommendations.

The evaluation produced a number of practicable lessons for programme operators and for policy makers. However, its main shortcoming is its reliance on traditional data collection approaches (interviews, case studies, workshops) to the detriment of more advanced analytical methods such as Social Network Analysis, which would appear of particular interest in the context of the Finnish CoE programmes. Network analysis could have yielded further insights and added a useful quantitative element to the evaluation.

3. Further information

- The full case study may be found at: (url)
- Link to the evaluation study: http://www.proinno-europe.eu/sites/default/files/3831FI29_T2_Appraisal_Report.pdf.
- Link to the Managing Authority that commissioned the evaluation: http://www.aka.fi/en-GB/A/.