



FINHEEC

External QA moving across borders - QA agency's experiences of a cross- national audit

Senior Advisor **Kirsi Hiltunen**

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council

Gothenburg, 22 November 2013

FINHEEC

FINHEEC (The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council)

- An independent expert body founded in 1996
- **The Council**
 - decision-making body
 - 12 members (universities, universities of applied sciences, students, working life)
 - appointed for a 4-year period by the Ministry of Education and Culture
- **The Secretariat** (11 officers)
 - implements the decisions made by the Council
- Full operational independence
- Financed by the Ministry of Education and Culture
- Full member of ENQA (European Association of Quality Assurance Agencies)
- Listed in EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education)
- **Enhancement-led** approach since the beginning: Aims to support HEIs in the enhancement of quality and establishment of quality culture by producing information and exchanging and disseminating good practices



Duties of FINHEEC

- Duties based on a *Government Decree*:
 1. **Assist** institutions of higher education and the Ministry of Education and Culture in issues relating to evaluation;
 2. **Organise** evaluations on the operations of HEIs and on their quality assurance systems;
 3. **Support** assurance and development of the quality of HE;
 4. Engage in **international** evaluations and evaluation cooperation.



Three **main types of evaluation**

- **Audits of quality systems**
- **Thematic evaluations**
- **Field-specific evaluations**
(themes and fields must be significant with regard to education and society, rapidly growing and developing or problematic)

FINHEEC may also undertake evaluations

- 1) under a mandate from the Ministry of Education and Culture
- 2) as payment services (also outside Finland).



FINHEEC

FINHEEC as an **auditing agency**

... How did we have the courage to meet a challenge of cross-border evaluation?

- Experienced actor: Full cycle of audits conducted during the years 2005-2012
 - Feedback from the audited Finnish HEIs shows that they have been quite satisfied with the audits
 - The model refined three times
 - All but one of the Finnish HEIs signed up for a FINHEEC second round audit
 - Well-established and "stable" procedure
- Impact studies, institutions' feedback and follow-up reports: Improvement of management and feedback systems as well as results of activities, new operational and quality cultures in HEIs
- Acquaintance with the Austrian framework



FINHEEC

Finnish agency – Austrian university

- Compatibility of the Finnish and Austrian frameworks:
 - Institutional approach
(Rather than evaluating every single programme)
 - Indirect (audit) approach: External assessment of internal QA
(Reflects institutions' autonomy and responsibility, and a large measure of trust)
 - Similar assessment areas and criteria
(Covers not only education but also research and social impact
– and overall quality management)



Audit targets

1. Quality policy of the Uni Graz

2. Strategic and operations management

3. Development of the quality system

4. Quality management of the
HEI's basic duties

4 a) Degree
education

4 b) RDI & artistic
activities

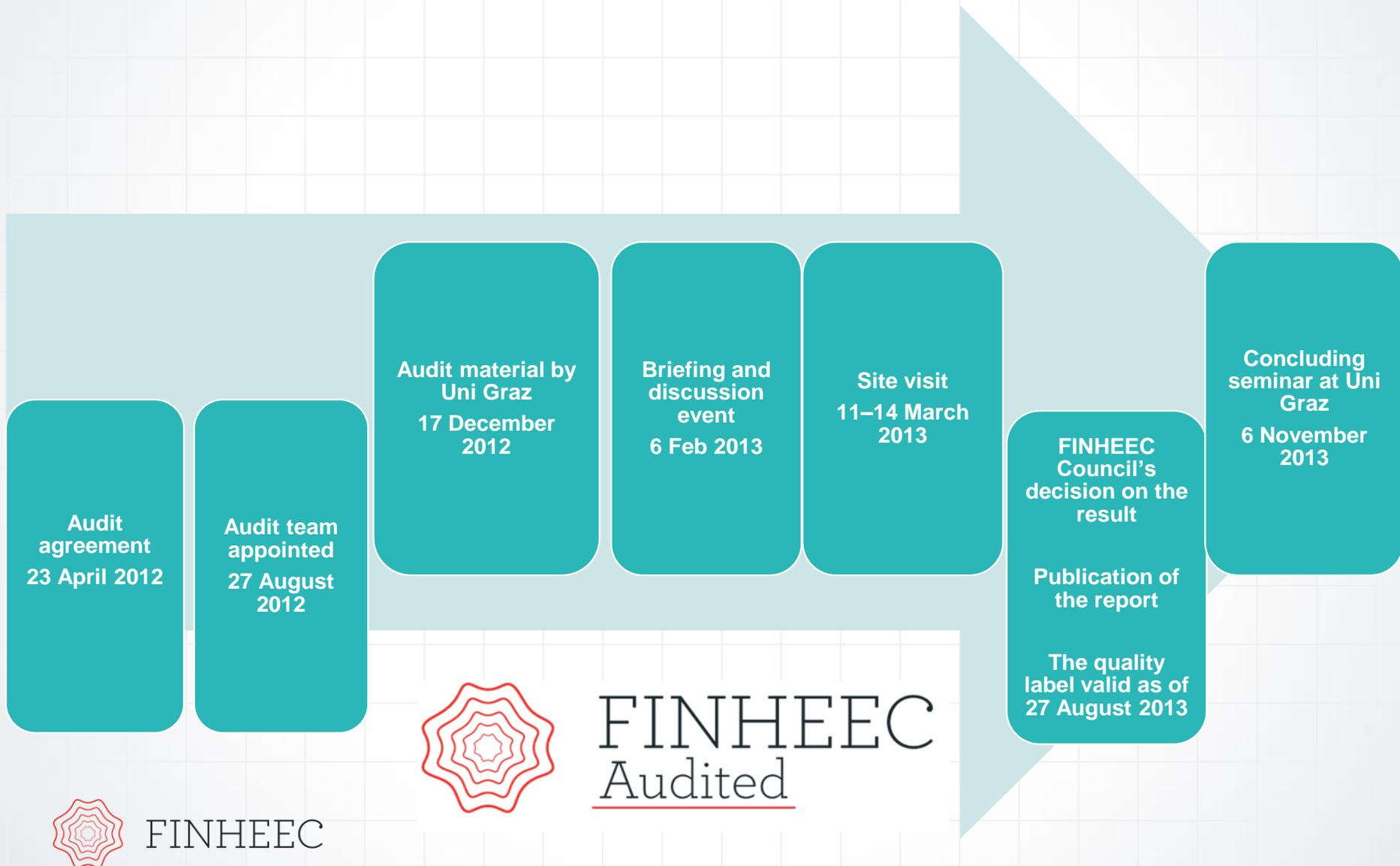
4 c) Societal impact

4 d) Optional audit target:
Internationalisation

5. The quality system as a whole



Uni Graz **Audit process**



Lessons learned by the agency when crossing borders

1) Agreement negotiation

- Acquaintance with the higher education and QA system (legislation)
- Reasoning why to cross borders and how the national frameworks are compatible to the University of Graz, the FINHEEC Council and the Austrian ministry
 - Amendments to the model
- Even more detailed and well-planned time frame of the audit needed for the agency, the HEI and the experts
- Language to be used to carry out the evaluation – no-one's mother tongue, a lot of translation and spelling out needed
- Price should be reasonable both to the agency and the HEI
- How to build up a trust between the institution and the agency?



Lessons learned by the agency when crossing borders

2) Team composition and selection criteria

- The University of Graz's wishes in addition to FINHEEC's own principles and selection criteria
 - Knowledge of the Austrian framework
 - Expertise and experience in FINHEEC audits
 - Expertise and experience in all the assessment areas
- "Pan-European" 6-member team (2 experts from Finland; one from Norway, Switzerland, Netherlands and Romania)
 - Experts from different higher education and QA systems and operational cultures conducting an audit in accordance with the Finnish framework in Austria – various challenges in the audit process!
- How to build up a trust between the experts and the agency?

Lessons learned by the agency when crossing borders

3) Training of the experts

- The objectives and procedure of the FINHEEC audit
- The Finnish enhancement-led evaluation culture
- Familiarisation with the Austrian framework (by the Project Manager and a representative from the university)
- "Unwritten rules" need to be spelled out

4) Site visit - key element for the success of the whole process!

- 4 days of interviews + 1 extra day at the site for recording central findings of the site visit into the report
- Different operational cultures within the team and between Finland and Austria
- How to build up a trust between the interviewees and the experts / the agency?



Lessons learned by the agency when crossing borders

5) Application of the criteria and writing process

- Interpretation of the assessment areas and application of the criteria – Extra time needed for face-to-face discussions within the team and great amount of guidance by the Project Manager
 - What does FINHEEC mean by "quality policy", "quality culture" etc.?
 - Assessment against the FINHEEC criteria but in a larger frame of audited Finnish institutions, other Austrian universities, "general European level"?
- Many different writers with different backgrounds and writing styles – extra time needed to edit the report

6) Quality of the report

- Report, of course, has a central role in the Council's decision-making process
- Enough information and linking with the Austrian higher education system and its implications to the quality system



FINHEEC

Conclusions

- Different national frameworks proved to be compatible
- A mutual trust and openness between the university and agency
- Additional efforts required by both the agency and institution in cross-border evaluation, BUT
- Added value
 - Promoting European cooperation and transparency in the field of higher education and QA
 - International visibility for the university and FINHEEC
 - Dissemination of good practices across national borders
 - Challenging our own expertise and audit model in another HE system
 - Valuable feedback from the institution and experts
 - There are things that need to be commented from outside national borders (with regard to both the agency and institution)!



Would **FINHEEC** do it again?

... Would **I** do it again?

Definitely YES!

An overall positive experience!



FINHEEC

Thank you for your attention!

More information:

kirsi.hiltunen@minedu.fi

www.finheec.fi



FINHEEC