

# Quality Assurance on the Road

## Finland and Austria in Comparison

Andrea Bernhard<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The ongoing necessity of quality and quality assurance in the whole Bologna Process remains one of the main issues for European policy makers. The aim to create comparable systems to guarantee quality within higher education systems are the reasons for national developments and their eagerness to reform. The situation in two relatively small European countries, Austria and Finland, are in the centre of discussion and shall exemplify different ways to cope with international developments and the need to establish a comprehensive quality assurance system. How do these countries cope with the pressure to compete with the global higher education market? Is their system of quality assurance in line with the European mainstream to create a *European Higher Education Area*? The purpose of this paper is to give a broad view on the quality assurance systems of Finland and Austria and to deal with current issues in national policies.

### **Development of "Quality" in Higher Education**

Quality is one of the main issues of the institutional and political agendas of higher education policies throughout Europe. While funding is certainly a limit to their expansion, higher education is still growing; with a transition process of Western societies towards technology-based economies and a need to mobilize human resources being visible (Neave/Van Vught 1991). Nevertheless European universities have always tried to evaluate their activities by a way of examinations and published papers. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century especially governments have been interested in the quality of higher education because of "*underwriting the finance of higher education as well as defining the legal and administrative framework within which that institution evolved*" (Neave 1988, p.8).

The political context of most Western European higher education systems changed dramatically in the past which consequently affected quality control mechanisms in a significant way. In almost all nations quality assurance is regulated within national laws (Schwarz/Westerheijden 2004a) and managed within the lines of academic disciplines ("*peer review*") (Becher/Trowler 2001, p.86). Quality assurance is linked to certain standards which are based on shared understanding (formal rules and regulations) (Luijten-Lub 2007, p.61). Different kind of monitoring procedures have been elaborated from the governmental processes for evaluating quality in terms of indicators (Harvey/Akling 2002, p. 1).

In the European context the call for more visibility, transparency and comparability of quality in higher education is tightly linked with the Bologna Declaration of the European Union Ministers of Education in 1999 and this tendency continues to be one of the central themes in the whole Bologna process (Prague 2001, Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005, London 2007)<sup>2</sup>. In most European countries, quality assurance agencies are autonomous and organized on a national or regional level. In the following the development of a quality assurance system in two European countries – Finland and Austria – is illustrated.

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<sup>1</sup> Research fellow at the Institute of Educational Sciences at the University of Graz/Austria; formerly Austrian Accreditation Council (ÖAR) Email: [andrea.bernhard@uni-graz.at](mailto:andrea.bernhard@uni-graz.at)

<sup>2</sup> More information is available under: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna>

## **Finland – Evaluation and Audit**

The legislation on educational issues are under the responsibility of the Finnish Parliament and "all higher education institutions are accredited by the state in the sense that they cannot operate without being acknowledged by legislation (universities) or without a government granted licence (polytechnics)" (Omar/Liuhannen 2005, p.40). Furthermore the government can require the approval of new educational programmes as well as further development of operations or provisions. All Finnish universities are autonomous except of general prescriptions in functions, operations and objectives. Nevertheless they are run by the government and primarily financed by the state whereas polytechnics are organised on the municipally or private level and only co-finance by the government and local authorities.

The arrival of the "evaluative state" (Neave 1988) in Finland took almost two decades and was adopted principally in the 1990s during the deep economic depression of 1991-1993. After that period of transition the changes have occurred straightforward and nowadays Finnish higher education is regularly evaluated (Fägerlind/Strömquist 2004, p.115).

The idea of systematic evaluation of higher education institutions (universities and polytechnics<sup>3</sup>) was born by a committee deliberating university performance assessment, the so-called KOTA committee, in 1985 which recommended two different ways of evaluation: institutional reviews and national disciplinary evaluations of research and teaching. For that reason the national university data base KOTA<sup>4</sup> was established to publish quantitative data on the resources and performances of universities. Since 1986 universities have to implement their own evaluation system (Ministry of Education 2005, p.77) "capable of producing sufficient and comparable information of the results of research and teaching and of their costs" (Liuhanen 2001, p.12).

After several pilot studies in the 1990s the Finnish Government enacts that each higher education institution should undergo an evaluation by 2000 (Development Plan for Education and University Research for 1995 – 2000) (Liuhanen 2001, p.12). External evaluation/quality assurance includes research, degree programmes, institutions as well as specific themes (admissions, student guidance counselling etc.) (Ministry of Education 2005, p.77). To carry out these evaluations the *Finnish Higher Education Council* (FINHEEC) was established at the end of the 1990s.

Since the University Act 1998 all higher education institutions are required to participate in external evaluations and publish the results of such evaluations publicly (Välilmaa 2004, p.107; Omar/Liuhanen 2005, p.40). Although external evaluations and publications of their results are regulated by law the choice of evaluation is free to the institutions (Ministry of Education 2005, p.77). Though, accreditation and approval agencies or practices cannot be found in Finland till now, but processes in this direction are underway such as accreditation schemes for polytechnics (Välilmaa 2004, pp.112ff). A new approach of audit of the quality assurance systems following the Berlin Communiqué is in planning. Since 2004 an audit procedure has been developed which concentrates on the quality assurance systems on higher education institutions (Wahlèn 2007, pp.12, 33ff). Up to now 18 audits have already been conducted and the first audit cycle will be completed by 2011. One future perspective could be that by 2009 audits will be obligatory for all higher education institutions (Moitus 2008).

### **FINHEEC – The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council**

FINHEEC<sup>5</sup> was established in 1996 as an independent expert body of the Ministry of Education to conduct evaluations. The Council assists all kind of higher education institutions (universities,

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<sup>3</sup> The AMK sector (*ammattikorkeakuolu*) are the non-university sector in Finland (Hölltä/Malkki 2000, p.231ff). This sector is quite new (Polytechnics Act was passed in 1995) and was created gradually over the 1990s in Finland (Hämäläinen et al. 2001, p.20).

<sup>4</sup> More information available under: <https://kotaplus.csc.fi>

<sup>5</sup> More information available under: [www.finheec.fi](http://www.finheec.fi)

polytechnics) as well as the Ministry in concerns relating to evaluation (Ministry of Education 2005; Omar/Liuhanen, 2005, Froestad/Bakken 2003). FINHEEC consists of 12 members who are representatives of universities, polytechnics, students and employers (Välilmaa 2004, p.111). The Council has two additional permanent subcommittees: "*the Special Section for the Accreditation of Polytechnics and the Accreditation Board for Professional Courses.*" (Froestad/Bakken 2003, p.16). As FINHEEC is an active and full member in the *European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA)<sup>6</sup> the legitimacy of its work increases (Ministry of Education 2005, p.79).

Different types of evaluations are conducted by FINHEEC such as institutional evaluations, audits of quality work, programme and thematic evaluations, accreditation of professional courses, selection of centres of excellence and quality units and follow-up evaluations of implemented projects (Froestad/Bakken 2003, p.16). Evaluations initiated by the Council do not include positive or negative formal sanctions; simply the Ministry of Education can base its annual performance negotiations on these results although there are some exceptions when the evaluation has a monetary impact (Omar/Liuhanen 2005, p.40). The methods are mainly focussing on enhancements and improvement rather than on accountability or accreditation (Ministry of Education 2005, p.78, Hämäläinen et al., 2001) but "*the latter is obviously an activity included in the overall system*" (Stensaker/Danø 2007, p.85).

### ***The Academy of Finland***

Next to FINHEEC there are also other evaluators such as the *Academy of Finland*<sup>7</sup>, which is responsible for evaluating research and developing methods for evaluation. Furthermore the work includes general evaluation, evaluation of scientific disciplines and research programmes, developing research indicators and the evaluation of funding. The *Academy of Finland* evaluates researchers, research teams and entire institutions and research institutes according to the results they have achieved. Next to national evaluation also international evaluations of different fields of research in Finland as well as other evaluation activities are carried out (Ministry of Education 2000, p.30).

### ***Critical View***

Looking closer to the Finnish system some conflicts are visible. Although no higher education institution will deny to participation in evaluations they are on a voluntary basis. To increase visibility and international competitiveness a change of this Finnish higher education policy would be needed. Davies et al. (2006) made in their thematic review of Finnish higher education several recommendations on the quality assurance system such as:

- FINHEEC should keep being independent from the Ministry and the relationship between the main stakeholders has to be completely clear.
- The legal status and the relation to the Ministry of Education have to be specified because the work of FINHEEC does not fit to upcoming issues in terms of quality assurance (f.e. Open University).
- FINHEEC should also have more rights to deal with follow-up activities and R&D.
- Better coordination and more joint activities between FINHEEC and the Academy of Finland would be needed not to duplicate evaluations (pp. 47ff).

With an increased international approach the strong role of FINHEEC and the national coordination of quality assurance can be diminished. A crucial problem to get international evaluators will be, of course, the Finnish language. Therefore different approaches into a more international direction in the present legislation will be needed.

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<sup>6</sup> More information available under : [www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu)

<sup>7</sup> More information available under : [www.aka.fi](http://www.aka.fi)

## ***Austria – Accreditation in Various Ways***

Austria has a short history in terms of accreditation and evaluation in higher education, though quality assurance is an issue that has been widely and openly discussed in the last few years. While public universities are still on their way to find their suitable quality assurance models, the *Fachhochschul*-sector as well as private universities<sup>8</sup> have already implemented internationally recognised forms of accreditation and evaluation schemes (Pechar/Klepp 2004, p.45).

The University Organisation Act of 1993 (UOG 1993) introduced for the first time a systematic and comprehensive evaluation programme assessing the quality of teaching and instruction. The Ministry can instruct a more detailed framework for quality assessment whereas universities have to develop their individual evaluation procedures according to this framework on their own (Beerrens 2003, p.42).

In this context the institutional differentiation according to a non-university and a private higher education sector is important. These new sectors implicated transformations according to the quality assurance of the whole system. For both sectors at least a kind of approval of institutions or academic programmes in form of an *ex ante*-accreditation has to be introduced.

Due to the new national concurrence the public sector of higher education in Austria developed or adopted internal and external quality assurance. According to the University Act of 2002 (UG 2002) Austrian universities gained a high degree of autonomy as well as the legislative possibility to develop quality assurance procedures. According to the UG 2002 universities can develop their own quality management systems, which can lead to accreditation at the level of academic programmes in the *Fachhochschul*-sector and as an instrument to accredit private universities (institutional and programme level). For public universities some kind of „approval“ of the Ministry of Education for academic programmes can be found in the sense that the rector has to ask for admission for implementing a new academic programme. Nevertheless no governmental approval of the curriculum and its quality is added. External evaluation (supra-institutional) can be made and system-wide evaluations of single disciplines are conducted occasionally. In summary, quality assurance schemes at public universities are still quite flexible (Beerrens 2003, p.56; Pechar 2005).

### ***FHR – Fachhochschulrat (universities of applied sciences)***

The *Fachhochschul*-sector (in short: FH-sector) was newly set up in 1994 and builds up by accrediting new programmes rather than transforming existing educational institutions. The establishment of this new higher education sector was a radical break from the previous traditional system with state-run universities. Since *Fachhochschulen* are founded and run privately a fast expansion with presently nearly 30,000 students is in line with (Leitner 2006, p.8).

A politically independent *Fachhochschulrat* (College Council, FHR)<sup>9</sup> with 16 members (half with academic backgrounds and qualified university lectures and half from business and industry fields) is responsible for quality assurance and the development of accreditation, evaluation and re-accreditation of college degree programmes. Confirmation of government funds, application and accreditation are the main issues and aims of this Council (Pechar/Klepp 2004, p.45-49). Quality assessment, including accreditation policy, is laid down under the Act on *FH-Studiengänge* (1993). The FHR checks the legal requirements of the proposed programmes and gives its approval for a maximum of five years while assessing it at the same time. The FHR is

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<sup>8</sup> Private universities in Austria do not have to be private in terms of privately financed. The only exception is that private universities are not to receive subsidies from the Federal Government but funding from the regions or from municipalities is possible.

<sup>9</sup> More information available under: [www.fhr.ac.at](http://www.fhr.ac.at)

member of various international quality assurance networks such as ENQA or ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation)<sup>10</sup>.

### **ÖAR – Austrian Accreditation Council (private universities)**

To open up the university sector for private suppliers on the one hand and to ensure the quality in the private sector and to maintain general standards on the other hand the *Austrian Accreditation Council* (ÖAR)<sup>11</sup> was established in 1999 as a full decision-making authority in terms of accreditation of private universities (University Accreditation Act of 1999). The Council consists of eight members who are acknowledged experts in the field of higher education (Pechar/Klepp 2004, p.52). The ÖAR is responsible for re-/accreditation and supervision of private universities and their academic programmes. Private universities are accountable to the Accreditation Council concerning expenditure for classroom space, current expenditure and personnel costs, quality assurance (Beerkens 2003, p.43). The ÖAR is member of various international networks in the field of quality assurance (such as ENQA, ECA).

Currently there are twelve private universities with 149 academic programmes accredited which already comprise more than 4200 students. The ÖAR can be seen as gatekeeper in the private higher education sector when looking at the number of applications, especially in terms of institutional accreditation: in terms of applications including the number of projects (that did not submit an application) only 15% have been accredited positively.

### **AQA – Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance**

At the beginning of 2004, the *Austrian Agency for Quality Assurance* (AQA)<sup>12</sup> was set up to assist higher education institutions to implement quality assurance procedures, coordinate evaluations and elaborate quality assurance standards (Pechar/Pellert 2004, p.325). Since June 2008 AQA is full member of ENQA.

### **Critical View**

As in Austria there are various quality assurance agencies with different objectives it would be interesting to see the interactions between them and how these links will be developed. In this context Hackl (2008) asks the following questions: "*Will there be eventually be only one quality assurance agency for all higher education? Will this put an end to the binary system? Will this be by accident or design?*" (p.40). The necessity to enhance quality and create a more comprehensive quality assurance system is evident but the road Austria is taking is not decided yet.

Although there are legal regulations for higher education institutions to develop an internal university quality management there are no defined parameters for the design of the quality management system. It lies within the institutions to implement different processes. Though, external quality assurance is not compulsory which "*runs the risk of external quality assurance being largely avoided*" (Hanft/Kohler 2008, p.53). Despite the establishment of AQA quality assurance schemes at public universities are still quite flexible. In terms of the non-university sector as well as the private sector the situation is different. While the FHR evaluates and accredits academic programmes regularly the impact of the regions or municipalities is quite strong and quality enhancement can be impeded. The private sector is also quite regulated in through the ÖAR because not only institutions are to accredit also every single additional academic programme has to undergo an accreditation procedure. Especially in terms of university courses (that lead to an academic title or grade and are cost-intensive) there are lots of ongoing discussions as public universities can open up new programmes without undergoing any kind of accreditation procedure.

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<sup>10</sup> More information available under: [www.eacaconsortium.net](http://www.eacaconsortium.net)

<sup>11</sup> More information available under: [www.akkreditierungsrat.at](http://www.akkreditierungsrat.at)

<sup>12</sup> More information available under: [www.aqa.ac.at](http://www.aqa.ac.at)

## **Comparative View – Austria and Finland**

Till 1980s the term “quality” was more or less not really used in policy texts. Was it held self-evident or just considered as a marginal concern in the university community? Economy, competition and regulation not the academic community itself are seen as the predominant values in this context. Therefore more critical discourses and analysis to raise these issues are needed to make clear policy processes (Saarinen 2007). And that’s why policy makers, administrators as well as academics should take part in these discussions.

The Bologna process implicates several changes in the whole higher education sector, such as a European and a national qualification framework, a new degree structure, learning outcomes orientation and employability focus. This also concerns quality assurance to a high impact (Davies et al. 2006, p.48). Presently the setting up of a Register of Quality Assurance Authorities is highly discussed at the EU level as well as in all participating nations. The main aim and objective of this Register is to offer public access and availability to information on Quality Assessment Authorities (Bologna Process 2007, par. 2.14). To promote a European-wide quality assurance system, as focussed within Bologna, the recognition and comparison of higher education systems as well as degrees in terms of mobility and employability have to be facilitated.

Looking at the situation in Finland and Austria, both countries started quite lately with policy discussions and reforms concerning quality assurance. While in Finland first discussions on quality assurance and strategies started in the mid-1980s (Neave 1988) but in Austria they started not till the 1990s and were primarily linked “*to enhance the efficient and effective use of public financial resources (i.e., accountability) and to the idea of loosening ties between state ministries and institutions (i.e., autonomy)*” (Rhoades/Sporn 2002, pp.363ff).

In Finland ‘*quality assurance*’ is translated as “*quality development*” (‘quality as development’). Accreditation is not widely discussed, mainly because of the reason that a formal Finnish “*government accreditation*” already existed (Välimaa, 2004). However, a critical point is the change towards assessment (development of an audit system) or accreditation which is presently an ongoing process in Finland (Saarinen 2005, p.201).

In Austria quality assurance was very input-oriented until 2004 because academic programmes have been regulated by a strong *ex-ante* legal control to ensure quality. This situation changed dramatically with the university autonomy and the freedom to develop own quality management systems. For the public sector an accreditation procedure is still not compulsory compared to the non-university and the private higher education sector (Pechar/Pellert 2004, p.325).

Currently increasing care for student participation and involvement at each level of quality assurance has been taken. Finland has already realized to involve students at all levels – students are even chairs in expert panels – whereas Austria lacks behind and is just on the way to involve students in review panels in their accreditation procedures (ÖAR, FHR).

Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004b) conducted a comparative study of 20 European countries in terms of their accreditation and evaluation activities. As Finland and Austria have been part of this study the main features will be illustrated:

- Till 1992 Austria and Finland featured no evaluation activities at the supra-institutional level as it was the case in half of the European countries (p.9).
- Six years later both countries concentrated on state approval, both changing to an accreditation scheme with evaluation activities in 2003. While Austria uses approval procedures of “*degree programmes at one type of higher education*”, in Finland the Ministry acts as the “*accreditation agency*” together with quality assurance agencies (pp.10-11).
- Concerning the unit of judgements, Austria concentrates on accreditation schemes (p.19) while Finland concentrates on evaluation schemes (p.28).

Though, to balance accountability and quality enhancement is claimed to be a main goal but also difficult to reach, especially as funding is in discussion as well. Both Finland and Austria have taken great efforts in their educational sectors to make their population fit for future challenges and to develop and enhance their quality assurance systems continuously. Summarizing it can be stated that both countries integrated Bologna issues into their regular policy planning cycle (Wende 2001, p.436) although Finland can be seen as much more in line with these developments as Austria.

But what will happen in the future with quality assurance? Are both countries frontiers in forming a European Higher Education Area? Westerheijden (2007) argues quite punctually and in the only possible way: *"Whatever will happen to the landscape of the European Higher Education Area, it won't be what we expect now! Prediction of the future will remain difficult – that is the only safe prediction."* (p.90)

### ***What has to be further discussed?***

- ❑ *Which country is more in line with the objectives of the Bologna process?*
- ❑ *Which way can be seen as more effective in the development of a quality assurance system?*
- ❑ *Could mutual recognition of accreditation decisions bring a common understanding?*
- ❑ *What are the future developments in terms of quality assurance in Finland and Austria as well as at international level?*

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