



**The 3rd European Quality Assurance Forum,
Budapest 20 – 22 November 2008**

A case study:

An audit process as a tool for quality assurance and enhancement at the University of Helsinki

**Aimo Virtanen, Quality Manager & Helena Immonen, Quality Specialist
University of Helsinki, Finland**

Abstract

The University of Helsinki reorganised its quality assurance system between 2004 and 2007. The build-up process and some of the challenges are described in this paper.

The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) will audit the quality assurance systems of all Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) by the end of 2011. The quality assurance system of the University of Helsinki was audited in autumn 2007. The objective of FINHEEC audits is to ensure that HEIs have a quality assurance system that supports continuous improvement. Careful preparation for the audit process produced a positive result and the audit was certificated in February 2008.

Introduction

This paper concerns the reorganising of the quality assurance system at the University of Helsinki in the years 2004 to 2007 when the university was preparing for the audit of that quality assurance system. The University of Helsinki offers the widest range of disciplines in the Finnish higher education system, and has about 35,300 degree students and 7,900 staff members.

In accordance with the principles of the Bologna Process, the national quality assurance system for higher education institutions (HEIs) includes a procedure which will guarantee their national and international quality. In Finland this procedure is known as *auditing or external evaluation of the quality assurance system*, and it is the responsibility of the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC). It is expected to be completed by the end of 2011.

The objective of FINHEEC audits in general is to ensure that a higher education institution has a quality assurance system that supports the continuous improvement of university activities. An audit also ensures that a higher education institution is operating in accordance with its objectives and that its activities are internationally competitive.

Audit is a useful process because it

- allows better chaining of assessment and development
- is not satisfied with only achieving the minimum level, but seeks to go further
- offers a better opportunity for a university to make its own choice in quality assurance systems and to develop its own activities
- is more suitable & flexible for different kinds of HEIs.

The goal of the audits of institutional quality assurance systems is

- to evaluate how well the quality assurance system works as a tool for quality management and improvement

- whether the HEI's quality assurance system promotes the attainment of national higher education policy objectives, as well as those set by the HEI itself;
- whether the HEI's quality assurance system produces useful information for the improvement of its operations and engenders improvement measures
- to evaluate the quality assurance system in terms of the audit criteria, to highlight strengths and best practices, to put forward recommendations for the development of quality assurance and to determine whether the HEI passes the audit or needs to undergo a re-audit at a later date (FINHEEC 2006).

In general, these audits do not take a stand on the objectives of university activities or the results as such, but they assess the processes that are used to control and improve the quality of activities.

Auditing consists of an external evaluation that assesses the comprehensiveness, functionality, communicative performance, transparency and effectiveness of the system, etcetera. The audit focuses on the whole HEI and on all activities. The criteria of the audit are published in the [FINHEEC Audit manual](#) (FINHEEC 2006). If an audit is passed, it means that the Quality Assurance System corresponds to the criteria.

The University of Helsinki began its active preparation for the audit process in 2005. The quality assurance system of the University was audited during the latter half of 2007 and the audit report was published in March 2008.

What challenges for quality assurance have there been?

Quality assurance – or quality management, including assurance, management and development, has been a 'sexy' trend for several years, starting in the business world and then expanding into the public sector. In spite of this, not all members of academic communities have been enthusiastic and sufficiently committed to take it into serious consideration and in their own work.

The academic world globally, and even in Europe during the last ten to fifteen years, has finally recognised the importance of quality work leading to more expedient processes and producing results of a higher quality.

Through quality work, the aims are to:

- react to national and international competition
- have relevant measures for results
- ensure transparency of activities and results
- guarantee a coherent European Higher Education Area
- respond to the expectations of the Ministry of Education and FINHEEC.
- make university activities and results visible
- have data that will enable comparisons between units
- improve the processes fit for purpose.

Towards the quality assurance system at the University of Helsinki

In this section, we briefly describe the methods the University has adopted for quality assurance and what happened when the University prepared for the audit of its quality assurance system during the years 2004 to 2007. The history of the quality assurance system is described in Appendix 1.

Methods for quality assurance at the University of Helsinki

In order to assure high quality in activities and results, the University of Helsinki has long-term development programmes, consisting of a mixture of both traditional and innovative means, as follows:

- Quality assurance procedures of basic processes applied within the international community of research (such as referee practices, quality assurance of theses, dissertations and degrees)
- Quality assurance in recruitment (researchers, teachers, students)

- Documentation of the quality assurance system with definitions of quality politics, operations, actors and responsibilities, mostly through the *Operations Manual (Quality Manual)*
- Analysis of processes in core and support activities
- International benchmarking of administration (1998 - 99)
- Evaluation processes, based on decisions of the University of Helsinki:
 - International evaluations of research (1999, 2005, 2011)
 - International assessment of the University's libraries (2000), follow-up (2004)
 - International evaluation of education and degrees (2001-02)
 - National evaluation of management, administration and support services (2004-2005)
 - International evaluation of education, academic and administrative leadership practices (2008)
- Self-assessment, e.g. the [*Teaching evaluation matrix*](#) with reporting, and *A tool for the creation and leadership of an effective workplace*
- *The participation of students and staff-members* has been comprehensively encouraged and organised since the 1990s. Both groups are represented on all decision-making bodies. In addition, both groups have the opportunity to be heard on matters relating to their own fields of activity.
- Collecting and analysing feedback from students, staff members and other stakeholders and interest groups, and operations based on that feedback. The *student feedback system* is decentralised. The University offers central support to the faculties and departments to operate their own systems.
- Audit of the Quality Assurance System.

The University of Helsinki's quality approach to auditing

2004

- Collecting, considering and selecting quality assurance processes
- Creating the post of Quality Manager

2005

- Setting up a quality assurance steering group, chaired by one of the deans
- Preparing rules for faculties and independent institutes in the process of quality assurance; considering ways to make quality processes visible through
 - Matrixes of quality work
 - Operations manuals (Quality manuals)
 - Other tools of quality assurance

2006

- Appointing a Quality Expert to work with the Quality Manager
- Commitment of the University Rectorate and the deans of faculties
- A revolt by heads of departments: "We will **not** operate according to the rules prepared by the central administration!"
 - Tighter commitment from both the Rectorate and the deans
 - The Rector decided to specify the guidelines and the time schedule
 - The deans and the heads of departments quickly realised the importance of quality work and started an intensive process of adopting the guidelines.
- The Rector allocated some extra funds to the faculties for quality work
 - several of the faculties recruited specialists for a fixed period for that purpose
 - quality training for quality contact persons and other responsible persons in the field of quality management was arranged.
- Active preparation of the Operations Manuals and the description of processes started
 - many support processes in the administration offices were described; the main processes were also described in faculties.

2007

- Finalising the Operations Manuals (Quality manuals) at the levels of the university and the faculties, and in some of the departments
→ most of the units were active and almost none of them were opposed to the preparations
- Intensive University-wide information campaigns through leaflets, posters, news, notices, a 'quality-test' for all University community members through the intranet etc.
- Public events for the University community, special information for managers and experts
- Collecting and finalising the data for FINHEEC's Audit Group
- Basic materials for an audit
- Evidence and samples chosen by the University of Helsinki to substantiate the performance of the quality assurance system.

Factors introducing problems on 'the quality approach'

There is a three-level organisation model at the University of Helsinki. It means that the central administration hands down guidelines to the faculties, which are then passed on to the departments. However, it is possible that information material provided by the central administration is sent on to the departments without any control or adaptation by the faculties, or the message doesn't reach the departments at all.

Often faculty administrators demand specific guidelines for development projects, but when the central administration formulates those guidelines, they are either not welcome or they are considered to be either too specific or too general.

One of the problems is lack of a common language. Some researchers and teachers consider the language of quality management to be odd. As a consequence, they criticise quality work and they don't want to participate in it. It is therefore necessary to seek common concepts for quality management.

Nowadays it is also too easy to forward e-mails to anyone. For instance, we sent an e-mail that outlined internal audits to quality contact persons for discussion at a joint meeting. The result was that this email was forwarded to deans. The idea was totally misunderstood because the short outline had not included any supporting information. The matter became very complicated and difficult to execute.

When the quality system was re-organised, it happened that at the same time there were several development projects going on. The faculties and the departments experienced excessive workloads. As a matter of fact, the coordination of several administrative projects was insufficient. Many projects come from outside the university.

The audit process and results with the University of Helsinki's reactions

The audit process had seven phases:

1. The University registered for an audit
2. An audit agreement was signed between the University of Helsinki and FINHEEC (May 2007)
3. The University collected the defined audit data and other material (by 15th September 2007)
4. A meeting was arranged to prepare for an audit visit (in October 2007)
5. The audit group (nine members) visited the University (26th to 30th November 2007)
 - Over 40 interview sessions were held with more than 330 interviewees
6. An audit report was prepared (December 2007 to March 2008)
7. The results were published, followed by a feedback meeting (March 2008).

Audit results

At its meeting on 29 February 2008, FINHEEC decided that the University of Helsinki was fulfilling the criteria set out for the quality assurance system as a whole and for quality assurance in its primary missions. The audit remains valid for six years.

Strengths and good practices

The audit team made for example the following findings about the UH quality assurance system:

- The quality assurance system largely covers the University's operations and the procedures used in it constitute a systems structure that works fairly well, but its effectiveness still varies between operations and fields of education.
- The University leadership is committed to the development of the quality assurance system at all levels.
- The production of manuals and process descriptions has been an effectual way to make quality work visible at the faculty level.
- The quality assurance system is linked to management and the direction of operations at the institutional and faculty levels. The strategy process is implemented and carried over to the faculties in a systematic and planned manner, and information produced through evaluations is used.
- The University has a clear overall picture of the development needs in the system and plans for its continuous improvement.
- The follow-up and support system of degrees *Etappi – study progress checkpoints* – helps in identifying students delayed in their studies and to direct improved self-management of studies for them.
- To support management many feasible tools have been developed, such as *A tool (matrix) for the creation and leadership of an effective workplace*.

Development recommendations with reactions by the University

Examples:

- Indicators relating to monitoring procedures and strategic main tasks need to be further improved as a tool for the direction of operations. In this connection it would be worthwhile to document the procedures and measures which the leadership uses to identify places where quality could be improved and their response to it.

The Rector has set up a group to consider the indicators to be used in the operations management process. The deadline for the group to report is the end of 2008.

- At the department level, quality assurance needs to be stepped up and made visible by means of documentation. At the same time it would be worthwhile to make certain that strategic aims are passed on from the faculty level to the departmental level.

At the moment the University is developing the departmental structure within the faculties and making it more functional through mergers. This makes also quality work more evident. Process analysis will help in establishing best practice in all areas.

- The University should systemise the handling and use of student feedback and to make sure that the consequent development measures are documented.

At the University level, a joint web-based model of the student feedback collection is available. Most departments are collecting and using feedback both from students and teachers, and improvements to make the system more coherent throughout the University are under way.

- The cooperation between the University and various stakeholders is multifaceted, but stakeholders' role in quality assurance needs clarification.

The University is strengthening its alumni activities, and development possibilities in the field of quality assurance are under consideration.

- The University needs to improve procedures for managing and monitoring the entity of quality assurance in order to maintain the system as a holistic entity.

A development programme of internal audits is under preparation.

General reactions and activities based on the audit results

The University was extremely satisfied with the audit process in itself as well as with the work of the audit group. During and after the audit visit, the atmosphere was very positive all over the university. In spite of that, willingness to promote the continuous improvement according to the recommendation of the audit group is not throughout the University very high.

After the audit process, the University executed a feedback survey to those who had been interviewed. The goal of the survey was to discern the interviewees' opinions about the audit process and the functionality of the quality assurance system for quality enhancement. According to the results, the audit process has helped departments considerably in the development of the quality assurance system and processes. The interviewees were very satisfied with the audit process as well.

An analysis of the audit report was composed, combining the main results as a part of the University of Helsinki strategy process (Strategic Plan for 2010-12). The recommendations of the audit group are taken into account when writing new policy programmes for research, education, societal interaction, human resources, and administration and support services.

The faculties and independent institutes pay attention to the audit results when developing their activities and processes. Actions and follow-up will be included in the operations management process. The faculties and independent institutes will report on their progress at the beginning of 2009.

The University of Helsinki is aiming for its next audit to be an international one. This could be most important when taking into account the orientation of the University as a 'Leading European University'. It will mean increasing the amount of input material, by having administrative documents in English as well as improving the language skills of administrative staff members in particular.

Conclusions

The University of Helsinki has invested heavily in the development of the quality of the results of its research and teaching over recent years. The pedagogic development of teaching, the different electronic learning environments and the development of research administration have had an important role. In addition, many quality assurance procedures have been used. The problem has been that these have not formed a uniform and dynamic 'wholeness'.

After a national decision to include the audit of HEIs' quality assurance systems in Finland's procedures for achieving the objectives of the Bologna process, the development of the uniform quality assurance system was begun. Thus, being aware of the approaching audit provided new strength to quality work and for the re-organisation of the uniform quality assurance system described above. The strong commitment to quality work and its influences on leadership by both University and faculty managers has had a great influence on this success. The significance of the management commitment and leadership has been addressed in several studies (Kanji et al. 1999; Sakthivel 2007). It seems that the top management commitment and the enthusiasm of the persons in charge in the faculties provided an impetus to the quality culture which is gradually developing. Hodgkinson and Kelly (2007) state that introducing one particular way forward will not be successful without an awareness of the existing organisational culture, and that introducing any model, process or approach will not, in itself, create or sustain a quality enhancement culture.

University researchers and teachers have committed themselves strongly to their own research and teaching work but some of them resist reforms which are considered to be mainly administrative in nature. This makes getting their involvement more difficult. In the first stage, the matrices of quality work were chosen as quality tools at the University of Helsinki, but many regarded them as too laborious and bureaucratic. Instead, the construction of Operations Manuals became a success. The modelling of processes divided opinions. In any case, a portion of the staff considered them useful in their own work and especially in the orientation of new employees. The methods to be used in an academic community in quality management must be thought through carefully.

When the term ‘quality assurance system’ is used in Finland in the university sector, the objective should be that it will correspond to the term ‘quality management system’ from its contents. Many elements of quality management (Kanji et al. 1999; Sirvanci 2004; Venkatraman 2007) such as leadership, top management commitment, staff and student participation, continuous improvement and the use of the most suitable quality tools in the restructuring of the University of Helsinki quality assurance system proved to be important factors. A mission, vision and strategy which direct operations have largely been accepted in the University. However, we still have much to do for real quality management. Among other things, it will be necessary to develop indicators and to utilise them when improving management (management by fact).

A major restructuring of the university sector is going on in Finland. When it comes into effect, the new university law will increase the universities’ autonomy and economic independence. The university is faced with considerable change. We believe that the quality assurance system will help the University to adjust to the new situation. As a matter of fact, we may thank the audit process for this.

Suggestions for questions / discussions

1. Commitment of the Rector, Vice-Rectors, deans and directors. – Commitment of teachers and researchers.
2. Performance measurement. – Tools and methods.
3. Experiences from process management through models and descriptions.
4. Student participation through active communication in different working groups and decision-making bodies as well as by means of student feedback.
5. Experiences of the benefits and challenges of quality assurance systems.
6. Strengths of the audit model. - Discussion on different kinds of external evaluation on national level.

References

- Development Programme for Administration and Support Services 2007 – 2009.* (2006). University of Helsinki Administrative Publications 30. Helsinki: University Printing House.
- FINHEEC (Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council). (2006). *Audits of Quality Assurance Systems of Finnish Higher Education Institutions. Audit Manual for 2005-2007.* Tampere: Tammer-Paino Oy.
- Frimodig, M. (2007). *Teaching Evaluation Matrix.* University of Helsinki. Administrative Publications 44. Helsinki: University Printing House.
- Geleijnse, H. & Gellerstam, G. & Mowat, I.R.M. & Ruokonen, K. (2000). *Helsinki University Libraries. – Report of an Assessment Panel.* Evaluation projects of the University of Helsinki 7. Tampere: Painomainos Oy.
- Geleijnse, H. & Koskiala, S. & Sahlin, G. (2004). *Follow-up Evaluation of Library and Information Services 2004.* Evaluation projects of the University of Helsinki 25. Helsinki: University Printing House.
- Hämäläinen, E. (Ed.) (2000). *Research Assessment Exercise 1999.* University of Helsinki Evaluation Projects of the University of Helsinki 6. Helsinki: University Printing House.
- Hodgkinson, M. & Kelly, M. (2007). Quality management and enhancement processes in UK business schools: a review. *Quality Assurance in Education* **15**, 77-91.
- Kanji, G.K., Tambi, A.M.A. & Wallace, W. (1999). A comparative study of quality practices in higher education institutions in the US and Malaysia. *Total Quality Management* **10**, 357-351.
- Makarow, M. & Haila, K. (2006). *Research Assessment Exercise.* University of Helsinki Administrative Publications 17. Helsinki: University Printing House.
- Sakthivel, P.B. (2007). Top management commitment and overall engineering education excellence. *The TQM Magazine*, **19**, 259-273.
- Sipilä, J. & Tammeaid, M. (2005). *Towards University Governance. Report on the external evaluation of the administration of the University of Helsinki 2004–2005.* University of Helsinki Administrative Publications 14. Helsinki: Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy.

- Sirvanci, M.B. (2004). TQM implementation: Critical issues for TQM implementation in higher education. *The TQM Magazine*, **16**, 382-386.
- Tuomi, O. & Pakkanen, P. (2002) *Towards Excellence in Teaching. Evaluation of the Quality of Education and the Degree Programmes in the University of Helsinki*. Edita: Helsinki.
- Universitas renovata continuata. Helsingin yliopiston arviointiryhmän raportti (in Finnish)*. (1994). Helsinki: Yliopistopaino.
- Universitas renovata. Helsingin yliopiston arviointiryhmän raportti ja ehdotukset (in Finnish)*. (1993). Helsinki: Yliopistopaino.
- Venkatraman, S. (2007). A framework for implementing TQM in higher education programs. *Quality Assurance in Education* **15**, 92-112.
- Virtanen, A. & Mertano, S. (1999). *Learning by Comparing. The Benchmarking of Administration at the University of Helsinki*. Publications of Higher Education Evaluation Council 12:1999.

APPENDIX:

History of the quality assurance system at the University of Helsinki