

THE PERCEPTION OF EXTERNAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN TIMES OF CHANGE — FINLAND'S ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE AS A CASE EXAMPLE



Jasmin Overberg
University of Oldenburg, Germany

Timo Ala-Vähälä
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

STRUCTURE

1. Introduction and state of the problem
2. Methodology, results & summary
3. Discussion

INTRODUCTION

- Profound changes in the European HE sector since the 90s; e. g. implementing NPM – *“Apparently, the quality of higher education is no longer seen as self-evident”* (Westerheijden et al. 2007)
- QM as an instrument of high importance in this process – *„[Q]uality has turned [...] to an everyday issue in higher education“* (Saarinen 2010)
- But: not only concerned with the micro level – *„national quality assurance systems should include [...] a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures”* (ENQA 2003)
- Different developments across Europe; Finland: **quality audits**

INTRODUCTION

- Conducted by FINEEC since 2005
- Evaluation of the HEI's quality management in order *“to help HEIs to recognize the strengths, good practices and areas in need of development in their operations”* (FINEEC 2015, p. 4)
- Multi-level process: e. g. self-evaluations, audit group's visit, the publication of an audit-report, the awarding of a quality label



INTRODUCTION

- **Previous studies:**
 - Generally considered as **effective** and **reasonable**
 - **But:** great differences between personnel groups
 - **Most critical:** university researchers, **most positive:** top management
 - Central impact of the first audit round: implementation of a **quality management system** (Ala-Vähälä 2011, Ala-Vähälä/Saarinen 2013)
 - Helped departments to build up their **own identities** and achieve **social integration**
 - Some departments considered audits as **pointless; lack of connection** to their daily work (Haapakorpi 2011)

STATE OF THE PROBLEM

- Studies reflect the situation in 2010
- Changes in the framework of Finnish universities:
 - New university law (2010)
 - Merging of universities
 - Audits mandatory
- *„[They] are now as much needed as ever, with the on-going budget cuts, planned mergers, and other major shifts within the national context” (FINEEC 2016)*
- Research: changes have an impact on university staff (e. g. Ylijoki 2014, Diogo 2016, Kallio et al. 2016)

STATE OF THE PROBLEM

- **Do the attitudes towards external quality management change compared over time?**

RESEARCH DESIGN

2010

- Web survey
- 4 universities, 4 universities of applied sciences
- **Universities:** personnel from: administration and support services & faculties: social sciences, educational sciences, natural sciences and law
- **UAS:** personnel from: administration and support services & fields of study: social services, health and sport, technology, communication and sport, social sciences, business and administration, culture
- 901 answers (response rate: 15,1%)
- 58 statements on a Likert-Scale from 1-5
- Available in Finnish
- Survey period: May 2010

2017

- Web survey
- 4 universities, 5 universities of applied sciences (4 from the 2010 sample)
- Same personnel groups as in 2010
- 484 answers (response rate: 8%)
- 52 statements on a Likert-Scale from 1-5
- 9 new items; items about the start of the audits deleted
- Available in Finnish, Swedish and English
- Survey period: June – August 2017

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

- Low response rates; 2017 even lower
- Response rates vary from HEI to HEI (between 2 and 23%)
- Some participants did not answer all the questions
- Not exactly the same cohort

SAMPLES

variable	2010	2017
Gender		
Female	59,7%	63,1%
Male	40,3%	36,9%
Field		
Teaching and research	12,3%	13,7%
Teaching	28,9%	19,5%
Research	17,1%	17,3%
Management	10,3%	20,7%
Support services	24,0%	24,6%
Other	7,4%	4,1%
Type of HEI		
University	56,7%	69,7%
University of Applied Sciences	43,3%	30,3%

SAMPLES

variable	2010	2017
Gender		
Female	59,7%	63,1%
Male	40,3%	36,9%
Field		
Teaching and research	12,3%	13,7%
Teaching	28,9%	19,5%
Research	17,1%	17,3%
Management	10,3%	20,7%
Support services	24,0%	24,6%
Other	7,4%	4,1%
Type of HEI		
University	56,7%	69,7%
University of Applied Sciences	43,3%	30,3%

RESULTS

1. Change

- Increased trust towards quality management
- Diminished problems/increased practical benefits
- Decreased practical benefits/relevance

2. Continuity

Please note: the results presented in the EQAF-paper refer to the state of July 2017, the results presented here refer to the whole study.

CHANGE

Increased trust towards quality management							
Item	Mean		T-test between 2010 and 2017				
	2010	2017	All	Teaching & research/teaching	Research	Management	Support & Service
1. In my opinion, audits are used as an excuse for implementing reforms that would not have succeeded otherwise.	3,26	2,91	0,000	**			
2. The quality system of our HEI exists primarily in order to pass the audit.	3,40	2,95	0,000	*			***
3. Other HEI's experiences about audits had a strong impact on the preparations for the last audit (tuning the quality system etc.).	3,53	3,04	0,000	***	**		**
4. The audit criteria stated by Finnish Education Evaluation Centre had a strong impact on the preparation for the last audit.	4,10	3,59	0,000	***	***		***

CHANGE

Diminished problems/increased practical benefits							
Item	Mean		T-test between 2010 and 2017				
	2010	2017	All	Teaching & research/teaching	Research	Management	Support & Service
1. Data (information) collected in various surveillance (control) systems does not give a correct picture about my work .	4,23	4,00	0,000				
2. Audits and external evaluations that are part of the quality work take too much time in comparison to the benefits that they give.	3,70	3,26	0,000	***	**		***
3. A quality system makes it more difficult to carry out things (practical work) .	3,17	2,74	0,000	***	***	*	**
4. Audits and external assessments (evaluations) that are a part of the quality work give a reliable picture about the quality (level) of the activities of our HEI.	2,95	3,22	0,000				***

CHANGE

Decreased practical benefits/relevance							
Item	Mean		T-test between 2010 and 2017				
	2010	2017	All	Teaching & research/teaching	Research	Management	Support & Service
1. During the preparation phase (process) for the audit many topics for development (items to be reformed or developed) were found.	3,84	3,46	0,000	**	**	*	**
2. Preparations for audits were a good learning experience .	3,69	3,46	0,006			*	
3. I followed the process of the (last) audit with great interest .	3,41	3,04	0,000	***			

CONTINUITY

High approval		
Item	Mean	Standard error
1. The quality system of our university or university of applied sciences was presented to the audit group truthfully , pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses.	3,70	0,059
2. The preparation for the last audit took place in a positive atmosphere .	3,71	0,049
3. In my opinion, a negative audit outcome weakens the reputation of HEIs.	3,61	0,60
4. In my opinion, a positive audit outcome increases the credibility of universities or universities of applied sciences in international co-operation.	3,90	0,056
5. If my HEI does not get a positive audit assessment even after the re-audit, it may have a weaker position in the negotiations with the Ministry of Education and Culture regarding resources and targets.	4,09	0,51
6. In my opinion, the audits of our quality assurance system are essential for developing our HEI .*	3,61	0,63

**only asked in the 2017-version*

SUMMARY

The results indicate that...

- experiences of practical benefits of quality management have increased and experiences of mistrust or problems have diminished – even though they still exist.
- the preparation for the audit was carried out more based on the HEIs own interests and less on external pressures.
- quality assurance and audits support are seen as supportive for the development work carried out in HEIs.
- the audits are considered to be essential for reputation and international co-operation and also with regard to the specific relation with the ministry of education.

SUMMARY

But...

- the interest towards audits diminished.
 - the consideration of audits as a 'learning experience' decreased.
 - the reputation of the HEI and the negotiations with the Ministry of Education and Culture are considered as connected to the audit outcome.
-
- The overall attitude towards audits is more positive in 2017, but the interest and the relevance is lower.
 - Over the years, the means are more or less centred in the middle → A sign of indifference?
 - Audits as a 'rating instrument'?

DISCUSSION



1. What are the potential advantages and disadvantages if the interest towards external quality management decreases?



2. Where do you see the role of external quality management in times of change?



3. What are the experiences you made in your own country – do you recognize the developments or are they surprising?

THANK YOU!

Contact information

Jasmin Overberg
jasmin.overberg@uol.de

Timo Ala-Vähälä
timo.ala-vahala@jyu.fi

LITERATURE

- *Ala-Vähälä, T. (2011): Mitä auditointi tekee? Tutkimus korkeakoulujen laadunvarmistusjärjestelmien auditointien vaikutuksista.* Published by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council FINHEEC. Tampere: Tammerprint Oy.
- *Ala-Vähälä, T./Saarinen, T. (2013): Audits of quality assurance systems of higher education institutions in Finland. In: Shah, M./Nair, C. (Eds.): External Quality Audit. Has it improved quality assurance in universities? Oxford: Chandos Publishing, pp. 183-194.*
- *Diogo, S. M. A. (2016): Changes in Finnish and Portuguese higher education governance: comparing responses to the Bologna Process and New Public Management.* Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- *ENQA (2003): "Realising the European Higher Education Area" Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003.* URL: <http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/BerlinCommunique1.pdf> (03.11.2017).
- *FINEEC (2016): External review of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre.* Tampere: Juvenes Print.
- *Haapakorpi, A. (2011): Auditointiprosessi ja sen vaikutukset yliopistossa.* Published by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council FINHEEC. Tampere: Tammerprint Oy.
- *Kallio, K./Kallio, T./Tienari, J./Hyvönen, T. (2016): Ethos at stake: Performance management and academic work in universities. In: human relations 69, 2016, 3, pp. 685-709.*
- *Saarinen, T. (2010): What I talk about when I talk about quality. In: Quality in Higher Education 16, 2010, 1, pp. 55-57.*
- *Westerheijden, D./Stensaker, B./Rosa, M. (2007): Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Trends in Regulation, Translation and Transformation.* Dordrecht: Springer.
- *Ylijoki, O. (2014): University Under Structural Reform: A Micro-Level Perspective. In: Minerva 52, 2014, 1, pp. 55-75.*