



## **10th European Quality Assurance Forum**

**19-21 November 2015**

**Quality Assurance Agency and UCL Institute of Education**

**London, UK**

### **Taking stock and looking forward**

**Paper presented during EQAF 2015**

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#### **Short bios:**

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Central Administration

1998–2004 Planning Officer, evaluations and quality assurance

1998–1999 International benchmarking of administration (University of Helsinki, Universities of Amsterdam, Stockholm and Oulu)

2000 International library assessment of the UH

2004 International follow-up of libraries and information services, UH

2004– Quality Manager

2004–2005 Evaluation of administration, UH

2006–2008 and 2013–2015 Primary responsibility (together with Helena Immonen) for the Quality Assurance Audit by the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) and the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), UH

2008–2012 Member, Vice-Chair or Chair of four Audits of Quality Assurance, FINHEEC

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Phil. Lic. 2009 in Organic Chemistry, University of Helsinki

Quality Specialist at the University of Helsinki 2015–

Quality Coordinator at the Faculty of Science 2006–2015



Project Manager of the Project: Quality Management in Laboratories  
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## Proposal

### Title:

## Self-evaluation as an effective tool in establishing quality management at the University of Helsinki

### Abstract:

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is the organization responsible for quality assessment in Finland. The UH passed an international audit performed in 2014–2015. The most important document produced as a part of the audit process is a self-evaluation report. It was prepared in eight workshops, each taking part with 15 to 25 members. The self-evaluation was documented according to the guidelines of FINEEC, including both a descriptive and an evaluative part.

The biggest challenges included

- Describing issues honestly without being false or too positive
- Noticing problems and searching for solutions
- Using the input from the workshops in the most beneficial way
- Constructing a realistic picture of the University and its units and activities

The self-evaluation helped the audit team to find the University's strengths and make recommendations for further development.

### Text of paper:

## Self-evaluation as an effective tool in establishing quality management at the University of Helsinki

### Content

1. A Finnish model of quality assurance evaluation
2. The audit process
3. Self-evaluation as a tool for improving quality management
4. Implementation of the self-evaluation
5. Benefits of the self-evaluation

### 1. A Finnish model of quality assurance evaluation

In Finland, the Universities Act and the Polytechnics Act oblige higher education institutions (HEIs) to participate regularly in external evaluations of their operations and quality systems and to publish the results of these evaluations. The Finnish Evaluation Education Centre (FINEEC) is responsible for the national evaluation of education. The Finnish audit model is based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher



Education Area (ESG), which has been adopted nationally and encompasses all the activities at an institution, not only education. The external evaluation can be carried out with a domestic or international audit panel, and the label is valid for six years. Frequency is ok, but performed in a more unburdened manner, it could be possible to run the site visits more in an ad hoc manner. In this way, the figure on HEI's quality assurance might be more realistic. Both the results of the audit and self-evaluation reports are analysed and implemented in everyday work. The goal is to avoid extra workload for an audit process itself.

In Finland, the focus of the audit lies on unity of quality management. The challenge of an international panel is to manage the comprehensive quality system and to support the HEI in enhancement of its quality work. Based on ESG, it may happen that the audit team members focus too much in one of the main activities of a HEI, and the feedback on the general view remains narrow. It may happen that the audit team members have different understanding about some alignments e.g. of quality system or QA methods. So, the audit team should have enough time for adapting their impressions as a one and only, included in the audit report. The feedback HEI gets from the audit team easily show what areas of HEIs quality management are not clearly enough documented or described.

The auditing method is based on respecting the autonomy of HEIs and trusting in the institutions' intentions regarding their statutory responsibility for the quality of their operations. Participating HEIs have decided on the development and form of their quality systems, and the comprehensiveness, functionality and effectiveness of those systems are evaluated by the audit. The principle of the audit is enhancement-led evaluation, which has become a guiding principle in Finnish evaluation practice. The goal is to help HEIs to recognize the strengths, good practices and areas in need of development in their operations.

## **2. The audit process**

The University of Helsinki (UH) has twice passed the evaluation conducted by FINEEC. The first round was carried out in Finnish and the second in English. FINEEC provides detailed guidelines for HEIs about the audit targets, schedule and material needed for the evaluation. The audit process itself takes one year, starting from the university's registration for the audit and ending with a follow-up seminar.

### **Audit targets**

1. Quality policy
2. Quality system's link with strategic management
3. Development of the quality system
4. Quality management of the higher education institution's core duties, including essential services supporting:
  - a. Degree education (including first-, second- and third-cycle education)
  - b. Research, development and innovation activities
  - c. Societal impact and regional development work (including social responsibility, continuing education, the Open University, as well as paid-services education)
  - d. Optional audit target: staff recruitment for an international university
5. Samples of degree education: four degree programmes



## 6. The quality system as a whole

### **Audit team**

The audit team and its chair were appointed by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee of FINEEC. The audit team consisted of six members, selected so that they included representatives of the two higher education sectors, student representatives and representatives of working life outside the higher education sector. Two members of the international panel were Finnish and thus acquainted with the domestic higher education system. The other team members had experience in the activities of different personnel groups, as well as in the core duties and management of HEIs. The project manager and secretary of the panel were appointed from the FINEEC staff to ensure the consistency of the final audit report.

### **Audit material**

The UH compiled material for the audit with the goal of providing the audit team with a sufficient knowledge base and evidence for the evaluation of the quality system. The material consisted of two parts: basic material and a self-evaluation report.

*The basic material consisted of*

- An organizational chart
- The overall strategy of the UH and a description of the strategy process
- A description of the quality system
- The operations manual
- Some detailed information on the four chosen degree programmes

*Self-evaluation report*

The self-evaluation report was written according to the guidelines given by FINEEC. It must focus on evaluation rather than description. The issues raised in the self-evaluation report must be evidence based and able to be verified during the audit visit interviews.

### **The audit team's visit to the University**

The audit team visited the UH twelve weeks after receiving the audit material. They interviewed in small groups of seven to eight people some 200 University staff members, students and representatives of stakeholders. Each interview session lasted 50 minutes. The aim of the interviews was to provide the audit group with evidence based on the written documents in comparison with the experiences of the interviewees.

## **3. Self-evaluation as a tool for improving quality management**

The starting point of a self-evaluation is challenging: the institution must try to be critical and honest, but not give the impression of very serious problems. The guidelines of FINEEC include a recommendation to focus on evaluation rather than description. Both points of view were separated inside the document.



The feedback from the self-evaluation report given by the audit team was mainly positive. The self-evaluation was carried out in depth, and the audit team obtained an extensive overview of the UH and its quality management. The chair of the audit team mentioned that the University was very critical in the self-evaluation, perhaps even too critical. From our point of view, this is the main issue. How can the report be honest and not too critical at the same time? Can criticism backfire?

One explanation for the strong emphasis on criticism is that by taking a critical perspective, we are demonstrating that we have noticed shortcomings in our procedures. And at the same time, we are considering improvements of our activities. If we do not notice any defects, we cannot correct them. If we do not desire to be excellent, we cannot do better and reach higher. This is an important lesson to be learned.

#### **4. Implementation of the self-evaluation**

The University launched the self-evaluation process in the winter of 2013, and hundreds of members of the University community participated in it as producers of texts, commentators and evaluators. Workshops constituted the most important working method in conducting the evaluations.

The first versions of the descriptive sections were written by experts from different sectors at the University's Central Administration. After that, self-evaluation workshops were organized. Each workshop had a different focus, and 15–25 participants from different units were invited. A total of eight such workshops were held, and their participants included representatives of the management, teachers and researchers as well as of the support staff and students (about 150 persons in total). The key duty of the workshops was to produce an evaluation of each function being assessed and to discuss the strengths and development areas of this function. In addition, the workshops discussed the descriptive sections, for which important comments were received.

After each workshop, the quality experts worked further on the texts on the basis of the feedback received. They edited the descriptive and evaluative sections, and reviewed the material in each chapter in order to eliminate overlap. In addition to the feedback received in the workshops, feedback from actors such as unit quality coordinators and the University leadership was collected.

Each faculty was asked to produce one sample of degree-oriented education and to prepare its own self-evaluation of the education in question. The Academic Affairs Council proposed suitable samples for the Quality Management Steering Group. The Council justified its proposal by stating that the samples represent the different types of education at the University in a balanced fashion: professionally oriented degree programmes and degree programmes based on major subjects. In addition, one sample represented department-level operations and another a degree programme coordinated by a faculty. The Council's evaluation stated that the samples represented different situations in the University's quality management of education as extensively as possible.

The Steering Group processed the report as the chapters began to be produced. The members of the group gave feedback both collectively and individually. The text changed fundamentally during the process.

At the end of the process, the University opened the self-evaluation report for comments from all members of the University community on the Flamma intranet in February 2014 and proceeded to develop the text further on the basis of the comments.



## Examples from the self-evaluation report

Four examples from the self-evaluation report of the UH are provided here to further clarify our concept.

### a) Quality culture

*Collecting versatile feedback and making use of it in operations testifies to a good quality culture. There are some University units where feedback procedures work well, but the practicalities involved need fine tuning. So far, well-tried feedback models for internal use within units are mainly available for the development of teaching. Clearly, this is an area in need of development. Besides the University's risk assessment model, the survey on occupational risks, the survey on occupational wellbeing (which can be conducted in units as well) and the self-evaluation contained in operations management, other forms of collecting feedback must be introduced. Making the feedback process work in both directions is also a challenge.*

### b) Information production and the follow-up of operations

*The success of information production and monitoring depends on the reliability of the information. The functionality of the data warehouse in collecting, sorting and merging information is of key importance, and in this respect the University's needs have not been met to the full. The quality and quantity of information produced by the systems is not adequate in all respects and lacks the capability of sending alarm signals. The competence to manage and apply the information produced is inadequate, as is the competence to manage overall information production. The allocation of resources on the basis of the information generated by the information systems is difficult.*

### c) The functioning of the quality system at different organizational levels

*The development of operations management at the University has been a cultivated long-term process. There is general consensus that its progress and the drafting process of the Strategic Plan were satisfactory and that its functioning, effectiveness and workload are, for the most part, in balance. However, the workload of the strategy's drafting process differs between faculties with and without departments. The follow-up of the Strategic Plan and the implementation of any necessary corrective measures pose some problems; there is room for improvement especially in the attainment of the strategic objectives in terms of communication.*

### d) Development of the quality system

STRENGTHS	AREAS IN NEED OF DEVELOPMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The development of strategic planning as an inclusive process and the development of operations management, also on the unit level</i></li> <li>• <i>The development measures of leadership and management skills have improved.</i></li> <li>• <i>Horizontal networks and other forms of cooperation serve to disseminate good practices.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Example 1. Establishment of the Teachers' Academy at the initiative of senior lecturers in university pedagogy</i></li> <li>○ <i>Example 2. The Kumpula Campus Service Centre was assigned its own finance specialists, thanks to its lobbying of University Finance.</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The priorities of the Strategic Plan are not seen to be adequate; the coordination of development areas and the prioritisation of projects vs. resources</i></li> <li>• <i>Monitoring of the staff's and students' workloads and the required measures – are the current workplace wellbeing surveys and surveys among students enough?</i></li> <li>• <i>The inter-relationships between the various parts of the quality system. Overlapping development wastes resources in, e.g., the feedback systems.</i></li> <li>• <i>The clarity of the quality system's objectives – everyone must understand their meaning.</i></li> <li>• <i>The description of the quality system in the operations manuals requires clarification from the point of view of various actors.</i></li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The awareness and will to develop teaching. The status of teaching has grown (the Teachers' Academy).</i></li> <li>• <i>Students are represented in all groups of importance for the student body.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The development of the management of teaching and the development of teaching have visible profiles, but efforts still continue.</i></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Strong evidence of the development and assessment of research</i></li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Users and their needs are considered in the design stage of information systems. Deployment of the Enterprise Architecture</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Tools at the deployment stage (including RAPO, Learn, PROHA, plagiarism detection) – their deployment must be supported and their impact evaluated. The usability of the information produced by information systems has room for improvement.</i></li> </ul>

## 5. Benefits of the self-evaluation

The audit process was established to help uncover and improve shortcomings. In that sense, the self-evaluation was found to be a most useful tool. It is a splendid tool for analysing operations, opening up processes and finding blind spots that have lacked the needed criticism and suggestions for improvement. In a large university such as the University of Helsinki, the differences between processes and units clearly emerged.

Another point of view is that the self-evaluation process forces us to work together to discuss basic quality concepts and search for better ways to operate. People coming from different parts of a big and diversified university think and tend to operate in different ways. Very often we hear academics – and also members of administrative staff – describe the necessity of a variety of methods of operation. When considering an issue with colleagues from different parts of the University, it may arise that somewhere else the same operation is performed in a notably more efficient and clear way, and that good practice can be disseminated and taken into active use in other units.

The third, and more or less the core idea of the self-evaluation, is to provide the audit team with a basic analysis of the quality assurance system from the HEI in question. After reading the report, the members of the audit team have a preliminary understanding of the HEI. Their task is to compare the information acquired through the self-evaluation with that gained through interviews. When the information is not parallel, the audit group must consider what information is closer to the truth.

The audit is not aimed to be a tool of control, but a tool of enhancement. In any case, it would be instructive to know whether the HEI has worked honestly when preparing the self-evaluation document. The audit team was asked if their observations were consistent and reliable. Reliability is the most important principle in every evaluation process. It is a challenge for both sides, at the HEI and within the audit team. If one cannot rely on the other, the results are irrelevant and unbelievable. For the HEI, this may mean a failed audit and the necessity of undergoing a re-audit process. However, since the reliability of an audit team cannot be proven, one must trust the audit results as far as possible.

The self-evaluation process was challenging, and it raised the idea of quality management as a whole and its effects inside the University. Regardless of the fact that all units did not complete their own self-evaluation, a considerable number of the members of the University community participated in the process, either completely voluntarily or ex officio because of their work duties.



The mastery of quality concepts was especially challenging. Everyone had to consider what terms such as quality policy, quality culture, quality management, quality assurance and quality work mean, as well as what message these terms send to “ordinary” members of the University community. Because these concepts are as integral to the self-evaluation report as its headings, they could not be “translated into” standard language. Instead, they had to be employed throughout the process with the hope of not alienating ordinary community members from participating in the core of quality work. At the University of Helsinki, quality assurance is tightly integrated into the management system and is part of our normal daily work. A recommendation by the audit panel was that the University should make the quality system more visible and develop an overall blueprint for the architecture of the quality system.

Primarily, self-evaluation served overall quality management. It also provided an excellent starting point for the evaluation and development of different functions and their sub-functions. The joint self-evaluation workshop on support services, which evaluated support services as part of all core functions, serves as an example of this. The “siloesation” of support services was identified, and common procedures to improve the quality of core functions through support services were discovered.

We are currently starting the self-evaluation of the whole audit process. FINEEC asks for feedback from the HEIs taking part in an audit during the previous few months. It is hoped that this feedback is also honest and not flattering and that it aims to improve the whole system. The same situation can be found throughout working life: you do not dare to criticize your superior for fear of sanctions. But a clever boss, as well as a thinking member of an audit team and an official working at FINEEC, will honestly consider the possibilities of improvements in the audit process. Therefore, the sense of self-assessment runs through the entire process, nourishing and improving it through co-operation with HEIs.

### **References:**

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