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Her doctoral dissertation is about "Quality Audits in Finnish Higher Education Institutions".

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## Proposal

**Title:** The perception of external quality management in times of change – Finland's academic landscape as a case example

**Abstract (150 words max):**

While most of the European countries conduct accreditations, quality audits are the Finnish way to follow the Berlin conference's demand of implementing an external quality assurance instrument on national level. Even though mainly considered as a highly effective instrument to improve the quality management of universities, they have not been without criticism. As the Finnish universities are facing profound external changes for the last decade, the question how the attitude towards quality audits changed is the key question the paper in hand follows. By carrying out a cohort comparison between 2009 and 2017, we explore if the perception of external quality management changed in a positive or negative direction. The results show that the perception is slightly more positive in 2017 than in 2009. This might indicate that people working in higher education institutions became more familiar with quality work; external changes can be regarded as subordinated and distracting.

**The paper is based on:** research

**Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.** No

**Text of paper (3000 words max):**

### 1. Introduction

Against the background of budgetary restrictions, demographic developments, competition caused by globalization, and the impact of the knowledge society in the 1990s, the European higher education sector has been subjected to far-reaching reforms, such as the implementation of the New Public Management Model. More and more seen as a provider, educational institutions are increasingly measured by their efficiency and their output (cf. Anderson 2008; Dobbins et al. 2011).

Quality management is an instrument of high importance in this process of introducing managerialist ideas into the public sector. To meet the described challenges, expanded by the new challenges caused by the Bologna process, quality management plays an important role in European universities nowadays in order to scrutinize, assure and develop the universities quality (cf. Schwarz et al. 2005, p. 7; Sursock 2015, p. 10). "Apparently, the quality of higher education is no longer seen as self-evident, but as a value about which different actors in higher education systems have different views", as Westerheijden et al. (2007, p. 1) observe.

However, quality management is not only concerned with the micro level: In 2003, the Berlin Conference, a follow-up conference of the Bologna Process, decided that quality management should play a role on the national level as well: "[B]y 2005, national quality assurance systems should include [...] a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures" (ENQA 2003, p. 3).

This decision led to different developments in the European countries. While for example the Netherlands, France, Germany or the UK took the path of accreditation, Finland has chosen a 'comparable procedure' by implementing the system of quality audits. Since 2005, they are conducted by the 'Finnish Education Evaluation Centre' (shortened form: FINEEC; until 2014 FINHEEC), an independent government agency, and aim to evaluate the university'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). Higher education institutions are audited every six years. By 2012, every Finnish university had been audited and the second round of audits will end in 2018. To reach the audit's goal, a multi-level process is applied. It consists of for example self-evaluations, the audit group's visit to the university, the publication of an audit-report, and the awarding of a quality label (cf. Alavähälä 2011, FINEEC 2015).

The Finnish system of audits serves as an example of good practice in other countries, especially because of its focus on learning instead of control. For example in the current German debate on the procedure of accreditations, the Finnish way is seen as a kind of 'royal road' of external quality assurance (cf. Overberg/Röbken 2017). However, previous studies indicate that the process has not



been without any problems. Even though considered as generally effective and reasonable, universities of applied sciences have a more positive attitude towards the audits than research universities do, where audits are often seen as an additional burden and as a one-time exercise. Especially researchers at universities are quite critical towards the audits while persons in management positions tend to be more open-minded. One central impact of the first audit round was the implementation of a quality management system specifically for the audit (cf. Ala-Vähälä 2011, Ala-Vähälä/Saarinen 2013). While the audit process helped the individual departments and communities of universities to build up their own identities as well as to gain social integration, some departments considered the audits and their feedback as rather pointless because of the lack of connection to their daily work and the additional work load. In general, the impact of the audits differed a lot between universities and between faculties, depending for example on the different cultures (Haapakorpi 2011).

## 2. State of the problem

While this was the situation in 2009, many changes in the framework of Finnish universities occurred since then. What happened in Finland?

For several years, the Finnish economy suffers from a recession. Important sectors such as the electronic sector or the paper industry were not able to maintain the strong position in the world market they had for a long time. The gross domestic product growth is currently below the European average. This has an enormous impact on the public sector, including the higher education field. Especially the new government, which has been in office since May 2015, has set itself the objective of reducing expenditures as far as possible, a direction which has already been taken by the former government. In 2010, a profound reform of the university system was conducted.

The largest part was the new university law, which replaced the previous version of 1997. Among other changes, the extension of the universities' autonomy and the change of the legal status has been decided – universities are now either bodies of public law or foundations – as well as the merging of universities. The fact that this merging was subsidized to a large extent by the government increased the popularity of this procedure: Since 2009, the number of universities has already been reduced from 49 to 38. A further reduction can be expected. In the future, there will be fewer universities which are even more dependent on the government's and the Ministry of Education's demand to build up an individual profile and thus to be able to compete in the international competition. In addition to that, university staff is no longer employed by the state since 2010; civil-service employment relationships became contractual employment relationships (cf. Aarrevaara et al. 2009, pp. 4ff.; Kohtamäki 2014, p. 80; Saarivirta/Jaatinen 2016, p. 107ff.; Diogo 2016, pp. 364ff.; Overberg/Röbken 2017, p. 27).

In concrete numbers, the current economic developments affect that the expenses on education have been cut by 210 million euros in 2016. The University of Helsinki will face a reduction of around 100 million euros by 2020. The first consequences were already drawn: in the first half of 2016, the university let go 560 employees, and it should be a total of 1000 by the end of 2017. This corresponds to 10% of the total staff (cf. Myklebust/Dobson 2015, Teivainen 2016).

It is obvious that these changes also cause changes in the (quality) management of the Finnish universities, and they may also have an impact to the reception of the processes of quality assurance and audits. FINEEC itself assesses the audits and their reports in its last year's self-evaluation as more important than ever before: „[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, S. 5).

So far, several studies have paid attention to the effect of those changes on Finnish university staff: Ylijoki (2014) carried out in-depth interviews with Finnish academics working under structural reforms and investigated how they make sense of and respond to them. She found out that those reforms “sensitize academics to a growing need for profiling, branding and justifying their existence” (Ylijoki 2014, p. 72). Influenced by a certain anxiety about the future, external steering is perceived as a particular pressure for academics in this situation, especially against the background of growing competition. By conducting a document analysis, a literature review and interviews, Diogo (2016) found i. a. out that especially the fact that university staff lost its civil servant status was one of the most significant changes concerning the university working conditions, even though it is perceived both positively and negatively. Additionally, Finnish university staff is concerned about the constant increase

of administrative and bureaucratic work, for example concerning budgeting (cf. Diogo 2016, pp. 364ff.). Kallio et al. (2016) examined the influence of performance management, which is closely connected to the new university act, on Finnish academics. By carrying out a mixed methods study, they investigated that, even though perceived rather negatively, Finnish academics state that factors like performance management cause a profound change in the ethos of being an academic (cf. Kallio et al. 2016, pp. 685ff.). Moreover, further interviews from 2016 with Finnish academics suggest that the described changes might also affect the university staff's attitude towards quality management and audits: People working at universities might attach less importance to quality audits since other topics and developments are more important. Vice versa, it is possible that the relevance increases since they are considered as an instrument used to rank universities, whether officially or unofficially. The focus of the third audit-round is expected with great curiosity (cf. Overberg/Röbken 2017, p. 30f.). In addition, quality assurance may become a scapegoat for general frustration, caused by the various other developments mentioned above.

The situation in the Finnish higher education sector changed rapidly during the last six years – due to the fact that the last comprehensive studies on the audits has been conducted in 2009, an analysis on how the impacts, attitudes and importance of the audits have changed can give relevant insights. The summarized key question of our paper is: In what way does a change in organizational framework conditions influence the attitude towards external quality assurance?

### 3. Methodology

In 2008, FINEEC distributed funding to projects assessing the impact of its audits. Two projects were financed: “What do audits accomplish? Research on the impact of HEI quality assurance system audits” (Ala-Vähälä 2011) and “The audit processes and their outcomes in universities” (Haapakorpi 2011). The summarized results are presented in chapter 1.

As Ala-Vähälä's research focused especially on the person's attitudes towards quality management and especially audits, it is considered as suitable for our research purposes. After conducting 38 qualitative interviews, he started a web-survey and collected data from four Finnish research universities and four universities of applied sciences. In research universities, he addressed the personnel in administration and support services as well as the personnel in faculties (social sciences, natural sciences, educational sciences, faculties of law) and in universities of applied sciences, he addressed the administration and support services and personnel in different study fields (social services, health and sport, technology, communication, social sciences, business administration and culture). The questionnaire, which was available in Finnish and English, mainly asked for the participant's attitudes toward quality work in general and the reception of quality audits in particular by letting the participants judge 58 statements on a Likert-Scale from 1-5. All in all, he received 901 answers (response rate: 8,9 per cent in universities and 21,3 per cent in polytechnics) (Ala-Vähälä 2016, pp. 3ff.).

As stated in chapter 2, the situation in the Finnish higher education sector changed rapidly during the last eight years. By using Ala-Vähälä's results as a point of comparison, changes on the impacts, attitudes and importance of the audits can be deduced. Even though the questions used in Ala-Vähälä's survey generally fit our research purposes, some preparatory work has been done in order to update them (for example: instead of asking for the first audit we asked for the last audit). All in all, the new questionnaire consists of 52 statements to be judged on a Likert-Scale from 1-5, among them 9 new items. After translating the questionnaire (it is available in Finnish, English and Swedish) and transferring the questions to an online-questionnaire, data from four Finnish research universities and three universities of applied sciences has been collected. Even though addressing the same universities as eight years ago would have been useful, we abstained from contacting the ones which have an audit upcoming soon in order to not distort the survey results. All in all, two of the research universities from 2009 and two of the universities of applied sciences from 2009 took part. The other three universities have not been addressed in 2009. The data was analyzed by using SPSS.

Table 1: addressed HEIs in 2009 and 2017

	in 2009	in 2017
1.	University of Jyväskylä	University of Jyväskylä
2.	University of Lapland	University of Lapland
3.	University of Turku	University of Helsinki
4.	University of Tampere	Åbo Akademi

5.	Turku University of applied sciences	Turku University of applied sciences
6.	Satakunta University of applied sciences	Satakunta University of applied sciences
7.	Lapland University of applied sciences	Saimaa University of applied sciences
8.	Savonia University of applied sciences	

#### 4. Preliminary results<sup>1</sup>

In the following, we present a selected comparison of the results from 2009 and 2017. The results are preliminary and on a descriptive basis. However, some first tendencies can be derived.

Table 2: means 2009 and 2017

	2009	2017
<i>A quality system makes it more difficult to carry out practical work.</i>	3,17	2,74
<i>Due to the quality system, it is easier to understand how things proceed in administration.</i>	2,85	2,85
<i>Audits and external evaluations that are part of the quality work take too much time in comparison to the benefits that they give.</i>	4,00	3,26
<i>In my opinion, my university or university of applied sciences gave reliable and sufficient information about the (last) audit before it was carried out.</i>	3,79	3,83
<i>I followed the process of the (last) audit with great interest.</i>	3,41	3,02
<i>The quality system of our university or university of applied sciences was presented to the audit group truthfully, pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses.</i>	3,79	3,76
<i>In my opinion, audits are used as an excuse for implementing reforms that would not have succeeded otherwise.</i>	3,26	2,91
<i>Preparations for audits were a good learning experience.</i>	3,69	3,45
<i>The quality system of our university or university of applied sciences exists primarily in order to pass the audit.</i>	3,40	2,91
<i>The preparation for the (last) audit took place in a positive atmosphere.</i>	3,71	3,78
<i>If my university or university of applied sciences 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.</i>	4,20	4,13

The very preliminary analysis indicates that the people working in higher education institutions are slightly more positive towards audits than they were in 2009. While in some of the statements there is no difference at all, especially the statements which are formulated in a negative direction receive less agreement than they did in 2009. Overall, the perception of quality audits is good, even though the general interest decreased.

#### 5. Discussion

Our very first results show that the audits are perceived more positively in 2017 than in 2009 and that the general interest towards them decreased. This might indicate that the people working in higher education institutions are more familiar with the quality work nowadays: they do not see it as much as an obstacle to effective working and they are less skeptical or suspicious towards the audits – while the audits were quite new in 2009 and the first round was going on then, the second round of audits is

<sup>1</sup> The survey has been opened on the 30th of May 2017 and will be closed on the 31st of August 2017. When handing in this paper, the number of respondents was 557; 268 of them completed the whole questionnaire. The findings presented refer to the responses we have so far.



almost over in 2017. People seem to 'got used' to the audits and do not see it as a disconcerting threat anymore. This development reflects in a way the research results presented in chapter 2: people working in higher education institutions are confronted with several changes influencing their daily working life and academic careers – quality audits can be considered as a minor matter and not as an 'extraordinary happening' anymore. While the (external) quality management seems to be more or less accepted among the persons working in higher education, there are now other, newer developments catching the persons' attention and worries. Thus, the question formulated in the beginning (In what way does a change in organizational framework conditions influence the attitude towards external quality assurance?) can be answered as follows: the results indicate that a change in organizational framework conditions diverts the attention people working at universities away from external quality management. Of course, one needs to consider the individual situation of a country – the perception might be different if e. g. the implementation of external quality management happens at the same time other external changes take place.

In interpreting these preliminary findings, we have to take into account that these results need still more detailed analysis, e. g. a profound comparison of means by conducting a Mann-Whitney U Test. In addition to that, the results of 2009 indicate that the attitudes differ according to the status of the respondent in his/her university and differences in response activity may have had an impact on these preliminary results. Therefore, our findings ought to be treated as tentative until a profound analysis has been conducted and more data has been collected.

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#### **Discussion questions:**

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?



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