EUA Institutional Evaluation Programme

ÅBO AKADEMI, ÅBO / TURKU

EUA REVIEWERS’ FOLLOW-UP REPORT

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Foreword

During 1997 the Åbo Akademi requested an institutional evaluation by the CRE. The preliminary and main visits took place in January and May 1998 respectively. The report of the review was presented in November 1998. Åbo Akademi requested CRE (now EUA) for a follow-up visit, and this took place from 2 to 4 May 2001. The follow up team consisted of Professors Dirk Bresters and Inge Jonsson (Chairman), who were members of the original review team, and Professor Malcolm Frazer (Secretary).
The Follow-up Process

Since 1998 CRE has offered, as an extension to its institutional evaluation programme, the possibility of a follow-up visit. The rationale is that a second visit can assist the university to evaluate the progress it has made since the original review. What was the impact of the original visit? What use has the university made of the evaluation report? How far has it been able to address the issues raised in the report? The follow-up visit also is an opportunity for the university to take stock of its strategies for managing change in the context of internal and external constraints and opportunities.

In line with the CRE institutional evaluation programme as a whole, the follow-up process is a supportive one. There is no prescribed procedure, and it is for the university to set the agenda in the light of its experiences since the review. The university is expected to submit its own evaluation report which will describe the progress made, possibly indicating barriers to change. The university’s report will also indicate the issues it wishes to discuss with the follow-up team.

The report from Åbo Akademi, prepared by Rector Gustav Björkstrand and his colleagues, was received by the follow-up team in advance of the visit. Further papers were made available during the visit. Although these were mainly in Swedish, the Chairman was able to translate them for the other members of the team. During the two day visit, the team had meetings with the Rector, Pro-Rectors and staff in the Rector’s Office; the Chairman of the Structural Change Group; staff of the Careers Service; members of the Senate including some deans; a faculty director; directors of the Library, the Computer Centre, the Language Centre and the Continuing Education Centre; representatives of the Student Union; members of the Board for Quality Enhancement; and the Registrar. A particularly valuable part of the visit was an open seminar attended by about forty staff from the Akademi as well as a representative of the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council. The visit concluded with an oral report to the Rector, the Chancellor and senior staff of Åbo Akademi on the preliminary findings of the follow-up team.
**Åbo Akademi**

Åbo Akademi is the only wholly Swedish-speaking multi-disciplinary university in Finland. It is situated in Turku (Åbo is the Swedish name for Turku). The two other higher education institutions in Turku, both Finnish speaking, are the University of Turku and the Turku School of Economics and Business Administration. Åbo Akademi was founded in 1918, although its roots go back much further. There are three campuses: at Åbo, Vasa and Jakobstad. There are about 7,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students. There are seven faculties. The five based in Åbo are: Faculties of Arts (14 departments and 3 institutes), Mathematics and Natural Sciences (8 departments and 1 institute), Economics and Social Sciences (8 departments and 6 institutes), Chemical Engineering, Theology (3 departments and 2 institutes). The two primarily based in Vasa, comprising the Osterbottens Hogskola are: Faculties of Education (4 departments) and Social and Caring Sciences (4 departments).

**Developments between Review and Follow-up**

The 1998 review report contained several suggestions for Åbo Akademi to consider. The follow-up team (hereinafter “team”) was interested to learn how far these suggestions had been pursued.

**Structural changes**

The 1998 report contained some comments about the size of the Senate. It was noted that with 27 members it was the largest university senate in Finland. Since 1998, the Senate itself, and other groups in the Akademi, have given consideration to the optimum size and mechanisms for changing the size. However, no change has so far been made. The team discussed this issue at several of its meetings, and it was pleased to hear from all the senators it met that Senate meetings are efficient and that the current composition (Rector and two Vice-Rectors, 8 representatives of the professors - which usually includes the 7 deans, 8 representatives of teaching and other staff, and 8 representatives of students) provides satisfactory representation. The team is now of the opinion: “if it works, why change it?” The team does have a suggestion about staggering elections to the Senate (see below), but no longer sees any reason for changing its size.
The 1998 report suggested that Senate meetings should be less concerned with technical details and should concentrate more on policy issues. The Rector’s report for the follow-up indicated that definite progress had been made, and that Senate meetings are now much more concerned with far-reaching strategic decision making. It was difficult for the team to confirm this directly, because the senators it met had so far only attended two meetings. The Rector has introduced a scheme of schooling for new senators. This has been much appreciated and the team encourages the Akademi to develop this scheme further.

The team was pleased to hear of two changes, in line with its 1998 proposals, to assist with strategic planning. The first is the introduction of regular informal meetings between the rectorate and the deans. These have clearly been successful, but the team cautions that care must be taken not to give the impression, held by some it met, that these meetings are in fact those of an “inner cabinet”.

Their operational, and not policy making, character should be stressed. The team understands that the librarian cannot have an ex-officio seat on Senate, as is the case in universities in some countries, but does suggest that the librarian might be included in the rectorate / deans informal meetings. The second change, confirmed at several of the team’s meetings is that much more “power” (the team would prefer “responsibility”) has been devolved from Senate to faculty boards. In this context, the strengthening of the role of faculty directors, formerly titled “faculty secretaries” has been helpful.

There was a strong view in 1998, that 51 departments was far too many. The decision to reduce the number to 22 from August 2001 is to be welcomed. However, the process of implementing this change should not be under-estimated.
Pedagogic changes

After considerable internal consultation, the Senate has recently agreed to introduce from August 2001 a three term system, which will replace the present two semester system which had been identified as inefficient. The team welcomed this change and suggests that its impact be monitored. As proposed in the 1998 review, graduate schools have now been widely introduced and are working well. In the academic year 2000, the Akademi awarded 50 doctoral degrees exceeding its target by 13.

Staff development in pedagogy is now compulsory for all new teachers, and is available on request to all academic staff. The team was encouraged by the wide support for this initiative. However, it was noted that many staff have short term contracts and that their future depends on research publications, consequently they do not pay much attention to teaching. The Akademi should make efforts to address this problem.

External changes

The Government has introduced a new system of funding for higher education. Basically, one third of the funds depend on achieving pre-set targets for awarding master and doctoral degrees. This “output funding model” was discussed with the team at most of its sessions. There is no evidence at present that standards had been reduced in order to meet targets, but there was recognition that if the system continued, and particularly if the targets were increased, there could overtime be negative effects on quality. The team noted that the present funding system is being evaluated and there is likely to be a new system from 2004.

Management of change and quality

Following the 1998 review, the Rector established two working groups (Structural Change Group and the “Tiger” Group) to advise on the changes necessary. The team had access to the reports and welcomed the proposals contained in them, many of which had already been implemented. Clearly the groups had been effective. The short time scale for producing their reports may have been advantageous. The team noted that not everyone it met had had access to the reports and suggests that for such groups to be fully effective in the future, reports should be widely disseminated.

The Board for Quality Enhancement has recently recommended to the Senate that all programmes and the corresponding amount of credit should be re-evaluated. The team detected some resistance to the proposal, but hopes that the faculty boards will undertake this task. It is a requirement of the Ministry that all universities undertake regular self-evaluation. However, this appears to be based mainly on student questionnaires. There is much more to self-evaluation than obtaining the views of students. It is understood that an element of external evaluation is to be introduced and the team would encourage this.
It is also essential that the information gathered by evaluation is converted into corrective actions, and that feedback on self-evaluation results is disseminated. In this respect, the team noted that the Board for Quality Enhancement has no administrative support exclusively for self-evaluation. There is clearly a need for the appointment of some permanent staff dedicated to quality assurance and enhancement (please see also the section below on the size of the central administration)

**Unresolved Issues from the 1998 Review**

**Age profile**

The team was disappointed that not more has been done to address this issue. It reiterates the view expressed in the 1998 report that Åbo Akademi is "storing up a problem" for the future. It is recognised that this is a national problem and the introduction of schemes to encourage early retirement offers the best solution. The creation of the akademi lecturer positions is also a partial solution and might be further developed.

**Period of service for senators, deans, etc.**

The team had much discussion on this issue, and fully appreciates the concern not to put student senators at a disadvantage. However, there does seem to be recognition that a two year period on Senate is too short, particularly when all senators retire at the same time. The team recommends that this issue is re-considered, and suggests that a partial solution might be to stagger the elections, so that there are always some senators with more experience.

A three year term for deans might be made more attractive by allowing sabbatical leave at the end. Sabbatical leave might also be introduced for pro-rectors.

**The optimum size for the Akademi**

Although it was suggested in the 1998 review that the optimum size should be considered, the team now accepts that this is a complex problem and that there is no simple solution. There are too many external factors, particularly the national system of funding higher education and the demography of Swedish speakers in Finland who could benefit by attending university.

**Bachelor degrees and credit**

The team recognises that it is not within the power of Åbo Akademi to alter the situation that, although the Government has introduced Bachelor degrees, it does not provide funding for them. This was pointed out in the 1998 Review, but becomes even more anomalous in the light of the Bologna declaration. The team hopes that the Akademi will strongly press the Government, when it introduces a new funding system in 2004, to rectify this situation.
The team understands that there is another anomaly in funding which needs attention. At present, some students take more credits than necessary to graduate. This is because student stipends are for 55 months, whereas the minimum time to graduate is 48 months. There is nothing wrong with students wishing to take additional credit, but the additional resources used need to be supported by additional funding.

Findings from the Follow-up

Drop out

The team understands that the number of students dropping out from studies is 50% of the intake. Although the team was told that this is close to the national figure, it does seem to be excessively high. Furthermore, an institution priding itself on the quality of its provision should not be complacent about being at the national average. The team recommends that Åbo Akademi should do more: (i) to make sure that there is greater awareness of the percentage drop out, (ii) to investigate the causes, and (iii) to take actions to reduce the drop out. More attention to student counselling through mentors and advisers might be helpful. Although student advisory systems work well in some faculties, they should be extended to all faculties and further developed. The team was impressed by the work of the careers guidance team.

External co-operation

The extent of co-operation is commended. The team was particularly impressed by (i) the amount of external funding for research, (ii) co-operation between the three institutions in Turku, and (iii) interactions with the ammattikorkeakoulu (AMK), particularly as a source of students to be admitted to study programmes at the Akademi.

The team noted that the overheads on external funding are still low compared with other countries. Some progress has been made, but the team suggests that there is a need to increase the overheads percentage even further. Every opportunity should be taken to explain openly to staff applying for external funds and to external funders why overheads are needed and the practice in other countries.

Size of the central administration

In many institutions of higher education this is a matter of dispute, as the team found at Åbo Akademi. Academic departments allege that the central administration is too large and the central administration complains it is too small to fulfil all the internal and external demands. The team was unable to resolve this dispute during a two day visit, but strongly suggests that it is resolved. The way forward is clear.
The team recommends that there is an external assessment of the tasks which fall on the central administration and that this “needs analysis” is then related to the job descriptions of specific posts. In this way, the number and level of any new posts will be identified.

**Osterbottens Hogska / Ostrobothina Unit at Vasa**

There is still some tension between the two major sites. There is a need to clarify the role of the Senate at Vasa in the context of the Åbo Akademi Senate. The team understands the need to have a consultative body at Vasa with powers to make decisions at local level, but wonders whether some cause of the tension is by it having the name “senate”. The new single campus at Vasa, which will be ready in 2003, will enable greater efficiency and clearer identity.

**Interaction with the Community**

The *Samhällsdelegationen* is a forum for discussion between the Akademi and the local community. The team gained the impression that although this is useful, it could be further strengthened. The team strongly commends the work of the Centre for Continuing Education.

**Students**

This report ends with the most important component of any university - its students. The team had useful meetings with representatives of the students. They were supportive of the education and facilities provided by Åbo Akademi, and it is clear that they have an opportunity to contribute to its future development.
Envoi

Rector Gustav Björkstrand, and all his colleagues at Åbo Akademi, are thanked most sincerely for their warm reception and generous hospitality. The open approach of all members of the Akademi at the various meetings with the team was greatly appreciated, and helped to make the follow-up visit a positive experience for all concerned. It was clear that considerable progress had been made since the initial visit in 1998, and the team is now certain that Åbo Akademi will continue to develop, and adapt to changing circumstances, effectively and confidently.