MY QUALITY

An Introduction to the Concepts of Quality and Quality Management at Åbo Akademi University

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1 INTRODUCTION

Quality is often asked for in ceremonial speeches about research and education, but the meaning of the term is rarely specified. In this booklet we try to explain what the concept of quality contains and how we want to apply it in our daily work at Åbo Akademi University. Finally we introduce the notion of quality manuals. Our system of manuals demonstrates how we convert theory into practice. It also shows why we should be proud of belonging to Åbo Akademi University.

2 WHAT IS QUALITY?

The concept of quality helps us value a specific phenomenon, a service or a product. Most of us recognize good quality without further ado. We also know when quality is poor. However, it is very difficult to define quality, and therefore, comparison is fundamental for defining. Criteria are also important to evaluate since the outcome relates to the context of the phenomenon we want to evaluate. Therefore, we have to take into consideration the individual experiences, demands and skills of the evaluator. For example, a chef in a restaurant is more likely to have higher demands on a cucumber than a general consumer, and a mechanic demands more from a car than an average driver does.

Quality can be regarded from two separate perspectives. On the one hand, a decision maker is dependent on laws and general instructions. He continuously evaluates his own work along the criteria given in those documents in order to guarantee that he acts appropriately and makes the right decisions. On the other hand, a person responsible for a product or a service tries to convince people that his service or product is of high quality. In doing this he introduces the concept of reliability by providing evidence of how the product or the service was produced. This is the way in which universities demonstrate their capacity with regard to other universities, financial supporters, stakeholders, applicants and authorities.

What do we mean by quality?

Two conditions precede quality definition:

a) The purpose of a process must be defined (for example “What outcome do we wish to reach by a specific program?”)

b) The quality of the specific process must be defined (“What kind of quality do we want to demonstrate?”)

At Åbo Akademi University we see quality in the following way:

All kinds of university activities have their defined goals. These goals must be reached in an ethical, efficient, and planned manner continuously correcting deficiencies and aiming at improvement. Methods for considering reliability and validity must be clearly described. However, in many cases quality assessment contains subjective components.

3 WHAT IS QUALITY MANAGEMENT?

In our everyday tasks we hardly think about matters of quality. We conduct our research, studies and other activities by routine. Sometimes we may make a conscious effort to improve our routines, but we are more likely to stay in the same routine and make very little changes. We are usually compliant to changes when new demands are made from within or from the outside. For instance a new law or a big crisis can make us reflect over our routines. We ask questions such as “What works well?” , “What does not work well?” , “Why does it not work?”, and “What should I do to make it work better?” These kinds of questions are the foundation for quality management. However, in quality management we do not wait until something happens, instead we
continuously reflect over our procedures, processes and routines. We try to improve them preventively in order to minimize risks.

**Quality management and quality assurance**

There are two concepts to consider. Quality assurance is a concept that comes from the field of industry and contains conscious work in order to improve the products of a factory. However, in universities and other non-industrial institutions, quality matters concern a wider range of processes than in industry. Assurance is but one of several important processes within quality management. Therefore, we adopted quality management as a suitable concept for the entire process.

*Quality management consists of the governance, development and assurance of operational quality, as well as the education in quality thinking offered at the university. The purpose of quality management is to improve the prerequisites for activities in the academia, reduce the risks and keep a high standard of reliability on all levels of the organization.*

4. WHAT IS A QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM?

An organized and complete system for quality management is needed in order to demonstrate a high reliability of operational quality. As an illustration, let us assume that you want to invest money in a football team and there are two equal options. Would you pick the team with many strong individuals or the one with a well organized coaching, good junior activities and a thoroughly planned future?

A quality management system does not only assure and develop quality, but it also explains how these goals should be reached and how responsibility is distributed. It concerns all parts, functions, and methods used to assure and develop quality. It covers the planning process and all other processes, resources and documents concerning how to reach the goals set and how to account for the results.

The system is part of the steering on all levels. It must offer answers to questions about responsibility, structure and results posed by internal and external stakeholders. Its goal is to increase the reliability of the university and to satisfy the different stakeholders.

4.1 The quality management system of Åbo Akademi University

There are four basic principles along which the quality management system is built. All of which are needed in order to reach the aims of a quality management system. Practical everyday work routines are described in the quality manuals.

1. Active steering
2. Identified responsibility
3. Continuous development
4. Documentation
4.1.1 Active steering

Steering means functions for control and, if needed, positive change of the activities at the university. Åbo Akademi University defines three types of steering: strategic, operative, and qualitative steering. Steering mechanisms must be continuous and together create a meaningful whole.

For instance: a group of people are lost in the forest. What can they do? Firstly, they analyze alternative solutions respecting each individual’s capacities. Then each of them receives an individual task to fulfill in order to find their way home again. They will reach the best outcome if everybody knows and accepts the procedure.

Strategic steering
Strategic steering at Åbo Akademi University means the activities through which the university evaluates societal development and its role and position relating to the development. The aim is to change and improve work from an overall perspective.

Vision → strategy → working plans

Operative steering
Operative steering at Åbo Akademi University means the activities that aim to improve the goals formulated in visions, strategies and working plans through concrete economic frames, defined responsibilities and right, a defined control system, and instructions for practical work.

Annual planning → realization → follow-up

Qualitative steering
Qualitative steering at Åbo Akademi University means the activities that aim to strengthen a common model for how work should be conducted at the university.

Democracy + education + commitment + follow-up

Ethics + care + individual desire → quality culture

For instance: You believe that you reach your goal quicker if you drive through a red light. If everybody is allowed to create his individual rules nobody really gets there. Correspondingly we have to base the activities within our university on rules and common decisions that everyone is committed to. If commitment fails we get decisions without realization.

4.1.2 Identified responsibility

From the very beginning every individual affiliated with Åbo Akademi University should know his responsibilities and rights. There are three types of responsibility.

In a building firm the electrician knows that she is responsible for the electric system. Her work is of the quality provided by her. There is also a builder in charge of the quality of the entire house. Finally, the building contractor is responsible for the quality demanded from the customer who buys the house.

Responsibility for a specific task
Work at Åbo Akademi University is a conglomerate of processes. Large processes can be divided into smaller ones. If one divides processes into small enough parts they feel like separated tasks. In the quality management system of Åbo Akademi University every part of a process has a
specific and named person in charge, whose documented responsibility is to see to it that the task is performed to its purpose.

**Individual responsibility**
At Åbo Akademi University every individual has their independent responsibility to conduct the specific working task/s in a correct way. This is a right as well as a responsibility. He or she should work according to the law, considerately and professionally. Common changes can be realized only through individual decisions and activities.

**Steering responsibility**
Laws, regulations, and internal instructions establish rights and responsibilities for managers and authorities to control work. Control does not only mean to look for mistakes and lacks, but also to maintain an overall responsibility to analyze each situation in order to support development. This kind of steering aims at confirming a functional work method or intervention if needed.

### 4.1.3 Continuous development

A cyclic model for development guarantees continuous improvement. Every part of a working process must be planned. Repeated processes must be documented. In realizing a process one has to check how the methods work. There is a follow-up system, and responsible persons make use of the results when they plan for the future.

### 4.1.4 Documentation

At Åbo Akademi University documentation is a prerequisite for demonstrating a high international quality level in a reliable way. Documentation at Åbo Akademi University is divided into five categories. The documents are archived according to a special system.

#### Policy documents
Development and long-term goals at Åbo Akademi University are formulated in visions, strategies, working programs and working plans.

#### Over-all descriptions
The organization and work at Åbo Akademi University of today are described in quality manuals on three levels. See chapter 5.

1. The quality manuals of the university
2. The quality manuals of departments/institutions/administrative fields
3. The quality manuals of subjects in a faculty/units in a department/ unit of an administrative field.

The Board of Åbo Akademi University decided on manuals on the first two levels. Manuals of the third level are voluntary or can be written on demand from faculty boards or relevant administrative units.

#### General documents
General documents are general regulations in the law, the administrative instruction and corresponding norms.
Specified documents
These are process descriptions, routines, instructions and concrete plans for taking measures describing how work is, or should be, conducted. The goal is to make sure that the work is conducted and steered in a correct way.

Accounting documents
These are reports and minutes demonstrating the results that have been reached at the university.

4.1.5 The organisation of quality work

To support and ensure that quality enhancement takes place on all levels of the university there are a network of committees and appointed persons.

The tasks and responsibilities of the committees and appointed persons are presented on https://www.abo.fi/personal/en/organisation
5. WHAT IS A QUALITY MANUAL?

A quality manual presents how quality management is conducted. The manual provides a means for students, employees and other interested people to receive an over-all image of the relevant unit and how routines are realized. It also describes how things generally are at the moment. The manual also helps new employees and students understand how their place of work/studies functions. There is an introduction to general functions at the university, as well as links to adequate websites, such as:

Laws, instructions and other documents that steer the work
- The tasks of a specific unit
- How the unit is organized
- How responsibility is divided
- How work is planned and realized
- Methods for control, follow-up, evaluation and development

All manuals are electronic according to a universal, given structure. If you learn the structure of one of them it is easy to find corresponding information in the other ones, for comparison between different units. In this way good practice and methods of work is spread easily.

You can find all quality manuals in one web place via a link on Åbo Akademi University’s front page.

Take a look at
https://www.abo.fi/personal/en/kvalitet

The Quality Assurance Unit