The National Audit of the Quality System of Universities

The Model for 2015-2018

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Why do we have national audits?

- The European effort to create an collective Higher Education Area EHEA (the Bologna process) requires every member state to ensure that the universities have reliable mechanisms for quality assurance
  - To be trustworthy a member state must have a system in place that checks the universities’ QA-mechanisms on a regular basis.

- The University Act of Finland states that the universities must take part in external evaluation of their activities and quality assurance systems on a regular basis.
Tools for checking the quality assurance systems

- Two QA-tools dominate in Europe, audits and accreditations
  - Audit - checks if the unit has sufficient mechanisms
    - to fulfil laws and regulations
    - to reach their own set goals
    - mostly used for institutions (development orientated)
  - Accreditation - checks if the unit achieves a specified minimum quality level set by the accrediting body
    - mostly used for study programmes (national/international standardization)
  - Audits and Accreditations have become more and more intertwined. Nowadays the national QA-tool is often a combination of both.
The National Structure

- The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) defines the national structure for quality system evaluations
  - In what way will the quality system be assessed
  - What must be fulfilled to get the quality system approved

- FINEEC introduced audits in 2005
  - The structure consists of external evaluations (audits) of the university’s quality system every six years
  - The university reports on how it is assuring and developing the quality of its operations
  - An appointed panel of experts reads through the material and then visits the university to conduct interviews with staff members, students and other parties linked to the university
  - The evaluation results in a public report referring to good practice at the university but also giving recommendations for further enhancement
The Audit Process and Approval

- The Audit checks the quality management at the university from different angles via six audit targets.

- For each target there are given criteria that can be described as levels of development.

- There are four levels of development:
  - Absent, emerging, developing and advanced.

- To pass the audit the university must not get any target assessed as absent and the average score for all targets must be at the level developing.

- An approved university receives a quality certificate and will be listed in the national audit register for six years forward. Failure means a re-audit after two years.

- Åbo Akademi University was successfully audited the first time in the autumn of 2009.
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Changes in the audit model

- The first round of university audits were conducted during the years 2005-2011
  - The focus was on the quality assurance at university level
  - The audit checked the systems for documentation and the allocation of responsibilities

- The second round slightly changes the focus
  - More quality management than quality assurance
  - Stronger linkage with the university’s strategic processes
  - Emphasis on the university’s structures for education
    - The European standards and guidelines for quality management in higher education has got more attention, ESG
  - A self-evaluation report replaces the lengthy list of samples
    - The self-evaluation requires more in-depth analysis by the university
Audit targets 2015-2018

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 these:
   a) Degree education (including first-, second- and third-cycle education)
   b) Research, development and innovation activities
   c) The societal impact and regional development work (incl. social responsibility, continuing education, open university education, as well as paid-services education)
   d) Optional audit target
5) Samples of degree education: degree programmes
6) The quality system as a whole
Audit Material

The audit starts with the university preparing a fixed material for the Audit Panel

1) Basic material
   - A description of the university’s organisation
   - The overall strategy of the university and a description of the strategy process
   - A description of the quality system
   - The university’s quality manual or other corresponding document describing the development of the operations
   - Statistical data on staff, students and results for all degree programmes
   - Curriculum for programmes chosen as samples

2) Self-evaluation report
Self-evaluation Report

- The report structure is fixed and has questions covering all audit targets
  - Descriptions of processes
  - Assessments of university development and the current situation
  - Assessments of strengths and needs of further development

- The focus should be on reflection
  - The report shall be 50-70 pages

- The Audit Panel can ask the university to present evidence of the issues brought up in the report
Example from the self-evaluation report:
2) Quality system’s link with strategic management

a) Information produced by the quality system for strategic management

**Description:** What information does the quality system produce for the needs of strategic and operations management? What kind of procedures are there for the use and communication of this information?

**Evaluation:** Assess how well the quality system and the information produced by it serve the needs of strategic and operations management. Assess also the significance of the information produced by the system for the overall evaluation of the quality of the operations.

b) Functioning of the quality system at different organisational levels

**Description:** How is the quality system used in management at different organisational levels?

**Evaluation:** Assess the system’s functioning, effectiveness and workload in terms of management at different organisational levels and units.
Assessment of Degree Education

- The university must choose two study entities as samples
  - One programme leading to a degree that includes both bachelor’s and master’s education
  - One programme leading to a doctoral degree
  - The Audit Panel chooses a third sample (“the joker”)

- The university must describe how the quality is assured for the chosen programmes

- The presentation is to be divided into the following three stages
  - Planning of the programme
  - Implementing the programme
  - Effectiveness of quality work (e.g. evaluation methods, indicators for follow-up)
Example from the self-evaluation report

a) Planning of the programme

**Description:** Describe how the quality of the following matters is ensured:

- Curricula and their preparation
- Intended learning outcomes and their definition, as well as the assessment of learning that supports the intended learning outcomes
- Links between research, development and innovation activities, as well as artistic activities, and education
- Lifelong learning
- Relevance of degrees to working life.

Describe also how personnel groups, students and external stakeholders participate in the quality work related to the planning of education.

**Evaluation:** Assess the functioning, workload and impact of the procedures used for planning education, as well as how different parties participate in the quality work.
The Audit Process at ÅAU

- ÅAU and FINEEC signed the audit agreement 19th Feb. 2015
  - Deadline for handing in the material: 1st Sept 2015
  - The panel visit will take place on 24-26th Nov 2015
  - The composition of the panel: members from the Nordic countries, language for the material thus Swedish
  - Sample (bachelor/master): Study Programme in Information Technology
  - Sample (doc.): Doctoral Programme in Education
  - Sample (decided by the audit panel): Decision in Oct
  - Optional Audit Target: Teaching Enhancement at the University
The Audit Process at ÅAU (cont.)

- The first vice rector is in charge for preparing ÅAU for the audit
  - the support team for teaching and learning has functioned as the vice rector’s right-hand in the process, especially for generating the required audit material
  - a steering group has overseen the progress of the preparations

- The process of describing the current situation has been challenging since ÅAU in the last months has
  - carried out a significant reform of all bachelor level study programmes and also the university administration
  - accepted a new overall strategy
  - renewed several of the basic university regulations
  - renewed the university management processes
  - renewed the quality management system
Will the audit have an effect on me?

- The audit is a check of the current situation at ÅAU. The panel’s visit at ÅAU will therefore have little impact on everyday life.

- Possible effects:
  - You are invited to take part in one of the groups being test-interviewed in October.
  - You are invited to take part in one of the groups being interviewed by the panel 24-26th Nov 2015.
  - If the audit panel chooses your study programme as the third sample, you may be included in the working group that will describe the work routines of the programme (planning, implementing and evaluation).
  - The audit panel visits your unit to discuss the work routines.
More information

- The Audit at Åbo Akademi University
  https://www.abo.fi/personal/en/auditering

- The Audit Manual

- Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)
  http://karvi.fi/en/higher-education/

- ESG, European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA
  https://revisionesg.wordpress.com/

- EHEA, European Higher Education Area
  http://www.ehea.info/