

6.4.2005

Dr. Seppo Saari, docent

Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council

seppo.saari@minedu.fi, www.kka.fi

Theme track 1

Diversity of QA systems and divergent approaches to QA systems in Finnish Higher Education Institutions - FINHEEC, national agency's auditing approach in the context of European development and institutional autonomy.

Abstract

As a consequence of the Bologna process, FINHEEC started a planning of a national wide auditing of QA systems. In order to make planning sensible and suitable for the situation of the HEIs, FINHEEC has analysed all their QA systems. FINHEEC has planned an auditing in order to reach the multiple forms of QA systems.

The Polytechnics (29) have developed the QA systems some years ago due to a permanent position application. The well developed systems follow the known models such as EFQM, BSC, CAF, ISO. Most of the universities (20) have developed their quality assurance systems although many of them have had no known model for it. As a result of this each one of them uses different and even new quality concepts. In a couple of seminars higher education institutions have evaluated one another's systems through papers and group discussions.

1 Higher education in Finland

The Finnish higher education system is made up of two parallel sectors: universities and polytechnics. The universities rely on the connection between research and teaching. Their basic purpose is to perform scientific research and to provide higher education connected with it. Students at universities may take a lower (Bachelor's) or higher (Master's) academic degree and academic further education, consisting of licentiate and doctoral degree. Universities also arrange further education and open university teaching.

There are 20 universities in Finland, ten of which are multifaculty institutions and ten specialist institutions. Of the specialist institutions three are universities of technology, three are schools of economics and business administration, and the remaining four are art academies. In addition, university-level education is provided at one military academy under the Ministry of Defence.

There are altogether 29 permanent polytechnics (under the MofEd). Most of these institutions are multisector establishments. Degrees have a professional emphasis and take between 3.5 and 4 years to complete. In addition to theoretical studies, polytechnic degrees also require practical training in the workplace and a diploma project.

2 Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council - FINHEEC

Decrees 1320/95 and 465/98 formalise the duties FINHEEC will have: 1) initiate evaluations of higher education and promoting its development, 2) engagement in international evaluation cooperation and 3) promote research on evaluation of higher education; and in addition, evaluation and approval of professional courses offered by higher education institutions, entering of courses into a register as stipulated in Article 14 of the Decree on the Higher Education System, and maintenance of such a register.

2.1 Aims of FINHEEC

The most fundamental aim of FINHEEC is a long-term development of higher education through evaluations. For this reason, FINHEEC supports higher education institutions while they design their own quality assurance and evaluation systems; supports the HE institutions' own evaluation work. Also financial

aid for projects is granted. Evaluations produce national data enabling international comparison of higher education institutions for policy makers, students, trade and industry.

2.2 Working group for planning national quality assurance

In 1999, the European Ministers of Education set an objective for the development of a coherent and cohesive European Higher Education Area by 2010. Along with 40 other countries, Finland is involved in this process.

Instituted by the Ministry of Education, a working group including the representation of HEIs, their students, the Ministry and FINHEEC, elaborated on the Finnish reply to the objectives set forth by the Berlin communiqué.

The working group found that with regard to the elements of national quality assurance required in the Berlin communiqué, the Finnish higher education quality assurance system meets the requirements related to the division of responsibilities between various bodies and institutions, the evaluation of HEIs and degree programmes, student participation and involvement in international cooperation. However, Finland has had no accreditation, certification or other similar, clearly demonstrable system in place.

National quality assurance of higher education is constituted of three elements: national higher education policy, national evaluations and the higher education institutions' own quality assurance. National quality assurance signifies for the procedures, processes or systems, which aim at assuring the quality of higher education on a national level. Institutional, program and thematic evaluations form a basic element of national quality assurance system.

2.3 Finnish model for national quality assurance

In spring 2004 the quality assurance working group proposed that the universities and polytechnics will develop quality assurance systems comprising all the operations of the respective HEIs, to be audited by FINHEEC on a regular basis. The working group also recommended that the national higher education quality assurance system should be made clearer so that 1) the HEIs are responsible for their own quality assurance; 2) the Ministry of Education is in charge of defining the criteria and evaluation procedure for the launching of new education or termination of old programmes, as well as for the evaluation of existing education in particular cases; and 3) FINHEEC is in charge of the evaluations of the quality of education and operations of the HEIs. (OPM 2004.)

The working group also proposed that Finland introduce the concepts of 'quality assurance' and 'quality assurance system'. FINHEEC has chosen an interpretation for the term 'quality assurance system' having two meanings: it may either refer to the quality assurance system of an individual HEI or to the national higher education quality assurance system as a whole. The quality assurance system of a HEI refers to the entity constituted by the quality assurance organisation, division of responsibilities, procedures, processes and resources. The national quality assurance system refers to the whole constituted by the procedures and processes of the HEIs, FINHEEC and Ministry of Education, as well as the legislation promoting the assurance of higher education quality. (Manual for the pilot 2004.F)

The objective of auditing is to ensure that the HEI in question has a quality assurance system in line with the intention to continuously improve and that such a system aims at achieving its objectives, brings about change and has international credibility. The training provided for the HEIs includes both seminars focusing on the auditing model and training of the auditors.

The auditing of quality assurance systems is not only done on the basis of international requirements but it is considered also in the best interests of the HEIs themselves. Auditing serves the HEIs assuring their quality and rendering this quality visible. Quality assurance provides support for the management and strategic work of the HEI, generating tools for their internal result-based steering or performance management. Well-functioning quality assurance also contributes to the defence of students' rights. It will also be easier to convince the national and international co-operation partners about the quality of education, making the education more attractive as the HEI operations and quality assurance procedures are systematically described and evaluated.

The international developments, and the Bologna process, in particular, have brought about new challenges for the development of higher education. The ministers have risen into discussion the higher education markets in relation to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and global providers. The situation has been justified with the competition and operations across national borders that the trust in the uniform level of the country's own national higher education being no longer sufficient, but the higher education provided by each country must also be understandable and credible to outsiders. In particular, the mobility of students and workforce induce an increased need to prove the quality of education and degrees on an international scale.

FINHEEC policy has been not to introduce accreditation as the national quality assurance solution since accreditation involves a control aspect and evaluation of the HEI objectives, which in Finnish context would be seen as interfering with the HEIs' autonomy.

The memo written by the working group was distributed extensively for comments to universities, polytechnics, as well as to the major co-operation partners involved in education and higher education policy. The requested comments showed that the HEIs and other stakeholders were in favour of the proposals which they found feasible.

In the spring 2004 FINHEEC instituted an expert group for audit planning, charging it with the task of defining the objectives and targets of the audits as well as determining the methods, evaluation criteria, principles of audit applications and procedures related to audit results. The expert group comprised representatives of HEIs, students and the working life, as well as by exponents of the FINHEEC secretariat.

2.3.1 Fitness for purpose approach

When defining the quality in the context of audits the FINHEEC has defined it as fitness for purpose. The purpose depends on the higher education institutions' premises. Therefore the approach takes account the independence and autonomy of the institution. There are many duties the institutions will have that can be derived from the laws and decrees. Therefore public institution's autonomy includes also acceptance of government regulation.

In quality definitions it is not only a question of semantics although there is a huge amount of definitions of quality originating from Latin and Greece (quality, *qualitas*, 'poios' ποιοζ and 'poiotes' ποιότηζ, (Abbagnano 1964; Conti 2004). There is a rather clear distinction between 'fitness for' and 'fitness of' approaches. (Scott 2003; Woodhouse 2003, 133; Woodhouse 1996; Vroeijenstijn 2003, 123; CHE 2004). At last it is a question about evaluation policy. The key question is who will define the quality. The frontier between these two concepts can be drawn according to the autonomy of the institutions.

The audit targets and auditing principles and criteria constitute the general auditing framework used in all audits. Moreover, the audits can be customised to meet the development needs, quality assurance development stage and operative environment of each individual HEI.

The stage of the autonomy in the institutions can be interpreted according to the process of quality assurance or to the outcomes of institution's teaching and learning.

The stage of the autonomy is 'higher' in the institutions when the focus is on:

- *processes - fitness for purpose*
- efficiency - fitness for purpose
- make things right - fitness for purpose
- (good) quality is defined by the institution itself - fitness for purpose

The stage of the autonomy is 'lower' in the institutions when the focus is on:

- *outcomes, output - fitness of purpose*
- effectiveness - fitness of purpose
- make right things - fitness of purpose
- accountability - fitness of purpose

The institutions might use a term 'quality management' or 'quality improvement' instead of quality assurance which they often consider a minimum quality. Universities' aim is articulated as an exceptional quality. As a consequence of the quality definition the enhancing process can be considered endless. The exceptional quality is challenging continuously.

National quality assurance signifies for the procedures, processes or systems, which aim at assuring the quality of higher education at a national level. The main responsibility for the quality of education, R&D, scientific research and other operations lies on the individual higher education institution due to their autonomous status.

2.3.2 Audit Schedule flexible - depending on pilots and the HE institutions

The auditing project has been launched in 2004 with a planning phase. First two pilots of the audits have chosen in early 2005. Both of them were polytechnics, universities did not make any application. As far as all the plans will realise, all universities and polytechnics will have gone through one round of audits by 2010.

Each higher education institution has a quality assurance system that best suits its own operations and set aims. The objective is to audit the quality assurance systems assuring the quality of the higher education institutions' operations, not the operations themselves or the quality of their outcomes.

3 Purposes mentioned to quality assurance

In the planning seminars, some questionnaires were made in order to understand the real situation of QA in the higher education institutions. Universities responded why they are using quality assurance systems and developing them. The answers were two types, describing:

A. Developing function

Under the title of the developing function strategy was mentioned, management, transparency, achieving the objectives and recruitment.

B. Inner and/or outer control

The second aspect was controlling under which there were mentioned: means to result-based work, responsibility and rights, comparability, cooperation, outer pressures and transparency.

Universities (altogether 19) described their quality assurance (systems) or as some of them used the term 'quality work'. There are remarkable differences in concepts used in the descriptions by HEIs. According to the descriptions, the system can be seen on micro-level - assessment and evaluation of students – feedback systems or on macro-level – top down system – as a part of a management. In some description there can be seen fragmented parts of QA systems but not very clear systematic structures.

The descriptions were categorised into three groups according recognition of micro- or macro-level

1. On macro-level

- a) QA - system for example EQUIS
- b) QM - Quality management
- c) Continuous culture of development; quality policy, mandate-based approach

2. Both on macro- and micro-level

QA approach

- a) Quality process of teaching and learning, external review and internal quality assurance
- b) QA of education, study and support. QA based on ICT

- c) QA system of education (training); focus on competence of the students; peer review and peer evaluation are systematised
- d) QA of education; BSC
- e) QA of education as a part of management and result based steering on university level; micro and macro-plans, visible responsibilities and action plan, flexible and concrete
- f) EQUIS – QA of teaching and learning; structural approach
- h) Q-work, Q-development, EFQM, BSC, QA of teaching and learning process

QM approach

- i) Teaching and learning quality management including also education
- j) Quality of education and quality management, learning and its evaluation combined to management, government, planning, development, research and cooperation with society

Other Q approaches

- k) BSC, to ensure quality education; learning culture, learning process and good results; content quality, process quality, customer quality, and competition quality; core areas: teaching and learning, that is supported by teaching management strategy
- l) Effectiveness and quality; map of strategy that covers finances, customers, processes both growth and development
- m) Quality measurement – 'outcomes prisma'; starting from core processes: graduate students, post graduate students, adult education, research and regional development

3. On micro-level

- a) QA - connected with the holistic strategic work; QA-system, Q-policy and Q-culture
- b) Continual quality evaluation of teaching, long term development and practices, internal evaluation system
- c) Characteristic quality
- d) No documented QA-system

In the descriptions concerning the category **both micro- and macro-level** there were three subcategories as QA, QM and 'other' quality approaches. Each one of the examples (from a to m) represents only one institution.

3.1.1 Conclusions derived from the descriptions of universities

QA 'systems' are expressly from different conceptual world. Also different concepts are used even inside the same quality assurance system. As systems, they are under the development and enhancement. It is also difficult to recognise common features between universities. Universities have their own premises that supposedly are dependant on management culture, institutions development history and challenges ahead.

From the perspective of (A) **developing function** and on the other hand from (B) **inner and/or outer control** the descriptions are mainly the latter i.e. control (1a, 1b, 2a, 2c, 2d, 2e, 2f, 2h, 2i, 2j, 2k, 2m). The interpretation means that the emphasis is controlling aspect. In spite of that the system itself can be seen as a part of improving mechanism.

4 Quality assurance systems in polytechnics

Polytechnics mentioned quality assurance system descriptions such as following: strategic perspective, score and supportive processes, decree and steering mechanisms, quality culture and in the background was mentioned a system's approach.

Polytechnics were asked to respond, which their quality assurance systems or tools in quality work were: EFQM (6), BSC (11), ISO 9000, 9001, 9004 (5), Malcolm Baldrige (2), not any known system (5). The systems are under development and also new combinations are made.

4.1 Problems experienced in implementation of QA

In the feedback gathered from the HE institutions were mentioned some problems that will arise speculation. The main trend, however, might be positive.

- Systems were considered too heavy to implement;
- Validity problem in measuring core processes;
- There were too different approaches inside the same HEI;
- Too complicated Q-handbook;
- QA was not a tool for management;
- Information generally too much, not used in practice;
- Recommendations of internal audits were not transferred into practice;
- Internal audits were not evaluative;
- QA knowledge was needed more in the HEIs;
- Added bureaucracy.

The expressions are direct citations given by polytechnics. They, however, must be interpreted in the context of continuous developing challenges.

What ought to be audited?

The consequent answers will describe how the polytechnics interpreted the audit objectives. The objectives have been categorised into five groups:

Strategic approach

- objectives were derived from the strategy of HEIs; strategic planning, management and economic aspects

Core processes of education

- teaching, learning, quality of education, support and steering of education, pedagogic learning, policy and procedures

Decrees and steering

- laws and decrees define the mission, cooperation with working life, international cooperation, effectiveness and efficiency, educational activities, research and developing, regional development

Quality culture

- quality system was seen the core of the quality culture

Higher education institution might have quality policy program, where quality work supports the implementation of the vision and strategy of the institution.

Aspect of quality structure

Under this title the system was a composition of measurement, documentation and analysing tools. Tools might be supportive, developing or both of the previous together.

4.2 The question - Does the institution have a holistic program for evaluation

Many of the HEIs had strategy for quality work. In polytechnics, it was combined with the application procedure for the official position. Some of the institutions had self-auditing processes. Many of the institutions had quality handbooks. They had designed the program and strategy for the audit. The content might be equal with EFQM and BSC. Some had a total program for evaluation. Many of the institutions had separate parts of quality assurance systems. Some of the institutions expressed their system as feedback gathering only.

Developing phase of the quality assurance systems

In fall 2004 seminar participants (universities and polytechnics) expressed some qualifications that will describe the phase of quality assurance or quality management or respective system.

1. Systems that were considered well advanced

Processes have the right direction; institutions' own needs had been recognised; system had international recognition; system was implemented in practice; students' voice was heard; graduation had been accelerated; feedback was analysed; bottom-up approach was utilised; development of teaching was evaluated; year-cycle was in use.

2. Systems that were considered developing (arising)

Attributes that were supportive

The Teaching matrix was used; participation in international audits; the timetable and responsibilities were clear, objects were clear, the practical approach; the quality matrix was in use; web-based feedback system; cooperation was working well; structures were clear; pedagogical education was organised for teachers inside the institution; cooperation with stakeholders; assessment criteria was defined together with the staff inside the institution; strategic approach; good practices were presented.

Attributes that were absent

The quality handbook was not in use; documentation was absent.

3. Systems that were considered undeveloped

Not the same system inside HEI; QAs were not working; diffuse quality systems; integration and continuation were absent; the common framework was absent; not (systematic) implementation in practice; only some separate laboratories were active in QA work.

Conclusions

As a general phenomenon all the HEIs agree that there must be QA systems, where all the staff members are committed to quality and quality improvement. QA and audit were good tools in analysing the steering system, but the content and the quality of education must be outside the audit. Some universities expressed their distrust towards quality assurance work.

Universities are steered through the knowledge production (research). Some representatives of the HEIs are also suspicious about the audit procedure.

The basic problem is to reach the different levels of QA systems. The symbol or parable of QA is a map that can be on global level, on European level and at bottom in a certain forest environment. Criteria ought to differ on these levels. Quality in laboratory and on the other hand in arts ought to base on different criteria.

There is a clear fear that the audit process will define both the system and the quality itself and will overwhelm the autonomy. The HEIs are, however, willingly prepared to clear recommendations - softy

approach is not at all desirable. Universities' standards belong to the category of excellence. How to discuss with the European system if the concepts that HEIS are using differ from it? It must be recognised that there is a variety of QA systems in every country and the institutions will have their own character and profile, too. In addition to that, they are shifting all the time.

5 Is paradigm shift well recognised

The understanding what autonomy means might differ between agencies and higher education institutions in relation to the Ministry of Education. In FINHEEC, comprehension about the developing function of institutional audits, evaluations etc. means that autonomy is the first principle, which the developing and improvement function appreciates. Therefore the institutional audit method is built on the conditions of the institutions' autonomy. Tailoring requirements in the audits will arise from the expectations of the institutions, not of the agencies. The Finnish higher education institutions are accredited by law. Therefore FINHEEC is auditing accredited institutions. The emphasis of the audit might be different if the main object were to gain or to grant accreditation instead of improvement role only.

Is evaluation paradigm shifting from 'fitness for purpose' to 'fitness of purpose' as a consequence of the conscious proceedings or does it happen by accident or at random? When planning the institutional audit procedure FINHEEC has analysed many audit cases steered by agencies in an international context.

The basic conclusion has been that not all the evaluation or accreditation agencies articulate their evaluation policy (mandate) in relation to the education policy. There might even be differences what is the degree of independency of the agency in relation to the MoEd. The same phenomenon might concern the autonomy of the higher education institutions in relation to the agencies and the MoE. FINHEEC is consisted of a council, where are representatives of the HEIs', student unions and working life. The composition of the council will give a character to the council. The Council articulates the voice of the 'field'. The structure is very democratic and the decision making in the council will cut off one-eyed and extreme aims.

However, does any pressure to accreditation exist also in Finland? The European Higher Education area might bring harmonisation to higher education, as a process itself although not aiming harmonisation. At least there are pressures to use the same conceptual world. Vroeijenstijn has categorised the changes in European quality assurance. The pre-Bologna phase can be seen through national setting, national needs, quality as fitness for purpose, process orientation and as improvement or accountability. The paradigm shift can be seen and interpreted now as post-Bologna process that emphasises European dimension, international needs, quality as fitness of purpose, output-orientation and criteria based accreditation (Vroeijenstijn 2004).

Who is steering the paradigm shift? Nobody alone rules the changes. There are many roles and managers like national and other evaluation agencies, governments, E4 (quadripart cooperation - EUA, EURASHE, ESIB and ENQA), quadripart partners have their own agendas that can be derived from their missions. European Commission is expressing its own policy. The HEIs themselves are expressing pressure to change, but not in the direction of harmonisation but still aiming to have institutions' autonomy as a basic value. Accreditation 'movement' and 'improvement policy' are two main streams of evaluation agencies having different national history and origin.

The traditions in higher education institutions ought to be interpreted as a social phenomenon and in the light of social psychology and organisational psychohistory. The international quality invasions have dressed in a new formula, which we usually describe as globalisation. New global trends are proceeding with common ideas and frameworks. The paradigm shift is following the invasion of attractive ideas crossing national borders - consequences are experienced positive, negative or neutral depending on the perspective of the higher education institution or the evaluation agency or the Ministry of Education.

References

CHE 2004. COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION. Higher Education Quality Committee Institutional Audit Framework April 2004. South-Africa.

Manual for the pilot phase. 2004. Auditing the quality assurance systems of higher education institutions. Draft 14 December 2004. FINHEEC (not published).

OPM 2004. Reports of the Ministry of Education, Finland 2004:6. Ministry of Education.

- Scott, W.R. 2003. Productive Approach to Quality Management in Higher Education An Alternative perspective. Evaluation Seminar on Quality Units of Education, in Finnish Polytechnics.
- Vroeijenstijn, A.I. 2003. The Netherlands - Higher Education' in Educational Evaluation around the World. An International Anthology. Denmark: EVA.
- Vroeijenstijn, T.I. 2004. "We are all so DIFFERENT, aren't we?" A search for a common framework in Quality Assessment. in Metaevaluation Evaluation von Studium und Lehre auf dem Prüfstand Zwischenbilanz und Konsequenzen für die Zukunft. Bonn, 16 Mai 2003. Beiträge zur Hochschulpolitik 5/2004: 9–16.
- Woodhouse 1996. Quality assurance; International trends, preoccupations and features. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, Dec96, Vol. 21 Issue 4, 347–357.
- Woodhouse 2003. Improvement through Quality Audit. Quality in Higher Education. Vol. 9, No. 2, July 2003.