



# Audits of QA systems of Finnish higher education institutions - supporting institutions in the continuous development of their activities

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# Enhancement-led institutional audits

- From 2005, FINHEEC has undertaken institutional audits at Finnish HEIs - by the end of 2011 the QA systems of all institutions will have been audited once
- The aims of the audits is to produce information to assist HEIs to develop their activities - enhancement
- In line with the principle of the autonomy of HEIs, the Finnish system starts with the premise that HEIs are ultimately responsible for the quality of their education and other operations
- Thus, each HEI can set up an internal QA system that best suits its own needs



# Summary report of the mid 1st cycle

- QA has generated tools for the internal management of the HEIs and steered the HEIs to develop their activities as a whole
- The most typical framework for the QA system follows the Deming Cycle for Continuous Improvement
- QA of education seems to be most advanced
- Five out of 19 institutions analysed did not pass the audit and received a re-audit decision (app. 26%)
- Common factor in all re-audit decisions is that the HEIs in question had deficiencies in their overall QA system, in its comprehensiveness, and in its impact
- Most challenges are in QA of scientific postgraduate degrees and UAS Master's degrees; QA of social interaction, impact and regional development cooperation; QA of strategy work; comprehensive utilisation of evaluation and feedback data; definition of the role of the stakeholders in QA and of the kind of information they need and receive from QA



# Self-evaluation conducted by FINHEEC

**Strengths:** no ranking, comprehensive, same criteria for both sectors, enhancement-led, process has impact as such, engaging for external stakeholders, management made visible, flexible, inclusive, developed jointly with stakeholders

**Weaknesses:** emphasis on the QA-system level is too strong, external stakeholders are over-emphasized, no feedback for units within HEIs, difficult to draw the line between the QA system and the actual quality of outcomes, council bases decisions solely on the report - objectivity may be hard to guarantee, how useful is the report for the HEI?

**Opportunities:** gives good tools for further development work, makes comparisons and benchmarks possible, adds public interest in the quality of HE, adds understanding between the two HE sectors, strengthens the quality-related debate, makes QA systems visible, fulfils the international need for QA label

**Threats:** same audit model > no added value > frustration > no commitment in the 2nd cycle, the expertise of the secretariat might narrow down, can FINHEEC compete successfully with foreign agencies? EQAR?, what if the audit model does not fulfill international requirements anymore?, too many recommendations?, every institution passes the second cycle, heterogeneity of the audit processes, because internal QA systems are so different



# Feedback from stakeholders

- FINHEEC collects systematic feedback from all audited HEIs and members of the audit panels.
- FINHEEC used the feedback collected to revise the audit method for second edition of the Audit Manual for 2008-2011.
- Furthermore, minor changes and improvements in the procedures have been implemented when needed during the first audit cycle.
- The nature of the feedback received right after an audit process is quite practical and can often be taken into account soon in the following audit processes.

Examples of changes on the 2 cycle model based on the feedback:

- Self-evaluation will be given more emphasis in the second round, and clearer guidelines will be available for the compilation of the material.
- Special attention has also been paid to the transparency and comprehensibility of the audit criteria.
- Duration of the re-audit visit will be prolonged to two days in the new method.



# External Review of FINHEEC: Strengths

- High quality of audit reports
- Open dialogue in feedback to and from HEIs
- Readiness of FINHEEC to carry out self-critical analysis in the course of its work
- The panel was clear that FINHEEC is contributing to the development of Finnish HE and has the full support of the sector, based on an excellent working relationship with its stakeholders



# External Review of FINHEEC: Recommendations

The review panel considered that, as FINHEEC continues to develop its audit procedures, its work would benefit from consideration of the following aspects:

- to make explicit reference to the standards and guidelines of ESG Part 1 within the FINHEEC Audit Manual, the audit process and the audit reports
- to give continuing attention to the question of international expert participation in its processes, including consideration of international membership of the Council and the establishment of the proposed international advisory committee
- to allow for a form of representation to the Council, subsequent to the audit report, with reference back to the team, in cases where an institution disputed the Council's decision on procedural grounds



# The planning group's work

- Enhancement-led approach was still valid, but some changes were needed in order to provide added value and new challenges for the institutions.
- FINHEEC organised an open national seminar for all stakeholders to discuss the on-going development of the new audit model.
- The majority of the seminar participants were in favour of still including an element of pass/fail.
- Concreteness of the recommendations and reduction of quality jargon were pointed out as means to strengthen the utilisation of audit reports in the academic community.
- Institution's possibility to select some of the targets of the evaluation was found to be motivating and to support institutional autonomy and strategic development.
- Internationalisation of the audits received diverse reactions.



## To evaluate the quality assurance system, the audit focuses on:

1. The quality assurance policy of the higher education institution
2. Strategic and operations management
3. The development of the quality assurance system
4. Quality assurance of the higher education institution's basic duties:
  - a) Degree education
  - b) Research, development and innovation activities, as well as artistic activities
  - c) The societal impact and regional development work
  - d) Optional audit target
5. Samples of degree education: degree programmes
6. The quality assurance system as a whole



## Major changes in the 2nd audit cycle

- An optional audit target that is central to HEI's strategy or profile and which the institution wants to develop in terms of its quality assurance. The activity may also be an overarching feature of the institution's basic duties; such as internationalisation, sustainable development, the status and well-being of the staff and students, lifelong learning.
- More emphasis on self-evaluation process.
- More detailed look at evidence of QA in degree education.
- Special attention has also been paid to the transparency and comprehensibility of the audit criteria.
- Institutions that pass their audit will get a quality label that is valid for six years.



# Conclusions

- According to the audit reports and feedback received from HEIs, the audits have enhanced the systematic development of QA systems and HE activities
- Involvement in the evaluation process has truly enabled HEIs to identify their own strengths and development needs
- Audits have also led to the creation of exceptionally comprehensive evaluation material on Finnish HE system, which enables comparisons in the field
- The audit method is continuously developed further based on the feedback from HEIs, auditors and other stakeholders
  - open dialogue and mutual trust between FINHEEC and HEIs!



**Thank you for your attention!**

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