

PERSPECTIVES ON EXTERNAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

—

FINNISH QUALITY AUDITS AND THEIR PERCEPTION AS A CASE EXAMPLE



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STRUCTURE

1. Introduction
2. Theoretical background
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Summary
6. Discussion

INTRODUCTION

- Profound changes in the European HE sector since the 90s; e. g. implementing NPM – *“Apparently, the quality of higher education is no longer seen as self-evident”* (Westerheijden et al. 2007)
- QM as an instrument of high importance in this process – *„[Q]uality has turned [...] to an everyday issue in higher education“* (Saarinen 2010)
- But: not only concerned with the micro level – *„national quality assurance systems should include [...] a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures“* (ENQA 2003)
- Different developments across Europe; Finland: **quality audits**

INTRODUCTION

- Conducted by FINEEC since 2005
- Evaluation of the HEI's quality management in order *“to help HEIs to recognize the strengths, good practices and areas in need of development in their operations”* (FINEEC 2015, p. 4) → “Enhancement instead of control”
- Multi-level process: e. g. self-evaluations, audit group's visit, the publication of an audit-report, the awarding of a quality label, follow-up seminar
- Feedback after every round → development of the audit process
- 2018: third audit-round → benchlearning & excellence

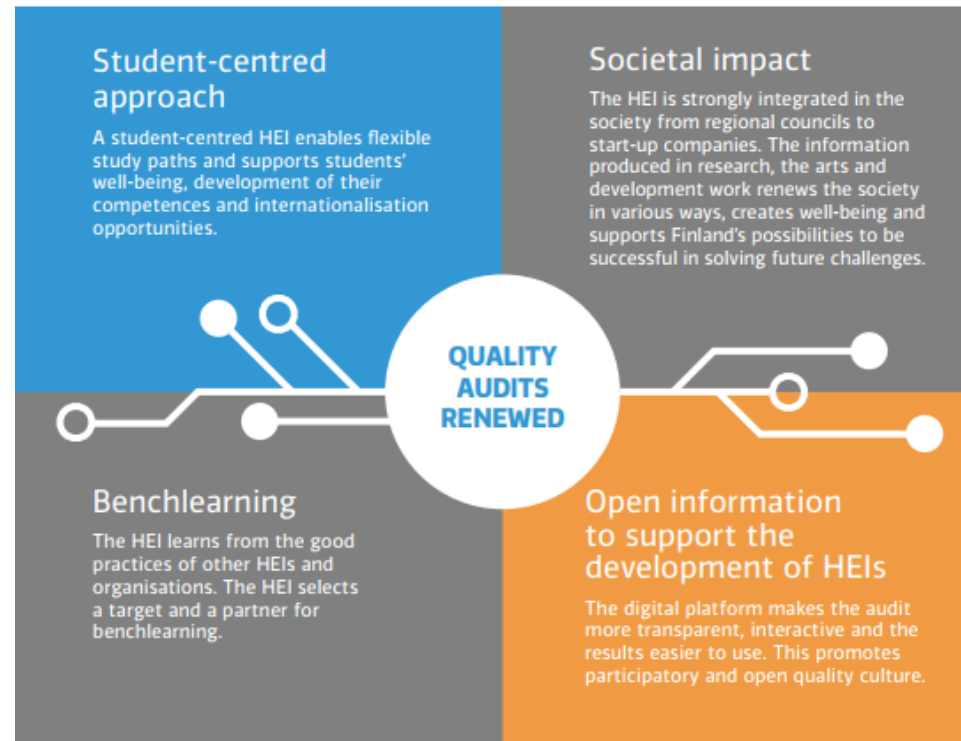
WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE AUDIT?

Evaluate quality work of the HEIs against European standards

Evaluate, if the continuous development of HEIs is enhanced by their own quality evaluations

Encourage internationalisation, experimenting and a creative atmosphere at HEIs

Accumulate open and transparent information on quality work at Finnish HEIs



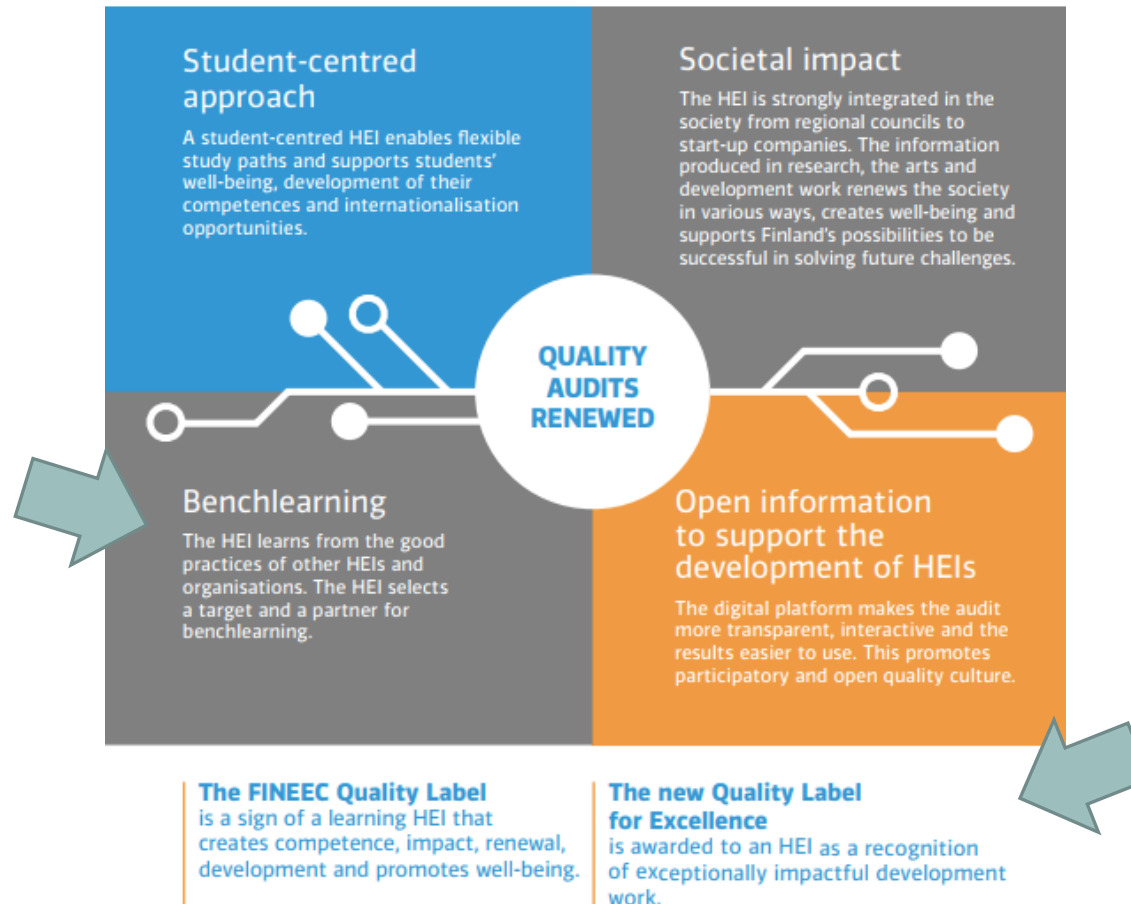
The FINEEC Quality Label is a sign of a learning HEI that creates competence, impact, renewal, development and promotes well-being.

The new Quality Label for Excellence is awarded to an HEI as a recognition of exceptionally impactful development work.

Audit model 2018-2024

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Audit model 2018-2024

INTRODUCTION

- **Previous studies:**
 - Generally considered as **effective** and **reasonable**
 - **But:** great differences between personnel groups
 - **Most critical:** university researchers, **most positive:** top management
 - Central impact of the first audit round: implementation of a **quality management system** (Ala-Vähälä 2011, Ala-Vähälä/Saarinen 2013)
 - Helped departments to build up their **own identities** and achieve **social integration**
 - Some departments considered audits as **pointless; lack of connection** to their daily work (Haapakorpi 2011)

INTRODUCTION

- Studies reflect the situation in 2010
- Changes in the framework of Finnish universities:
 - New university law (2010)
 - Merging of universities
 - External evaluation mandatory
- *„[They] are now as much needed as ever, with the on-going budget cuts, planned mergers, and other major shifts within the national context” (FINEEC 2016)*
- Research: changes have an impact on university staff (e. g. Ylijoki 2014, Diogo 2016, Kallio et al. 2016)

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Organization-theoretical point of view:

- Universities as...
 - *Professional bureaucracies/expert organizations (Mintzberg 1979, Pellert 1995)*
 - *Loosely coupled systems (Weick 1976)*
 - *With: goal ambiguity, problematic technologies, professionalism, environmental vulnerability (Baldrige et al. 1974)*
- *Became: Organizational actors (Krücken/Meier 2006)*
- *Academic resistance: refusal, avoidance, qualified compliance (Anderson 2008)*

➤ **Do the attitudes towards external quality management change compared over time?**

RESEARCH DESIGN

2010

- Web survey
- 4 universities, 4 universities of applied sciences
- **Universities:** personnel from: administration and support services & faculties: social sciences, educational sciences, natural sciences and law
- **UAS:** personnel from: administration and support services & fields of study: social services, health and sport, technology, communication and sport, social sciences, business and administration, culture
- 901 answers (response rate: 15,1%)
- 58 statements on a Likert-Scale from 1-5
- Available in Finnish
- Survey period: May 2010

2017

- Web survey
- 4 universities, 5 universities of applied sciences (4 from the 2010 sample)
- Same personnel groups as in 2010
- 484 answers (response rate: 8%)
- 52 statements on a Likert-Scale from 1-5
- 9 new items; items about the start of the audits deleted
- Available in Finnish, Swedish and English
- Survey period: June – August 2017

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

- Low response rates; 2017 even lower
- Response rates vary from HEI to HEI (between 2 and 23%)
- Some participants did not answer all the questions
- Not exactly the same cohort

SAMPLES

| variable | 2010 | 2017 |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------|
| Gender | | |
| Female | 59,7% | 63,1% |
| Male | 40,3% | 36,9% |
| Field | | |
| Teaching and research | 12,3% | 13,7% |
| Teaching | 28,9% | 19,5% |
| Research | 17,1% | 17,3% |
| Management | 10,3% | 20,7% |
| Support services | 24,0% | 24,6% |
| Other | 7,4% | 4,1% |
| Type of HEI | | |
| University | 56,7% | 69,7% |
| University of Applied Sciences | 43,3% | 30,3% |

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RESULTS

1. Change

- Increased trust towards quality management
- Diminished problems/increased practical benefits
- Decreased practical benefits/relevance

2. Continuity

CHANGE

| Increased trust towards quality management | | |
|--|------|------|
| Item | Mean | |
| | 2010 | 2017 |
| 1. In my opinion, audits are used as an excuse for implementing reforms that would not have succeeded otherwise. | 3,26 | 2,91 |
| 2. The quality system of our HEI exists primarily in order to pass the audit. | 3,40 | 2,95 |
| 3. Other HEI's experiences about audits had a strong impact on the preparations for the last audit (tuning the quality system etc.). | 3,53 | 3,04 |
| 4. The audit criteria stated by Finnish Education Evaluation Centre had a strong impact on the preparation for the last audit. | 4,10 | 3,59 |

CHANGE

| Diminished problems/increased practical benefits | | |
|---|------|------|
| Item | Mean | |
| | 2010 | 2017 |
| 1. Data (information) collected in various surveillance (control) systems does not give a correct picture about my work . | 4,23 | 4,00 |
| 2. Audits and external evaluations that are part of the quality work take too much time in comparison to the benefits that they give. | 3,70 | 3,26 |
| 3. A quality system makes it more difficult to carry out things (practical work) . | 3,17 | 2,74 |
| 4. Audits and external assessments (evaluations) that are a part of the quality work give a reliable picture about the quality (level) of the activities of our HEI. | 2,95 | 3,22 |

CHANGE

| Decreased practical benefits/relevance | | |
|--|------|------|
| Item | Mean | |
| | 2010 | 2017 |
| 1. During the preparation phase (process) for the audit many topics for development (items to be reformed or developed) were found. | 3,84 | 3,46 |
| 2. Preparations for audits were a good learning experience | 3,69 | 3,46 |
| 3. I followed the process of the (last) audit with great interest. | 3,41 | 3,04 |

CONTINUITY

| High approval through the years |
|---|
| Item |
| 1. The quality system of our HEI was presented to the audit group truthfully , pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses. |
| 2. The preparation for the last audit took place in a positive atmosphere . |
| 3. A negative audit outcome weakens the reputation of HEIs. |
| 4. A positive audit outcome increases the credibility of HEIs in international co-operation. |
| 5. If my HEI does not get a positive audit assessment even after the re-audit, it may have a weaker position in the negotiations with the Ministry of Education and Culture regarding resources and targets. |
| 6. The audits of our quality assurance system are essential for developing our HEI.* |

**only asked in the 2017-version*

SUMMARY

The results indicate that...

- experiences of **practical benefits have increased** and experiences of **mistrust or problems have diminished** – even though they still exist.
- the preparation for the audit was carried out more based on the HEIs **own interests** and less on external pressures.
- quality assurance and audits are seen as **supportive** for the development work carried out in HEIs.
- the audits are considered to be essential for **reputation** and **international co-operation** and also with regard to the specific relation with the ministry of education.

SUMMARY

But...

- the interest towards audits **diminished**.
- the consideration of audits as a **'learning experience'** decreased.
- The overall attitude towards audits is more positive in 2017, but the interest and the relevance is lower.

DISCUSSION



1. Over the years, the means are more or less centred in the middle → A sign of indifference/”compliance” (Anderson)?



2. How can an effective external quality management be defined?

- *Full support vs. mediocre satisfaction of all stakeholders?*
- *A completed audit process and derived measures?*
- *Resistance as a desirable feedback instrument and a precious part of external quality management?*

THANK YOU!

Contact information

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