KANSALLINEN KOULUTUKSEN ARVIOINTIKESKUS
NATIONELLA CENTRET FÖR UTBILDNINGSUTVÄRDERING
FINNISH EDUCATION EVALUATION CENTRE

AUDIT OF AALTO UNIVERSITY

Tekijät **Antoinette Perry, Mia Brzakovic, Mika Konu, Geir Øien & Sirpa Moitus, Self-assessment of Aalto University (ed.) Rediet Abebe**
Auditointivuosi **2023**, Karvin julkaisu **13:2023**
Kieli **Englanti**
ISBN **978-952-206-764-7 pdf**

1.2 The implementation of education

- Korkeakoulun itsearviointi

Aalto has jointly prepared and openly communicated student selection criteria for all degree levels. The schedules, study options and intake numbers of the BSc and MSc student selection are decided well in advance. The university has processes prepared with clearly delineated responsibilities for handling appeals regarding student selection.

The degree programmes have been instructed to base their programme planning and the selection of teaching and evaluation methods on the intended learning outcomes. To achieve the degree programme’s targets, the learning outcomes are investigated from different points of view (student experience, digitalisation, etc.), and varied and experimental teaching methods are supported. Pedagogical and digi-pedagogical consultation and support is available at each school to help with tasks like choosing teaching methods. The goal of pedagogical support is to foster and strengthen the quality of teaching and learning.

Our goal is a future-led learning culture

Aalto University fosters and supports a learning-centred, interactive and inclusive educational culture. Our goal is to enhance dialogical course practices and ways of working between community members. An inclusive orientation programme at the start of studies brings students into Aalto’s academic community. Students are encouraged to actively discuss and plan their studies and to give feedback not only at the end of a course or their studies but also throughout. Peer practices and students’ collaborations also play an important role in inclusion activities. Some programmes invite students to additional development meetings to get a better understanding of their experience and to activate them more deeply.

Teachers inform students about practicalities and ways of working at the beginning of each course. This includes, for example, the learning outcomes, feedback and assessment practices and the assessment criteria. This practice encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning and to be involved, as well as to cooperate actively with their co-students and teacher(s). Academic advising and student counselling throughout the studies are also tools of inclusion.

Feedback on students' learning is provided through a variety of assessment and feedback methods. For example, Aalto teachers use peer-assessment, peer feedback, counter feedback and self-evaluation methods both during and after a course. Continuous assessment is becoming more common as a tool to replace or supplement final exams.

The methods of assessment and feedback vary depending on the course and the number of students. Personal feedback on a student's learning is given more often in small teaching groups and is less common in larger courses. Teaching and learning in larger groups generally uses scalable and digital tools of assessment and feedback. Academic advice given to each student supports the learning processes and the student's academic and professional growth.

Close stakeholder collaboration improves the possibility of students getting employment during their studies and after graduation. The close connection with working life is also evident in how education is implemented, such as in the use of real-life cases and visiting lecturers, and collaboration with industry and the public sector in courses, as well as excursions and thesis work with industry. Professors of practice also bring additional specific expertise and practical skills to teaching and research.

Course practices support individual study paths

Courses and minors at Aalto generally do not have application procedures or quotas for Aalto students. Where application procedures are required, they are made as easy as possible for students and are mainly to ensure that students have the requisite knowledge or that labs/studios have adequate seating.

Multidisciplinary studies and student mobility are promoted through the degree structures: programmes at BSc and MSc level generally have a large scope for electives, and all BSc programmes include a compulsory minor that is almost always chosen freely. Students are encouraged to follow their interests and enthusiasm when planning their studies. The degree structures enable students to try many paths before choosing their minor or deciding on an MSc programme. In addition, multidisciplinarity is enhanced at course planning and teacher collaboration.

Students may also choose to undertake exchange studies that are embedded in the timetables of the BSc programmes, which include at least one semester without compulsory studies during the three-year programme. In all the schools, exchange studies may comprise the minor in a degree.

In addition, Aalto has agreed on flexible study rights with other national Finnish universities,

which allows students to take courses at other universities as electives or as a minor. Aalto is also part of various networks that offer courses to our students, such as the Hilma gender studies network, Helsinki Graduate School of Economics and FITech Network University, which includes all the technical universities in Finland.

Degree students may transfer credits from accredited universities as part of a degree at Aalto University. The guidelines for credit transfer require that the transferred credits be at a level corresponding to the degree they become part of and be aligned with the programme's intended learning outcomes. If a student wants to use transferred credits to replace compulsory courses, then the content and intended learning outcomes must also match the ones being replaced. Students apply for credit transfer after completing the course and provide the transcript and course description or other extracts from the curriculum. Skills and capabilities gained outside of formal education may also be included in a degree. The responsible teachers determine how the student can validate their learning using various methods such as oral exams, learning diaries, and reports.

Significant attention is given to offering students support and counselling services throughout their studies. Every degree programme has a designated planning officer/coordinator who is at the disposal of the students for both practical questions and individual study planning. Planning officers/coordinators take care of orientation activities and introducing students to the programme, as well as offering individual advice and counselling services in face-to-face and online meetings, as well as via email or phone. Academic advice is provided to all students either individually or in group sessions to support their study planning and integration into the academic community. In addition, University provides career services aiming at improving students' possibilities to get employed during their studies (e.g. internships) and after graduation. The new Career Design Lab is intended to be beyond service delivery and become an integral part of teaching to increase the accessibility of the support.

Moreover, Aalto University has several study psychologists to provide counselling to students with study-related difficulties, such as with time management skills. Aalto University chaplains are also available to all students for counselling in times of stress and to help them with other personal concerns. Aalto has also launched a 'Starting point of Wellbeing' desk as a low-threshold service for students to seek help with any issue they might have. The service desk is available in person at the Otaniemi campus and online via Zoom. Students can seek support without make an appointment and receive either immediate help and advice or assistance in finding and reserving counselling or other services required by their situation.

The wellbeing of students has been a priority at Aalto for several years. The 'AllWell?' survey provides information about students' study wellbeing, and the results are used widely to develop degree programmes, courses and services. A doctoral wellbeing survey has also resulted in a dedicated study psychologist resource for doctoral students.

The Aalto University Business Students association (KY) started a new wellbeing program, 'BeWell', in 2019 in response to challenges in student wellbeing. The program offers wellbeing

tutors and anonymous help as peer-to-peer support to students. The School provides support for this activity and works together with KY to reach students in need of support.

Strengths	Enhancement areas
Stakeholder collaboration in teaching improves students' employment possibilities. Stakeholders are involved through the use of real-life cases in teaching, company projects, Capstone courses, and student internships.	The integration of international students and supporting them in getting employed needs further attention. This is addressed through the Talent Boost project, for example, which aims to develop and advance the recruitment of international talent and support their integration.
Clear and transparent student selection procedures at all degree levels, including the annual evaluation of student selection and admission criteria.	Processes for maintaining a manageable course portfolio in school and in programme level need to be improved.
Clear processes for the recognition of prior learning and for learning gained outside of formal education.	Incentives are needed to encourage co-teaching practices so that cross-cutting themes are more broadly integrated into teaching.
Strong focus on the development of feedback and assessment practicalities.	The development of versatile evaluation and feedback mechanisms.
A focus on learning-centred education and the use of challenge-based learning, where practice, theory and reflection are tightly connected.	The orientation of teaching towards working life is being improved, starting from defined learning outcomes. This will help get the best out of existing collaboration mechanisms in all fields.

1.2 The implementation of education

- Auditointiryhmän arvio

Aalto has consistent and transparent provisions and regulations concerning student admission, the recognition of prior learning, the progress of studies, and the completion of degrees

Aalto's intake numbers result from a national agreement between Aalto and the Ministry of Education and Culture. At the same time, Aalto's criteria for student admission are decided by the university's Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) and are openly available.

Aalto's policy on credit transfer and recognition of prior learning is also openly available. It lists detailed principles relevant to credit transfer and criteria for recognition of prior learning in a

target-oriented way, which is a strength. It concludes with an explanation of the formal procedures used in credit transfer, including the opportunity to appeal against a negative decision from the university.

Since 2021, the regulations associated with bachelor's and master's degrees have been collected in common degree regulations across schools. Doctoral education has had similar common regulations since 2018. The regulations come across as both consistent and transparent.

Students have an active role in their learning process, but feedback on students' learning could be more systematic and personal

Both Aalto's Programme Director's Handbook and the guide GetInspired! – A Guide to Successful Teaching focus on this constructive alignment principle. Aalto has also designed a Teacher's Handbook with explicit checklists on what teachers must consider when preparing and implementing a course. It explicitly supports target-oriented learning and the active role of students in their own learning processes.

When it comes to student-active learning, Aalto lists many specific tools for teachers, e.g. in the design of assignments, online sessions, student feedback activities, questionnaires, in-class multiple-choice surveys and shared course diaries. Students can ask the lecturer questions, comment on lectures or give feedback through an online platform. The lecturer can also request students to answer questions. It is a very useful tool to aid target-oriented learning and active student participation.

Responses from student workshops during the audit visit also indicate that students appreciate student-activating teaching methods, assignments and peer tutoring as essential aspects of their learning experience at Aalto.

As regards student assessment, the principles of good assessment are defined in Aalto's Teacher's Handbook as aligned – versatile – continual and, interactive – sustainable – transparent. In the SER, Aalto also lists several good practices for giving students feedback on their learning. In the interview with student union representatives, however, interviewees indicated that little or no personal feedback is provided in most courses.

The ongoing project Leap for Learning has been devised to renew Aalto's digital tools and platforms to support teaching and learning services and workflows. The audit team recommends that Aalto use this tool to improve processes for giving feedback to students on their learning.

Aalto has implemented extensive support procedures for the progress and completion of studies

Aalto has an extensive system for supporting students at all levels throughout their study path, including career guidance. Aalto's web pages on Academic advising describe how students can be guided and supported throughout their studies in their study skills, study planning, study well-

being and career reflections. The web portal Info for Aalto students contains supplementary information. The audit team recommends structuring all this info in a way that is easier to navigate.

Aalto requires each student to draft a personal study plan. Service staff, academic advisors, and the recently updated student information system Sisu support students in this process. The interview with student union representatives emphasised that there is still considerable room for improvement in developing Sisu as a support system.

Degree structures support flexible study paths and student mobility with ample room for electives at the BSc and MSc levels. All bachelor programmes have at least one semester without compulsory courses and include a minor which can be chosen freely.

The webpage Doctoral education services contains information about the support offered to doctoral students. The webpage Your hub for doctoral education includes a Doctoral student study guide. Aalto HR handles employment contracts for doctoral students.

The Leap for Learning project seeks to integrate existing digital education support platforms into a more holistic experience. Thus, developing digital platforms and support systems is ongoing and will probably result in better student support over time.

Aalto has several systematic procedures in place to support students' integration into working life

A particularly interesting piece of evidence of students' integration into working life is the 2020 Stakeholder Review process, a part of the Teaching and Learning Exercise (TEE) 2020 project. Sampling the TEE 2020 final report, it was found that the School of Electrical Engineering's review identified several well-functioning forms of stakeholder collaborations: theses completed in cooperation with stakeholders, project-work courses, assignments from stakeholders, student internships in companies, summer jobs for students, guest lecturers, materials and equipment and Professors of Practice. Several schools seem to have the potential to systematise and strengthen the integration of students into working life. The ELEC School's good practices should inspire such work.

The comments about working-life connections were all positive in the student workshops held during the audit visit. The students mentioned that much attention is paid to the link to working life and that courses encourage students to apply for jobs in their field. There are also examples of various well-appreciated student events supporting integration into working life. Also, master theses done for external organisations, and visiting lecturers from industry, were appreciated by the students. The visiting lecturers bring viewpoints from the industry and relate them to the theories taught in the courses. The students' comments confirm that their integration with working life is prioritised and works well at Aalto.

The well-being and equality of students are strongly promoted

Aalto has substantial resources and procedures for counselling and other services to support student study progress and well-being. University-level examples include, for instance, periodic student and doctoral student well-being surveys, systematic discussions of survey results to identify suitable development actions and a Starting Point of Well-being desk, which is a low-threshold service for students experiencing problems, offers of psychology services for students at all levels and ombudspersons and stress management tools for doctoral students. There are also school-specific measures, such as the Business Students association's new well-being programme, BeWell.

However, output from the staff workshop indicated that although the Starting Point of Well-being offers students a place to drop in for advice and guidance on study issues or well-being, even more emphasis should be addressed on structural guidance as a proactive tool. It was revealed that fewer study psychologists' resources are available this year (2023), and consequently, there is a long queue for individual appointments. Aalto is recommended to take proactive measures to address this issue, one possible approach being closer integration of health services support at the school level.