KANSALLINEN KOULUTUKSEN ARVIOINTIKESKUS
NATIONELLA CENTRET FÖR UTBILDNINGSUTVÄRDERING
FINNISH EDUCATION EVALUATION CENTRE

AUDIT OF AALTO UNIVERSITY

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2.1 Managing societal engagement and impact

- Korkeakoulun itsearviointi

Aalto strives to contribute to society

According to the constitution of the Aalto University Foundation, the foundation's purpose is to 'work in interaction with the rest of society and with the international scientific and artistic communities and advance the impact of research and artistic activities on society.' Societal impact and societal engagement are thus Aalto University's very *raison d'être* and are accordingly the principles and goals that guide all the activities of the university. Through our strategic aim of 'shaping a sustainable future,' Aalto University strives to contribute to society.

Our most prominent impact is to educate experts for society—for companies and the public sector— and to provide research results addressing the global challenges facing humanity.

As a community of faculty, staff, students, alumni, donors and partners, Aalto builds an ecosystem of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship that connects with others in global networks. Our long-term purpose is to renew society with research-based knowledge, creativity and an entrepreneurial mindset, and to generate innovative solutions that tackle grand global challenges.

Participation in public conversation

Aalto's societal impact and engagement are integral elements of the university's core functions and their management, not separate endeavours managed and carried out separately from the core activities. The operating environment analysis is led by the President and the Development Director and supported by the Advisory Services Team. The advisory services, together with other

relevant service teams, support the Aalto Leadership in participating in the public conversation, as well as in formulating Aalto's statements and comments, operating environment and policy analysis, and in maintaining a constant dialogue with higher education policy actors, such as partner higher education institutes, Universities Finland (Unifi), ministries, Parliament, cities (especially in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area), the Aalto University Student Union (AYY) and other student organisations, employers' and labour unions, political parties, the European Parliament and Commission, and others.

The main strength of Aalto University's operating environment analysis is that it has notable specialist resources. The work is planned and assessed systematically and included in the annual management cycle of the university.

Clear annual processes and organisation

As part of the annual strategic processes, Aalto has a University Preview in which assumptions related to the university's operating environment are evaluated against new trends and other signals to update the assumptions for the planning process of the coming year. In the University Review, the academic and service units self-assess their strategy implementation using results and feedback from the previous year. Academic units highlight research and education activities that have had significant societal impact, such as research contributing to mitigating climate change. These self-assessments are gathered and reviewed first by the steering groups and then as a whole by the Aalto Management Team (AMT).

Vice President for Research leads and coordinates the development of the University's research and artistic activities across the schools and represents the University in the development of research nationally and internationally. Vice President for Research oversees the support services for research. The work of the Vice President for Research is supported by the Research Steering Group (ReSG). Similarly, Vice President for Innovation leads and coordinates the development of the University's innovation activities across the schools and represents the University in the development of innovation ecosystem, commissioned research, other business cooperation and partnership activities as well as innovation policy and instruments. Vice President for Innovation oversees the support services for innovation. The work of the Vice President for Innovation is supported by the Impact Steering Group (ISG). The steering groups discuss strategic and operational issues (including university-level strategic development projects) that require a university-wide position, policy line or recommendation for the university's leadership and decision-making.

Strengths	Enhancement areas
The combination of an annual review to assess the previous year's results and university dialogues to set new targets.	Working profiles and targets should be provided for Vice Deans responsible for Impact at schools.

Engagement in societal discussions and policy-making at both the university and school level.	There is a need for quantitative measures of societal impact.
An Impact Steering Group prepares, discusses, and develops the university's positions and policies in line with its broader goal of societal impact.	There is a need for qualitative and quantitative measures of multidisciplinary activities so that researchers are properly merited for multidisciplinary work.
	Improve the definition/recognition of forums for societal discussion and increase Aalto's presence at societal discussion forums where its expertise would be of great value to society.

2.1 Managing the societal engagement and impact

- Auditointiryhmän arvio

Reforming society is Aalto's long-term goal

Aalto University has defined ambitious goals of societal engagement and impact and developed a variety of means and instruments to achieve them. The long-term strategic goal of Aalto University is to renew society with research-based knowledge, creativity, and an entrepreneurial mindset and to create innovative solutions that respond to major global challenges. Among the central means to boost cross-disciplinarity are Aalto's three cross-cutting areas and seven key research areas.

Based on the SER, Aalto's most significant impact is to train experts for society – to meet the needs of companies and the public sector and provide research results to answer the global challenges facing humanity. Based on the audit visit, lifewide learning is closely tied to societal impact as a continuum of Aalto's teaching and learning activities. In addition to professional upskilling, reskilling, and international executive education of individuals, Aalto focuses on supporting organisations in RDI development through lifewide provision.

Aalto has impressive and multilevel organisational structures for managing societal engagement and impact. The vice presidents for Research and Innovation lead the research, innovation and ecosystem activities, supported by the Research and Innovation Ecosystem units and the Advancement and Corporate Engagement unit. The Impact Steering Group plays a vital role in the university-level development of innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystems. Based on their interview, Aalto relies on a bold and risk-taking approach, allowing researchers to trial and error and embracing the fact that innovations may emerge after a long period.

Aalto’s measures to promote start-ups have proven highly effective. Aalto’s intranet has a page, From Ideas to Impact, with services and models of how research ideas can turn into impactful commercial activity and what steps must be taken to proceed from an innovation project to a start-up company. All these efforts, together with the Aalto Start Up Centre, have led to the acceleration and creation of hundreds of companies. Furthermore, Aalto Start Up Centre has been evaluated by UBI Global as one of the three best university-affiliated accelerators in the world. During the audit team’s interviews, members of Communications Services acknowledged their central role in promoting societal impact by communicating Aalto’s innovations to the public and building a broader narrative on how Aalto’s innovations advance sustainable development in society and people’s everyday life.

Regarding operational environment analysis, the University Preview process uniquely identifies significant trends shaping Aalto and its strategy. The process involves foresight surveys, workshops, community events and students’ projects for future visions. Based on the top management interview, Aalto changed their strategic focus in the global collaboration context due to the recent uprisings of a pandemic and war, indicating how the Living Strategy delivers on its name.

School-level societal impact is assessed through the University Review, where academic and service units self-assess the implementation of the strategy based on the results and feedback from the previous year. The academic units emphasise research and educational activities that have had significant social impacts. Furthermore, in the RAI evaluation conducted in 2018, the impact was one of the areas evaluated from four perspectives: societal quality and impact, valorisation and dissemination. The audit interviews indicated RAI recommendations had been utilised, for instance, in the Aalto strategy process.

During the audit visit, the team asked how Aalto measures societal change and reform. As for quantitative indicators, Aalto’s KPIs for impact align with the national funding model and include technology transfer income, the volume of university and group corporate collaborations and the share of open-access publications. Based on the SER and audit interviews, Aalto sees these indicators do not capture societal impact to its full meaning. It was also confirmed by the audit interviews that there is not yet a shared understanding of the concept and dimensions of impact in the Aalto community. The top management interview revealed that Aalto is working towards a holistic picture of impact.

In many respects, Aalto’s organisational structures and achievements advancing societal impact are exceptional. However, Aalto might benefit from clarifying short-term, medium-term and long-term goals and milestones for societal impact and defining processes to continuously monitor together with its partners if the intended change is taking place at a desired pace.

Sustainable development and the entrepreneurial ecosystem are at the

core of Aalto’s impact

Building sustainability and a sustainable future is at the core of Aalto’s activities around societal reform. Through the audit visit, it was clear that Aalto’s research has focused on sustainability in recent years. As a good practice, some courses within degree programmes evaluate how they contribute to strategic areas, including sustainable development. Aalto measures its carbon dioxide emissions from its operations with the ambitious and commendable goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2030. A key element will be flight reduction; to this end, digital meeting tools and practices are being embedded and encouraged. Evidence already shows that CO2 emissions in Aalto are decreasing yearly.

A new initiative recently launched is a designated Sustainability Action Fund, targeted at students, recognising that students feel a lot of climate anxiety. The thinking behind this initiative is that it will support students in setting up their own projects and solutions to tackle this global crisis. It is expected that there will be up to 100 student-led actions in place over the next two years. It is an exciting initiative which has the potential to considerably increase climate engagement among Aalto students and stimulate climate-related student innovation.

Aalto has a lively entrepreneurial ecosystem, with students and stakeholders, generating approximately 100 start-ups annually, many of them in deep tech, working on sustainability solutions. The university has its own accelerator programme. Several successful start-ups, such as a satellite imaging technology company and the first Finnish quantum computer, have spun out from Aalto. IPR and patents sold to other companies have led to products and services in everyday use, including phones and computers. This entrepreneurial spirit and track record are one of the university’s strengths.

Aalto also strives to strengthen students’ potential to affect societal change through entrepreneurship. More than 2,000 students are exposed to entrepreneurial education every year. Underpinning this is the theme of sustainability. Every bachelor student acquires an entrepreneurial mindset during their degree. Entrepreneurial studies are also supported by Aaltoes, a student-run society providing entrepreneurial training to students and running events open to the public. Another impressive example of student-driven success is the Slush event, with over 12,000 attendees, attracting a lot of venture capital and consisting of a network of thousands of students and companies.

Overall, Aalto’s emphasis on entrepreneurial competences and training for students is highly important, as it prepares the ground for future entrepreneurial initiatives and subsequent societal impact from Aalto graduates.

Multi-layered collaboration and an ecosystem-based approach ensure and deepen the societal impact

The audit team commends Aalto for inclusive dialogue and an ecosystem-based way of

promoting societal impact. Based on the interviews, there is a continuous dialogue with external stakeholders, donor foundations and other universities. Through Aalto strategic partnerships, deeper and broader research and a wide impact on society are achieved. Aalto's strategic partnerships with leading companies in various fields are reflected in a significant number of research projects and programs. In the SER, Aalto stated that it aims to strengthen communication forums with stakeholders even more to promote impact. This is an important aim very much supported by the audit team.

During the audit visit, several examples were given of Aalto members contributing to societal reform in different aspects – with companies, cities, particularly in the capital region and ministries. It was learned through audit interviews that the Finnish government partnership proved particularly fruitful. Specifically, an academic project to cut carbon emissions by 30% in conjunction with the government and a €30m project on improving preschool education in Finland in partnership with the Finnish government, education researchers at the University of Helsinki and economists at Aalto. Another example is learning gained from the pandemic. During the COVID-19 crisis, Aalto approached the government to offer assistance. As a result, they helped with economic policy writing and establishing a data room for immediate analysis of trends, such as outbreaks and vaccination uptake. The interview with stakeholders also highlighted strategic cooperation between Aalto and the University of Helsinki in research profiling and identifying shared interests, such as computer science.

Overall, Aalto has various well-functioning procedures and arenas for interacting with external stakeholders and strategic partners to produce and co-create societal impact. Several interesting examples of concrete collaborations demonstrate the strength of Aalto's approach in this area.