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**

3.3 Functionality and development of the quality system

- Korkeakoulun itsearviointi

The quality system supports continuous developments in core activities

Aalto’s quality system ensures that our core activities are systematically assessed and enhanced and that they meet acceptable national and international standards. Elements of the quality system are systematically embedded in the university’s governance and daily activities.

Aalto’s well-functioning quality system tangibly supports the enhancement of core activities and management through a variety of tools, such as regular internal and external evaluations that focus on key areas of the university’s operations (e.g., the long-term evaluation programme described in section 3.4), feedback and development mechanisms that engage members of our community and stakeholders, an annual clock for the university management processes and a clear quality policy and PDCA cycle. The Aalto Handbook clarifies the responsibilities for the quality and development of core activities.

Aalto actively monitors its performance in international rankings and has markedly improved in rankings specific to science, art, technology and business. This has enhanced Aalto’s competitiveness and visibility. Additionally, the School of Business participates in international accreditations and has Triple Crown status (AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS)—an honour held by only few business schools worldwide.

Sharing of good practices improves operations and fosters internal cooperation

Aalto University believes in the value of sharing good practices to fully realise the potential for internal learning and cooperation. Good practices are shared through regular peer meetings, such as the Aalto Leaders' Dialogue, professors' council, development team (comprising school's development managers and Leadership Support Services), the Service Leader Seminar and the EDI committee.

Some examples of good practices that are broadly applied at Aalto include the use of risk maps in annual risk assessment and management and the lessons learned from remote and hybrid ways of working. Additional examples include the sharing of information in collaborative networks, crisis communication practices, the use of data and web analytics in decision-making and developing communication and marketing content, and student marketing and recruitment steering groups.

Aalto strives to build a participatory and impactful quality culture

At Aalto, quality management is a collective undertaking. Efforts are systematically directed towards ensuring a wider sense of ownership of quality management processes and the PDCA way of working at all levels. Aalto's quality culture promotes participation, open discussion and continuous improvement of the university's activities and operations (Figure 6). Progress in this regard has been commendable and in line with the feedback from the latest quality audit.



Figure 6. PDCA through a participatory approach

The university promotes the active participation of Aalto community members and stakeholders in quality system processes. Well-developed formal feedback channels ensure that members of

the Aalto community have adequate opportunities to influence decision-making and contribute to the development of operations. Student feedback and course development and student representation in various management units are integral components of the system. Improvements made based on feedback are communicated to the university community. This has built mutual trust and commitment.

External partners also engage in Aalto's research, teaching and lifewide learning. Stakeholder engagement was commended in the latest quality audit and has continued to progress. However, Aalto still lacks a comprehensive way to collect service feedback despite several good individual cases.

Aalto's quality system is continuously assessed and developed

The purpose of Aalto's quality system is to support the management and development of core activities. To ensure that this is achieved, a periodic review of the quality system is conducted. A thorough evaluation is carried out every six years as part of the quality audit by FINEEC, and an interim review of developments in the quality system is conducted every three years. Elements of the quality system are reviewed annually during the University Review. Aalto also periodically assesses its strategy in order to revise strategic choices continuously and proactively. This complements the current annual strategic processes that fine-tune the system incrementally.

The information obtained from quality management processes is used to improve the quality system. For example, a feedback survey is administered every year for annual strategic planning processes, and developments based on it are undertaken in subsequent rounds. This feedback was used to prioritise focus areas in the annual strategic processes and reduce overlaps by combining the University Review and the self-evaluation of the quality audit. Merging the Research, Art and Impact assessment (RAI) and Teaching and learning Evaluation Exercise (TEE) is also being considered. Feedback is also currently being used to further improve the follow-up on strategic plans and milestones and budgeting issues in the University Dialogue. Furthermore, the Aalto Handbook has been extensively updated to enhance its visibility within the Aalto community and further improve the university's quality culture.

An important feature of the quality system is its flexibility in enabling schools and services to use quality management procedures and processes in ways that serve their specific needs and disciplinary contexts. The annual strategic processes ensure a degree of consistency in the implementation of quality management procedures across schools and services, and they serve as an umbrella for all information collection to avoid ad-hoc requests. Through the Leadership Support Services (LSS), the university management coordinates the university-wide quality work.

Strengths	**Enhancement areas**

Internal and external quality evaluations of core activities are conducted systematically and continuously based on a clear long-term evaluation plan that is updated annually.	Need for continuous assessment and management of the workload that quality management processes create for members of the Aalto community at various levels.
Transparent communication and documentation systems are open to Aalto community members (e.g., KPI dashboards, open digital platforms for joint working, and Aalto's 'Our plan' site).	More systematic methods to identify and share good practices are needed.
Steering groups further facilitate the implementation of strategy, improve quality and ensure that all stakeholders are engaged.	Enhanced methods to fully use the feedback and data generated by the quality system.
Measures to implement our values, including a Code of Conduct, based on our values, which all community members commit to following (on-line course for all community members).	A clear and structured approach to understanding, implementing and monitoring cross-cutting approaches and strategic initiatives is needed.

3.3 Functionality and development of the quality system

- Auditointiryhmän arvio

Aalto's quality system is comprehensive and systematic

The audit team commends Aalto University for a comprehensive and well-functioning quality system. Aalto's long-term evaluation programme clearly demonstrates the systematic use of internal and external evaluations to enhance Aalto's activities and regular cycles of improvement. The strategic annual University Preview, University Review, and University Dialogue processes form the core of the quality system, encompassing all of Aalto's core duties; education, research, artistic activities and societal engagement and impact.

Regular external evaluations complement Aalto's quality system: Research, Art and Impact (RAI) and Teaching and Learning Evaluation Exercise (TEE) conducted in 7–9-year intervals and as well as regular reviews conducted by the Scientific (and Artistic activities) Advisory Boards (S(A)AB). Furthermore, the School of Business regularly participates in external AACSB, AMBA and EQUIS accreditations and has acquired a rare Triple Crown status.

During the audit visit, the team gained abundant evidence of how information generated by the

quality system helps the Aalto community to identify development needs in core duties and how the evaluation and feedback data is used to manage Aalto successfully. Through the systematic annual Preview-Review-Dialogue processes, feedback from RAI and TEE evaluations and S(A)AB reviews, Aalto updates strategies, priorities, goals and overall portfolio. With this evaluation data, Aalto University can continuously monitor and develop the quality of its degree and other educational provision, research, innovation and artistic activities and support services and improve its societal impact. Overall, there is strong evidence that the PDCA cycle is implemented in all of Aalto's core activities.

The quality system is being systematically developed

Quality management is steered by the Aalto Management Team, which convenes fortnightly. The Leadership Support Services prepares the Evaluation Programme. The operative Quality Management team manages the operations and meets formally monthly and casually every Friday.

Aalto monitors and develops its quality system annually in connection with the University Review. Feedback is collected from all staff members each year on the Preview-Review-Dialogue process itself, how it can be improved and whether the annual timetable works. This process works well and ensures broad participation in developing the university's quality system. For example, in the last annual University Review, the operative Quality Management team learned that services needed attention and resourcing because end users found the system too time-consuming. Based on staff feedback, the workload created by the quality system was lightened, and common templates were revised. The workload created by the quality system needs constant attention from leadership.

Aalto also utilises feedback from FINEEC audits. Since the previous FINEEC audit in 2016, the KPI dashboards were introduced, the Aalto Handbook format was changed from pdf to electronic format and school-level handbooks were combined into a common handbook.

Based on the SER and audit visit, there is ample evidence that good practices are shared via the intranet and through regular meetings of the Development team, the university-level Quality Management team and department quality teams, and EDI Committee. However, the audit team agrees with Aalto's conclusion in the SER that even more systematic methods could be introduced to identify and share good practices.

Participatory quality culture

Significant evidence was contained within the SER and showcased during the audit visit of Aalto's participatory and open-quality culture. Aalto's quality culture promotes participation, open discussion and continuous improvement of the university's activities and operations. One example mentioned in the interviews was the Quality Party at the School of Arts, Design and Architecture to develop and renew the course provision, including broad student participation. In

other schools, such as Business, the quality culture is driven by accreditation bodies, whose processes must be followed. This allows for continuous improvement, learning and action. The staff and leadership in this school were very positive about this process. Overall, the progress in improving participatory quality culture has been commendable and in line with the feedback received in the previous FINEEC audit.

Several channels are available for Aalto community members to give feedback and influence strategic choices and decision-making, thus influencing the development of operations. External stakeholders and Aalto alumni can contribute to and enhance Aalto's activities at different levels; for instance, as members of the Board, on school-level advisory boards, and as partners in research and artistic activities. Furthermore, student feedback, course and programme development and student representation in different working groups are essential to the quality system.

However, interviews with students revealed that many feel they could be better integrated into the preparatory decision-making processes. Similarly, staff workshops identified a lack of transparency on how staff input can influence high-level decision-making. As a result, the audit team recommends Aalto better showcase the importance and value of community input, perhaps with direct evidence of how it has affected essential decisions.