

AUDIT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

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Publikationsår **2024**, NCU:s publikation **28:2024**

Språk **Engelska**

ISBN **978-952-206-890-3 pdf**

4.1 Management of education programme portfolio

- Högskolans självvärdering

Focus and concrete objectives of the assessment

By the year 2030, the university aims to increase the number of degree students to 7,500 and the share of international students to 35%. The University of Vaasa has proposed to the Ministry of Education and Culture ambitious degree goals for the years 2025 – 2028. By doing so, the university is responding to Finland’s goals to increase the proportion of people with higher education and skilled R&D professionals. Achieving the higher degree goals necessitates actions to support smooth and fast study pathways, and a significant increase in the number of students from Finland and internationally. It is important to maintain high quality teaching with available resources.

The management and renewal of the education programme portfolio was selected as a self-assessment area in the Karvi audit because of its importance and complexity. By programme portfolio, we mean our degree programmes for bachelor’s and master’s degrees. In this self-assessment, we specifically focus on the renewal of the portfolio. In addition to this, we carry out development activities to improve pedagogical development, guidance and supervision, smart digitalization, student recruitment, and marketing.

The objectives of this self-assessment are: i) to describe the required activities and procedures for programme portfolio development; ii) to identify the strengths in the process; and iii) to identify enhancement areas. The self-assessment also includes a bench-learning case.

The development actions for programme portfolio renewal

The renewal of the programme portfolio includes several simultaneous processes to be managed: i) merging and scaling the programmes and courses to achieve critical mass, ii) developing the curricula to form lean and coherent programmes with synergies between the programmes, and iii) renewing the programme management practices for flexible study pathways and delivery. In addition, we are working on iv) enhanced proactive methods for data-driven growth management) processes for timely and fluent student recruitment and admission.

This development work is carried out in the programmes and schools, in the joint development and decision-making groups for education (KOKE and Education Council), and in the UVA management group. The process is led by the Vice Rector for Education, together with the Deans. The processes are supported by the Education and Student Services.

Assessment of strengths and enhancement areas

The strategic development programmes have started, and the university community is engaged to them. Quality management approaches facilitate development processes. Faculty and students are committed to ongoing improvement. The faculty and staff is working towards the same goal. The change processes have already started, for example with programme mergers and management structure renewals. To meet the targets, thorough programme and curriculum changes are further required. More exact planning and scheduling are required to coordinate the renewal processes and comply to the university's decision-making procedures.

Benchlearning

BI Norwegian Business School (BI) in Oslo was chosen as the bench-learning organisation. It is a non-governmental business school that offers bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees to 22,000 students. The University of Vaasa management group conducted a bench-learning tour in December 2023. BI has an education programme portfolio management system in place, as well as uniform programme and course frameworks throughout the school. For the first basic courses, all curricula can use common core content. The Business School bundles related programmes into larger blocks, facilitating the sharing of digital core information for professional studies. The Business School has achieved critical mass and quality by restricting the number of distinct curricula and individual courses. Management responsibilities are organised by education level (BA, MSc, PhD), programme ownership, course ownership, and teaching responsibilities. The lean planning and operating strategy enable the BI Business School to provide a high and consistent quality education to many students. The bench-learning provided the University of Vaasa with significant insight into the synergetic development of degree programmes and their delivery to meet an increasing number of students.

Strengths

Enhancement areas

Faculty, staff and students have a constructive attitude towards change

Proactive knowledge management has started. Performance objectives are clear and actively lead

Larger, more effective study modules are being created. The delivery of educational programmes has been improved and proactive modifications have been made. The ability to collaborate has improved.

Enhanced, continuous change management is needed to ensure engagement and commitment to the change

Need to continue work to reduce degree programmes' vulnerability and teacher dependency

Need to increase student enrolment to reach ambitious degree targets, which necessitates significant steps. During the phases of putting change into action, the emphasis will be on anticipating student numbers, forecasting, and managing growth.

4.1 Management of the portfolio of study programmes

- Auditeringsgruppens bedömning

The University of Vaasa prioritises renewing the portfolio of study programmes

UVA has chosen the management and renewal of the portfolio of study programmes as an evaluation area. The university aims to increase the number of bachelor's and master's degree students based on the national objective of expanding higher education. This goal is well aligned with UVA's strategic development. According to the self-assessment report, the process is led by the Vice-Rector for Education and the deans. It is supported by the Education and Student Services. UVA also carried out a benchlearning project with BI Norwegian Business School in the evaluation area. As described in the self-assessment report, the benchlearning provided UVA with significant insight into the synergetic development of degree programmes and their delivery to cater for increasing number of students.

According to the audit visit, the renewal of UVA's degree programmes has a key impact on the efficient use of available resources and the diversification of the students' population. UVA has provided sensible arguments in favour of resource optimisation, as not all existing programmes manage to produce a sufficiently high numbers of graduates. This situation has led to a reduction in UVA's funding in the national performance-based funding allocation model. Similarly, according to the audit visit, the need to account for more diverse students, such as international students and continuous learners, requires the creation of core study programmes with versatile deliverables suitable for multiple student groups.

According to the self-assessment report and the audit visit, programme mergers have been conducted in an inclusive and collaborative manner by engaging students, academic faculty, and programme leaders. Needs and ideas for the portfolio of study programmes are discussed openly

and continuously at various levels, i.e., on the Programme Development Committee, in meetings with teachers, students, administrators and in feedback sessions. The academic faculty seems to have sufficient understanding of the interconnections between various study programmes. According to the audit visit, international accreditations have also supported the reform of study programmes. However, staff expressed a need for more sharing of good practices between schools and study programmes.

UVA is committed to preserving and improving its quality, while expanding the study offer. This is achieved through internal budget reallocation from administration towards tenured academic faculty. The increased use of teaching assistants and collaborative teaching in several programmes have good potential as regards maintaining a sufficiently high level of teaching with the growing student numbers. The university's expansion strategy is promising as regards the employability of its own alumni as teaching and research professionals. UVA focuses on increasing the number of sufficient teaching and research staff if student numbers increase by 30%. The audit team recommends that the same attention be paid to administrative staff as their workload also increases. Enough attention should be paid to ensure that the quality of education is not compromised for the sake of increasing the number of students and graduating time.

Establishing change management processes and procedures to streamline the work

Based on the self-assessment report, additional materials and the audit visit, the renewal of the study programme portfolio requires a more systemic and systematic approach to managing the change at the university level. Faculty and students have a constructive attitude towards change based on the audit visit. UVA has certain tools for forecasting the growth of student numbers, such as the Programme Development Committee's regular meetings and the real-time dashboard with the key performance indicators. Based on the audit visit, staff is urged to constantly monitor the database for key performance indicators. These tools, however, do not substitute lack of a coherent approach in implementing the change.

UVA is carrying out multiple, simultaneous activities to merge, scale up and renew its study programme. The audit team therefore recommends that the university develops a dedicated change management strategy and implementation plan for monitoring and evaluation activities. UVA should also further develop its process documentation. Process descriptions should streamline the work of renewing the study programmes and support staff understanding of the processes. Such process descriptions would be particularly useful for new employees. According to the audit team, defined processes and procedures should also be conducive to raising greater awareness and a more structured and sustainable engagement among UVA stakeholders in the change management process. Interviewees during the audit visit also expressed a need for guidelines for the different phases of study programmes, such as the life cycle of programmes, planning and budgeting. Staff and students feared that as student numbers increase, the quality of education and teacher well-being will decline.

Collaborative efforts of academic faculty, students and employers are key

During the audit visit, UVA acknowledged the need to develop collaborative competences among the university community as part of bridging the gap between varying programmes' quality and sharing good practices. Teachers felt it would be a challenging task in the future. During the visit, it was also found that there will be a certain number of hours per course that teachers can devote to it. Teachers should learn pedagogical methods related to how to teach a given content for a given number of students in each number of hours. This also allows managers to monitor better the amount of teaching provided. It was also emphasised during the visit that training on the use of digital technologies for more efficient teaching was beneficial for the growing student-staff ratio and the large share of students studying online or hybrid. Other recommended support areas are training for delivery of the English-language courses and multicultural skills.

Providing programme managers and academic faculty with guidelines on standardised good practices across various UVA units has also been underscored in order to facilitate the change management process. The audit team recommends closer involvement of students in decision-making on the portfolio of study programmes. According to the self-assessment report, study programme changes are communicated to the students once formulated.

The role of external stakeholders in curriculum preparation should be solidified. During the audit visit, the collected evidence recognises their involvement in UVA's steering bodies and in providing work-related internships and case studies. According to the visit, the degree programmes' learning outcomes and the labour market expectations in terms of employability are not fully aligned. The audit team therefore suggests that external stakeholders be more closely and practically involved in detailing the competences that UVA study programmes deliver.

UVA has made considerable efforts to review the study programmes and in implementing their plan to increase student numbers. According to audit team, its updated portfolio should address crucial societal challenges. According to the audit visit, the academic faculty recognises the need to develop students' competences in view of present and future societal relevance. The key topics highlighted as useful in the study programmes include digital technologies, responsible use of AI, sustainability, and geopolitics. Focusing on societal challenges has implications for UVA's future work on pedagogy and teaching methods, with flipped learning, learning by doing, simulation exercises, project-based learning and experiments reported as good practices. According to the audit visit and the self-assessment report, international students also get support for their integration through the Talent HUB programme.