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AUDIT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

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5 Benchlearning

- Högskolans självvärdering

Planning and goals of benchlearning

The planning of the University of Helsinki's (UH) benchlearning was initiated in spring 2019 through the cooperation of the rector and vice-rectors, the audit steering group and the project manager for benchlearning. In the first stage, the benchlearning theme and partner were selected. In terms of the latter, emphasis was placed on the following:

- The partner university should be a member of the League of European Research Universities (LERU).
- The partner university should have special expertise relevant to the benchlearning theme.
- To engender learning, the partner university should not be too similar to the UH.

In addition to the above criteria, the aim was to make the benchlearning process an element of a long-term development partnership. The University of Edinburgh, one of the UH's strategic partners, was selected as the benchlearning partner.

The new strategic plan of the UH strongly emphasises student and staff wellbeing. The UH's objective is to be the best place to study and work in 2030. Therefore, staff and student wellbeing was chosen as the benchlearning theme (incorporated into evaluation areas '1 The HEI creates competence', under 'The implementation of education', in terms of support for student wellbeing, and '3 The HEI enhances quality and wellbeing', under 'Supporting the competence development and wellbeing of the staff').

Benchlearning goals:

- To obtain feedback from the benchlearning partner on where the promotion of wellbeing among UH students and staff currently stands
- To gain new perspectives for the promotion of student and staff wellbeing
- To establish social networks for the promotion of themes relevant to the wellbeing of students and staff

After the selection of the partner and theme, the planning of a more detailed benchlearning programme began. The programme was designed in close inter-university cooperation, utilising the expertise of student and staff wellbeing specialists. The sessions focused on staff wellbeing included themes of management and leadership, supervisory work and the acquisition and upgrading of professional qualifications. The sessions on student wellbeing were dedicated to the significance of the community, the role of student unions in promoting wellbeing, growth into an expert as well as the relevance of learning environments and learning paths for professional development.

Mutual sharing of advance material related to the theme was considered key to successful benchlearning to ensure an equal starting point and the opportunity to concentrate on sharing best practices and conducting comparative dialogue instead of general introductions.

According to the original plan, the aim was to carry out the benchlearning process as an on-site visit in late 2019. The selection of the benchlearning partner and theme as well as the planning stage postponed the schedule to early 2020 when, in turn, the coronavirus pandemic upended the plans. By the decision of the audit steering group, benchlearning was first moved to autumn 2020.

Due to the coronavirus situation in the autumn, the steering group decided on 2 September to conduct the process virtually over remote connections on 24 and 25 November 2020.

Implementation of benchlearning

As the decision was made to implement the benchlearning process online, the original programme had to be adapted. Instead of three days, the programme was narrowed down to two, part of the content was cut, and sufficient breaks were included during the virtual sessions. Staff and student sessions were carried out in parallel to enable a longer duration and wider audiences for both thematic entities. Zoom was chosen as the virtual platform.

Participants in the sessions on student wellbeing included representatives of senior leadership from both universities, the rector of the UH, vice-rectors from the University of Edinburgh, the director of development from the UH, the director of student wellbeing from the University of Edinburgh, specialists, teaching staff and students. Similarly, the sessions on staff wellbeing were attended by representatives of senior leadership, a vice-rector from the UH, the directors of human resources from both universities, a dean from the UH, heads of human resources and specialists.

Instructions on the method of working for the sessions were distributed in advance. The sessions began with introductions to each theme, after which best practices and enhancement areas were

identified on both sides. The progress of the sessions was steered by chairs, and secretaries recorded key observations on template forms. Solid advance planning and instructions as well as documentation were employed to ensure the success of the virtual process.

Evaluation and results of benchlearning

To assess the success of benchlearning, the participants from the UH were sent a small survey, in addition to which a feedback session was organised. Benchlearning was also assessed in the audit steering group.

Overall, the process was considered a success, although areas for development were identified. The schedule was found to be too tight. With short sessions, it was difficult to conduct in-depth discussion. For instance, the discussion on quality management viewpoints was fairly shallow. There were challenges associated with distributing the advance material, and no material was received from the partner university for certain sessions. Some of the session participants changed from session to session. The introductions prepared by the universities did not always match.

The selection of a theme relevant to both universities and the diversity of perspectives were considered particular strengths. Both universities have emphatically highlighted in their strategic plans people and community wellbeing. Mentoring for staff and tutoring for students were found to be important tools for promoting wellbeing at both institutions. In recent years, both universities have focused on the development and digitalisation of services. In matters pertaining to equality and diversity, the differences in the history and environment of the two universities were acknowledged. The themes are essential and topical for both universities. The development actions determined on the basis of benchlearning have been taken into account in the implementation plan of the UH for the years 2021–2024.

The atmosphere in the benchlearning sessions was enthusiastic, and their virtual implementation went better than expected. The method made it possible to have a larger number of participants than would have been possible in conjunction with an on-site visit, especially in the case of the UH. The tools utilised in the process (e.g., the template forms) were found to function well. The chairs, introductory speakers and secretaries conducted their duties successfully.

Good practices of the UH	**Good practices of the University of Edinburgh**
Work between key stakeholders concerning student wellbeing, e.g., dedicated workgroups and networks related to student wellbeing	Student Mental Health Strategy and Student Experience Action Plan
Student Union and student organisations have a strong role in the UH’s decision-making.	Simplification of service structure for students, three contact points: schools, student hubs specialist services
A holistic approach to student wellbeing. An approach to student wellbeing based on the ability to learn	Service Excellence Programme advancing both student and staff wellbeing
University Services development since 2016: developing tailored services to faculties and easy-to-use online services	Experiences and thoughts among employees shared in small groups (peer-to-peer support), both academic and supporting staff together for learning and increasing openness and trust
Coaching and mentoring as methods to increase staff wellbeing (e.g., coaching for new deans)	A holistic way to improve the UH instead of developing separate operations
	Just-in-time skills development for staff

Concrete actions to be applied on the basis of the benchlearning process

Development of career and counselling psychologist services, included in the University of Helsinki Implementation Plan 2021–2024, measure 9: Smooth student progress

Development of teacher tutoring in support of student wellbeing, included in the University of Helsinki Implementation Plan 2021–2024, measure 9: Smooth student progress

Promoting equality and diversity of staff and students through LERU and Una Europa collaboration

Development of University operations with an increasingly comprehensive approach. Instead of developing individual functions, the organisation is developed as a whole.

Audit team's feedback

The University of Helsinki carefully selected the topic for its benchlearning activity and the partner. The project was unfortunately affected by the COVID pandemic, but the activity was still successfully carried out online. The activity was based on mutual learning and exchange with active participation from both institutions. During the process, several examples of excellent practices at the partner university that the university can learn from and get new ideas for improvement were identified. The University of Helsinki can especially be commended for selecting a key strategic priority area as the benchlearning topic, and for linking the outcomes of the benchlearning activity to its strategic development.