

AUDIT OF VAASA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Författare **Eva Werner, Touko Apajalahti, Jade Brouns, Tero Janatuinen, Sirpa Moitus and Hanna Väättäin.** Self-evaluation of Vaasa University of Applied Sciences edited by **Tarja Kettunen.**

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5 Benchlearning

- Högskolans självvärdering

Efficient Thesis Writing Process for Timely Graduation

Selection of the Target and the Partner

VAMK's Benchlearning Theme 'Efficient Thesis Writing Process for Timely Graduation' is part of evaluation area 1.1. The planning of education. The success of the student is one of our strategic enhancement areas. With efficient thesis process we promote the student's graduation in time and thus their success in working life. In the free choice benchlearning project we examined the thesis guidance processes at VAMK and Novia UAS, methods used and ways of working in various phases of the thesis. We asked Novia to be our benchlearning collaborator because we knew, based on our previous cooperation, that our thesis processes differed from each other. We had observed that the students of Novia seemed to do better in the final phases of the studies than VAMK's students.

Aims of Benchlearning Project

The aim at VAMK is to reduce the number of dropouts and to increase the number of students that graduate in the normative time. The reason for study delay with many students is the prolongation of the thesis process. With some students, the thesis may be the only part that is missing from the degree. With this benchlearning project we wanted to find means and ideas to make the thesis process more effective at VAMK. The organisational cultures are different in Technology, Business Administration and Health Care and Social Services and this influences the thesis process, as well. Therefore, we chose corresponding degree programmes from VAMK and Novia for comparison.

Table 1. Degree programmes selected to the benchmarking project

	VAMK	NOVIA
BUSINESS Bachelor of Business Administration	Tradenomi, Taloushallinto (Business Administration)	Tradenom, företagsekonomi (Business Administration)
	Tradenomi, Kansainvälinen kauppa (International Trade)	Tradenom, internationell handel (International Trade)
TECHNOLOGY Bachelor of Engineering	Insinööri, Sähkötekniikka (Electrical Engineering) Insinööri, Tietotekniikka (Information Technology)	El- och automationsteknik (Electrical Engineering and Automation Technology)

Phases and Schedule of the Project:

The decision on the benchlearning theme was taken by the Management Team in February 2019. After discussions, we contacted the Quality Manager at Novia UAS and invited the Presidents, Quality Managers and Director of Units from both UASs to a meeting.

The project proceeded as follows:

1. The meeting of the partners

We met on 4 October 2019 and draw up the preliminary project plan. The plan included the target, aims, restrictions and participants of the benchlearning project. VAMK's Quality Manager was appointed the project manager.

2. Acquiring background information

The project manager compiled background information on the thesis processes at both UASs and visited a thesis seminar at Novia on 22 November 2019.

3. Sending the questionnaires

We sent a student questionnaire to students in various phases of the thesis process and a supervisor questionnaire to the teachers participating in the project. We received 113 responses from VAMK's students.

4. Workshops

Before the workshops, the teachers were sent a summary of both questionnaires. Workshops were held on 28 January for both Technology and Business Administration programmes and another for Business Administration programme on 10 February 2020.

5. Summary of the observations made in workshops

The project manager presented a summary of the observations to the Directors of Units

6. Policy to develop the thesis process

The Directors of Units drew up common policies concerning all degree programmes to develop the thesis process at VAMK.

7. Information and application

The results of the benchlearning project were presented in the Quality Zoom on 21 October 2020. We have already piloted new methods and experiences have been positive. The process has been refined and more students have already graduated on schedule. We will continue to develop the process in accordance with the policy.

8. Assessment of Benchlearning and Measures Taken

The implementation of the benchlearning process succeeded very well and we found means to develop our thesis process. It was evident already in the background material that the thesis processes at VAMK and Novia were different; the most significant difference was in the approach: at Novia it was collective, at VAMK individual. The other differences observed were due to this basic difference, and they can be found in the table below.

Table 2. Observed differences in the thesis process at VAMK and Novia

Practices of VAMK	Practices of Novia
<p>Individual process, in which the teacher and the student have a possibility to accommodate the process into their schedules. Consequently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The general instructions are available on the Study site on the portal • Every thesis supervisor decides independently on the scheduling and other matters related to supervision • The student receives individual guidance, but it takes a lot of the supervisor's time • The thesis process is flexible for the teacher and the student, but this flexibility can delay the completion of the thesis 	<p>Scheduled group process, which follows up both the teacher's and the student's activity. Consequently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The schedule and the instructions are available on the Moodle platform, a joint platform for the supervisors and the students • The thesis process of all groups in the degree programme follows the same <i>annual planning cycle for the thesis</i> • One process starts in the autumn semester, one in the spring semester • The process compels everyone to follow the same schedule, which puts pressure on some teachers and students but gives the support of the group

The project produced outlines for principles towards which we aim to develop our thesis process:

- Advancing the thesis process in the study plan
- Scheduling the process beforehand so that students are aware of their scheduled progress and deadlines of each phase. At VAMK, a supervising teacher of each degree programme and group prepares the schedules.
- Increasing group tutoring
- Better utilisation of digital tools in the thesis guidance
- Better inclusion of the enterprise that has provided the thesis topic in various phases of the

process.

Comments of the audit team

VAMK's benchlearning project led to increase in timely graduations

VAMK'S benchlearning project focused on efficient thesis writing and thus goes hand in hand with VAMK's ambition to care for students' timely and smooth progression in studies to facilitate graduating on time. The choice of the benchlearning topic was the result of data provided within the institutional student-life cycle and thus provides evidence of the effectiveness of VAMK's quality management.

VAMK chose Novia UAS as a partner for this project since the thesis writing processes at each of the institutions were highly diverse and thus provided an ideal basis for mutual learning. Furthermore, as was known from previous cooperation between the two institutions, Novia UAS students were seemingly able to cope better with the task of thesis writing than VAMK students, who faced the risks of drop-out or at least study delay, both resulting from hurdles in the thesis writing process. As programmes in Technology, Business Administration and Health Care Services are impregnated by specific "discipline-cultures", similar programmes at Novia were chosen as benchlearning partner programmes. Thus, three programmes from Business and Technology were selected at each institution.

The process steps were jointly set up and fixed. To set the stage for the project, a questionnaire was sent to students in various phases of their thesis process and another questionnaire was sent to supervising teachers. The information gained from these questionnaires served as a starting point for two subsequent workshops organised for teachers, the summary of which was brought to the attention of the directors of units as these are responsible for the planning, implementation, and enhancement of education.

As a result of this benchlearning project, common policies for all degree programmes and their thesis processes were developed, with new methods and a refinement of the processes being implemented. This process approach demonstrates that VAMK consistently involves students and other stakeholders in policy decisions.

In the interviews, the audit team learned that the new process entailing an earlier start of the thesis project as well as the group monitoring was welcomed by students and staff; the first results collected showed that the number of timely graduations had increased, thus confirming the success of this project. VAMK is to be commended for this stringent follow-up evaluation of the impact and results.

VAMK is recommended to implement the new thesis process in all

programmes

As was equally learned in the interviews, the new process has not yet been implemented in all programmes, and thus should be rolled out consistently throughout all programmes. The lengthier period for thesis preparation could also be used to link smaller parts of RDI projects with the theses and thus foster students' involvement in RDI. It was also mentioned in the interviews that external stakeholders and partners wished to see interdisciplinary topics being tackled in students' theses as well; with the new timeline for the thesis project in place, VAMK is encouraged to consider this request as interdisciplinarity mirrors students' future work environment.

Furthermore, the audit team encourages VAMK to define rules for thesis guidance as the quality of thesis guidance is rather varied and dependent on the teacher a student is assigned. When further developing and implementing the renewed thesis process throughout the institution, VAMK should also focus on equal quality of thesis guidance.

VAMK is encouraged to undertake more benchlearning projects on topics of concern in the future, eventually also with some of its international partners, as these projects not only contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning but also constitute an important element of quality enhancement for the entire institution.

VAMK is already actively engaged in benchlearning with the Health and Well-being Unit of Novia; as the development of students' bilingual skills is a topical need for the development of the health and social sector of the region, VAMK is encouraged to intensify its cooperation with NOVIA in this respect, also through benchlearning projects.