KANSALLINEN KOULUTUKSEN ARVIOINTIKESKUS
NATIONELLA CENTRET FÖR UTBILDNINGSUTVÄRDERING
FINNISH EDUCATION EVALUATION CENTRE

# AUDIT OF AALTO UNIVERSITY

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# 5 Benchlearning

## - Korkeakoulun itsearviointi

## 5.1 Benchlearning process with the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL)

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) was chosen to be our learning organisation and benchlearning theme based on community input and discussion. The Aalto Management Team agreed on the importance of this evaluation area in 2021. Aalto considers a comprehensive assessment of EDI vital for understanding how well it is being managed and implemented and for further developing EDI through insights from the evaluation and lessons from the benchlearning.

Aalto University identified several potential benchlearning partners, of which the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL) was selected not only for its continuous effort on EDI work and status as the 3rd most international university in the world (THE most international universities 2022) but also because it is a prominent Aalto partner in research and education. In previous years, Aalto has for example benchmarked its career systems against EPFL.

EPFL is Europe’s most cosmopolitan technical university. It welcomes students, professors and collaborators of more than 120 nationalities. Equal opportunities are an integral part of EPFL’s development and excellence policy. The Equal Opportunity Office is attached to the Vice Presidency for Responsible Transformation (VPT).

At the beginning of our learning journey, we met three times virtually and discussed our current state, strengths and enhancement areas, as well as the development plans both institutes have in place for 2024. Topics for the site visit were agreed upon in the final preparatory meeting between the EPFL vice president and Aalto provost.

During the site visit to EPFL (24-26.5.2022), we met EPFL's provost, vice-president, and many people from student associations, the equal opportunity office, HR, the School of Architecture, Civil and Environmental Engineering, and different leadership support teams. The participants from Aalto included a student representative, the provost, an EDI officer and the person responsible for the quality audit process.

## 5.2 Evaluation and results of the benchlearning

The benchlearning process and site visit resulted in useful knowledge and insights for further developing EDI work within Aalto's development areas. Accessibility (i.e., Aalto's fifth EDI development area) was excluded from the benchlearning agenda because accessibility is not part of EPFL's development plan.

### Building EDI capabilities

At both universities, data shows that the sense of belonging and overall experience of EDI varies between different demographics, hence both are focusing on recognising the breadth of diversity and fostering an inclusive culture for diverse community members. Both universities are working to raise awareness through dialogue and communication and by building competences, especially about working together and inclusive communication. Structural developments are also ongoing, such as updating processes and data. One of EPFL's best practices is a holistic 'Respect' initiative that combines survey results with a communications campaign with community dialogues, workshops and eLearning. Grass-roots development activities are also ongoing within schools and units. At the school level, the Diversity Office at EPFL's School of Architecture, Civil and Environmental Engineering (ENAC) is actively working on ensuring that their culture is welcoming to everyone and that people have awareness about diversity, and that they fight stereotypes. They have built webpages and organised workshops and informal EDI movie nights. In addition, EPFL has several smaller bottom-up activities, such as a safer space for LGBTQIA+ supported by the university administration. At Aalto, bottom-up grass-roots activity is mostly visible within the student community but has recently become more active amongst personnel as well. For example, our Department of Computer Science has recently appointed the first Vice Head of Department focusing on diversity. At EPFL, support for international hires is more advanced than at Aalto, including dual career funding to support international employees; we agreed to investigate their processes and practices in this area in more detail.

### Fostering inclusive learning experience

Although the number of women is gradually increasing at both universities, they are still an underrepresented group. Both universities are taking actions to attract diverse students across study programmes, including collaborating with high schools and organising student recruitment fairs. EPFL has benchmarked gender balance across 15 institutes of technology and found that women are underrepresented in technology higher education across Europe, although there are differences between institutes and fields. This study suggested that actions are needed earlier, in primary and secondary education, and this is an area that Aalto is already investing in through the Aalto Junior programme and the 'Shaking Up Tech' event.

At both universities, students are actively working on fostering safer and more inclusive learning environments, collaborating closely with the university administration. At Aalto, the board of the student association AYY, as well as its hired professionals and other associations, are all highly committed to EDI development. For example, they have organised workshops and revised the student orientation process to include EDI and wellbeing topics. Students at EPFL have played an active role in preventing harassment and inappropriate conduct and building a culture of respect through multi-channel communication campaigns, following up on cases of inappropriate conduct and organising workshops together with the university. This is an area we agreed to continue working on together.

## Developing equal people processes & practices

The share of women in academic positions is improving, but a gender gap in career progression is present at both universities. Thus, diversity and a better gender balance continue to be a development area for both Aalto and EPFL. Switzerland has a federal program to support equal opportunity at universities, and they also have set a target state for gender-balance (35% newly nominated professors and 25% upper management women by 2024). Both universities have developed recruitment tools and practices to ensure a merit-based, bias free processes. At EPFL, unconscious bias training is compulsory for all recruitment committee chairs, and at Aalto, all employees are required to complete a Code of Conduct e-training. In the School of Architecture, Civil and Environmental Engineering at EPFL, a member of the diversity office participates in departmental tenure track committee work and helps to spot and address unconscious biases. The Dean may also pause a recruitment process if the candidate pool is not diverse enough. At Aalto, there has a been a lot of focus on gender balance in academic recruitments. For example, we use an internal headhunting service, Talent Search, to provide support for identifying and attracting diverse candidates. Aalto is using leadership trainings (e.g., the Aalto Academic Leader programme) to attract diverse candidates to leadership and management positions, but more work is needed in this area.

## Strengthening a data-driven operating model

Both universities are continuously developing EDI data and analytics, and both have made some key information available publicly. EPFL conducted an in-depth survey on harassment and a culture of respect and published the Report of the Commission on the Status of Women Faculty at EPFL, and at Aalto EDI-related experiences are part of the biannual personnel and student wellbeing surveys, and statistics on gender and internationality are followed up in the annual University Review at the schools and at the university level.

Both universities have strengthened their EDI governance. EDI work is led by the provost at Aalto and by the vice-president for responsible transformation at EPFL. More governmental funding is allocated for developing equal opportunities in universities in Switzerland than in Finland; this is reflected in a larger team working full-time on EDI development at EPFL. On the other hand, Aalto's EDI work is perhaps better integrated across the community: Aalto has a university-level EDI committee that has representatives from each school, diverse and active employee and student groups, and an EDI task force or equivalent body in each school which works on EDI

development and annual action planning that builds on the university-level development plan.

Further improvements in the processes, guidelines, communication and monitoring of reports of inappropriate behaviour are ongoing at both universities. For example, EPFL's Trust and Support Network, a multi-professional network providing low-threshold support for challenging situations, is a good model that Aalto is investigating for our formal processes.

| Good practices of your organisation | Good practices of the partner organisation |
| --- | --- |
| Close collaboration with the student union and associations. AYY board and its hired professional employees, as well as other student associations, are highly committed to EDI development. | Raising awareness and building an inclusive culture through a holistic 'Respect' initiative, and grass-roots development done at ENAC and through peer-support bottom-up initiatives. |
| Well-integrated organising model: university-level EDI committee led by the provost, with representatives from each school; diverse employee and student groups. | Recruitment practices to tackle unconscious bias at the university and school level developed by the Diversity Office at ENAC. |
| All schools have an EDI task force or equivalent body which is responsible for the annual action plan for EDI development. | Advanced support to international employees. |
| EDI is integrated into values and strategy and as a part of the University Review in 2022. | Trust and Support Network and processes to handle challenging situations and inappropriate conduct. |

## Applying the benchlearning observations

At Aalto, an overview of the best practices has been shared with EDI actors across the university in a shared workshop between the university EDI committee and the schools' EDI task forces. The provost and the EDI officer will discuss the new ideas with process owners: EPFL campaigns with our communications team, competence development solutions with our HR team, multi-sectoral support team for handling inappropriate conduct with our Education team, and support of grass-roots activities with the schools and the student union. The implementation of some best practices has already started; for example, the multi-sectoral support team for handling inappropriate conduct, as well as work on inclusive language.

# Audit team's feedback

The benchlearning project with the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL) provided Aalto University with valuable insights into EDI approaches, including awareness and discussions, dual career support and the importance of addressing sensitive issues such as harassment and unconscious biases. As a result of the visit, new ideas and activities to promote EDI at Aalto University have been proposed, such as creating content about inclusive language use on the university's website.

While EPFL was found to be ahead of Aalto in internationalisation and funding, Aalto has

successfully integrated EDI into all activities and processes. However, as the project was recently completed, there has not yet been an opportunity to analyse and implement all the lessons learned fully.

Overall, the benchlearning project has the potential to enhance Aalto's EDI actions, but further analysis and implementation are needed to realise the benefits of this exercise fully. The audit team recommends that Aalto utilise the benchlearning experience to specifically advance support and inclusion for international staff and students in the Aalto community.