

## Quality Assurance System of Åbo Akademi University 2005

### Background

The importance of Quality Assurance (QA) has been emphasized in the Bologna Process. Transparency in QA procedures is essential. That is why the Finnish Ministry of Education gave the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) the task of creating a national QA structure that will fulfill the international requirements. In January of 2005 FINHEEC presented the plan for the universities. The main responsibility for QA will remain the same as it is stated in the University Act. The responsibility for the quality of research, education and administrative structure lies foremost on the university itself. New is that external evaluation panels chosen by FINHEEC will visit the universities. The agenda for these visits is explicitly to audit the QA system of the university.

Due to the FINHEEC plan every university must now concentrate not only on improving the different routines of QA but also on allocating each routine in a system. Focus must be put on how different QA measures interact to secure that all sections of activity are included in the QA system. The FINHEEC audits will require that the university to document every procedure in a more thorough manner than before. The methods for QA must be clarified to ensure an adequate level of transparency. A key point in the FINHEEC audits is to focus on *the quality wheel* which consists of three processes: planning, implementation and evaluation of results.

The audits will result in an evaluation document which will state if the university has a QA system that fills certain standards set by the FINHEEC. These standards will be in accordance with the standards and guidelines accepted by other Bologna countries (see ENQA 2005). Approved QA systems will grant the university a FINHEEC Certificate and a place on a list (web site) over universities that fulfill the Finnish QA standards.

### Quality Assurance at Åbo Akademi University

The university's strategy states that Åbo Akademi University should continue on the current path. Even with small resources the results must meet the highest standards nationally and internationally in research and education. In order to secure and improve the level of quality within the university a broad range of activities has been introduced over the years. A Quality Board was introduced in 1997 to coordinate evaluations and other QA activity. However, there has not been a clearly systematized plan of action. Creating QA routines within the subjects has to a large content been relying on the interest of the teachers.

In December of 2004 the University Senate accepted a plan for a QA system. Implementing the suggested reforms will mean extensive changes in the way quality is monitored at Åbo Akademi University. Activities already in use will be improved

and some new elements will be introduced in order to fulfill the standards set by the FINHEEC. The plan is only a framework for QA. In the present situation the university is working at concretizing every sector in the plan. During this period of introduction there will be a more detailed analysis of the FINHEEC requirements.

Details about each sector of the plan are shortly described in the following chapters.

## **1) Electronic Course Evaluation System**

One of the key elements in QA, course evaluations, has been in practice since 1995 at the university. The Quality Board's instruction that every teacher must give the students a possibility to evaluate a course they have participated in has been widely accepted. A concern for the Quality Board has been the fact that any criticism about the course stays between the teacher and the student. It's in the teacher's hands to choose if he/she wants to acknowledge the students opinions and make changes to the structure and/or content of the course. Another problem has been the sometimes low student participation in the evaluations. Also the questions in the evaluation forms differ in quality.

The QA plan suggests that the university introduces a web based course evaluation system. This kind of system is already being used in many universities. By using a web based system you can ensure the students right to evaluate every course. You can also introduce some standard questions to the evaluation form which opens up a possibility to compare answering statistics between subjects and between faculties.

To secure student participation, course evaluations could be set as an obligatory part in every course. Åbo Akademi University has chosen a semi-obligatory system where it's compulsory for the students to evaluate four courses (two in the autumn, two in the spring) during the Academic year.

## **2) Development documentation**

An important part of the QA system is to bring forward the continuous development work that take place within each subject. This will be achieved by urging the personnel to give short descriptions on development processes going on in different sectors (for example internationalisation, student guidance). Even quite small changes on ground level should be included. Descriptions of this activity will be published on each subject's home page using a web based form that the Quality Board will design. The QA plan states that the development description should be updated at least once a year.

When fulfilled each subject's web document will include last year's statistics, descriptions of development projects and evaluation results for finished projects. The web document will also include the university's long term goals for a range of sectors. It will thereby become possible to compare the current situation for the subject in question with the long term goals of the university.

### **3) New Management Structure for QA**

One of the elements considered necessary to change was the decision-making structure for new QA strategies. Furthermore the responsibility on each level had to be clarified in order to secure an effective implementation of decisions in this area. Creating a web based course evaluation system also needed some structural changes within the faculties (see 3.3).

#### ***3.1) Enhanced Role for Vice Deans***

One of the ideas in the QA plan is to enhance the development of a quality culture within each faculty. To achieve this goal one of the staff members must ensure that there is continuity in developing the quality procedures. To secure a good result it was regarded that this person must be in a leading position. Giving the task to the Deans was however not considered a good choice since this position already contains a great deal of responsibility. Therefore the University Senate decided that the Vice Deans will carry the responsibility for developing this sector.

#### ***3.2) Management Group for QA***

The members of the Quality Board represent all sectors of the university; students, teachers, professors and administrators. One of the university's two Vice Rectors acts as chairman. Still the Board's regulations give it only a position as an advisory body. Consequently the Board's decisions on QA activity are not always implemented in a desired way within the university.

By the decision of the University Senate in December of 2004 the university will introduce a Management Group for QA. Members in this organisation will be the Vice Deans and Directors/Vice Directors of Supporting Centres (Continuing Education, Language Centre, Computer Centre, Library etc.). The Management Group will meet a couple of times every year.

The idea behind forming a Management Group is on the one hand to improve the level of information on national and international QA development at the faculties and supporting centres, on the other to create a forum for strategic planning from a quality perspective. The most important role is, however, to secure a commitment to QA strategies on a higher level in the administrative hierarchy. This should give the Quality Board better opportunities to achieve the goals set for QA.

#### ***3.3) Faculty Evaluation Boards***

The new QA system will also introduce an Evaluations Board/Evaluation Work Group in every faculty. The task for these units is to evaluate the level of quality for each subject by combining statistics, course evaluations and information from the development chart (see 2.). The idea is to gather a small group with an interest for quality enhancement and a good knowledge of background factors concerning each subject. By knowing the circumstances in which the subject functions it's expected that the unit will have better opportunities of giving feasible recommendations on how to improve the level of quality. Each evaluation unit will consist of teachers, students and administrators. One member should come from another faculty.

By introducing evaluation units for each faculty the university aspires to in a better way integrate a quality culture on faculty and subject level and spread the information from course evaluations to a bigger audience. The units will gather a short report on every evaluation. This report will be a public document.

#### **4) External Evaluations**

Evaluations performed by external panels will continue to play an important role in Åbo Akademi University's QA system. For evaluations organized by the university there will be a shift from evaluations on faculty level towards evaluations of individual subjects or study programs. Focusing on smaller units will give the evaluation panel more time to concentrate on details. Åbo Akademi University believes that concentrating on small scale evaluations may benefit the participating units the most.

The university will also actively take part in evaluation projects organized by the Ministry of Education or FINHEEC. Benchmarking projects with universities similar in size will have a high priority.

#### **5) Electronic Study Planning, Guidance and Supervision**

One part of the Bologna reform in Finland is the introduction of compulsory study plans for all students. At Åbo Akademi University an electronic system has been developed and will be activated in August of 2005. The system will consist of two sections that will serve students, a database for all courses available and a planning tool. The database will give the student information on contents, work load, learning outcome and timetable for the course in a more systematic manner than before. The planning tool will enable the student to form a plan for the whole duration of the studies (bachelor, master or bachelor + master). It will be obligatory to present an individual study plan for the next academic year. An assigned teacher tutor at the faculty must accept the study plan before any credits can be registered in the university's credit accumulation system. This measure will mean that every student get to/must meet with a teacher to discuss his/her studies in the beginning of every academic year.