**FINHEEC and EUR-ACE accreditation – making up a quality palette**

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*Some recent developments in the Finnish higher education system*

In many ways recent development in the Finnish higher education is similar to what has happened in higher education in many other industrialized western societies. In late 1990’s Finnish universities insisted in more autonomy, even though institutions already were practically autonomous in comparison to many countries. At the same time it became evident that demographic development of Finland and in many other countries, challenges the future of higher education institutions. The fact seemed to be that younger age groups were decreasing and the population was drawn by a few growing regions.

These were the circumstances under which the new higher education and science policy initiative of structural development was practically structured. The dual higher education system including universities and universities of applied sciences UAS is being restructured by the means of organisational, disciplinary and regional prioritization and profiling of institutions.

Organisations have merged and condensed their network of operational units. This in turn has led to savings that can be used to enhance the quality of education, research and other tasks of higher education institutions. The work is done in the higher education institutions reflecting the needs of the surrounding society. In Finland the Ministry of Education and Culture provides dedicated funding and maintains as a main funding body of the higher education institutions. The ministry has the power to steer the entirety of the higher education sector.  
  
The initiative has been developed in response to the Finnish Government resolution on the development of the public research system and overarching policy objectives defined at EU level which are modernisation of higher education and Lisbon strategy. **A simple goal of the process has been that t**he quality, efficiency and effectiveness of all higher education institutions is strengthened by choices of profile and priorities. The higher education system reflects the need of regions, the country and the international education and research community. All higher education institutions in Finland have the option to operate internationally. The size and locations of the higher education system meets the needs of the society. Education takes into account both the quantitative and qualitative needs of the working life. **An example of restructured HEI** is theAalto-university in Helsinki city region formed by a merger of three universities, combining design, economics and technology. Another example is Tampere city region where two universities of applied sciences were merged forming one diversified university of applied sciences. Often the result has been fewer institutions but not necessarily less campuses.

Dual System

One main principle in the Finnish higher education policy has been to form an extensive network of HE institutions covering the whole country. Basically there has to be regional equality what comes of higher education in the country. Finland has relatively big land area with few people which are in addition mainly living in the southern part of the country. However one main political principle has been to offer higher education in main parts of the country. The basic ideology has been that there should have been at least one higher education institute in every province. At its highest the number was more than 50 institutions including universities and universities of applied sciences. One reason for that relatively high number of institutions was based on the various educational institutions e.g. technical, business or nursing colleges, which were in the beginning of 90’s forming new higher education system called universities of applied sciences or as they were originally called in English - polytechnics. Also many universities were established in main provincial cities from 60’s onwards.

One reason for the policy of education for a knowledge society Finland adopted in the early 1990s. Finland's economy was in decline, and the rate of unemployed people was suddenly sky-high. The government's response involved improving labour productivity - it introduced a high-wage strategy to increase output - and promoting knowledge-intensive business. It also developed a dual system of higher education and one result was large university of applied sciences –sector. The government set out to double participation in higher education and to transform its output by expanding and upgrading vocational and professional education. By 2000, the experiment was made permanent. There were 29 UAS enrolling 58 per cent of all new higher education students. Engineering programmes were one of the biggest in the UAS sector.

The UAS focus on more vocational education and the training of "high-quality experts in working life". The four-year UAS courses lead to a bachelors-level degree, as opposed to the five-year masters offered at universities. They aid regional development as many AMKs are owned by municipalities and there is co-operation with small and medium-sized enterprises.

Building on this success, the Government has permitted UAS to develop postgraduate programmes. After much controversy, these now lead to master’s degrees. Finland appears to have sustained a genuinely differentiated higher education system with two distinctive and complementary sectors.

Employers are anxious about an oversupply of graduates, and they and others claim that some aspects of technical and vocational education are neglected. The relationship with the municipalities and regions is not always smooth, and there is a high dropout rate.

Maintaining a dual system in Finland has been made more difficult by the success of the policy and of the Bologna Process. When UAS were established, they were the only institutions that offered bachelor’s degrees; since Bologna, most Finnish universities do. UAS now also offer masters programmes, although they are mostly part-time schemes for mature students. But some universities are also entering this market. The dual system is thus challenged by "vocational drift". The challenge for the UAS - and for the Government - is to maintain the distinction between the broad aims of the two sectors while recognizing that a difference of purpose does not necessarily imply a difference of status.[[1]](#footnote-1)

External Quality Assurance

Recently some structural changes have been taken place in the Finnish higher education and some evident changes in legislation have been occurred as well. E.g. new universities act from 1 January 2010 which underlines that universities are either independent corporations under public law or foundations under private law like Aalto University or Tampere University of Technology. The majority of the Finnish universities are operating under public law. Currently there are university senates or boards with external members including the chair. Personnel are practically contract based which means that there are no civil servants anymore and mostly staff is employed by the rector.

There will also be a reform of the university of applied sciences -act in 2014 which basically means profound reform of funding - meaning performance based funding – and steering – like joint stock companies. For UAS there will be new licences/authorisations which probably can lead to big changes in degree programmes and to mergers. Will there be less campuses is still an open question. In general universities are expected to have a stronger role in the society, especially this is the case in the innovation system comparing EU action lines in higher education policy.

Funding

Funding for the whole higher education sector has changed dramatically. Along the new university act in principle universities have much more economic freedom but basically also responsibilities are different. Instead of former result based funding performance indicators for (research) universitiesfrom 2013 onwards in Finland are as follows:

* Education: 41 % bachelor & master -degrees , students completing 55 ECTS annually, open university credits, employment of graduates, internationalization
* Research: 34 % (Doctoral degrees, publications, external research funding, internationalization)
* Other: 25 % (strategic funding, support for ”expensive” fields, national tasks)

Funding from the state budget covers about 2/3 of university budgets and supplementary funding such as Academy of Finland, Tekes, private foundations, paid services etc.

For Universities of applied sciences the new act means also that from 2014 onwards a new system of indicators which is purely performance based will be set up. The whole UAS sector is also facing significant cuts up to 16% during 2012-2015.

Students and Studies

One notable reform has been that a student may begin studies in only one degree programme during one academic year. A reason for this restriction has been the idea to offer at least one study place to as many applicant as possible. Besides this there will be in 2014-15 a reform of the application system including national joint electronic application system and more weight will be addressed on applicants without higher education or study place so called “positive discrimination” of young secondary school graduates. At the same time wider application targets like from discipline based to study fields and renewal of bachelor and master programmes have been taking place. Normative duration has been set for 3+2 years which means three years for Bachelor’s and two for Master’s. In principle no “eternal students” are allowed any more. A considerable novelty was that tuition fees as a pilot project became possible in international Master programmes for students outside European Union. Usually it has been tend to think that higher education without any tuition fees has been an asset for a smaller country like Finland but at the same time pressure to change the system has become evident.

Audit

The goal of the audits is to support Finnish higher education institutions in developing their quality systems to correspond to [the European quality assurance principles](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20%282%29.pdf). The aim is also to create strong quality culture in Finnish higher education institutions with the principles of transparency and publicity of the system.

From 2005, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council FINHEEC has undertaken institutional audits at Finnish HEIs – by March 2012 the QA systems of all institutions have been audited once. The aims of the audits is to produce information to assist HEIs to develop their activities – enhancement. In line with the principle of the autonomy of HEIs, the Finnish system starts with the premise that HEIs are ultimately responsible for the quality of their education and other operations. Thus, each HEI can set up an internal QA system that best suits its own needs. To evaluate what procedures and processes the HEI uses to maintain and develop the quality of its education and other activities; to evaluate whether the HEI’s quality assurance works as intended, whether the QA system produces useful and relevant information for the improvement of its operations or whether it brings about effective, improvement measures. Main questions in the audit process are linked to comprehensiveness, effectiveness and transparency.

FINHEEC and EUR-ACE

Previously an accreditation conducted by FINHEEC was linked to the accreditation process of professional courses in higher education institutions. In 1998 FINHEEC was assigned the task of assessing professional courses like MBe-courses or courses for particular medical treatments. That accreditation was a process that gave public recognition to professional, non-degree courses which met certain standards and criteria. The introduction of accreditation into the higher education sector in Finland was one element in the national quality assurance system. However, enhancement and assessment of the quality of education has seen many years as more important than accreditation.

FINHEEC has decided on its meeting in May 2012 to apply for the recognition of EUR-ACE label. The process is active and currently – if the process continuous as planned – the application for ENAEE and pilot accreditation will be proceeded in 2013. One big challenge in the process has been to regularize EUR ACE criteria which suits for the Finnish higher education system. FINHEEC has decided to establish a technical committee which will mainly deal with EUR ACE process but also to discuss wider issues related to question in higher education in the field of engineering.

Finland trains a remarkable number of engineers in relation to its population. There has been even a time when Finland had the highest figure for the number of engineering students. According to the strategy of the Union of Academic Engineers and Architects in Finland there are three specific areas:  
  
**1) Developing engineering education**

Defining how Finnish education (contents and pedagogy) must be developed in order to provide the best possible engineering education.   
  
**2) Sustainable development in engineering education**

Finding out what kind of learning objectives do the challenges associated with sustainable development impose on the Finnish engineering education and how have the units providing engineering education responded to these challenges.   
  
**3) Profile map of the Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences**

Compiling a national profile map of the Finnish universities and UAS providing engineering education with the aim of improving quality through specialization and structural reform.   
  
One of the concrete goals is to promote differentiation of universities and UAS offering engineering education and to sharpen the division of work between institutions. Practically iIn the universities the bachelor degree is regarded just a milestone before the master’s degree. Therefore there is not really well defined view on what is its job-market value. Graduates have average of two years of work experience from the field of they study. There is a lot to do in universities to identify and recognize the knowledge and know-how the students get while working. Graduate surveys show, that the majority of non-engineering skills needed have students learned thanks to this working experience. That is also one of the reasons that the unemployment for just graduates is very low compared to many other European countries. Generally in engineering programmes there is no tradition of quality assurance methods. This means that processes haven't been thought thoroughly and education has been seen as under teacher responsibility. EUR-ACE quality label accreditation might be a relevant method for this situation.

Case Lappeenranta

In Lappeenranta University of Technology, the decision to apply for international accreditations for the degree programmes in engineering was made by the university board in November 2009. The objective was to assess the degree programmes against international standards but also to obtain instruments for student exchange and recruitment and collaboration with international partners, both in the industry and university sector. In point of view of quality management, a goal was set to develop internal procedures for quality assurance of the degrees.

The University chose ASIIN from Germany for its partner in EUR-ACE / ASIIN accreditation. The strong international orientation of ASIIN was the main reason to cooperate with ASIIN.

The University proceeded in the accreditation process in two waves: first in the academic year 2010-2011 the degree programmes of Chemical Engineering, Industrial Management and Electrical Engineering were all accredited. In the next academic year 2011-2012 the degree programmes of Mechanical Engineering, Energy Technology, Environmental Technology and Information Technology were in accreditation process. At the moment, in September 2012, only one Bachelors’ and one Masters’ degree programme are still waiting for the decisions of the ASIIN accreditation commission.

From the quality management perspective, the following benefits of the accreditation process can be brought out:

* Strengthening the quality assurance of the degrees
* Enhancing transparency of the learning outcomes of the degrees
* Strengthening the two cycle degree structure according to the Bologna declaration
* Providing common language of curriculum work for the heads and planning officers of the degree programmes
* Clarification of the responsibilities in the degree programmes
* Strengthening the internal cooperation of the degree programmes
* Benchmarking of the degree programmes in comparison with field specific European criteria
* Revealing the strengths and development targets of the programmes.

To conclude, one could say, that accreditations have had an important effect on the curriculum work and thereby on the development of teaching and education. What the accreditation means for the learning of the students, can not easily be evaluated. By describing the learning outcomes carefully, which have now been done in all the accredited degree programmes, the University has taken an important step in developing the quality of learning.

1. PRATT J, Dual System is Singular Success, Times Higher Education 1 December 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)