



RESEARCH ASSESSMENT AS A TOOL FOR STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

PROMOTING INTERDISCIPLINARITY THROUGH ENHANCEMENT-LED EVALUATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the evolution of research assessment as a tool for strategic development and management. At the University of Helsinki, research assessment framework's enhancement-led approach emphasizes continuous development and quality enhancement, supporting the implementation and planning of the organisation's strategy. In 2025, the statutory research assessment is harnessed as a tool for promoting multi- and interdisciplinary research by rethinking what and how to evaluate. Integrating interdisciplinarity into comprehensive research assessment exercise is an ambitious attempt in the field of research assessment. To succeed, it requires careful and regenerative planning.

Keywords: Research assessment, enhancement-led evaluation, interdisciplinarity, strategic management

INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS ENHANCEMENT-LED APPROACH OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

The University of Helsinki has a long tradition of evaluating its research activities. The latest assessment is underway in 2025, with previous assessments conducted in 2018–2019, 2012, 2005, and 1999. In 2018–2019, the assessment framework underwent significant revisions as the University renewed it with an enhancement-led approach to better reflect the evolving landscape of academic research and its societal impact. Enhancement-led evaluation emphasizes continuous improvement and future-oriented goals. It clarifies current conditions and trends, supporting ongoing development and a forward-looking mindset. This inclusive, interactive approach builds trust, encourages participation, and promotes collaboration among all stakeholders. A key feature is the flexible use of diverse, suitable and adaptable methods. By treating evaluation as a learning process, it supports change, offers feedback on strengths and areas for improvement, provides actionable recommendations, and enables progress tracking over time.¹

At the University of Helsinki, key driver for the research assessment framework development in 2018–19 was to support the University's 2021–2030 strategy implementation.² At the same time, the comprehensive assessment was to fulfil the national legal requirements and cover all research, carried out at the University. In Finland, the Universities Act requires universities to assess their own research and its effectiveness frequently and publish the results openly.³ However, there is no common framework specifically focused on research quality, whereas the Quality Audit system for Higher Education Institutions in Finland, conducted by FINEEC, covers education, research, and outreach as general elements of institutional quality systems.⁴ Therefore, universities can freely define how they assess their research and what they aim to achieve with the assessment.

1 Moitus & Kamppi 2020, 6.

2 University of Helsinki 2024a.

3 Universities Act 558/2009.

4 Moitus & Kamppi 2020.

In 2025, the University of Helsinki conducts the overall assessment of its research again. The positive experience, gained from the previous Research Assessment at the University of Helsinki (RAUH 2018–19), along with subsequent strategic developments, enables the RAUH 2025 assessment to build on some of the same elements. However, the University decided to renew the assessment process from the perspective of the University's management and strategic thinking. In 2025, the statutory research assessment is harnessed as a tool for strategic management to promote interdisciplinary research. The goals of RAUH 2025 include highlighting strong research areas, identifying emerging fields, and evaluating the University's success in addressing societal challenges through research, as outlined in the University's strategy 2021–2030. It focuses on the management and state of multi- and interdisciplinary research at the University.⁵ In addition, the results of the 2025 assessment will be used in preparation of the strategic period starting in 2031.

This article examines the development and evolution of the research assessment framework at the University of Helsinki from the perspective of strategic management. How can a research assessment support strategic renewal and foster interdisciplinarity at both university and unit levels? How can the academic community be engaged in the assessment project and commit the planned changes to the assessment framework? The article first approaches the University of Helsinki as an organization with a strategic goal to promote interdisciplinary research and then focuses on the assessment framework methodology at the University of Helsinki. It becomes clear that the units being assessed, the assessment criteria and the panel structure cannot be treated as separate parts of the assessment project. Instead, the assessment framework is an entity, where each component influences the others.

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI AND ITS STRATEGIC GOAL TO INVEST IN INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

The University of Helsinki is the oldest and largest institution of academic education in Finland, an international scientific community of 40,000 students and researchers. It operates on four campuses in Helsinki and in 10 other localities in Finland. The University accommodates 11 faculties, four independent research-focused institutes, as well as multidisciplinary research networks and

campus units.⁶ The University of Helsinki is also a proud founding member of the League of European Research Universities (LERU)⁷. Through the power of science, the University has contributed to society, education, and welfare since 1640.⁸

The University of Helsinki is a distinguished research university, renowned for its extensive range of scientific disciplines. For example, the City Centre Campus hosts five faculties dedicated to the social sciences and humanities (SSH), while the Viikki Campus, with its focus on life sciences, is home to Finland’s only Faculty of Veterinary Medicine. The Kumpula campus serves a hub for the exact sciences, encompassing disciplines such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, and computer science, while the Meilahti Campus ranks among Europe’s leading medical campuses, combining top-tier research, education, and patient care.⁹ This diversity underscores the University’s commitment to fostering a multidisciplinary academic environment, making it an attractive destination for researchers and students across various fields.

The broad range of disciplines at the University of Helsinki enables it to thrive in both discipline-specific and interdisciplinary research. Solutions to complex questions require a creative and integrative approach that brings together diverse actors, perspectives, and structures. Recognizing this, the four international assessment panels of the RAUH 2018–19 emphasized the importance of nurturing curiosity-driven and interdisciplinary research, core characteristics of a research-intensive university, while also promoting inclusive research environments and coherent institutional practices.¹⁰ In response to the panels’ recommendations, the University of Helsinki has taken strategic steps to strengthen interdisciplinarity, across its research and academic initiatives. As outlined in the strategic plan of the University of Helsinki 2021–2030, *“In 2030, the University will enjoy an increasingly established international standing as a scientific partner, especially thanks to its ground-breaking discipline-specific expertise as well as its multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary research.”*¹¹

6 University of Helsinki 2024c.

7 LERU 2025.

8 University of Helsinki 2024d.

9 University of Helsinki 2024e.

10 Mälikki & al. 2019, 6.

11 University of Helsinki 2024b.

In this article, the term “interdisciplinarity” is used as an umbrella term to describe research that is multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary. The difference between these three research approaches relates to the degree of disciplinary boundaries in collaboration. In multidisciplinary research, actors from different disciplines work together, each bringing their domain expertise into the collaboration, whereas in clearly interdisciplinary research, interaction is multi-level and open to achieve collaboration that utilizes a deep, integrative approach. In interdisciplinary research, collaboration is seamless and participants’ understanding of their partners’ disciplines increases. Transdisciplinary research, on the other hand, almost completely merges the boundaries between disciplines to create a new, problem-oriented approach.¹² Interdisciplinarity not only enables studying complex challenges but also promotes the usability and value creation of research results for the world; maximizing the social and economic value of research and innovation, also known as knowledge valorisation.¹³

Scientific research is always built upon previous scientific studies and is influenced by strong discipline-based research paradigms. Interdisciplinary research is thus also built upon the foundation of previous scientific studies, with strong paradigms, rooted in disciplines guiding the research process. What makes interdisciplinary research special is its integrative nature that builds on strong disciplinary expertise – the purpose is to facilitate the encounter of different perspectives to generate so-called ‘landscapes of knowledge’.¹⁴ The University of Helsinki, aiming to foster novel insights and breakthroughs, began investing in promoting interdisciplinarity at the start of its 2021 strategic period. This commitment is reflected through new internal funding instruments and various strategic development initiatives, including the RAUH 2025 research assessment exercise discussed in this article. While it acknowledges the value of strong disciplinary foundations, it promotes the integration of diverse perspectives to drive scientific innovation. Through the interdisciplinary cooperation, the University aims to reach novel research directions that seek solutions to major global problems.

12 Willamo & al. 2022, 12–14, 36; Wernli & Ohlmeyer 2023, 5.

13 European Commission 2021, 10.

14 Huutoniemi & al. 2010, 80.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

The RAUH has evolved between the 2018–2019 and 2025 assessments, reflecting the changing priorities of the University of Helsinki’s quality management policy, strategic choices, and methodologies for evaluating research quality and impact (Table 1). The RAUH 2025 project started with the objective to streamline the assessment processes and to construct a tool that promotes interdisciplinary research.

	RAUH 2018-19	RAUH 2025
Units of assessment	39 units: Faculties, Institutes, Departments, disciplines or combinations of disciplines	15 units: Faculties and research-focused independent institutes
Assessment criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Scientific Quality▪ Societal Impact▪ Research Environment and Unit Viability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Scientific Quality▪ Societal Impact▪ Research Environment
Evidence base	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Metric data2. Self-assessment3. Panel Meeting	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Metric data2. Unit-level self-assessment reports3. University-level self-assessment on interdisciplinarity4. Panel Meeting
Panels	4 panels 46 international experts	1 panel with 3 sub-groups 27 international experts

Table 1. Assessment frameworks in RAUH 2018–19 and RAUH 2025 projects.

Unlike, in 2018–2019, the timeline for the assessment was set shorter than 1.5 years, from the planning of the assessment framework update to the completion of the panel report. Also, it was predetermined that the number of the units of assessment should be lower to condense the assessment effort. The well-regarded assessment framework from 2018–2019 was to be retained as much as possible, but it was clear that changes were necessary due to the shift to larger units of assessment and the implementation of the strategic goal of promoting interdisciplinarity. Previously, the classification of the 39 units of assessment varied considerably, from large faculties and departments to individual

disciplines or even combinations of disciplines. Now, the aim was to make the units of assessment more comparable, even though the sizes of faculties vary significantly within the University. RAUH 2025 streamlined the units of assessment to 15, focusing on faculties and research-focused independent institutes. At the same time, it was important to maintain a dialogical and strongly participatory approach with the University's academic community.

To allow academic units to monitor the success and progress of their development after the RAUH 2018–19 and to keep the continuous development cycle as productive as possible, the RAUH 2025 Steering Group decided that the three main assessment criteria of the RAUH 2018–19 assessment – Scientific Quality, Societal Impact, and Research Environment – will also be applied in RAUH 2025. However, changes were made in almost all other areas of the assessment framework, starting with the definition the units of assessment.

In the RAUH 2018–19 assessment, the evidence base was comprehensive, incorporating metric data, self-assessments, and panel meetings including site-visit and interviews. Self-assessment was seen primarily as a tool for improving operations. Therefore, the units were instructed to reflect upon the research and the research environment in a nuanced way to have a truly useful basis for further development. The assessment was conducted by four external panels comprising 46 international experts, utilizing an enhancement-led evaluation approach. The panels were asked to focus on the units' preparedness to address potential shortcomings by describing actions already taken or planned, rather than concentrating on the deficiencies themselves. Additionally, the panels valued the units' capacity for critical self-reflection, as RAUH 2018–19 used a rating scale of Weak – Good – Very Good – Excellent to categorize the performance of the assessed units.¹⁵

In the RAUH 2025 assessment, the evidence base was expanded to include a new university-level self-assessment on interdisciplinarity, while unit-level self-assessment reports and metric data on funding, personnel, publications, other outputs, doctoral research, and panel site-visit had already been used in the RAUH 2018–2019 assessment. The assessment panel was consolidated into one panel with three sub-groups, involving 27 international experts. The methodology continued to follow the enhancement-led evaluation. Notably, the steering group decided that RAUH 2025 will not use a rating scale; instead, the assessment was defined as focusing solely on identifying strengths and areas for improvement at both unit and university levels.

The reduction in the number of units assessed and the inclusion of a university-level self-assessment on interdisciplinarity suggest a strategic move to foster collaboration and integration across different research areas at the University of Helsinki. Additionally, the consistent use of international experts and the enhancement-led evaluation method underscore the University's commitment to maintaining high standards and continuous improvement on its research activities.

In the 2018–2019 assessment, the self-assessment report was structured according to the predesigned headings, but the units were encouraged to freely decide on the use of any sub-headings. The units were expected to carry out as reflective self-assessments as possible, to identify areas in need of development, and to provide concrete descriptions of the operations and results. The first part of the self-assessment report focused on background information. The core of the self-assessment was the second part: the description of the organisation, profile, mission, and goals of the unit. The unit's performance and operations were primarily assessed against those measures. The self-assessment included reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of the described actions. In section three, the units described the self-assessment process.

In the RAUH 2025 assessment, the structure of the unit-level self-assessment report largely followed the format used in 2018. However, due to the larger size of the units being assessed, especially the guiding questions for self-evaluating scientific quality needed an update. From the perspective of these larger units, the previous criteria focused too much on project-level details, with monodisciplinary emphasis. Therefore, for example, the assessment of scientific quality now included more specific criteria such as research profile and scientific impact, which are evaluated based on both outputs and the unit's own qualitative self-assessment report. The assessment units are also expected to outline their future vision and provide more detailed goals for their research.

The RAUH 2025 project highlighted that the units of assessment, criteria, and panel structure are closely interconnected and must be addressed as an integrated whole. Instead, the assessment framework is an entity where each component influences the others. For example, when the decision was made to move away from traditional gradings, it became necessary to establish new, more detailed assessment criteria that aligned with the self-assessment report and served to guide the panel's qualitative, narrative-based evaluations. Defining qualitative assessment criteria turned out to be more challenging than initially expected, particularly in terms of ensuring consistency and transparency. Drafting a comprehensive and responsible assessment

framework, required deep and profound discussions between the University's Research Assessment Office and with both the RAUH 2025 steering group and representatives of the units of assessment. In these discussions, clarity of the assessment objectives and an understanding of the differences between the units of assessment were key elements. Updating the assessment framework and considering every detail of the guidelines, templates and criteria has proven to be a complex exercise. However, this process has been a valuable learning experience for everyone involved.

ENHANCEMENT-LED EVALUATION AS AN ASSESSMENT METHOD – PARTICIPATION AS A CORE VALUE

Since the 2018–19 assessment, the RAUH framework has evolved from a one-time evaluation exercise into a dynamic and integrated tool for strategic development, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and alignment with the University's long-term goals. RAUH 2018–19 offered a solid basis for the mid and long-term development of research activities within the University's academic units, and the assessment results have been actively used since the assessment report's publication. Each academic unit has utilized the development areas identified by the assessment panel in their annual implementation plans, following the strategy of the University. The RAUH follow-up 2022–23 worked as a mid-term evaluation checkpoint, focusing on the development steps taken by the faculties and independent institutes. The follow-up phase included 15 faculty-level qualitative self-assessment reports, which addressed the main insights from RAUH 2018–19, the principal development measures undertaken based on the results, and the extent to which these actions align with the University's current strategic plan. In this context, it was observed that awareness had shifted positively, with representatives of academic units recognizing the value of RAUH as a tool for strategic development and expressing a desire for continuity between the frameworks of the RAUH 2018–19 and RAUH 2025 assessments.

In addition to the RAUH research assessment exercise, a more ambitious measure was taken in 2021–2022, when the University and its academic units elaborated 'Roadmaps for Implementing Research Themes'. These Roadmaps contributed to the goal of fostering interdisciplinary research. The roadmap process was part of the implementation of the University of Helsinki's strategy, but it also provided input for the RAUH follow-up in 2022–23. It became

clear that the units benefited from the work they had done to develop their Roadmaps in connection with the mid-term RAUH self-assessment. To make the most of the constructive dialogue with the external panel, the self-assessments were submitted to the RAUH 2018–19 panel chairs, who provided feedback on the progress made. A joint discussion for the unit leadership, research managers and administrators, and other interested services and members of the university community was organised on 29 March 2023. Linking the two major university-wide strategic research management development tools – the RAUH and the Roadmap processes – was a natural outcome of building on synergies and the momentum of organisational learning.

In accordance with enhancement-led evaluation, self-assessment has been primarily a tool for improving operations in both RAUH 2018 –19 and RAUH 2025 assessments. The purpose of the RAUH assessment is to strive for meaningful impact and operate in a manner that is both positive and respectful towards all participants. The design and implementation of the assessment processes are intentionally crafted to foster continuous learning, facilitate the sharing of valuable information, and build a stronger, more cohesive understanding among all stakeholders. The true impact of all efforts is realized through the learning process itself. This process leverages evaluation data and expertise to enhance understanding, inform decision-making, and develop effective solutions. These outcomes drive development initiatives at both the University and unit levels, ensuring that the University's efforts are both comprehensive and impactful.

In practical terms, the enhancement-led research assessment method used in RAUH encourages the units of assessment to critically assess their own activities. This self-assessment helps identify strengths and areas for improvement in relation to the specific goals of the units of assessment. When necessary, this process is supplemented by external assessment feedback, providing an additional layer of insight and validation. Throughout the process, the assessment method emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining trust. The foundation for creating and sustaining meaningful, productive relationships both within the University and with external partners, ensuring that all participants feel valued and respected.¹⁶

The University of Helsinki has concluded that assigning grades in research assessment does not best support the intended trust-based approach. Instead, it is better to focus on qualitative, descriptive feedback, which genuinely aids the development of activities. This mindset aligns well with the spirit of the

Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA)¹⁷. Updating the RAUH assessment framework, in connection with the 2025 assessment, was therefore one of the actions in the University of Helsinki's CoARA Action Plan¹⁸.

In the realm of research assessment, the emphasis on participation cannot be overstated. The RAUH process exemplifies this commitment, embedding participation as a core value in its enhancement-led methodology. This approach recognizes that the subjects of an assessment are not mere data points but are integral to the interpretation and success of the assessment. By involving the academic community of the University of Helsinki in the co-design and co-interpretation of the assessments, RAUH ensures that the assessment is conducted with researchers and not just about their work, fostering a deeper understanding and more meaningful results. The participatory method aligns with the SCOPE principle of evaluating with the evaluated, ensuring that evaluations are not only thorough but also respectful and inclusive, enhancing the relevance and impact of the research outcomes.¹⁹

In RAUH 2025, the University's Research Council – comprising vice-deans and directors of academic units – has taken a central collaborative role in shaping a shared, university-level self-assessment with a focus on interdisciplinary research. This represents a new form of participatory collaboration. The same academic leaders, who are responsible for coordinating the self-assessment processes within their units, have come together as a multidisciplinary body to influence the strategic development of the University. As there was no pre-existing model for such a university-wide self-assessment at the University of Helsinki, the process was approached with a strong orientation toward learning. The outcome was successful: the self-assessment phase not only deepened institutional understanding of the state of interdisciplinary research at the University but also strengthened the Research Council as a cohesive group.

The RAUH enhancement-led approach to research assessment is well aligned with current developments with responsible research and researcher assessment (e.g., CoARA). Thanks to the established qualitative approach, it allows the University leadership to gain a rich understanding of the development work and its meaning for the units and faculties.

17 Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment 2022.

18 University of Helsinki 2024f.

19 INORMS Research Evaluation Group 2021, 5.

The results of the follow-up show a variety of concrete steps stemming from the panel feedback, leading to impactful development activities. The quality of operations ensures the quality of results, too.

MAKING USE OF THE RAUH RESULTS IN CONTINUOUS STRATEGIC UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT

Research assessment at the University of Helsinki has been closely integrated into all strategic development, related to research activities and reflecting the continuous development driven quality culture at the University. The RAUH process interconnected especially with the Roadmaps for Implementing Research Themes (2021–2022). Initially, the Roadmap project was only loosely connected to research assessment, as its primary purpose was to provide tools to support the University's strategic goal of promoting multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research. The roadmaps were designed to serve as an intermediary between the university-level strategic goal and the academic unit implementation plans, providing direction for defining the concrete actions in them. Since the completion of the Roadmaps, they became foundational to the planning of RAUH 2025. This integration was driven by the recognition that the Roadmaps offered a comprehensive framework that aligned well with the University's strategic objectives, ensuring that research assessment and strategic development were seamlessly connected.

While the Roadmaps provided a foundation for planning RAUH 2025 and updating the assessment framework, there are several other concurrent actions that support RAUH 2025. In spring 2025, the University of Helsinki launched a training program on strategic management of research activities for the members of the University's Research Council. The university-level self-assessment report, with a focus on interdisciplinary research, which was part of the RAUH 2025 assessment, was prepared as part of the training by the Research Council's teamwork, enhancing strategic thinking at both the University and unit levels. This prompted the academic leaders at the University's Research Council to define the success from their own perspective and use the understanding gained towards reflecting on the RAUH 2025 assessment criteria.²⁰ This form of participatory collaboration has impacts on the University's future strategic development, too.

Through the 2018–19 and 2025 assessments, RAUH has evolved and became part of the University of Helsinki's quality system. The quality system at the University provides the necessary structures and defines the procedures and responsibilities to ensure that the University can maintain and develop the quality of its operations in a spirit of continuous development. Through this, the University can monitor its progress towards goals, identify areas needing improvement, and make necessary adjustments. The approach not only supports the University's strategic objectives but also ensures that society can trust in the University's operations and results.²¹

CONCLUSION – THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH ASSESSMENT

As demonstrated in the article, the feedback received during the RAUH 2018–19 assessment – particularly the panels' encouragement to promote interdisciplinarity – led to impactful strategic development actions. This is now reflected in the University's strategic goal, the implementation plans of both the University and its academic units, and the Roadmaps for Implementing Research Themes. The recommendation to invest in interdisciplinarity even influenced the focus of the RAUH 2025 assessment. This trajectory has played a central role in shaping the University's strategic direction and illustrates how the assessment process can serve as a catalyst for long-term development.

In 2025, RAUH is not just an overall assessment of research, but rather an important next step towards the implementation of the University's strategic goal of promoting interdisciplinarity. What will be the focus of the next research assessment in the early 2030s? The open-endedness continuous development philosophy allows this unfold along the strategic developments occurring at the end of the 2020s, for which RAUH 2025 is already laying the groundwork. In any case, in the spirit of enhancement-led assessment at the University, there will likely be some form of follow-up for RAUH 2025 before the next assessment cycle.

Looking ahead to the future of research assessment at the University of Helsinki, the focus increasingly will be on enhancing inclusivity and participation. The objective is to foster a cultural shift within the University community by creating long-term impacts that strengthen the academic community's inclusion and ownership of the assessment processes.

This ensures that the academic community views these processes as collective efforts rather than mere administrative tasks. Emphasizing faculty leadership, the goal is to fully integrate the RAUH process into the units' strategic development. This approach aims to strengthen the community's inclusion and experience of the benefits of research assessment in continuous strategic and operational development. Starting from spring 2026, the RAUH 2025 results will be discussed thematically. These discussions will promote interdisciplinary dialogue, further embedding the principles of inclusivity and collective ownership in the research assessment process.

Integrating strategic alignment into the overall assessment of research is an ambitious attempt in the field of research assessment. To succeed, it requires careful and regenerative planning, building on existing processes and learned organisational strengths. One of the key lessons has been that research assessment can be conducted more ambitiously than merely evaluating current operations based on output analyses. It is essential to consider the collective learning process involved in examining both unit-level and university-wide activities. The idea of continuous development is practiced in research assessment, drawing from previous exercises such as Roadmaps for Implementing Research Themes and trust. Emphasizing the importance of participation is crucial, especially in building trust. Only through jointly planned and discussed efforts can the desired impact be truly achieved and owned. When assessment is used as a tool for strategic management, it simultaneously promotes organisational learning by enhancing organisational system thinking, team learning, and supporting the establishment of a shared vision within the University community.²²

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