



FINNISH EDUCATION
EVALUATION CENTRE

QUALITY AND IMPACT

Summary of the third audit cycle for
higher education institutions 2018–2024



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AUTHORS: Mirella Harri, Mira Huusko, Kati Isoaho, Sirpa Moitus,

Kirsi Mustonen & Hilla Vuori

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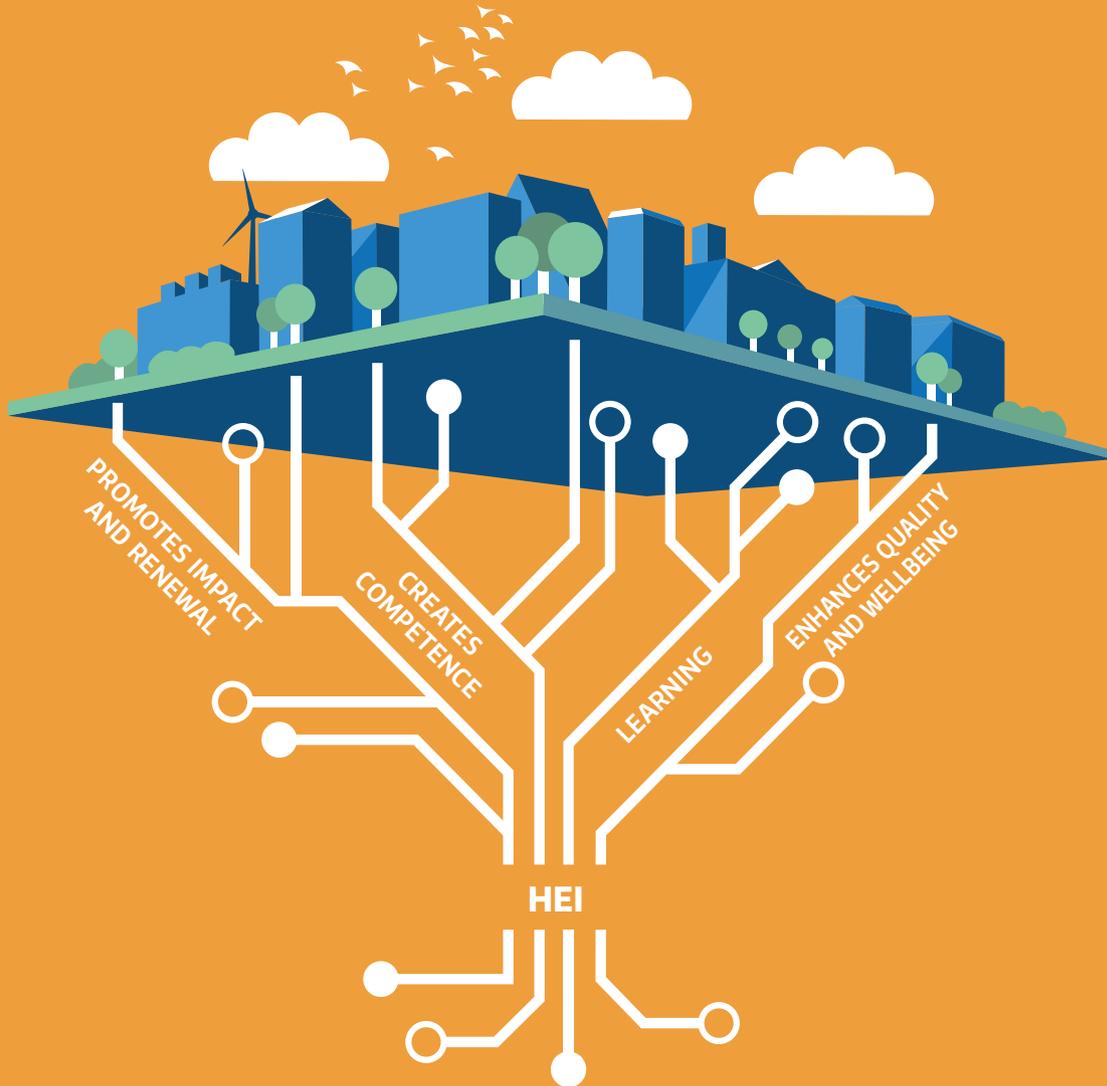
1 Introduction

This publication provides a summary of the key findings of Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's (FINEEC) third audit cycle of higher education institutions (HEIs) conducted between 2018 and 2024. During the cycle, 36 Finnish HEIs were audited. The purpose of this summary is to analyse quality work at Finnish HEIs based on their audit reports. The summary identifies institutional strengths, improvement areas and examples of good practice.

FINEEC's third audit cycle evaluated how HEIs ensure and enhance the quality of their activities based on the evaluation areas defined in the FINEEC audit manual for HEIs 2019–2024 (FINEEC 2019). In the third cycle, the audit criteria focused on educational provision and a student-centred approach, reflecting the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015). The criteria also highlighted societal engagement and impact, as well as the role of quality management in supporting HEIs in achieving their strategic objectives and enhancing their core functions..

This summary is based on reports from audits of 22 universities of applied sciences and 14 universities conducted between 2018 and 2024 (FINEEC 2025). The findings rely solely on the audit teams' reports, excluding the HEIs' self-assessments. The material was analysed mainly through qualitative content analysis, with some parts quantified.

2 Evaluation areas and criteria



Finnish legislation requires HEIs to take part in external evaluations of their operations and quality systems. The premise of audits is that HEIs develop their quality systems in line with their own objectives and are responsible for the quality of their operations.

THE PURPOSE OF THE THIRD CYCLE AUDIT FRAMEWORK

- to evaluate whether the quality work in the HEI meets the European quality assurance standards,
- to assess whether the quality system produces relevant information for the implementation of the strategy and the continuous development of the HEI's activities, and whether it results in effective enhancement activities,
- to encourage internationalisation, experimentation and a creative atmosphere at HEIs, and
- to accumulate open and transparent information on quality work at Finnish HEIs

The audit framework of the third audit cycle covered the three core functions of HEIs: education, research or research, development and innovation (RDI) activities, artistic activities, and societal engagement. The audits focused on the procedures by which HEIs maintained and developed the quality of their activities.

EVALUATION AREAS

- I HEI creates competence
- II HEI promotes impact and renewal
- III HEI enhances quality and wellbeing
- IV HEI as a learning organisation

The audit process and criteria

The audit process and criteria are described in the *Audit Manual for HEIs 2019–2024* (FINEEC 2019). The audits were conducted using predefined national criteria with a three-level assessment scale: *insufficient* – *good* – *excellent*. Achieving the level *good* in all three evaluation areas was a requirement for the HEI to pass the audit. HEIs assessed as *excellent* in one or more evaluation areas by the audit team were considered for FINEEC's Quality Label for Excellence.

The third audit cycle also included an evaluation area selected by the HEI, as well as bench-learning carried out by the audited HEI and a partner of its choice.

Each audit was conducted by a national or international audit team with 4–5 experts appointed by FINEEC's Higher Education Evaluation Committee. The audit teams included representatives from HEIs, students and work life. Each audit project typically involved two FINEEC experts, one of whom acted as the project manager for the audit.

The data used in the audits included the HEI's self-assessment report, interviews and workshops conducted during the audit visit, additional materials requested by the audit team, and access to the HEI's intranet. The interviews and workshops involved staff, management, board members, students and external stakeholders.

3 Audits in numbers

AUDITS 2018–2024

36 audits

22 universities of applied science

14 universities

21 national audit teams

15 international audit teams

146
auditors

453
audit interviews

66
workshops

5 094
interviewees

2 996
personnel members
interviewed

1 549
students and doctoral
researchers interviewed

314
external stakeholders
interviewed

235
HEI board members
interviewed

Table 1 presents the results of HEI audits conducted between 2018 and 2024 by evaluation area using the scale: insufficient – good – excellent. The majority of HEIs were assessed at the level good across different evaluation areas. No *insufficient* level assessment was given in any of the third-cycle audits. The highest number of assessments at the level excellent were awarded in evaluation area II: *HEI promotes impact and renewal* and evaluation area III: *HEI enhances quality and wellbeing*. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, nine of the 36 audits conducted between 2018 and 2024 were carried out remotely.

HEIs that passed the audit received a FINEEC Quality Label valid for six years and were listed in FINEEC's register of audited HEIs.

In the third audit cycle, HEIs had the opportunity to select one evaluation area that was central to their profile or strategy and for which they wanted feedback. This selected evaluation area was assessed in the audit report under evaluation area IV: *HEI as a learning organisation* (see Chapter 8). This evaluation area was not assessed using the assessment scale and did not influence the overall outcome of the audit. The focus in the evaluation was on enhancement. The third cycle audit also included the implementation and reporting of benchlearning (see Chapter 9).

TABLE 1. Assessment levels of FINEEC audits conducted between 2018–2024 on the scale: insufficient, good, excellent (n = 36)

EVALUATION AREA	INSUFFICIENT	GOOD	EXCELLENT
I. HEI creates competence	-	32	4
II. HEI promotes impact and renewal	-	27	9
III. HEI enhances quality and wellbeing	-	27	9

Quality Label for Excellence

As part of FINEEC's third cycle audits (2018–2024), HEIs had the opportunity to be awarded a *Quality Label for Excellence*. This label was an acknowledgement of exceptionally high-quality enhancement work by the HEI. The evaluation was based on FINEEC's Quality Label for Excellence criteria. The HEI awarded with the Quality Label for Excellence demonstrated innovative leadership, long-term commitment to development, and an inclusive organisational culture. HEIs were eligible for the Quality Label for Excellence if the audit team assessed at least one evaluation area as *excellent*.

The Higher Education Evaluation Committee awarded Quality Labels for Excellence five times during the third audit cycle (see Table 2). The excellence assessment panel, selected among the Evaluation Committee members, was responsible for the assessment of the candidates. Altogether, six HEIs received the Quality Label for Excellence for the duration of their FINEEC quality label.

TABLE 2. HEIs awarded the Quality Label for Excellence by evaluation area, 2021–2025

HEIs AWARDED THE QUALITY LABEL FOR EXCELLENCE	I. HEI CREATES COMPETENCE	II. HEI PROMOTES IMPACT AND RENEWAL	III. HEI ENHANCES QUALITY AND WELLBEING
Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences, 2021			X
Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences, 2022		X	X
Laurea University of Applied Sciences, 2023		X	
Aalto University, 2024	X	X	X
Lapland University of Applied Sciences, 2024		X	
University of Oulu, 2025		X	

4 Strengths and improvement areas presented in the audit reports

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The following tables provide a summary of key strengths and improvement areas of HEIs based on the three evaluation areas assessed in the audits. Tables 3 and 4 present themes that were mentioned in at least five audit reports as key strengths or recommendations made by audit teams.

TABLE 3. The key strengths of HEIs in audit reports by evaluation area

EVALUATION AREA	KEY STRENGTHS
I. HEI CREATES COMPETENCE	Involvement of students and external stakeholders in curriculum planning and development
	Work-life relevance of education
	Systematic curriculum planning
	Alignment of education with institutional strategy
	Collection of student feedback
II. HEI PROMOTES IMPACT AND RENEWAL	Networking and collaboration
	Organisational culture that encourages innovation and experimentation
	Societal engagement and impact grounded in strategy
	Strong regional role
	Significant RDI actor
III. HEI ENHANCES QUALITY AND WELLBEING	Staff competence development
	Participatory quality culture
	Broad engagement in quality work
	Attention to staff wellbeing
	Staff demonstrate a clear understanding of the HEI's strategic objectives

TABLE 4. Key recommendations for HEIs in audit reports by evaluation area

EVALUATION AREA	KEY RECOMMENDATIONS
I. HEI CREATES COMPETENCE	Better utilisation of student feedback systems Strengthening competence-based curriculum development Diversifying methods for assessing competence and learning Systematic recognition and validation of prior learning Increasing internationalisation of education
II. HEI PROMOTES IMPACT AND RENEWAL	Clarifying the objectives of societal engagement Developing indicators for societal engagement and impact Enhancing alumni activities Improving communication of research and RDI results Systematising partnership management
III. HEI ENHANCES QUALITY AND WELLBEING	Systematising staff competence development Expanding initiatives to support staff wellbeing at work Clarifying strategic areas for development Improving communication of quality work Engaging all student groups in quality work and development

5 HEI creates competence

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In evaluation area I – HEI creates competence, the audit team assessed the procedures which support student-centred, work life-oriented planning, implementation and enhancement of education, which is based on research or artistic activities.

Audit teams identified key strengths and gave recommendations for the improvement of HEI activities. The following were mentioned in at least five audit reports:

KEY STRENGTHS OF HEIs

- Students and external stakeholders participate in the planning and development of education.
- The work-life relevance of degree programmes is generally strong.
- Curriculum planning is systematic and well-guided.
- The educational provision is closely linked to the HEI's strategy.
- Feedback is comprehensively collected in degree programmes
- Teaching cultures are student-centred.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEIs

- Student feedback systems should be made more systematic, and students should receive feedback on the feedback they provide.
- Curricula and curriculum development should be enhanced in a diverse manner, ensuring the constructive alignment of learning outcomes.
- Methods for assessing competence and learning should be diversified, and students should receive feedback on their learning.
- The identification and recognition of prior learning should be systematised and expanded across different study fields.
- Degree programmes should be internationalised in a more diverse and comprehensive manner.

Curriculum planning

According to the audit reports, curriculum planning was systematic and well-guided across various HEIs. Learning outcomes had been defined for each degree programme. In curriculum planning, attention was given to labour market needs, student feedback and feedback from graduates.

The planning of curricula and the educational provision was closely linked to the HEI's strategy. Strategic objectives commonly shared by several HEIs included student-centred education, work-life relevance and internationalisation. Many HEIs strived for their education to produce responsible professionals with strong knowledge and skills in their field, the ability to learn new things, good interpersonal and international competences, the confidence to apply their knowledge boldly, adaptability to change, and the capacity to act as agents of change. Additionally, some HEIs emphasised entrepreneurial skills in line with their profile.

The processes for renewing curricula were generally systematic and consistent. Good practices included an annual calendar to structure curriculum planning and development, shared curriculum guidelines, and quality criteria for curriculum design. The audit teams recommended that HEIs continue to strengthen competence-based curriculum development and curricula, starting from the constructive alignment of learning outcomes. HEIs had clear procedures and defined responsibilities for approving degree programmes.

Learning outcomes were defined for degree programmes, study modules and individual courses. They were typically introduced to students at the beginning of each course. However, there were variations in the level of detail in the learning outcomes between different units and programmes. Examples of good practices that supported constructive alignment in teaching, that is, the alignment of learning outcomes and content, teaching methods and assessment, and the learning environment—included curriculum mapping (or competence matrices) and pedagogical scripts.

Students generally had good opportunities to participate in curriculum planning through feedback channels, student unions or associations and as members of various working groups. However, the participation opportunities for doctoral researchers and international students still need to be improved. Some HEIs would benefit from a more systematic utilisation of international networks in curriculum planning.

The student workload was allocated in accordance with the ECTS system (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). HEIs used workload calculators and assessed the actual workload through course feedback. Students reported that the amount of work required per credit varied significantly between different courses. Based on audit reports, HEIs should ensure consistent workload allocation and monitor students' actual workload more closely.

Internationalisation objectives were considered in diverse ways in curriculum planning. This was reflected, for example, in international study components included in degree programmes, study and internship exchanges, and the offering of international double degrees and joint programmes. Many HEIs had expanded their international educational provision in recent years.

However, the audit reports recommended a more comprehensive internationalisation of the curricula. HEIs should strengthen regional cooperation to improve internship opportunities and employment prospects for international students. Teachers' international and intercultural competences, as well as their language skills, should be systematically enhanced.

Research-based teaching

Research-based teaching was most often addressed in the audit reports in relation to curriculum planning. In universities, research-based education was realised through the principle that active researchers teach and teachers conduct research, which was considered to ensure a strong link between research and teaching. Research-based education was mentioned in the strategies of several universities and was regarded as a core value. Staff members incorporated their own research into teaching, and some also conducted research on their own teaching practices. Universities emphasised the importance of teaching research skills to students and considered it essential that the development of teaching itself be informed by research. However, the extent to which education was research-based varied across study fields.

In universities of applied sciences (UASs), the research, development and innovation activities (RDI) integration in education was reflected in teaching, internships, simulation environments, practical projects with work life, thesis work, and teachers' involvement in RDI projects. Students worked on real-world problems provided by companies in various events organised by the HEIs. Master's level students were actively involved in RDI activities. Teachers' participation in RDI work was also a means of professional development and job diversification.

In the audit reports of UASs, RDI activities were often linked more to cooperation with work life than to actual research and development. Participation in RDI projects also varied between study fields. In HEIs that applied a specific pedagogical model, RDI activities were integrated into education through that model.

A few HEIs were acknowledged for their research-based development of teaching. However, most audit reports did not specify how research knowledge on student learning, teaching, curriculum development or pedagogical methods was utilised in the development of education.

According to the audit recommendations, some HEIs still need to strengthen the research basis of education and the connection between teaching and RDI activities. It was also recommended in audits that students should be more actively involved in research and RDI projects and that multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches in education should be enhanced.

Work-life relevance

Nearly all HEIs ensured the work-life relevance of their education by utilising stakeholder feedback when defining learning outcomes and course content. Stakeholder views were gathered through surveys, advisory boards, career days, and other forms of cooperation, which effectively helped incorporate stakeholder perspectives into curriculum planning. Audit reports included several examples of new degree programmes being launched in response to labour market needs.

Changes in the labour market—such as demographic developments, increasing internationalisation and multiculturalism, skills shortages in certain sectors, and anticipating future competence needs—were strongly reflected in curriculum planning. Although the work-life relevance of education was generally strong, there were institutional, disciplinary, and unit-level differences in how this relevance was ensured. In universities in particular, the use of stakeholder feedback in enhancing work-life relevance should be further strengthened across different study fields.

HEIs supported students' integration into work life in various ways, such as by organising internships and providing placement opportunities, offering career-preparatory studies, and creating work-based learning environments.

In many study fields, links to work life were embedded into the curriculum. Students in UASs were generally satisfied with how their studies met labour market needs and how they were able to build professional networks during their studies through internships, thesis work, and collaboration projects with employers. Students also valued expert and guest lectures delivered by professionals from the world of work. Some students expressed a desire for even stronger ties to work life, such as through mentoring programmes or more support in finding internship placements.

Part of ensuring the work-life relevance of education involved monitoring graduates' competences and their employment in their respective fields. HEIs utilised data from national follow-up surveys, such as the bachelor's feedback survey, career monitoring surveys for master's and doctoral graduates, the AVOP survey, and the UASS' career monitoring, as well as other employment statistics. Making use of national and regional foresight data was one way of responding to the changing needs of work life and society. Feedback and evaluation data collected from employers and other stakeholders were reviewed in various field-specific groups within the HEIs and used to support the development of education.

In some HEIs, monitoring labour market needs would benefit from a more comprehensive approach. In particular, feedback from student internships, commissioned theses, and RDI projects should be systematically collected to ensure effective monitoring of work-life relevance.

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Implementation of education

Based on the audit reports, HEIs follow the regulations and requirements concerning student admissions and the completion of degrees. Applicants had access to transparent information about the criteria for student selection and the various pathways into higher education. Support for applying and choosing a field of study was provided through applicant counselling and introductory courses offered to upper secondary school pupils. Preparatory training for higher education was offered to applicants with an immigrant background. HEIs also evaluated the effectiveness of their admissions processes and selection criteria.

Procedures for the recognition and validation of prior learning (RPL) were in place. According to students, RPL procedures functioned well in some HEIs, while in others, the application of RPL guidelines varied between study fields. The recognition and validation of prior learning should therefore be further systematised and extended across different study fields. In several UASs, another area for improvement was the validation of work-based learning.

Teaching cultures in Finnish HEIs were student-centred. Many HEIs aimed to provide student-focused education, which included encouraging students to take an active role in their own learning, offering flexible learning pathways, and increasing opportunities for student engagement.

HEIs supported student learning in various ways. Teachers used a range of teaching methods and made use of educational technologies and diverse learning environments. Teachers' pedagogical and teaching skills, particularly regarding digital learning environments and tools, were systematically supported.

Students often reported learning best in courses where learning tasks and assessment were interwoven. They also felt that the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as learning-by-doing, promoted both learning and motivation. Many students expressed a desire for more teaching on campus after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students appreciated flexible learning pathways and the opportunity to complete studies across different campuses and units, through online courses, cross-institutional studies as well as in projects. Alternative forms of completion and blended learning allowed students to tailor their studies to fit their individual goals and personal circumstances. Flexible access to minor subject studies and the possibility to complete open university courses free of charge for up to two years after graduation were also appreciated by students. However, students' employment during studies and the reduction in contact teaching posed various challenges for teaching staff.

According to the audit reports, guidance and support services were a strength in many HEIs. Students were required to create an individual study plan. Regular individual study plan guidance sessions and recognition of prior learning clinics effectively supported study progress, encouraged students to take an active role in planning their own learning pathways and recognising their competences, and helped shorten the duration of study. Individual and group guidance was provided by teacher tutors, study advisors, study psychologists, campus chaplains, career and international services staff, as well as peer tutors. Many HEIs also actively reached out to students at risk of dropping out and offered them support and guidance.

Student learning was assessed and supported at the HEIs through learning assignments, individualised feedback, and both self-assessment and peer assessment. HEIs had defined assessment scales and shared assessment criteria. Assessments of study performance and courses were typically conducted on a 0–5 scale. Issues such as student workload, course assessment criteria and their application were often discussed in staff meetings.

Based on audit reports, assessment methods should be diversified, and feedback provided to students on their competence and learning should be improved in nearly all HEIs. Students felt that they did not always receive sufficient feedback from staff about their learning. They also considered feedback and support from fellow students an important factor in supporting learning. While peer assessment was found to be useful, students noted that it does not replace feedback from teachers as regards the achievement of learning outcomes. Students also reported that large group sizes, an excessive number of group assignments, and mass examinations posed a threat to student-centred learning. Therefore, HEIs should develop ways to provide students with more feedback on their learning at different stages of their courses and learning paths, regardless of group size.

Student wellbeing

According to the audit reports, student guidance and counselling services contributed to promoting student wellbeing. The most frequently mentioned staff groups supporting the wellbeing of students included study counsellors, study psychologists, teacher and student tutors, and student welfare officers.

Student unions and student associations played a significant role in supporting student wellbeing. These organisations were important partners for HEIs in monitoring and promoting student wellbeing. Information on student wellbeing was collected regularly through wellbeing surveys. Various wellbeing groups and events were highlighted as examples of good practice.

Students reported that a sense of community and belonging significantly supported their wellbeing, particularly in smaller HEIs. In some HEIs, community spirit was strengthened by increasing students' opportunities for direct interaction with staff. Students were particularly satisfied with individualised support services, which were further developed during the COVID-19 pandemic as the importance of maintaining personal contact became more apparent.

In several HEIs, support services for international students were identified as an area for improvement. Many international students felt that they did not receive sufficient support for their studies, wellbeing or integration into the academic community. Student unions were also encouraged to better include international students in their activities.

Mental health services, sports services and student healthcare were essential to supporting student wellbeing. However, according to the audit reports, mental health services were often under-resourced, and waiting times were long. While some HEIs effectively communicated available wellbeing services so that students were well-informed, in many cases, improving the visibility and communication of these services remained an area for improvement.

Accessibility and equal opportunities

All HEIs aimed to promote equal opportunities, and several audit reports specifically mentioned a zero-tolerance policy towards discrimination and harassment. According to the audit reports, HEIs primarily understood equal opportunities as treating applicants and students the same way. In some reports, equal opportunities was highlighted as a particular focus area at the time of the audit.

The most common measures taken by HEIs to promote equal opportunities among students included statutory equality and non-discrimination plans, along with the establishment of dedicated Institutional bodies and working groups responsible for drafting and implementing these plans. Additionally, various accessibility plans or individual accessibility measures were commonly in place. Audit reports also highlighted anti-harassment guidelines and the appointment of designated harassment contact persons. In some HEIs, emphasis was placed on promoting gender equality, providing special arrangements in teaching, and offering various adjustments and accommodations.

Efforts to promote equal opportunities mainly focused on students who had already been admitted to the HEI. Some audit reports also raised the issue of equal opportunities in student admissions. In general, HEIs ensured equal opportunities in admissions through consistent selection criteria and uniform processes, thereby guaranteeing equal treatment of all applicants.

Continuous learning

Five HEIs selected continuous learning as the theme in evaluation area IV HEI as a learning organisation (see Tables 8–9). Continuous learning was also addressed in the first evaluation area in all audit reports. Based on the audits, HEIs were at different stages as providers of continuous learning. Themes identified as strengths in some HEIs were considered improvement areas in others.

In UASs, continuous learning was visible in the institutional strategies and related development plans. Diverse collaboration with employers and stakeholders as well as insights derived from the operating environment supported the planning of continuous learning and enhanced the work-life relevance of education. The identification of target groups for continuous learning, the modes of delivery, and the development of flexible learning pathways were also strengths of UASs. In some UASs, the planning and implementation of continuous learning had been organised as a separate function, which facilitated its coordination.

Audit recommendations highlighted the need for UASs to reinforce a needs-based approach to continuous learning. UASs were recommended to collect information more systematically from networks, work-life partners, stakeholders, alumni and students to diversify the content of their provision. Needs-based approach also entailed further emphasis on flexible learning pathways and modes of delivery to accommodate students' different study goals and support needs. For example, UASs could diversify the use of degree programme courses in continuous learning and develop more opportunities for studies independent of time and place.

In universities, the strengths of continuous learning included diverse provision and modes of delivery tailored to different groups, such as providing opportunities to participate in degree programme courses, targeted online courses (MOOCs) and open university provision. Following audit recommendations, universities should clarify the internal division of responsibilities in continuous learning and seek synergies to develop study modules suited to different target groups.

Evaluation and development of education

According to the audit reports, the relevance and timeliness of higher education were regularly monitored and evaluated through feedback systems, various key performance indicators, and discussions with students and stakeholders. Key quality and performance indicators for education were monitored, for example, in institutional management teams, education working groups and teams.

Although HEIs collected comprehensive feedback on their educational provision, more than half received a recommendation in the audit to improve their course feedback systems—particularly in terms of how the collected data was utilised. A common challenge in many HEIs was the low response rate of course feedback and insufficient feedback to students on their feedback. The systematic provision of feedback-on-feedback—that is, information on actions taken in response to student feedback—needs to be strengthened across HEIs. Students should also be better informed about the structure and function of the entire student feedback system.

Good practices in course feedback processes included mid-course feedback opportunities, the inclusion of dedicated feedback sessions in courses, course-level and programme-level feedback events, and open discussions between staff and students. Students appreciated having the opportunity to give informal feedback directly to teachers, and dedicated time was allocated for this in some cases.

The achievement of learning outcomes and the realisation of course objectives were assessed through discussions between teachers, degree programme coordinators, teams and working groups. The achievement of learning outcomes was also monitored as part of annual planning and planning of teaching as well as during curriculum development processes.

Comprehensive curriculum reforms in HEIs

Comprehensive curriculum reforms in HEIs were typically carried out every two to five years. In some HEIs, individual course descriptions were reviewed annually. In addition to feedback systems, many HEIs also utilised internal and external evaluation methods to develop their educational provision. Some HEIs assessed and developed their degree programmes through annual self-assessments, internal peer reviews and impact evaluations of education. Others made use of field-specific accreditations, work-life audits, or international benchmarking to support programme development.

According to the audit reports, the development of support services took good account of the feedback and needs of both staff and students. The development of support services was facilitated by close dialogue between different actors and the representation of support service staff in various institutional working groups. Support services received particular praise for the way they managed the transition to remote teaching and guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Examples of good practices highlighted in the reports included training provided by support services to develop digital skills among teachers and students, supporting teachers in competence-based pedagogy, and offering extensive opening hours for student services.

6 HEI promotes impact and renewal

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In evaluation area II – HEI promotes impact and renewal, the audit assessed the procedures used to manage and improve societal engagement, to strengthen the impact of the HEI's research, development and innovation (RDI) as well as artistic activities, and to support an innovative organisational culture.

Audit teams identified key strengths and gave recommendations for the improvement of HEI activities. The following were mentioned in at least five audit reports:

KEY STRENGTHS OF HEIs

- Societal engagement is embedded in the HEIs' strategic objectives.
- HEIs are well-networked at regional, national and international levels.
- HEIs have a vital role in the development of their regions.
- HEIs are active and influential in RDI activities.
- The HEIs' organisational cultures support experimentation, knowledge sharing and continuous renewal.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEIs

- HEIs should define clearer goals for societal engagement and impact.
- HEIs need to develop more precise and measurable indicators for assessing societal engagement and impact.
- Communication of HEIs' research and RDI activities should be enhanced.
- Alumni relations should be systematically strengthened.
- Partnership management practices should be more structured and consistent.

Management of societal engagement and impact

According to the audit reports, Finnish HEIs are key drivers of renewal in their regions and society. They operated strategically with long-term societal goals. HEIs demonstrated a clear understanding of their social responsibility and role in society. HEIs' societal impact objectives were linked to their core missions and to broader societal needs and current challenges, with particular emphasis on sustainable development and responsibility.

Societal engagement was considered an integral part of education, research, development, innovation and artistic activities. HEIs typically implemented, monitored and developed their strategic objectives through these core activities. Many HEIs had well-developed processes for implementing and monitoring strategic objectives through strategic programmes, annual planning cycles and operations management.

Despite the strong emphasis on societal impact in HEI strategies, many institutions lacked a shared understanding of societal engagement and impact goals. Follow-up indicators were not always aligned with strategic objectives. Several audits noted that HEIs should not rely solely on the Ministry of Education and Culture's performance-based funding indicators, which did not fully capture the societal impact of HEIs or their progress toward strategic goals.

Audit teams advised HEIs to define their societal impact more clearly and set specific goals with measurable indicators. This would also help HEIs to better communicate their contributions to society. At the same time, some audit teams cautioned against using definitions that are too narrow, as this could restrict innovation and flexibility.

Foresight and analysis of the operating environment

According to the audit reports, the institutional strategies of several HEIs were built on a comprehensive situational analysis and analysis of the operating environment. HEIs had also developed various models for risk management, with management and quality systems playing a central role in identifying and addressing operational risks. Engaging closely with stakeholders and partners supported strategic cooperation and informed the HEIs' actions.

Audit reports recommended that HEIs take a more systematic approach to analysing their operating environment, clarify their roles and responsibilities, improve their management and use of data, and foster greater engagement and dialogue throughout the process. HEIs should consistently collect, analyse and use foresight data to support strategic management and to ensure the continuity of operations.

Audits indicated that foresight efforts were often fragmented across HEIs, typically confined to internal or representative structures of the HEI. HEIs should systematically assess long-term trends in their operating environments and translate these into concrete, future-oriented actions. Some HEIs were encouraged to take a proactive, leading role in regional foresight initiatives.

Impactful research, innovation, development and artistic activities

Audit reports showed that HEIs' research and RDI activities significantly contributed to societal renewal in a way that reflected their unique profiles. The audit reports of UASs noted the regional impacts of RDI activities, such as effects on the local business environment or the attraction of skilled labour to the region. The audit reports of universities highlighted the impact of research both nationally and globally. Many HEIs had aligned their research or RDI impact with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Some HEIs had set clear objectives for the impact of research or RDI activities based on the institution's strategy and the corresponding research or RDI programmes. In some HEIs, research or RDI impact objectives were either unclear or not defined at all. Among the good practices highlighted in the reports were various guides for promoting research impact and workshops reflecting on research impact.

Artistic activities were not consistently embedded in strategic objectives, with their impact enhanced mainly through project-based and research activities. The objectives for artistic impact were often not clearly differentiated from those for research or RDI, except in terms of measurable outputs. Indicators typically included the number of exhibitions or performances, audience attendance, competition success, external funding and publications. Some reports recommended enhancing the visibility of artistic activities.

HEIs primarily gathered data on research and RDI activities using quantitative measures. However, information on the societal impact of research, RDI or artistic activities was collected significantly less than other quantitative data related to RDI activities. UASs also collected feedback from partners involved in RDI projects.

Not all HEIs had established indicators to monitor the impact of research or RDI activities. Universities, however, placed a strong emphasis on data collection through research information systems and on conducting regular, comprehensive evaluations of research. Most HEIs relied on indicators from the Ministry of Education and Culture or other funding indicators. Several HEIs were recommended to develop qualitative indicators and assess the impact of research and RDI activities in both the short and long term.

The impact of research and RDI activities was communicated in HEIs through multiple channels. HEIs organised events and conferences to enhance the visibility of research and RDI impact. The use of diverse social media platforms, podcasts, webinars, videos, newsletters and websites for impact communication was widespread. Based on audits, some HEIs need to improve how they communicate about research and RDI activities. These HEIs were also encouraged to try new ways to increase RDI impact and involve researchers and staff more in science communication.

Good scientific practice and open science

HEIs had systematic procedures in place to ensure compliance with good scientific practice. They were committed to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK). In addition, HEIs had their own internal guidelines for promoting good scientific practice, as well as protocols for handling suspected breaches or misconduct in research ethics. Research and project plans underwent ethical review in advance when required. Some HEIs had a centralised ethics committee, while others had multiple bodies and designated research ethics officers. Several HEIs also offered research ethics courses to various staff groups and students. For doctoral researchers, these courses were mandatory in nearly all universities.

According to the audit reports, HEIs were committed to promoting open science, which was seen as a key means of enhancing the societal impact of research and RDI activities. In many HEIs, the openness of research and RDI was embedded in HEI's strategic objectives. Most HEIs had developed guides, websites and roadmaps for open science and RDI. University libraries, in particular, played a central role in supporting open science practices and parallel publishing. In some HEIs, libraries covered open access publishing fees. Some HEIs had also made research data available for external use and published their own open-access publications and journals. The openness of publishing was actively monitored across HEIs.

Many HEIs were signatories to the Declaration for Open Science and Research 2020–2025. They were also committed to responsible research assessment by endorsing the CoARA and DORA declarations. Some universities also referenced the Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics, which outlines 10 principles for research evaluation and the FAIR principles.

Organisational culture promoting renewal

According to the audit reports, the organisational cultures of Finnish HEIs encouraged experimentation, the sharing of ideas and supported renewal. Many HEIs promoted an organisational culture that emphasised open-mindedness, bold experimentation and innovative thinking. A spirit of entrepreneurship and co-creation was fostered through various collaboration platforms and development mechanisms. Multidisciplinary higher education communities were seen as an asset and a key source of innovation. Some HEIs also had internal incentive systems to promote multidisciplinary collaboration.

An open and innovative working atmosphere, along with a strong sense of community among staff, supported creativity and innovation. The small size of some HEIs contributed to organisational agility, lowering the threshold for collaboration and experimentation with novel solutions. In some HEIs, special efforts had been made to strengthen interaction between staff and students.

HEIs played a central role in their regions by connecting diverse stakeholders. Collaborative efforts were facilitated by operational models that aligned institutional strategies with shared interests and ensured mutual benefits for all parties involved. The societal impact of HEIs extended widely across society and was realised through various channels and methods. Incubators, accelerators, research, innovation and development environments, mentoring programmes, as well as science communication and education, were among the approaches HEIs used to enhance their societal impact.

Network and stakeholder cooperation

Audits found that Finnish HEIs were well connected regionally, nationally and internationally. Strong academic and inter-institutional networks played a key role in supporting institutional activities and development. While HEIs participated extensively in international networks, these opportunities were not always fully utilised. Audit recommendations for several universities suggested that HEIs could adopt a more systematic and goal-oriented approach to leveraging these networks to enhance their activities.

HEIs acted as key regional actors and drivers of development, making significant contributions to the vitality of regions. Many HEIs had established close, well-functioning partnerships with work life and played an active role in creating and strengthening regional ecosystems. At numerous HEIs, strategic goals as well as research, innovation and development activities were closely aligned with regional needs and development trends, thereby enhancing the impact of cooperation.

Some university audits highlighted the institution's national role and impact, but such national or international impact was not evident across all Finnish universities. Audit reports also recommended that UASs strengthen their national and international impact.

Defining key partners and stakeholders supported HEIs' societal engagement. Several institutions had developed partnership management through customer relationship management systems, while others were recommended to introduce them. Strategic partnership agreements and models were common and supported long-term, versatile cooperation with partners.

Stakeholder and network cooperation often relied on personal relationships or individual staff member's networks, which could undermine continuity and knowledge transfer when staff changed. Stakeholders sometimes faced difficulties in identifying the right contacts within HEIs. Audit teams recommended that HEIs make it easy for stakeholders to initiate contact and propose collaborations. In some institutions, stakeholders also called for clearer procedures for cooperation, more regular meetings and improved coordination.

Stakeholder and network management could be further strengthened in some HEIs. Audits recommended identifying the strategically most important national and international stakeholders, defining cooperation types and setting clear objectives. Shared guidelines and practices for managing stakeholder relations and networks were also encouraged. Some HEIs were advised to develop cooperation with SMEs and non-governmental organisations.

Alumni collaboration

According to the audit reports, alumni are a key stakeholder group for HEIs, serving as important link between universities and society. Finnish HEIs have developed their alumni activities in recent years, with a few universities demonstrating particularly strong, strategic alumni engagement. In these universities, alumni were actively involved in various institutional activities and provided significant benefits to the institutions.

However, in several HEIs, audit teams identified alumni as an underutilised resource. Alumni activities should therefore be developed more systematically at both national and international levels, closely aligned with strategic goals and societal engagement. Expanding international alumni activities could create new collaboration opportunities and enhance HEIs' internationalisation and impact. Some institutions were also advised to integrate alumni more closely into RDI activities.

Students expressed a desire for alumni to be actively involved in teaching and other activities. Engaging with alumni could support students' transition into work life. Many alumni representatives participating in the FINEEC audit visits showed strong interest in contributing to the development of their alma mater. HEIs should actively inform alumni about opportunities to engage in HEIs' activities. Alumni also represent a key target group for continuous learning provision.

7 HEI enhances quality and wellbeing

Photo: Kari Hakli



In evaluation area III – HEI enhances quality and wellbeing, the audit team assessed the functioning and development of the quality system and how the system is used in strategic management. The procedures used to support the competence development and wellbeing of the staff were also assessed.

Audit teams identified key strengths and gave recommendations for the improvement of HEI activities. The following were mentioned in at least five audit reports:

KEY STRENGTHS OF HEIs

- Staff demonstrated a clear understanding of their HEI's strategic goals.
- HEIs had participatory and well-functioning quality culture.
- Staff, students and external stakeholders were able to participate in quality work and institutional development.
- Staff competence was supported in various ways.
- Staff wellbeing was actively promoted.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEIs

- HEIs should clarify their strategic development priorities.
- HEIs should broaden communication about quality work and diversify the channels used.
- All student groups should be engaged in quality work.
- Procedures for staff competence development should be systematised and improved.
- Staff wellbeing should be addressed more broadly and comprehensively.

Using the quality system in strategic management

According to the audit reports, HEIs had systematically and consistently developed quality systems tailored to their specific needs. These systems operated according to the principles of continuous improvement (Plan–Do–Check–Act, PDCA), emphasising the responsibility of all staff members for the quality of the institution's operations.

Beyond ensuring and enhancing the quality of activities, the primary purpose of the quality systems was to support the achievement of the HEI's strategic objectives. Quality systems were clearly linked to strategic management, supporting both strategic decision-making and the operations management of institutions. In nearly all HEIs, the management system, operations management system and quality system functioned as an integrated entity.

HEIs had enhanced both participation in and the implementation of their strategic processes. Implementation was supported by roadmaps, operational plans, annual planning cycles, and forums for implementing and monitoring strategy. Institutional strategies were generally regarded as clear and closely linked to practice, and staff had often embraced the strategic goals.

Despite the strong connection between strategic management and quality systems, many HEIs were advised to strengthen strategic monitoring, diversify their indicators, clarify priorities and enhance the effectiveness of implementation. In some institutions, the large number and broad scope of strategic goals led to fragmentation and challenges in prioritisation. Effective implementation required stronger monitoring and the use of clear indicators to monitor progress. The audit reports also recommended that HEIs define target levels for their strategic indicators.

In some HEIs, overlapping and simultaneous strategic development initiatives increased staff workload. The audit teams recommended pacing these activities and streamlining processes. Integrating quality management with strategic management was also suggested in some HEIs.

Knowledge management

Audit reports indicated that data from quality systems were widely used to manage, guide and develop institutional activities. HEIs had established various reporting systems and real-time data tools to support both knowledge management and quality assurance.

The audit teams recommended that HEIs further strengthen knowledge management by defining clear goals and target levels. Institutions should ensure that collected data meets the needs of both staff and management and enhances its usefulness in decision-making.

There was a need for up-to-date, easily accessible data, yet existing metrics often failed to provide a comprehensive overview of quality. For example, low response rates to course feedback surveys compromised their reliability. Beyond quantitative measures, in-depth qualitative analysis was frequently necessary to gain a full understanding of outcomes.

Audit reports also advised clarifying the links between strategic goals and indicators to enable consistent steering and more effective monitoring of goal achievement. Enhancing the visualisation of key processes and expanding data analysis could further improve knowledge management, particularly in decision-making contexts.

Functionality and impact of the quality system

The audited HEIs offered strong examples of how quality systems and quality management had been integrated into everyday activities, supporting planning, implementation, evaluation and development through established processes, methods and responsibilities. Continuous and systematic monitoring and feedback systems were integral components of the quality systems. Both internal and external evaluations were used to ensure and improve the quality of activities.

Several HEIs had developed systematic approaches to managing the quality of education and research. However, quality systems varied in the extent to which they addressed societal engagement and impact. According to the audits, the quality management of societal impact needs to become more systematic.

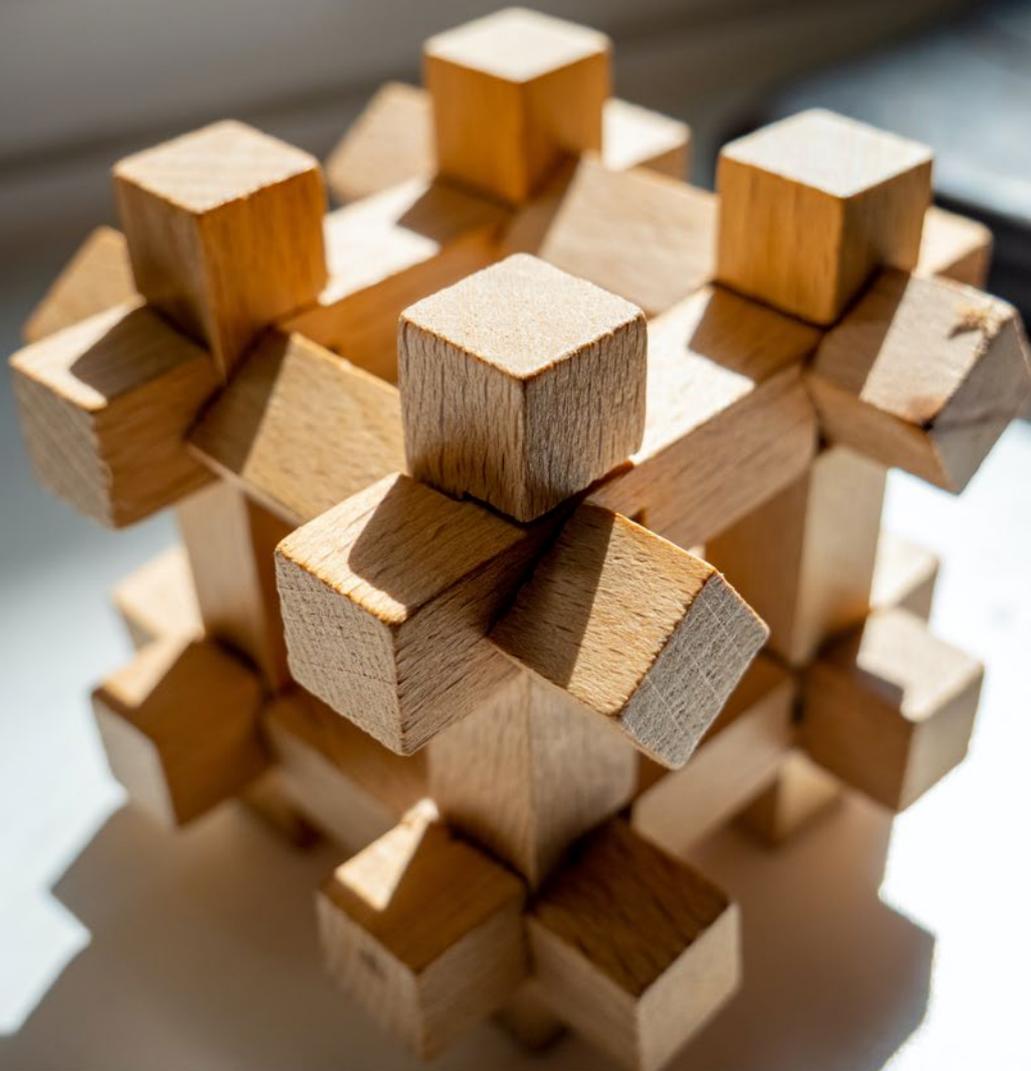
Some HEIs would benefit from simplifying and clarifying their quality systems. Common challenges included system complexity and the burden of maintaining the quality system. Documentation should be regularly reviewed in terms of findability, usability and accessibility. Staff were sometimes not fully informed about the key goals and areas of the quality system, and responsibilities were not always clear. The use of clear visualisations and presentation methods could strengthen staff awareness and the effective use of quality systems.

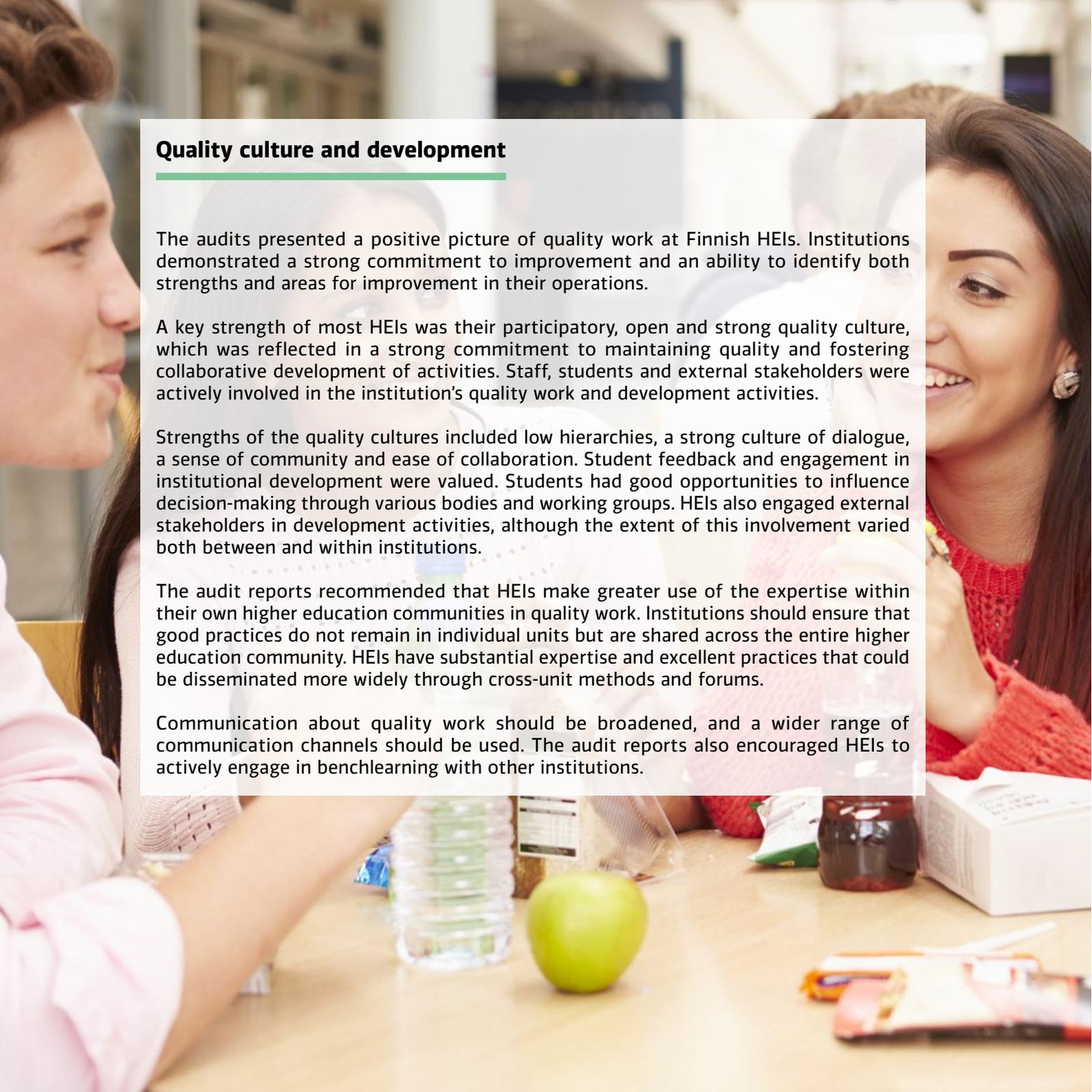
Audit teams also recommended harmonising and systematising quality management practices. HEIs often balanced between joint processes and approaches tailored to individual faculties or units. While decentralised systems offered flexibility, they sometimes led to inconsistent practices. Institutions were therefore encouraged to ensure consistency while retaining necessary flexibility.

A common challenge for HEIs was completing the full PDCA cycle (or quality loop). In particular, the 'Act' phase was often inadequately addressed, limiting the impact of development initiatives. Continuous monitoring of the outcomes and effectiveness of development actions was emphasised. Establishing clear processes for data use and defining responsibilities would further enhance the impact of quality management and support strategic decision-making.

Audit reports also suggested that quality systems could more effectively support proactive development and guide HEIs in responding to changes in their environment. Regardless of the overall maturity of the quality systems, HEIs were advised to regularly assess their effectiveness and impact to ensure continuous improvement.

Photo: Kieran Wood, Unsplash



A background image showing a group of young women sitting around a table in what appears to be a meeting or study session. They are looking at each other and talking. On the table, there is a green apple, a water bottle, and some papers. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box in the center of the image.

Quality culture and development

The audits presented a positive picture of quality work at Finnish HEIs. Institutions demonstrated a strong commitment to improvement and an ability to identify both strengths and areas for improvement in their operations.

A key strength of most HEIs was their participatory, open and strong quality culture, which was reflected in a strong commitment to maintaining quality and fostering collaborative development of activities. Staff, students and external stakeholders were actively involved in the institution's quality work and development activities.

Strengths of the quality cultures included low hierarchies, a strong culture of dialogue, a sense of community and ease of collaboration. Student feedback and engagement in institutional development were valued. Students had good opportunities to influence decision-making through various bodies and working groups. HEIs also engaged external stakeholders in development activities, although the extent of this involvement varied both between and within institutions.

The audit reports recommended that HEIs make greater use of the expertise within their own higher education communities in quality work. Institutions should ensure that good practices do not remain in individual units but are shared across the entire higher education community. HEIs have substantial expertise and excellent practices that could be disseminated more widely through cross-unit methods and forums.

Communication about quality work should be broadened, and a wider range of communication channels should be used. The audit reports also encouraged HEIs to actively engage in benchlearning with other institutions.

According to the audits, HEIs should enhance the effectiveness of feedback from students, staff and stakeholders, and improve communication with feedback providers regarding actions taken based on the feedback. Some students perceived the decision-making at their HEI as distant and asked for clearer channels for influencing decisions and better internal communication. All student groups should be actively involved in quality work. HEIs should ensure that, in addition to domestic degree students, international students, doctoral researchers and continuous learners have opportunities to participate in quality work. The audits particularly highlighted the need to improve the participation and integration of international students and staff within higher education communities. HEIs could also make greater use of external stakeholders in developing their activities.

Development of staff competence and wellbeing

According to the audit reports, HEIs identified the competence development needs of staff and supported competence development. Staff competence development was strategy-based. The most common way of identifying competence development needs was through personal, team or unit-level development discussions, which served as the basis for competence development plans.

Staff competence in HEIs was developed in various ways both individually and collectively, for example, by team teaching, mentoring and the sharing of good practices. Competence was also enhanced through research and RDI projects, participation in networks, work placements and other forms of collaboration with work life. Several HEIs applied the 70–20–10 model, whereby 70 per cent of new knowledge is acquired through learning at work, 20 per cent through learning from colleagues and 10 per cent through formal training. In some HEIs, significant resources were allocated to competence development, supported by dedicated training systems.

Audit report recommendations indicated that HEIs should provide opportunities for staff to engage in competence development during working hours, ensure consistency of competence development processes across units, strengthen monitoring of its impact and guarantee equal access for all staff groups. Some HEIs were also advised to conduct more systematic mapping of staff competences at the unit and team levels.

Staff competence development encompassed higher education pedagogy, digital pedagogy, multicultural competence, sustainable development competence, and a broad range of language training opportunities. In some HEIs, staff could participate free of charge in open university or open UAS courses or pursue doctoral studies. Only a few HEIs offered training specifically aimed at developing field-specific expertise. HEIs also invested in the development of supervisors' leadership skills.

HEIs had transparent procedures for staff recruitment, with principles and processes clearly described and openly available. Many positions were filled through open calls, and internal career paths also played a role in recruitment. Recommendations highlighted the need for HEIs to strengthen the recruitment of international staff as part of their internationalisation objectives. In many HEIs, staff induction was comprehensive and well-planned, although its implementation was not always consistent across the institution.

According to the audit reports, HEIs actively promoted staff wellbeing. The most common method for monitoring wellbeing was regular staff surveys, which were systematically conducted and analysed. However, the implementation of recommendations from these surveys and the monitoring of resulting actions still required further development. An open and colloquial organisational culture, effective staff feedback systems, and staff involvement in planning and development were key factors in supporting wellbeing. Many HEIs also provided extensive sports, occupational health, and other wellbeing services. The audits suggested that staff wellbeing could still be developed in a broader and more diverse manner across HEIs.

HEIs promoted equality and non-discrimination primarily through the statutory equality and non-discrimination plan. This plan was complemented by various action programmes, such as initiatives to advance gender equality and diversity, and to enhance accessibility and inclusion. The implementation of equality and non-discrimination measures was often integrated into recruitment practices, the promotion of multilingualism, monitoring of salary development, and the activities of cooperation groups (YT Act).

During the third audit cycle, HEIs had the opportunity to select one theme on which they wished to receive feedback for improvement from the audit team. The selected theme had to be central to the HEI's profile or strategy. The evaluation area chosen by the HEI did not affect the outcome of the audit and was not assessed using the assessment scale.

Many of the themes selected by HEIs focused on various aspects of education and on enhancing internationalisation in teaching and learning. Themes related to RDI activities, particularly innovation and societal impact, were also frequently chosen. Table 5 presents the evaluation areas selected by the HEIs.

TABLE 5. Evaluation areas selected by HEIs, by theme

THEMES	EXAMPLES OF EVALUATION AREAS SELECTED BY HEIs
EDUCATION PROCESSES, LEARNING PATHWAYS AND INTERNATIONALISATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-unit, multidisciplinary education Quality management of education exports Integration of international students and staff Work-life relevance of education Curriculum planning and guidance Supporting smooth learning pathways Management of programme portfolios
CONTINUOUS LEARNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demand-driven continuous learning Planning, organisation and development of continuous learning
RDI ACTIVITIES, ESPECIALLY INNOVATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management and governance of RDI processes Integration of project and research collaborations into programmes Support for advanced innovation activities
SOCIETAL IMPACT AND NETWORK COLLABORATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive monitoring of the operating environment Key partnership models for regional development Support services for societal impact International networks and collaboration
QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF HEI LEADERSHIP AND JOINT SERVICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Management of multi-campus organisations Joint services within the HE community and service management Joint educational services across the HE consortium
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND RESPONSIBILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responsibility and sustainability Ecological sustainability

9 Benchlearning as part of the audit process

Photo: Amy Hirschi, Unsplash



The third audit cycle included benchlearning as a method. Each HEI selected the topic and partner for benchlearning and agreed on the process together with its partner. The benchlearning topic had to relate to at least one of the four evaluation areas (I–IV).

The purpose of benchlearning was to encourage HEIs to adopt benchlearning as a method for developing their activities. The aim was that HEIs learn from another organisation's good practices and reflect on their own strengths. Many HEIs chose another HEI as their benchlearning partner. Some HEIs established new partnerships specifically for this activity in the audit.

Universities commonly partnered with other universities, the majority of which were international. UASs most commonly selected another UAS as their partner, while a few partnered with domestic companies. Table 6 provides a categorisation of benchlearning partners by country and type of organisation.

The benchlearning process generally followed a structured approach in which HEIs, together with their partner, defined the focus and objectives. This was followed by joint meetings during which the chosen theme and the practices of both partners were discussed. HEIs produced a summary of key learnings, which was included in their self-assessment report for the audit.

Experiences of benchlearning were generally positive. In the best cases, both partners gained valuable insights for enhancing their activities. The extent to which benchlearning ideas were implemented and shared within the higher education community varied. For some HEIs, the timeframe for conducting benchlearning was too short. Several institutions planned to continue benchlearning with their partner after the audit.

TABLE 6. Benchlearning partners selected by universities and universities of applied sciences, 2019–2024

COUNTRY OF BENCHLEARNING PARTNER	UNIVERSITIES	UASs
Netherlands	2	5
Ireland	2	-
Italy	1	-
Austria	-	1
China	-	1
Norway	1	1
Portugal	-	1
Sweden	2	-
Germany	-	2
Scotland	1	-
Finland (universities)	4	-
Finland (UASs)	-	8
Finland (companies)	-	4
Switzerland	1	1
Total number of benchlearning partners	14	24

The majority of benchlearning themes related to the development of education and study processes. HEIs also used benchlearning to address themes concerning quality systems and societal engagement. Table 7 presents a categorisation of benchlearning themes, and all partners and themes for the audited HEIs are listed in Appendix 1 tables 8 and 9.

TABLE 7. Benchlearning themes selected by HEIs, 2019–2024

THEMES	EXAMPLES OF BENCHLEARNING THEMES SELECTED BY HEIs
LEARNING PATHWAYS AND CONTINUOUS LEARNING	Flexible study paths and year-round study opportunities
	Organisation and development of continuous learning
	Blended learning and stakeholder collaboration in continuous learning
	Opportunities for digital learning
	Smooth thesis process – completion within the timeframe
STUDENT AND STAFF WELLBEING AND EQUITY	Wellbeing of staff and students
	Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI)
DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING COMPETENCE	Continuous development of teachers' pedagogical competence
	Co-teaching
	Support for digital pedagogy
	Development of strategic capabilities and expertise
DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY SYSTEM	Using the quality system in strategic management
	Improving quality culture in doctoral schools
	Student feedback systems
	Best practices in quality management
	Knowledge management
SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT	Leadership of societal engagement and impact
	Promotion of innovation and innovation capacity
	Development of strategic capabilities and expertise
	Sustainable development

10 Conclusions

This publication examines the audits of 36 Finnish HEIs conducted during the third audit cycle between 2018 and 2024. Of these, 22 audits were conducted in UASs and 14 in universities. In addition, FINEEC also audited the University of Graz and the University of Ljubljana during the third audit cycle.

The audits provided a comprehensive assessment of institutional activities and their development in Finnish HEIs. Compared with the previous two cycles, the third cycle placed greater emphasis on institutional activities rather than focusing solely on quality systems. Special features of the audit framework included the Quality Label for Excellence, an evaluation area chosen by each HEI and benchlearning. FINEEC also enhanced participation and dialogue in the third-cycle audit visits, for example by introducing workshops with students as a data collection method.

The third audit cycle highlighted both the strengths and improvement areas of Finnish HEIs, particularly in education, strategic development and societal impact. The audits demonstrated the significant role of HEIs as drivers of societal and regional renewal. Compared with previous cycles, societal engagement and impact featured more prominently on HEI agendas and were pursued more strategically. The role of HEIs in supporting regional economies and the labour market was evident.

Strategic and data-driven management has advanced considerably in Finnish HEIs over the three audit cycles. By the third cycle, many institutions had established systematic approaches to strategic management in which management of operations, quality system development and strategic objectives are closely aligned.

A particular strength of Finnish HEIs is their commitment to continuous improvement, supported by an inclusive and open quality culture. Students' voices are actively considered in decision-making and development processes. HEIs have developed their quality systems with long-term dedication. The model of continuous improvement (PDCA) has become firmly embedded in operations and development processes. Principles of open science and the reinforcement of good scientific practices are systematically promoted in most HEIs. New priorities in quality management of research have also emerged, such as the CoARA initiative and the DORA declaration.

The quality management practices of Finnish HEIs largely comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG 2015). Nonetheless, there is scope for further improvement, including more systematic periodic review of degree programmes, enhancing recognition of prior learning (RPL), and further developing student-centred and competence-based education. Competence-based curricula should continue to evolve to support deep learning and employability, and students should receive more comprehensive feedback on their learning.

HEIs collect substantial amounts of feedback data, however, its utilisation and the feedback-on-feedback to students require strengthening. Clear goals and the relevance of collected data are essential to support knowledge management. In particular, in societal engagement and impact, clearer objectives and better indicators are needed to help HEIs develop this area and to communicate their contributions to society more effectively.

HEIs continue to face challenges such as declining resources, increasingly diverse student competencies and support needs, growing demands for internationalisation, shrinking age cohorts, and the current geopolitical issues. Addressing these challenges requires strategic, knowledge management and robust quality assurance and enhancement practices. The quality of higher education and its continuous improvement are critical for maintaining international competitiveness and for deepening European cooperation. HEIs need to have the ability to identify their improvement areas and ensure their operations remain adaptable and competitive in evolving environments. Quality challenges should be addressed proactively. In developing their quality systems, HEIs should focus on what supports the achievement of their strategic objectives and the identification of changes in their operating environment.

Towards the fourth audit cycle

The third audit cycle concluded at the end of 2024, and the new audit framework for the fourth audit cycle was approved in June 2025. The institutional audit framework has proven effective in the Finnish higher education context, and enhancement-led evaluation continues to enjoy wide support. In many HEIs, audits are seen as a tool for strategic management and institutional development. Going forward, audits must continue to assess the quality of higher education and the extent to which HEIs meet the European quality assurance standards.

Finnish HEIs have done excellent work in developing Finnish higher education. Finnish higher education is of a high standard and is continuously evolving. As we move into the fourth audit cycle, it is essential that HEIs maintain their courage and ambition to further improve the quality of their education and operations—together, purposefully and with impact.

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Appendix

TABLE 8. Evaluation areas selected by universities and benchlearning topics and partners (n = 14)

UNIVERSITY	EVALUATION AREA IV CHOSEN BY THE HEI	BENCHLEARNING TOPIC	BENCHLEARNING PARTNER
University of Jyväskylä, 2021 (remote)	Multidisciplinary education across unit boundaries	Continuous improvement of teachers' pedagogical competence	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU), Netherlands
Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology (international), 2021 (remote)	Digitalisation in teaching and learning	Master's thesis in engineering programmes at PoliMi	Polytechnic University of Milan, Italy
University of Helsinki (international), 2022 (remote)	The concept of international master's programmes	Staff and student well-being	University of Edinburgh, Scotland
University of Lapland, 2022	Integration of project and research collaboration into the Degree Programme in Art Education	Student feedback system	University of Helsinki
Åbo Akademi (international), 2022	Work-life relevance of education	Student recruitment	Dalarna University, Sweden
University of Eastern Finland (international), 2023	UEF as a study and work environment for international students and employees	Continuous learning including stakeholder cooperation	University of Jyväskylä
National Defence University, 2023	Responsibility and sustainable development	Importance of multidisciplinary for the activities	Finland Futures Research Centre, University of Turku
University of Turku (international), 2023	Support services for societal impact	Sustainable development	University College Cork – National University of Ireland, Cork, Ireland
Aalto University (international), 2023	Equality, diversity and inclusion	Equality, diversity and inclusion	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL), Switzerland
Tampere University, 2023	Study plan and guidance	Opportunities for digital learning	Dublin City University, Ireland

UNIVERSITY	EVALUATION AREA IV CHOSEN BY THE HEI	BENCHLEARNING TOPIC	BENCHLEARNING PARTNER
University of Oulu (international), 2024	Internationalisation of degree programme curricula and the student experience	Enhancing quality culture in doctoral schools	Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands
Hanken School of Economics (international), 2024	Recruitment and integration of international students with a focus on the Hanken International Talent (HIT) initiative	Support for digital pedagogy (Hanken Teaching Lab)	BI Norwegian Business School (Learning Center), Norway
University of the Arts Helsinki, 2024	Ecological sustainability	Staff well-being at work	Hanken School of Economics
University of Vaasa (international), 2024	Management of the portfolio of study programmes	International student recruitment	Jönköping University, Sweden

TABLE 9. Evaluation area chosen by HEI, benchlearning themes and partners selected by UASs (n = 22)

UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES	EVALUATION AREA IV CHOSEN BY THE HEI	BENCHLEARNING THEME	BENCHLEARNING PARTNER
Jyväskylä UAS, 2019	Quality management of education exports	HEI creates competence	Esslingen University of Applied Sciences, Germany
Novia UAS, 2019 (international)	Nordic networks and cooperation	Societal impact and development of higher education activities in Turku region, case maritime education and marine technology	Turku UAS
Kajaani UAS, 2021 (remote)	Esports Business education	Continuous and multiform learning	Centria UAS
South-Eastern Finland UAS, 2021 (remote)	Learning environments supporting the integration of RDI and teaching	Students learning pathways	Henan University, China
Vaasa UAS (international), 2021 (remote)	Work-life cooperation	Efficient thesis writing process for timely graduation	Novia UAS
Seinäjoki UAS, 2022 (remote)	Planning, organising and enhancing continuous learning	Planning, organising and enhancing continuous learning	Satakunta UAS

UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES	EVALUATION AREA IV CHOSEN BY THE HEI	BENCHLEARNING THEME	BENCHLEARNING PARTNER
Tampere UAS, 2022	Common services of the higher education community – customer control and service management of the service buyer as part of the buyer's quality system	Best quality management practices in two higher education institutions – promoting impact and renewal	Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Groningen, Netherlands
Satakunta UAS, 2022 (remote)	The integration of international students, teachers, researchers and other experts by developing the possibilities for studying and working	Comprehensive study guidance and successful arranging of year-round study	Seinäjoki UAS
Savonia UAS, 2022 (remote)	Demand-driven continuous learning	Development of strategic capabilities and competence	Osuuskunta KPY, Genelec Oy, Mehiläinen Oy
Turku UAS, 2022 (remote)	Continuous learning	Management of social engagement and impact	Hogeschool Utrecht, Netherlands
Laurea UAS, 2022	The key partnership model for developing the region	HEI enhances quality and well-being	National Land Survey of Finland
Häme UAS (international), 2022	Design Factory	Design Factory	The Porto Design Factory, Portugal & Design Factory Mannheim, Germany
Haaga-Helia UAS (international), 2023	Work&Study model	Continuous learning, especially eLearning	HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland & NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences
Metropolia UAS (international), 2023	Innovation Hubs in RDIL perspective	Student and personnel well-being	Dutch Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA) University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
Centria UAS, 2023	Education exports	Knowledge-based management	Metropolia UAS
Lapland UAS, 2023	Considering the changing competence needs in work life in the provision of continuous learning	Work-life cooperation	Fachhochschule Technikum Wien, Austria

UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES	EVALUATION AREA IV CHOSEN BY THE HEI	BENCHLEARNING THEME	BENCHLEARNING PARTNER
Arcada UAS (international), 2024	Management and steering of RDI processes	RDI processes	Kristiania University College, Norway
Karelia UAS, 2024	Promoting education-based immigration	Quality system and its use in strategic management	Seinäjoki UAS
Police University College, 2024	Proactive monitoring of the operational environment	Co-teaching	Häme UAS
Oulu UAS, 2024	Shared educational services of the higher education consortium supporting a smooth learning path for the learner	Continuous learning	Häme UAS
HUMAK UAS, 2024	Management of a multi-location organisation	Societal impact of RDI activities	Jyväskylä UAS
LAB UAS, 2024	Support for demanding innovation activities	Student wellbeing	AVANS University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands



FINNISH EDUCATION
EVALUATION CENTRE

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre
P.O. Box 380 (Hakaniemenranta 6)
FI-00531 HELSINKI
Email: kirjaamo@karvi.fi
Switchboard: +358 29 533 5500
Website: karvi.fi

Quality and impact – Summary of the third
audit cycle for higher education institutions
2018–2024

Mirella Harri, Mira Huusko, Kati Isoaho,
Sirpa Moitus, Kirsi Mustonen & Hilla Vuori.

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Authors: Mirella Harri, Mira Huusko, Kati Isoaho,
Sirpa Moitus, Kirsi Mustonen & Hilla Vuori

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