

FINEEC's self-assessment report for the ENQA targeted review 2026

4.4 ESG Standard 2.3 Implementing processes - Institutional quality audit

Standard

External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent
- an external assessment, normally including a site visit
- a report resulting from the external assessment
- consistent follow-up.

Institutional quality audit compliance

The FINEEC audit process aligns with the four stages outlined in the standard. FINEEC conducts quality audits in Finnish, Swedish and English, with the language of the audit agreed upon in the audit agreement between FINEEC and the HEI. The audit manual is available in these three languages and includes information regarding the purpose and the objectives of the audit, the applied principles, the evaluation areas and criteria, a description of the audit process (Chapter 5 in the audit manual) and the potential outcomes of the audit. The manual also includes self-assessment guidelines and a description of the structure of the self-assessment report. By carrying out its audits consistently and transparently, FINEEC ensures that its audits are widely accepted by Finnish HEIs and other stakeholders.

The audit process starts with the HEI registering for the fourth cycle audit with a contact person designated by FINEEC. FINEEC organises a start-up meeting with the HEI to discuss the audit and the agreement is signed at least one year before the planned audit visit. The agreement specifies the schedule, language and the optional strategic cross-cutting theme of the audit. The Higher Education Evaluation Committee appoints the audit team and its chairperson based on a proposal from the FINEEC audit project manager. Before their appointment, the HEI may comment on any potential conflicts of interest regarding the team members. Once the audit team has been confirmed, FINEEC trains the team regarding their duties and the audit framework and takes a coordinating role in organising the team's meetings.

The written documentation gathered during the audit process, including the self-assessment produced by the HEI, is complemented by interviews and workshops with different stakeholders during the site visit. The report drafted by the audit team is based on the data collected during the audit process and follows the

enhancement-led approach. The audit report is published on FINEEC's website. The external quality assurance does not end with the report and the decision regarding the audit result as FINEEC implements consistent follow-up activities that complement the process.

The FINEEC audit process is explained in the table below based on the description in Chapter 5 of the audit manual. The current manual is designed for the pilot phase of the fourth audit cycle and will be confirmed once the pilot audits (2) have been carried out.

Phase	
<p>Self-assessment</p>	<p>The audited HEI conducts the self-assessment by following the guidelines in FINEEC's audit manual. The HEI decides on the method for conducting its self-assessment. FINEEC encourages the HEI to engage its community as widely as possible in identifying strengths and improvement areas in its activities. This should preferably involve diverse groups of staff and students, as well as HEI leadership and key stakeholders.</p> <p>The self-assessment report with the additional documentation listed in the manual is compiled and submitted to FINEEC's project manager three months prior to the site visit. The deadline is specified in the audit agreement. The material is prepared in the language of the audit, also agreed on in the audit agreement. The self-assessment report is 20–50 pages in length and is not published as part of the final audit report, but it is referenced in the audit report.</p> <p>The self-assessment report is a reflective document that includes both description and assessment of the HEI's activities, highlighting the HEI's profile, strategic priorities and positioning within the broader operating environment. Equally, the report should identify key strengths and improvement areas regarding each evaluation area. FINEEC encourages HEIs to publish the self-assessment report on their intranet or website.</p> <p>Audit teams can request additional material before and during the audit visit. In addition, audit teams also have access to the audited HEI's intranet site, which in the previous cycle proved to be a valuable additional source of information. FINEEC also compiles statistics for the audit team including Bachelor's Graduate Survey feedback or AVOP feedback, career monitoring feedback, degree completion times and mobility data, and the number of completed credits for continuous learning from the education administration's reporting portal Vipunen. The aim of compiling the statistics package is providing the audit team with useful data on the scale and results of the HEI's operations in addition to making better use of existing data.</p>
<p>External assessment, including site visit</p>	<p>Once the audit team has received the self-assessment report, FINEEC organises a meeting between the audit team and the HEI leadership. During the meeting, the HEI introduces its organisation, management and quality systems and current topics affecting its operations. The auditors can ask background questions, for instance, related to the HEI's management and quality systems. The aim of the meeting is to further strengthen the collaborative nature of the audit process, as well as to support the effective training of the audit team.</p> <p>In collaboration with FINEEC, the HEI organises an open event for its HEI community before the audit visit to discuss the audit objectives, themes and the implementation of the audit visit. This event serves as way for the HEI to promote the audit as an inclusive and shared process, and to discuss the upcoming audit visit with the HEI community.</p> <p>The FINEEC project manager sends the draft audit visit programme, along with the audit team's requests regarding the groups and persons to be invited, to the HEI and organises a meeting with the HEI's audit contact person to discuss the programme. The HEI has at least one month to finalise the visit programme and invite the participants. The visit programme reflects the specific characteristics of the institution. The team members and FINEEC project manager prepare for the site visit by drafting a question list for the interviews and documents for the workshops.</p> <p>The audit visit is primarily conducted on-site and lasts two days. For the largest HEIs (over 20 000 students), the visit lasts three days. The size of the HEI is considered when planning the audit visit, for instance, with respect to the number of interviewees and workshop participants. The purpose of the audit visit is to verify and supplement the observations made on the HEI's quality system and activities based on the audit material. A key aspect of the visit is to gather diverse perspectives and experiences from everyday life at the HEI, while also evaluating the audit themes within the institutional context. The objective is to create a supportive and respectful atmosphere that supports the development of the institution's activities. In addition to</p>

	<p>the audit team members, the FINEEC project manager and backup project manager also participates in the site visit.</p> <p>During the visit, the team conducts interviews and organises workshops with representatives of the institution's management, members of the HEI board, teaching and other staff members, students, and external stakeholders. The aim is to involve different groups of students and staff as widely as possible and the topics for the discussions are guided by the criteria.</p> <p>The visit concludes with a feedback session attended by at least members of the HEI's leadership, the quality manager, and a representative of the student union. In the meeting, the audit team provides the institution with preliminary feedback on the strengths and areas for improvement identified in the evaluation topics.</p>
<p>Report</p>	<p>The audit team draws up a report based on the data collected during the audit process and the analysis of that material. The audit teams are composed in a way that the team members complement each other with their expertise. The writing responsibilities are therefore divided according to the evaluation areas. However, all team members contribute to all evaluation areas over course of the process, and the report represents the whole team's effort.</p> <p>The structure of the report follows the audit criteria, and in the report, the audit team evaluates the HEI's activities and their development in relation to the criteria and the gathered data. In accordance with the enhancement-led principle, the report highlights key strengths of the HEI's activities and provides recommendations for improvement.</p> <p>Prior to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee's decision-making meeting, the institution is given the opportunity to fact-check the report. FINEEC offers information on the corrections made to the report. The final report is published on FINEEC's website (www.karvi.fi) within three working days of the Evaluation Committee's decision. The audit report is published in the language used in the audit (Finnish, Swedish or English), and an abstract is published in Finnish, Swedish and English for each report.</p>
<p>Follow-up</p>	<p>A final seminar is organised by the HEI and FINEEC approximately one month after the Evaluation Committee's decision. The seminar gives the HEI community the opportunity to openly discuss the audit results and conclusions with representatives of FINEEC and the audit team. The HEI decides on the format of the event.</p> <p>Each year, the audit follow-up procedure involves the HEIs that were audited two years earlier. Its purpose is for the HEI to report on and receive peer feedback regarding its post-audit enhancement activities. The follow-up report collects information on the impacts of the audit.</p> <p>Follow-up steps two years after the audit in the fourth cycle:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HEI prepares a follow-up report on post-audit enhancement activities with particular emphasis on the main recommendations from the audit and submits it to FINEEC by the agreed deadline, which is usually early autumn. The report is reviewed by FINEEC's Higher Education Evaluation Committee. • FINEEC organises a peer discussion event for the HEIs reporting in the same year. <p>In the case of a re-audit, the HEI is expected to have developed its operations in the areas evaluated to at least a good level by the re-audit. The same evaluation criteria, as well as the principles for appointing the audit team, its operations and decision-making, apply as in the initial audit.</p> <p>If the audit team assesses evaluation area I or II as Satisfactory, the HEI must report to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee on the development measures undertaken one year after the audit decision.</p>

Areas improved

- The audit reporting has been renewed for the fourth-cycle audits (see Chapter 4.7.).
- The fourth cycle aims to make better use of available data, reflecting feedback received during consultations. The self-assessment is submitted together with a list of attachments, including summaries of feedback data. In addition, FINEEC staff compile a statistics package using data available on the education administration's reporting portal Vipunen (see Audit Manual Appendix 1).
- The interactive nature of the audit process has been further strengthened. One example is the meeting between the audit team and the HEI's leadership, which now forms part of the audit team's training.
- Some HEIs have wished for more follow-up after the audit. Follow-up after the audit is conducted two years after the audit decision (previously three years). Additional follow-up is linked to the Satisfactory assessment (see Chapter 4.6).
- Based on feedback from the third cycle, FINEEC will organise open sessions for audit contact persons, typically quality managers at HEIs. The aim is to ensure that key messages are consistently conveyed across institutions ensuring equal treatment.
- In response to suggestions made at the FINEEC annual quality seminar 2025, a Q&A page for the fourth cycle has been added to FINEEC's website.
- Given the growing need for clear guidance, FINEEC has developed principles for the responsible use of AI in audits, applicable to HEIs, audit teams and FINEEC staff.
- Following stakeholder feedback and FINEEC's own experience, the size of the HEI will be taken better into account when determining the number of participants involved in the visit.
- Feedback on benchlearning was mixed from the third audit cycle. While some HEIs found the exercise useful, it was also viewed as somewhat detached from the rest of the audit process and as an activity that institutions already carry out independently. Given these observations, and considering the additional workload it created, FINEEC decided not to continue benchlearning as part of the audit process.

Based on experience from the third cycle, the Quality Label of Excellence process has been integrated into the fourth-cycle audit process instead of being a separate process with its own excellence criteria. (see Chapter 4.7.)

Areas to be improved

- FINEEC is planning to develop the annual audit follow-up process and seminars for HEIs based on HEIs' wishes. The structure for the presentations and peer feedback in the annual quality seminars has remained the same for many years.
- FINEEC could make better use of HEIs' follow-up reports in its activities. In the fourth cycle, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee will be engaged in the yearly process and give feedback on the follow-up.

The areas to be improved will be informed by the pilot audits. FINEEC also collects annual feedback from both audited HEIs and audit teams and smaller changes to the process can be made throughout the cycle.

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The Bachelor's Graduate Survey is a national feedback survey for graduating university bachelor's degree students. AVOP is a national feedback survey for graduating UAS degree students.