

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

 Finnish Education Evaluation Centre

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The *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA) will conduct an external review of the higher education evaluation activities of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) in September 2026. The review will be carried out using ENQA's Targeted Review methodology and aims to verify that FINEEC continues to comply with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG 2015). Particular attention will be paid to developments in the agency's activities since the previous full review in 2021–2022.

This self-assessment report (SAR) prepared as part of the external review process presents FINEEC's own description and critical reflection on the ESG compliance of its higher education evaluation activities. The report focuses primarily on FINEEC's fourth-cycle audit framework for higher education institutions (2025–2030). It also examines the agency's EUR-ACE accreditations for engineering degree programmes. In addition, the SAR includes reflections on audit reports, which FINEEC has chosen as an optional enhancement theme for the review.

As a central document of the review process, the SAR provides evidence for the ENQA external review panel while also supporting FINEEC's own assessment and enhancement of its activities. The report was prepared by FINEEC's Unit for Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education and draws on self-assessment exercises conducted in spring 2026 involving unit staff, members of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee, and FINEEC's management.

Tiivistelmä

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) arvioi Kansallisen koulutuksen arviointikeskuksen (Karvi) korkeakoulutuksen arviointitoiminnan vuonna 2026. Arviointi toteutetaan kevennettynä Targeted Review -menettelynä. Arvioinnissa varmistetaan, että Karvin toiminta on edelleen eurooppalaisten korkeakoulutuksen laadunhallinnan periaatteiden (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, ESG 2015) mukaista. Arvioinnissa keskitytään erityisesti toiminnassa edellisen arvioinnin (2021–2022) jälkeen tapahtuneisiin muutoksiin.

Ulkoista arviointia varten laaditussa itsearviointiraportissa Karvi kuvaa ja arvioi omaa korkeakoulutuksen arviointitoimintaansa suhteessa ESG:n vaatimuksiin. Itsearviointiraportti keskittyy erityisesti Karvin korkeakoulujen neljännen kierroksen auditointimalliin (2025–2030). Lisäksi raportissa tarkastellaan tekniikan alan tutkinto-ohjelmien EUR-ACE-akkreditointimallia. Raportissa käsitellään myös auditointiraportteja, jotka Karvi on valinnut ulkoisen arvioinnin valinnaiseksi kehittämisteemaksi.

Itsearviointiraportti on arvioinnin keskeinen asiakirja, joka tarjoaa ENQA:n arviointiryhmälle tietoa Karvin toiminnasta ja samalla tukee Karvin oman toiminnan arviointia ja kehittämistä. Raportti on laadittu yhteistyössä Karvin korkeakoulutuksen ja vapaan sivistystyön yksikön henkilöstön kanssa. Raportti perustuu keväällä 2026 toteutettuihin itsearviointeihin, joihin osallistuivat yksikön henkilöstö, korkeakoulujen arviointijaosto sekä Karvin johto.

Sammandrag

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) utvärderar Nationella centret för utbildningsutvärdering (NCU) och dess utvärderingsverksamhet inom högre utbildning år 2026. Utvärderingen genomförs som ett förenklat Targeted Review-förfarande. Syftet är att säkerställa att NCU:s verksamhet även i fortsättningen uppfyller de europeiska principerna för kvalitetshantering inom högre utbildning (*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, ESG 2015), och har ett särskilt fokus på förändringar i verksamheten sedan den förra utvärderingen (2021-2022).

I den självvärderingsrapport som utarbetats för den externa utvärderingen beskriver och utvärderar NCU sin utvärderingsverksamhet inom högre utbildning i förhållande till ESG:s krav. Rapporten fokuserar särskilt på NCU:s modell för den fjärde auditeringsomgången av högskolor (2025–2030). Därutöver behandlas EUR-ACE-ackrediteringar för ingenjörsutbildningar. Rapporten innehåller även NCU:s reflektioner kring auditeringsrapporter, vilka har valts som ett frivilligt utvecklingstema i den externa utvärderingen.

Som ett centralt dokument i utvärderingsprocessen utgör självvärderingsrapporten ett viktigt underlag för ENQA:s utvärderingsgrupp samtidigt som den stöder NCU:s egen bedömning och utveckling av verksamheten. Rapporten har tagits fram i samarbete med personalen vid NCU:s enhet för högre utbildning och fritt bildningsarbete. Den bygger på självvärderingar som genomfördes våren 2026, i vilka enhetens personal, sektionen för utvärdering av högskolorna samt NCU:s ledning deltog.

1 Introduction

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) operates within a higher education system characterised by a culture of trust, institutional autonomy, and a long-standing commitment to enhancement-led evaluation. External quality assurance in Finland is grounded in an enhancement-led approach, as defined in national legislation and reflected in FINEEC's evaluation practices. While enhancement remains at its core, elements of accountability are also an inherently part of external quality assurance and are clearly embedded in FINEEC's evaluation frameworks.

Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) bear primary responsibility for the quality and continuous improvement of their activities. Over successive audit cycles, this responsibility has translated into strong institutional ownership of quality management and a sustained commitment to enhancing both the quality and impact of their core functions.

At the same time, the broader European higher education landscape is evolving. Across Europe, accountability-oriented approaches to quality assurance are becoming more prominent, partly driven by European Union-level initiatives. There is also an increasing demand for reliable and comparable information to support national policymaking. In parallel, structural developments, such as the growing number of higher education consortia in Finland and deeper engagement in European University Alliances, are reshaping the operating environment of HEIs and quality assurance agencies alike.

Against this background, FINEEC has developed its fourth audit cycle framework. The framework builds on the established enhancement-led approach while placing greater emphasis on systematic, data-driven, and impactful quality assurance and improvement. In addition to ensuring alignment with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, ESG 2015, the framework has been designed in close dialogue with the Finnish higher education sector and aims to respond to its evolving needs.

FINEEC welcomes the ENQA Targeted Review at a timely moment, following the piloting phase of the fourth audit framework. The review provides an important opportunity to reflect on current practices and to further strengthen FINEEC's external quality assurance activities in line with European standards and guidelines.

2 Development of the self-assessment report

FINEEC's self-assessment report (SAR) was produced collaboratively by the staff of FINEEC's Unit for Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education. The self-assessment process included self-assessment exercises conducted with the unit staff, the FINEEC Higher Education Evaluation Committee, and the FINEEC management team during spring 2026.

The unit staff's (ESG Part 2, enhancement theme) and Higher Education Evaluation Committee's (ESG 2.2., 2.4., 2.5. & 2.6.) self-assessments focused on the institutional quality audits. The reflections from the unit staff self-assessment exercise have been integrated in the text in Chapter 4. A summary of key points from the Higher Education Evaluation Committee reflections are presented in Part III. The self-assessment concerning the EUR-ACE engineering programme accreditations was conducted by a FINEEC staff member. The FINEEC management team conducted a SWOT analysis of FINEEC as an agency. Writing responsibilities for individual chapters were divided between unit staff members and the Head of Unit. Responsibilities were divided according to current responsibilities and interests. All unit staff, FINEEC management team and the members of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee commented on the report. The report was edited by a core team. The outcomes of the self-assessment exercise will be integrated into the annual strategic development cycle of FINEEC where appropriate. The outcomes of SAR will be further discussed in the unit, and improvement actions are taken where necessary.

Disclosure of AI use

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools (Copilot, Chat GPT) were used to support certain aspects of the preparation of this document. Specifically, AI was applied to assist with the language refinement. All content was subsequently verified by the responsible parties (FINEEC management and experts) to ensure accuracy, objectivity, and compliance with ENQA Policy on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Agency Reviews (available [here](#)). The use of AI did not replace human oversight or decision-making at any stage of the process.

3 Changes since the last full review

In this chapter, we describe the recent changes in the Finnish higher education system, FINEEC and institutional quality audits.

3.1 Higher education system

Some of the key developments since that last ENQA review 2021-2022, relate to structural reforms, policy shifts, steering and funding changes, international cooperation, as well as continuous learning.

Finland has both a stable and mature higher education system and national quality assurance system. The number of higher education institutions has remained unchanged since the previous ENQA review. Finland has a binary higher education system, commonly referred to nationally as the dual model, with 14 universities and 24 universities of applied sciences.

That said, a notable ongoing structural development in Finland is the emergence of higher education consortia, in which a research university acquires ownership of a university of applied sciences (UAS). Several such ownership arrangements already exist, and more are being explored. While this trend is clearly expanding, it still affects only a minority of UASs rather than the whole system. These ownership structures typically enable the consolidation of support functions, such as IT, HR, library, and administrative services, alongside more closely aligned strategic planning. In some cases, governance practices have also evolved; for example, the rector of the university may serve as chair of the UAS board. At the same time, the legal binary structure of Finnish higher education remains unchanged, as universities and UASs continue to operate under separate legislation. In addition to formal consortia, several HEIs have developed partnership models in which two or more institutions cooperate closely. These HEI partnerships may be local, regional, or formed e.g. based on shared strategic interests or thematic priorities.

The Ministry of Education and Culture has been preparing a new Vision for Higher Education and Research extending to 2040, which is intended to respond to major demographic and labour-market challenges, including declining tertiary attainment. OECD data show that only 39% of 25–34-year-olds in Finland hold a tertiary degree, compared to the OECD average of 48%, underlining the need to raise educational attainment. While Finland's current policy target is to approach a 50% tertiary attainment rate by 2030, longer-term discussions linked to the 2040 vision increasingly consider even higher attainment levels as desirable considering future skills needs. The vision also builds on Finland's established research and innovation target of increasing R&D expenditure to 4% of GDP. Work on the vision has been carried out through a participatory process involving HEIs and stakeholder organisations, with FINEEC among those consulted. The final vision together with recommended policy measures is scheduled for completion after a consultation cycle in summer 2026.

Finland has adopted revised funding models for universities and universities of applied sciences (UASs) for the 2025–2028 period. The established four-year agreement process between the Ministry and each HEI continues to form the backbone of steering. Funding of higher education institutions is largely allocation-based and relies on a transparent set of nationally defined performance indicators, ensuring predictability while maintaining strong outcome orientation. For research universities, funding is primarily driven by educational outputs and research performance, with completed bachelor's and master's degrees carrying significant weight alongside indicators of research quality, scientific publications and competitive research funding. The model continues to strengthen incentives for timely graduation. For universities of applied

sciences, approximately 95% of core funding is performance-based, reflecting a long-standing structure that emphasises education outcomes, applied RDI activities, external funding and graduate employment.

Internationalisation of the Finnish higher education system has strengthened further since the last review. As of early 2026, 23 of Finland's 38 HEIs participate in European Universities Alliances, nearly two-thirds of the system. This high engagement has prompted Finland to introduce national operating principles and a roadmap for digital interoperability to support alliance participation. The Ministry's European Higher Education Cooperation Working Group, in which FINEEC has been represented, has played a central role in coordinating national responses to European initiatives such as joint degrees, interoperable digital systems, and the European Education Area. Alliances are increasingly shaping institutions' strategic priorities, mobility frameworks, and digital infrastructure development. In addition, many Finnish HEIs are rapidly becoming more international as higher education communities, with increasing numbers of international students but also in several cases international staff. The number of degree programmes especially at master's level taught in English has grown steadily, and many HEIs are actively recruiting international students from outside the EU/EEA.

Continuous learning (i.e. lifelong learning) is being systematically strengthened and strategically prioritised within Finland's higher education system. Open higher education continues to offer a wide range of non-degree study options for adults, traditionally built on modules derived from degree programmes that can be completed independently as flexible learning pathways. Alongside these degree-based open studies, the Ministry is encouraging HEIs to develop RDI-based, market-driven and continuous learning solutions aligned with labour market needs, including micro-credentials. Open university studies have been brought together on a national level through the national Opin.fi platform, which compiles open studies from 29 HEIs and is expanding towards 37 HEIs, offering access to more than 4,400 courses and other learning resources in one place. The current Government is proposing a law allowing higher education degrees to also be completed as fee-based open higher education studies. Additionally, the Government is also proposing a free 30-credit study voucher for open higher education studies to those who have completed upper secondary education but have not secured a place in higher education.

3.2 FINEEC

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is an independent governmental agency responsible for the evaluation of education in Finland. FINEEC carries out evaluations related to education including the operations of education providers from early childhood education to higher education.

Provisions on the duties and organisation of FINEEC are laid down in the Act 1295/2013 and Government decree 1317/2013. The legislation concerning FINEEC allows the agency to operate across borders and provide also fee-based services to education organisations operating nationally or internationally, as well as to its other customers. Fee-based services are provided based on commissions, orders, requests or competitive tendering.

The key documents guiding the activities of FINEEC are the [FINEEC strategy 2024–2027](#) and the [National Education Evaluation Plan 2024–2027](#) (FINEEC 2024). FINEEC draws up its strategy and the national evaluation plans for four-year periods. The evaluation plan is drawn up in a participatory process in which stakeholders, FINEEC staff and FINEEC's decision-making bodies are strongly involved. The plan is approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the document steers the evaluation activities of the agency.

According to the current strategy of FINEEC (2024–2027), FINEEC's objectives are

1. Raising competence and education levels
2. Fostering social, ecological and economic sustainable development
3. Continuous improvement of the quality of education and early childhood education and care.

Following its strategic principles, FINEEC carries out impactful, trustworthy and independent evaluation activities. The agency aims at evaluation results that create impact and are used in making important societal decisions as well as decisions at the national and the local level. FINEEC's results are based on reliably produced information and evaluations are free from external influence. The agency is committed to following the ethical principles concerning evaluation in all its' activities. FINEEC also adheres to Finnish National Board of Research Integrity TENK principles on Responsible Conduct of Research.

Organisation

FINEEC operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) with complete independence in terms of its operations. FINEEC has the duties and decision-making powers of an independent authority. EDUFI provides FINEEC some administrative and support services, such as HR, financial, legal, procurement and data management services.

FINEEC comprises the Evaluation Council, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee and four units: Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education Unit, General Education Unit, Vocational Education and Training and Early Childhood Education and Care Unit and Development Services Unit. FINEEC has approximately 40 staff members of which 7 are engaged in evaluations of higher education. The main office and most of the staff are in Helsinki, and some staff are based in Jyväskylä.

The Evaluation Council is the strategic decision-making body of FINEEC. The Government Decree (1317/2013) on FINEEC prescribes the composition, tasks and decision-making powers of the Council.

The mandate of the current Council is ending in May 2026 (10 June 2022–31 May 2026). The new Council is expected to be appointed by the Government in June 2026. For tasks of the Council, please see [FINEEC's SAR of ENQA Review 2021-2022](#) (FINEEC, 2021).

Higher Education Evaluation Committee is the decision-making body for higher education evaluations and consists of nine members of which three must also be members of the Evaluation Council. According to the Government Decree, the Evaluation Council proposes members for the Higher Education Evaluation Committee, and the Ministry of Education and Culture appoints them. The Council makes its selection from the candidates put forward by the higher education institutions and other stakeholders. The members must be experts in the evaluation of higher education. The Evaluation Committee decides on:

- Project plans as well as the compositions of planning and evaluation teams for evaluations of higher education institutions
- Outcomes of audits of higher education institutions.

Composition of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee for the period 1 December 2022–30 November 2026 is available on the [FINEEC website](#).

3.3 Renewed external quality assurance activities – Institutional quality audit

A central starting point for the FINEEC audits is the statutory duties defined in higher education legislation, alongside the HEIs' responsibility for their operations and the quality thereof. The Universities Act (558/2009) and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014) include binding provisions requiring HEIs to undergo external evaluations of their operations and quality systems regularly and publish the results of these

evaluations. Enhancement-led evaluation is established as a core principle of FINEEC in the Government Decree (1317/2013). It is grounded in the values of trust, participation, and a respectful approach toward the evaluation object. While FINEEC's audits address all three main purposes of evaluation, accountability, improvement, and knowledge, the main emphasis since the first audit cycle has been on enhancement. Beyond examining whether HEIs meet the ESGs, the audits focus on supporting institutions in continuously improving their activities and strengthening their capacity to achieve their strategic goals.

Institutional quality audits have been the main external evaluation method of Finnish HEIs since 2005. The institutional quality audit frameworks have been holistic, and included in addition to teaching and learning, also research or RDI activities and societal engagement. The rationale is that quality management is integrated in all core functions of the institutions, not only teaching and learning. Alongside the ESGs, each audit cycle has also mirrored the development of quality management within Finnish HEIs and the needs of the sector. The first two cycles of audits, conducted in 2005-2011 and 2012-2018, focused on quality systems and processes. In the second cycle, the framework included a link to strategic management. The second cycle also included samples of degree programmes and an enhancement topic in the form of an evaluation area chosen by the HEI.

The audit framework was substantially reformed for the third audit cycle conducted in 2018-2024. The number of evaluation areas was reduced, and the criteria were rewritten in a more descriptive style and assessment scale renewed. In line with the development of quality management in Finnish HEIs, an aim of the reform was to shift attention away from the quality system to highlighting quality assurance and enhancement as integral parts of the HEI's everyday work. The more descriptive criteria made value judgements in audits clearer and more transparent, but at the same time inducing more binding content into the criteria. Some of the more descriptive criteria can also be traced back to the ESGs.

The revised criteria placed emphasis on educational provision, student-centredness, societal engagement and impact. The overall impact of HEIs' activities was highlighted, including the extent to which quality management effectively supported institutions in achieving their strategic objectives and improving their core functions. The third cycle also introduced benchlearning as a method and Quality Label of Excellence. Another major change was the introduction of a digital audit platform, which served as the submission system for the HEI's self-assessment and as the basis for producing the audit report that combined the institution's self-assessment with the audit team's evaluation.

FINEEC conducted a thematic mid-term analysis (Huusko et al., 2022) and an end of cycle analysis of the third audit cycle (Harri et al., 2025). It concluded that 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, as was also highlighted during the consultations of the fourth-cycle framework. Strategic and data-driven management has advanced considerably in Finnish HEIs over the three audit cycles (see also Huusko & Pyykkö, 2022). 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. HEIs have developed their quality systems with long-term dedication. A particular strength of Finnish HEIs is also their commitment to continuous improvement, supported by an inclusive and open quality culture. The model of continuous improvement (PDCA) has become firmly embedded in operations and development processes. (Harri et al., 2025.)

The planning of the fourth-cycle audit framework was an open and collaborative process engaging key stakeholder groups (see Chapter 4.3.). The planning was guided by several key principles that emerged from the consultation process in autumn 2024.

Key principles in the planning

- Ensure that the framework is aligned with the ESGs.
- Use same framework for both universities and universities of applied sciences, as it brings clear benefits.
- Ensure continuity with earlier audit cycles and incorporate identified development areas of Finnish HEIs.
- Focus on the core statutory functions of institutions.
- Make the framework more focused, highlighting only the essential themes.
- Keep the framework flexible so it fits different types of institutions with different objectives.
- Use existing national and institutional data more effectively in the audit.
- Continue with the enhancement-oriented approach.
- Differentiate the assessment scale, as the level good in the third cycle was too broad.
- Include more follow-up in the process.

Based on the work of the planning team and consultations with key stakeholders, the purpose and objectives of the fourth-cycle framework was defined as follows.

The purpose of the audit

- To ensure that HEIs maintain and develop the quality of their operations, and to support their continuous, comprehensive and long-term development.
- To ensure that the quality work of HEIs comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).
- To support strategic management in HEIs, and the implementation of their institutional profiles and core mission objectives.
- To provide stakeholders with information on the operations of HEIs and the development of their quality.

The objectives of the audit

- To support the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Finnish higher education system.
- To support HEIs in identifying their strengths and improvement areas.
- To support HEIs' foresight and readiness for change.
- To promote and support the planning, implementation, evaluation and development of high-quality education, research, RDI activities, artistic activities and their societal impact.
- To promote and support the well-being, equity, engagement and openness of higher education communities.
- To encourage the internationalisation, collaboration and responsibility of HEIs.
- To promote the development of HEIs' operations by disseminating good practices.

The audit framework for the pilot phase was approved by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee in June 2025, and the pilot phase audit manuals were published in Finnish in August 2025 and Swedish and English in September 2025. Two pilot audits, Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology, LUT and Southern Eastern University of Applied Sciences (XAMK), were conducted in spring 2026 with site visits in April 2026. The decisions and reports from the pilot audits will be published after the submission of this SAR, in August 2026. Following the pilot phase, the framework will be refined based on the findings from the pilots. The revised audit manual for the fourth cycle will be published in September 2026. The new audit cycle will begin in 2027 and end in 2030.

4 Compliance with Part 2 of the ESG

In this chapter, we describe and assess the ESG compliance of our external quality assurance activities. Particular attention is given to the fourth-cycle audit framework (2025-2030), which was introduced after the previous full ENQA review.

4.1 ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance - Institutional quality audit

Standard

External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

ENQA Review 2022 – suggestion for further development

FINEEC is encouraged to consider weighing ESG 1.9 more explicitly in its methodology and thus also raising the level of expectations of Finnish HEIs regarding monitoring and review of study programmes.

Institutional quality audit compliance

FINEEC conducts institutional quality audits with the same audit framework applied to universities and universities of applied sciences. The same framework is also available to non-Finnish HEIs commissioning an audit from FINEEC. The FINEEC audit framework is broad and covers the three core functions of HEIs: education, research or research, development and innovation (RDI) activities, artistic activities, and societal engagement.

The fourth cycle audit framework 2025-2030 (see Figure 1) has two evaluation areas:

- Evaluation area I: Strategic management supported by the quality system
- Evaluation area II: Learning supported by teaching and guidance

Evaluation area I assesses the HEI's quality system and its connection to strategic and knowledge-based management. It also assesses how the HEI analyses and anticipates changes and risks in its operating environment and organisational culture. Evaluation area II assesses how the HEI plans, implements and develops its degree programmes and continuous learning provision to support education that is student-centred, research-based, and connected to the labour market. The criteria for the evaluation areas are described in detail for the level *good* in the fourth cycle [Audit Manual](#) (FINEEC, 2025a).

The HEI may also choose an optional cross-cutting theme for the audit that is central for its profile or strategy, and for which it wishes to receive feedback from the audit team. The theme should concretely highlight the HEI's profile and its ambitions. The theme is integrated into the HEI's self-assessment. The cross-cutting strategic theme selected by the HEI does not affect the audit's outcome.

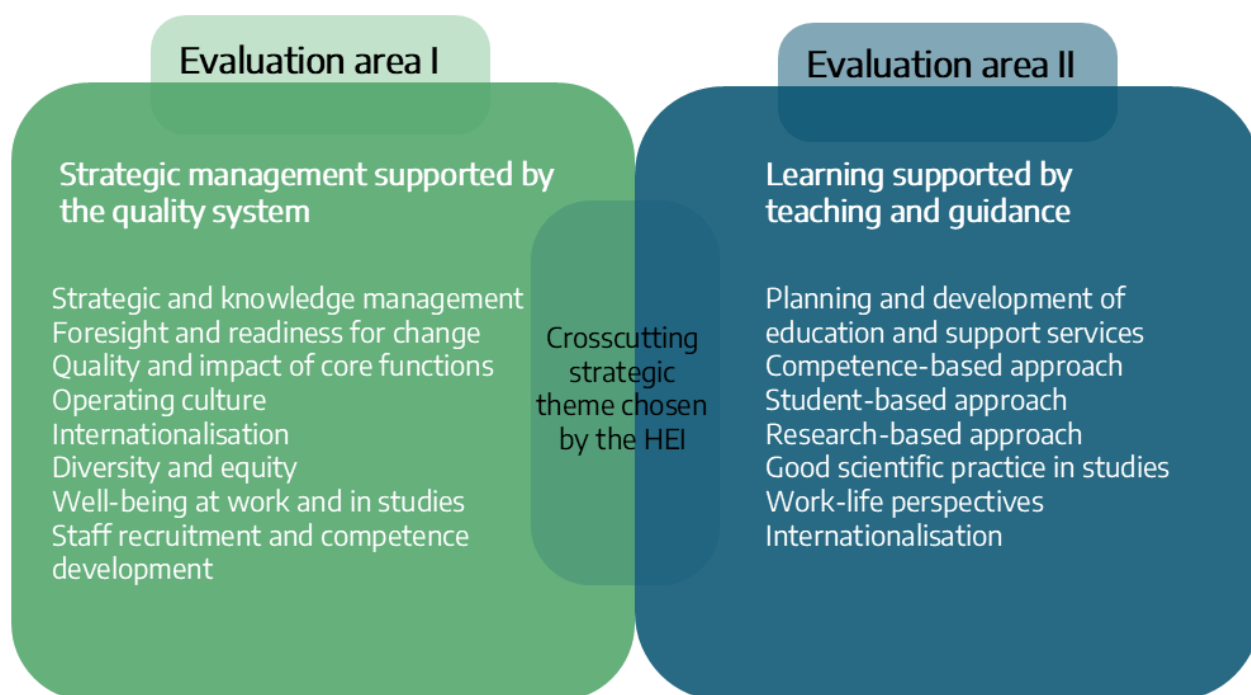


FIGURE 1. FINEEC fourth-cycle audit framework 2025-2030

The FINEEC audit criteria compliance with the ESGs is presented in the table below.

1.1 Policy for quality assurance Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.	The HEI's management and quality systems support the achievement of its strategic objectives and the development of its operations • The HEI has established the principles, objectives and responsibilities of its quality system, which supports its strategy and forms the basis of its quality work. The core principles of the quality system are openly accessible. • The HEI identifies societal changes and risks and analyses and applies foresight information to support its strategy implementation and to ensure operational continuity. • The information needs of the HEI's management have been identified, and the necessary data is readily accessible to both the leadership and the higher education community. The HEI has defined clear responsibilities for using monitoring, evaluation and foresight data to support the development of its operations. The information supports the HEI's management and strategic objectives. • The HEI has a risk management plan or equivalent and ensures the continuity of its education and research/RDI activities in exceptional circumstances. • The HEI promotes internationalisation in line with its strategic objectives, and it has defined principles for responsible internationalisation. The HEI's organisational culture is inclusive and open • The HEI's organisational culture and leadership are open and participatory. • Staff, students and external stakeholders participate in and have opportunities to influence the planning and development of the HEI's activities. • The HEI has effective practices for giving and receiving feedback regularly. The higher education community follows up on the feedback as part of the HEI's management processes, implements development measures and monitors their impact.
1.2 Design and approval of programmes Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.	The planning of degree programmes is systematic, and it ensures student-centred and research-based education, labour market perspectives and internationalisation • The degree programmes have been reviewed to ensure that they correspond with the National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules. • The planning processes ensure that the degree programmes are up-to-date, student-centred, research-based, include labour market perspectives and are aligned with the HEI's profile. • Education is based on research. The HEI integrates its research or RDI activities in degree programmes. • Degree programmes have clearly defined learning outcomes. The planning ensures that teaching and learning methods, learning environments and assessment enable the achievement of learning outcomes in a diverse manner. • Students' workload is defined according to the principles of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). • The HEI has systematic and effective practices for approving new degree programmes, including the consideration of existing educational provision nationally. The development of education, teaching and guidance is based on data and engagement • Teachers and students actively participate in the planning and development of degree programmes. • Degree programmes have established practices for interaction with the labour market, and the results of this cooperation are used in the development of degree programmes. • Degree programmes utilise monitoring, evaluation and feedback data to develop the programmes, teaching and guidance. • Degree programmes systematically monitor student workload and make changes when necessary.

	Degree programmes systematically monitor and assess the achievement of the learning outcomes.
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.	Teaching and guidance support goal-oriented studies and the active role of students in their learning process - The delivery of teaching and guidance, along with the assessment of learning, is purposeful and actively supports the students' engagement in the learning process. - Degree programmes have purposeful practices to accommodate the needs of diverse student groups in teaching. - The HEI has defined its pedagogical guidelines, model or an equivalent framework.
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.	Teaching and guidance support goal-oriented studies and the active role of students in their learning process - The HEI follows openly available regulations, guidelines and principles regarding student admissions, studies and graduation. - The HEI has clear procedures to ensure the recognition and validation of prior learning, the credit transfer of completed studies or the integration of other previously acquired competence into formal education.
1.5 Teaching staff Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.	The HEI promotes diversity, well-being at work and in studies, the development of staff competence and transparent recruitment - The HEI promotes diversity and monitors the realisation of equal treatment in its higher education community. - The HEI systematically supports the integration of international staff and students into the higher education community and Finnish society. - The HEI monitors and supports well-being at work and in studies. - The HEI applies transparent procedures in staff recruitment. - The HEI identifies the competence development needs of its staff and develops their competence in a goal-oriented manner. It also systematically monitors and records the teaching staff's pedagogical competence development.
1.6 Learning resources and student support Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.	Teaching and guidance support goal-oriented studies and the active role of students in their learning process - The delivery of teaching and guidance, along with the assessment of learning, is purposeful and actively supports the students' engagement in the learning process. - Degree programmes have purposeful practices to accommodate the needs of diverse student groups in teaching. - Study guidance, counselling and other support services help students complete their studies. The needs of both students and staff are considered in the development of support services, which are developed based on feedback and evaluation data.
1.7 Information management Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.	The HEI's management and quality systems support the achievement of its strategic objectives and the development of its operations - The HEI identifies societal changes and risks and analyses and applies foresight information to support its strategy implementation and to ensure operational continuity. - The information needs of the HEI's management have been identified, and the necessary data is readily accessible to both the leadership and the higher education community. The HEI has defined clear responsibilities for using monitoring, evaluation and foresight data to support the development of its operations. The information supports the HEI's management and strategic objectives. The HEI has effective practices to ensure and develop the quality and societal impact of its education - The HEI identifies the strengths and improvement needs of its educational activities.

	• The HEI actively addresses insufficient quality and identified problems in its operations. The HEI can provide follow-up data on the impact of development measures on its educational activities. • The HEI monitors and develops the societal impact of its educational activities in line with its strategy. The development of education, teaching and guidance is based on data and engagement • Degree programmes utilise monitoring, evaluation and feedback data to develop the programmes, teaching and guidance. • Degree programmes systematically monitor student workload and make changes when necessary. • Degree programmes systematically monitor and assess the achievement of the learning outcomes. The HEI's organisational culture is inclusive and open • The HEI has effective practices for giving and receiving feedback regularly. The higher education community follows up on the feedback as part of the HEI's management processes, implements development measures and monitors their impact.
1.8 Public information Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.	• The audit team visits the audited HEI's website and often the intranet site as part of the assessment process. • The Finnish HEIs have well-developed websites with key information on their activities and programmes. All degree programmes offered by the Finnish HEIs are also published on national platform Studyinfo.fi where applications to programmes are also submitted. Opin.fi is a new national platform that brings together the open study offerings of all Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences. • Finland has also a well-developed and open system for statistics collected by the Statistics Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education. Vipunen.fi is Finland's official national education statistics service. It is maintained by the Finnish National Agency for Education and provides comprehensive, detailed data on HEIs such as on applicants, enrolled students and graduates, placement after graduation, research publications, international activity, feedback and career monitoring.
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.	The HEI has effective practices to ensure and develop the quality and societal impact of its education. • The HEI regularly evaluates its degree programmes. • The HEI identifies the strengths and improvement needs of its educational activities. The HEI actively addresses insufficient quality and identified problems in its operations. The HEI can provide follow-up data on the impact of development measures on its educational activities. • Degree programmes utilise monitoring, evaluation and feedback data to develop the programmes, teaching and guidance. • The HEI has effective practices for giving and receiving feedback regularly. The higher education community follows up on the feedback as part of the HEI's management processes, implements development measures and monitors their impact. • The planning processes ensure that the degree programmes are up-to-date, student-centred, research-based, include labour market perspectives and are aligned with the HEI's profile.
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	• Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences are required by law to regularly participate in the external evaluation of their operations and quality systems. HEIs select the external agency conducting the external evaluation/s. FINEEC conducts institutional quality audits in line with the ESGs on a cyclical basis. The quality label is valid for six years, and thus, the FINEEC procedure requires an audit of the HEI to take place every six years.

One of the premises of the planning of FINEEC's fourth cycle framework was to incorporate ESG 2015 in the framework and clarify criteria which needed clarification. The ESGs were also discussed with the international experts that were consulted twice during the planning in spring 2025.

In the ENQA external review conducted in 2021–2022, FINEEC's third-cycle audit framework was assessed as fully compliant with ESG 2.1. Nevertheless, the ENQA review panel encouraged FINEEC to give more explicit weight to ESG 1.9 in its methodology, thereby raising Finnish higher education institutions' expectations regarding the monitoring and periodic review of study programmes. While the periodic review of degree programmes was included in the criteria for the third audit cycle, FINEEC has further clarified and strengthened its expectations regarding the ongoing monitoring and periodic review of degree programmes in line with ESG 1.9. These strengthened expectations are reflected both in FINEEC's communication on the ENQA review outcomes and in the design and implementation of the fourth-cycle audit framework.

The FINEEC Annual Quality Seminar 2023 focused specifically on the internal and external monitoring and periodic review of study programmes, showcasing good practices from various HEIs. The fourth-cycle audit manual now includes a glossary of key concepts, and the Q&A section on FINEEC's website (currently only available in Finnish) further clarifies expectations related to periodic programme reviews.

FINEEC requires HEIs to have a system for the periodic review of their degree programmes. Institutions are free to design a review process that best serves their needs, and reviews may be either internal or external. FINEEC, however, requires that the processes include reviewers without affiliations to the programme being reviewed. A self-assessment conducted by the programme is not sufficient. The entire evaluation framework including audit criteria have been renewed for the fourth cycle. In terms of teaching and learning, the evaluation area 2 criteria is a continuation on the third-cycle evaluation area 1. The framework continues to emphasise student-centred, competence-based, and research-based education, while integrating labour market perspectives.

Areas improved in audits

- The framework places greater emphasis on pedagogy, the consideration of diverse student groups, and internationalisation and the engagement of stakeholders.
- The criteria include an own sub-area for continuous learning.
- There is more focus on knowledge or data-driven management and quality improvement. Efforts have also been made to clarify expectations in specific areas, such as the periodic review of programmes.
- The entire evaluation framework including audit criteria have been renewed for the fourth cycle. In terms of teaching and learning, the evaluation area 2 criteria is a continuation on the third-cycle evaluation area 1. The framework continues to emphasise student-centred, competence-based, and research-based education, while integrating labour market perspectives.
- The framework places greater emphasis on pedagogy, the consideration of diverse student groups, and internationalisation and the engagement of stakeholders.
- The criteria include an own sub-area for continuous learning.
- There is more focus on knowledge or data-driven management and quality improvement. Efforts have also been made to clarify expectations in specific areas, such as the periodic review of programmes.

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.

4.2 ESG Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance - EUR-ACE accreditation

EUR-ACE engineering programme accreditation compliance

Engineering programme accreditation is a programme-specific evaluation that may lead to the award of the international EUR-ACE Label. The accreditation aims to support the development of quality in engineering degree programmes and to enhance the international comparability and recognition of Finnish engineering qualifications within industry. The accreditation methodology is based on the European Accredited Engineer (EUR-ACE) framework, administered by the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAAE). Programmes that meet the standards are granted the EUR-ACE Label, which is valid for six years from the accreditation decision. Participation in accreditation is voluntary for HEIs, and a fee is charged to cover the associated costs. FINEEC's mandate covers accreditation activities in both universities of applied sciences and universities.

FINEEC is authorised to award the EUR-ACE Label to the following types of higher education engineering and technology programmes:

- 4-year (240 ECTS) bachelor's degree programmes (full-time and part-time)
- 3-year (180 ECTS) bachelor's degree programmes (full-time)
- 2-year (120 ECTS) master's degree programmes (full-time)
- 1–2-year (60 ECTS) master's degree programmes (primarily part-time)

The accreditation criteria are described in the [Accreditation Manual](#) (FINEEC, 2025b). The criteria comprise 18 standards, along with reference programme outcomes for bachelor's and master's degree programmes.

The FINEEC EUR-ACE accreditation criteria compliance with the ESGs is presented in the table below.

1.1 Policy for quality assurance	The quality management procedures of the programme are consistent with the quality policy of the higher education institution. (Standard 15) • The HEI has a public quality policy. • The HEI and the degree programme have a functioning quality system along with the programme-level documentation and procedures. • The degree programme applies adequately institutional policies and quality management procedures in its operations.
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	The programme aims, which describe the educational task and purpose of the programme, are consistent with the strategy and mission of the higher education institution and reflect the identified needs of employers and other stakeholders. (Standard 1) • The degree programme has defined the set of programme aims. • The programme aims describe the educational task and purpose of the programme. • The programme aims are consistent with the strategy and mission of the higher education institution. • The degree programme has a functioning procedure for identifying employer and stakeholder (students, wider public, society) needs concerning the programme aims. • The degree programme has a functioning procedure for integrating the employer and stakeholder needs to the programme aims. • The degree programme aims are updated regularly. The programme learning outcomes, which describe the knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities that the programme enables graduates to demonstrate, are consistent with the programme aims, with relevant national qualifications framework and with the FINEEC reference programme learning outcomes. (Standard 2) • The degree programme has defined the set of programme outcomes. • In case there are tracks, specializations or options included in the degree programme, it is clear, which of the programme outcomes are same for all the graduates and which possibly differentiated. • The programme learning outcomes have been established in terms of what students are expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of the learning process. • The programme outcomes are consistent with the programme aims. • The HEI and the degree programme have a procedure for using the national qualification framework in its curriculum design and for ensuring the consistency between the programme and the framework. In case of Finnish institutions, FinQF is applied (VN 93/2017 and VN 120/2017). • The degree programme's mapping shows evidently that the programme outcomes adequately align with the FINEEC reference programme outcomes. • The programme outcomes are updated regularly. The course level learning outcomes, including thesis work and possible practical training, aggregate to the programme's learning outcomes. (Standard 3) • The degree programme has defined a set of learning outcomes for all the courses, including thesis work and practical training. • Course learning outcomes have been established in terms of what students are expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of an individual course. • The degree programme's curriculum analyses show evidently that the course level learning outcomes adequately aggregate to the programme outcomes. • The course learning outcomes are updated regularly.

	The curriculum gives comprehensive information on all the individual courses of the programme, including thesis work and possible practical training, and is accessible to students. (Standard 4) • The curriculum includes information on the learning outcomes, syllabus, course schedule, prerequisites, didactic materials, assessment methods and grading criteria. • The degree programme curriculum is publicly available for students, applicants and a wider public.
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	The curriculum and the course timetable enable students to graduate in the expected time. (Standard 5) • The degree programme has a procedure for designing and developing the course timetable. • The course timetable is publicly available for students, applicants and a wider public. • The course timetable supports the achievement of the programme and course level learning outcomes. • The course timetable allows students to graduate in the expected time. The teaching and learning process, including the assessment of students, enables students to demonstrate that they have achieved the intended course and programme level learning outcomes. Students have an active role in co-creating the learning process and the assessment of students reflects this approach. (Standard 8) • The learning process is effective and enables students to demonstrate that they have achieved the intended programme and course learning outcomes. • The degree programme embeds a student-centred teaching and learning approach. • The programme provides flexible study paths for the students. • In case there is a possibility for the cross study at the other institutions, the HEI has procedures to ensure the quality of these courses. • The degree programme has procedures in place to encourage students to take an active role co-creating the teaching and learning process. • The degree programme has a fit-for purpose variety of teaching and learning methods, and it applies new pedagogical approaches and methods. This includes an active use of the digital tools in teaching and learning. • The chosen teaching and learning methods are consistent with the learning outcomes of the individual courses, and with the programme learning outcomes. • Practical trainings contribute to the achievement of the programme learning outcomes. • The degree programme has a fit-for purpose variety of student assessment methods, and it applies actively new ones, including digital solutions. • Student assessment methods and criteria are designed to check the achievement of the intended course learning outcomes in a credible way. • The implementation of the degree programme curriculum enables the achievement of the intended programme and course level learning outcomes. Compliance with all five (5) areas of FINEEC reference programme outcomes are to be assessed separately.
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	The criteria and process for student admission and transfer are clearly specified and published. Students should be informed of the qualifications necessary to enter the programme. (Standard 6) • The HEI and the degree programme have a process and criteria for student admission. In case of national joint application, the HEI and the degree programme have a process and guidelines for its implementation. • In case there are bridging studies requirements, information on them is openly available for the applicants.

	• The HEI and the degree programme have a process and criteria for student transfer. • The HEI and the degree programme provide public information on admission criteria, entry level qualifications and admission process for students, applicants and a wider public. Entry level qualifications follow primarily FiNQF stages. • The degree programme has a procedure for monitoring and assessing the adequacy of entry level requirements and admission procedure. Students are informed of regulations and guidelines that concern recognition of prior learning, progress of studies and graduation. (Standard 7) • The HEI and the degree programme have a process for recognition of prior learning. • The degree programme has procedures and information channels for informing students on regulations, guidelines, and process of recognition of prior learning. • The information is publicly available for students and applicants. • The HEI and the degree programme have a process for monitoring the study progress. • The degree programme has procedures for informing students of regulations, guidelines, and a process of monitoring the study progress. The information is publicly available for students. • The HEI and the degree programme have a process for graduation and award of the degrees. • The degree programme has procedures for informing students of regulations, guidelines, and process of graduation. The information is publicly available for students. • Students are familiar with the regulation, guidelines, and processes on recognition of prior learning, monitoring the study progress and graduation.
1.5 Teaching staff	The academic staff are sufficient in number and qualification to enable students to achieve the programme learning outcomes. There are arrangements in place to keep the pedagogical and professional competence of the academic staff up to date. (Standard 9) • The HEI and the degree programme have a process and criteria for the academic staff recruitment. • The degree programme has sufficient academic staff in number and qualifications to achieve the programme outcomes. • The HEI and the degree programme have a policy, guidelines, and procedures for the staff development. • Academic staff have access to the training and other services that support in keeping the pedagogical and professional competence up to date. An effective team of technical and administrative staff supports the programme. There are arrangements in place to keep the competence of the support staff up to date. (Standard 10) • The degree programme has sufficient technical and administrative staff in number to achieve the programme outcomes. • Technical and administrative staff have access to the training and other services that support in keeping the professional competence up to date.
1.6 Learning resources and student support	The students are provided adequate and accessible support services to enable the achievement of the programme learning outcomes. (Standard 11) • The HEI and the degree programme have relevant information channels and procedures for informing students on the support services available for them.

	• The HEI and the degree programme provide adequate guidance and counselling services to the students through the study path, including personal study plans, tutoring, support for different learners, advice on practical training as well as career counselling. • Study guidance and counselling services include the support for choosing the possible tracks/specializations/options in a manner which ensures the achievement of the programme outcomes. • Study guidance and counselling services include the support for choosing the possible alternative and/or optional studies in a manner which ensures the achievement of the programme outcomes. • The HEI and the degree programme provide students adequate study administration services, including admission, international exchange, transfer, recognition of prior learning and graduation procedures. • The HEI and the degree programme provide adequate ICT support services for students and there is advice available. The classrooms, computing facilities, software, laboratories, workshops, libraries and associated equipment and services are sufficient and accessible to enable students to achieve the programme learning outcomes. (Standard 12) • The HEI and the degree programme have adequate classrooms, self-study spaces and computing facilities which allow the students to achieve the programme learning outcomes. • The HEI and the degree programme have adequate laboratories along with the competent technical staff and up-to-date equipment that enable achievement of the programme outcomes. • Students have access to software which are required to achieve the programme outcomes. • The HEI and the degree programme have library services that support the achievement of the programme outcomes. There is library staff in place as well as advice and user training available for the students. The HEI and the programme have external partnerships that are adequate to the achievement of the programme learning outcomes. (Standard 13) • The degree programme has identified its key external partners in teaching and learning as well as in RDI/research. • The choice of the employer partners supports the achievement of the programme and course learning outcomes. • The choice of the international partners supports the achievement of the programme and course learning outcomes. • The degree programme maintains and develops actively its external partnerships. The financial resources are sufficient to implement the learning process as planned and to further develop it. (Standard 14) • The HEI and the degree programme have sufficient financial resources available to implement the learning process. • The HEI and the degree programme have sufficient financial resources available to develop the learning process and enable achievement of the intended learning outcomes.
1.7 Information management	The organisation and decision-making processes of the programme are fit for effective management. (Standard 16) • The HEI and the degree programme have an internal organisation that is fit for effective management and supports the quality management of the degree programme. • The HEI and the degree programme have decision-making processes that are fit for effective management and support the quality management of the degree programme.
1.8 Public information	The programme provides public, up to date information about its objectives, teaching and learning process, resources, quality management procedures and results. (Standard 18)

	• The HEI and the degree programme web site provide public information on degree programme's objectives as well as teaching and learning process. • The HEI and the degree programme web site provide public information on the degree programme's resources, quality management and results.
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	The programme reviews and develops the programme aims, curriculum, teaching and learning process, resources and partnerships and quality management in a systematic and regular manner, considering analysis of results of student admissions, students' study progress, achieved learning levels, student, graduate and employer feedback and graduate's employment data. (Standard 17) • The HEI and the degree programme have procedures in place for the periodic review of the degree programmes. • The HEI and the degree programme systematically adjust the degree programme as well as teaching and learning operations based on the reviews. • The HEI and the degree programme gather systematically feedback from students on teaching and learning activities. • The HEI and the degree programme gather systematically feedback from graduates and employers. • The degree programme uses the following data and information in its development: results of student admissions, students' study progress, achieved learning levels, student, graduate and employer feedback and graduate's employment data. • The degree programme applies continuous development of teaching and learning in its operations.
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	• Finnish HEIs are required by legislation (University Act & UAS Act) to regularly participate in external evaluation of their activities and quality systems. HEIs decide how they meet their statutory obligation. EUR-ACE accreditation is valid for maximum six years. As accreditations are carried out on voluntary basis, FINEEC does not require HEIs and the degree programmes to engage with them on cyclical basis.

FINEEC has updated its EUR-ACE accreditation manual in two phases in 2024-2025. The aim was to clarify requirements for each of the standards. Before, they were only available in the accreditation report template to guide the work of the review teams. In the updated version of the manual each of the standard include a set of requirements available for the degree programmes, HEIs and a wider public. Therefore, the current version of the manual strengthens public availability of the information concerning standards in use.

The aim was also to clarify some matters arising from the discussions of the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education. These matters were:

1. Assessment of the university sector bachelor's degree (180 ECTS) as their own entities.
2. Assessment of the design and achievement of the multidisciplinary competences as a part of EUR-ACE accreditations.

FINEEC gathers both written and oral feedback from accredited degree programmes as well as review team members. Based on the feedback, many materials in use in the accreditations have been updated and/or created. This includes self-assessment report template, guidelines for creating an electronic evidence room and guidelines for arranging site visits at the HEIs. Furthermore, FINEEC website includes a checklist for HEIs, and the degree programmes interested in the accreditations. The checklist allows degree programmes and HEIs to check, whether they are eligible for accreditation. Finally, some sample site visit programmes

have been added to the website. All actions have been taken with the aim to enhance the accreditation process.

4.3 ESG Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose - Institutional quality audit

Standard

External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.

ENQA review 2022 – suggestion for further improvement (ESG 3.1.)

FINEEC is encouraged to consider including international stakeholders in their structure to assure some outside ideas feed in the system and enable input from a different perspective.

Institutional quality audit compliance

The planning of the fourth FINEEC audit framework was preceded by systematic feedback collection from audited HEIs and audit teams in the third cycle. FINEEC has an established annual internal process for analysing and discussing feedback from audit teams and audited HEIs and agreeing on follow-up actions. The feedback process ensures that stakeholder feedback is considered in the continuous improvement of the audit process. With the new framework in mind, the reflection in 2023 and 2024 focused on identifying what should be kept or changed in the third-cycle framework and gathering ideas for the next cycle.

In addition, FINEEC carried out an extensive thematic analysis of the third cycle by reviewing all audit reports and evaluation areas to identify common strengths and improvement areas in Finnish HEIs (see Harri & al., 2025). This work deepened FINEEC's understanding of necessary improvements, such as challenges related to the assessment scale as well as the broad scope of the framework and ensured continuity and learning between audit cycles.

The planning process was designed to be open, participatory and broadly informed by consultations with key stakeholder groups. This was considered essential given the maturity level of the Finnish HEIs, their longstanding quality work dating back decades, three completed cycles of audits and various changes in the higher education landscape and the operating environment. In addition to ensuring alignment with the ESGs, the renewed framework was designed to address the needs of the higher education sector.

The planning for the new framework took place during autumn 2024 and spring 2025 (see Figure 2). In August 2024, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee appointed a planning team responsible for developing the new framework. The external planning team had six members representing the universities (2) and universities of applied sciences (1), work life (2), and students (1). The composition of the planning team is available on [FINEEC's website](#). FINEEC's two project managers planned, organised and facilitated the process and contributed to the planning team's work. In addition, FINEEC decided early in the process to involve international experts, in response to suggestion made by the ENQA review panel to involve

international experts more in its activities. The profiles of the international experts consulted is available on [FINEEC's website](#).

The first phase of the work, carried out in autumn 2024, focused on defining the purpose, objectives, structure and scope of the new framework. The process began with a clean slate to avoid being constrained by previous audit cycles, the enhancement-led tradition, the audit method itself, or earlier thematic emphases. FINEEC sought to make the value judgements embedded in the framework explicit and therefore started by gathering views on what kind of HEIs Finland should be striving for and what the framework should promote. This work established the value base underpinning the framework. Another central question concerned the purpose and objectives of the framework, as these then shape the methodological choices. Feedback on the previous cycle was collected to identify elements that should be kept, revised or removed, to define the essential features of the renewed audit framework. During the autumn, several FINEEC staff members were also involved in a benchmarking exercise reviewing other QA agencies' evaluation frameworks to identify good and innovative practices. The FINEEC project managers and the planning team worked in parallel with stakeholder consultations to draft the framework. The initial outline of the framework was presented to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee in December 2024.

In spring 2025, the focus shifted to finalising the criteria, assessment scale and audit manual. The audit manual was primarily drafted by the FINEEC project managers. The draft framework was then discussed during stakeholder consultations, with several key groups engaged twice during the process. FINEEC also organised a large open webinar with more than one hundred participants to gather broad input on the draft. Feedback from the international experts was also sought.

The consulted key stakeholder groups in the planning process included national student organisations (SYL and SAMOK), quality managers and vice-rectors responsible for education in both universities and universities of applied sciences, rectors (UASs), representatives from the Ministry of Education and Culture, and representatives of labour market. A survey was also conducted for quality managers to gather preliminary views ahead of the consultation meetings in the autumn. Three international experts were consulted twice during spring 2025, providing valuable external input to the discussions and ESGs. Throughout the process, FINEEC colleagues were informed of the process and participated in the open webinar. In the final stages, all FINEEC staff, including those working in other units, were given the opportunity to comment on the draft framework.

In retrospect, the process could have been strengthened by involving a wider range of labour market representatives, as the consultations primarily included employer and employee organisations. Collecting systematic feedback from all participants would have also provided better overview of how the process was experienced and how it could be improved in the next revision. Although many participants in the process shared positive informal comments, structured feedback would have given more evidence-based feedback for future processes.

The Higher Education Evaluation Committee formally approved the fourth-cycle audit framework in June 2025 at the first presentation of the finalised framework. Pilot-phase versions of the audit manual were published in Finnish in August 2025 and in Swedish and English in September 2025, marking the start of the pilot phase. Piloting is being carried out in one university and one university of applied sciences, with site visits scheduled for April 2026 and audit decisions expected in August 2026. The audit manual will be revised based on findings from the pilots to ensure clarity, usability and applicability across different types of institutions. The intention is to also incorporate any necessary changes proposed for the ESG 2027. The final versions of the audit manual in all three languages are planned for publication in September 2026. The fourth audit cycle will begin in 2027.

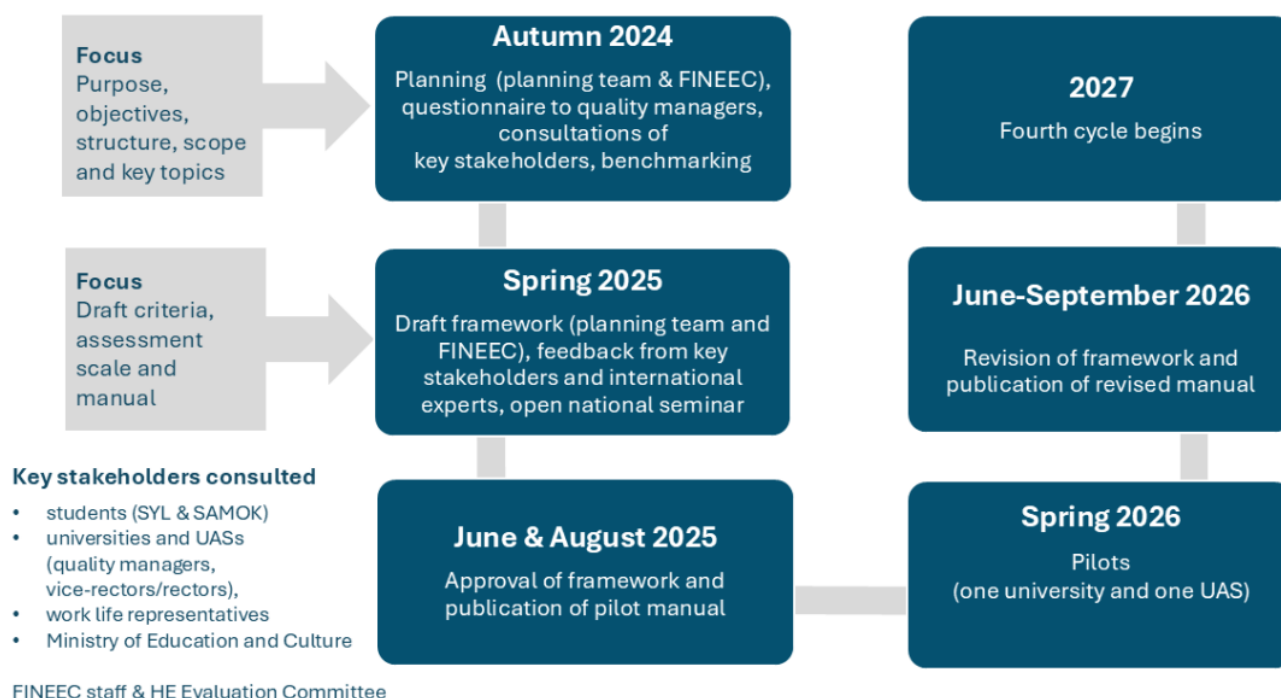


FIGURE 2. Planning process for FINEEC's fourth-cycle audit framework 2025-2030

Areas improved

- The planning began by defining the value base, purpose and objectives of the framework.
- An open mind was kept for alternative approaches, grounding the work firmly in the needs of the higher education sector.
- International experts with extensive expertise in EQA and ESGs were consulted in the process.

Areas to be improved

- More diverse group of labour market representatives could be engaged in the consultations.
- Systematic feedback could be collected from the participants of the planning process to improve similar processes in the future.

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	
Self-assessment	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. 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. 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. 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.
External assessment, including site visit	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. 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. 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. 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

	the audit team members, the FINEEC project manager and backup project manager also participates in the site visit. 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. 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.
Report	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. 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. 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.
Follow-up	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. 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. Follow-up steps two years after the audit in the fourth cycle: • 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. 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. 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.

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.

1. ^

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.

4.5 ESG Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts - Institutional quality audit

Standard

External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

ENQA Review 2022 - Suggestion for further improvement

FINEEC is encouraged to consider advance preparation of student and external stakeholder reviewers by providing e.g. short videos on certain specific aspects (the system, the role etc) before the review case specific training. These could be available for all categories of experts.

Institutional quality audit compliance

TABLE 1. Profile of experts in the third-cycle audits conducted in 2018-2024

Profile of experts	Total number of experts in third cycle audits (N=146)	Total number female experts in third cycle audits (n=74)	Total number male experts in third cycle audits (n=72)
National HE experts	106	48	58
International HE experts	40	26	14
Labour market representatives	36	9	27
National student representatives	27	13	14
International student representatives	10	8	2

Independent and impartial peer reviewers conduct FINEEC's audits. The HEI can choose either a national or an international audit team, and the roles and number of international members are determined on a case-by-case basis. The audit team typically consists of four members: two representatives from the higher education sector, one student representative, and one representative from the labour market outside higher education. For large HEIs (more than 20,000 students), a fifth member is appointed. A FINEEC project manager participates in the process as an audit expert and supports the team's work. The Higher Education Evaluation Committee appoints the audit team and its chair based on a proposal prepared by the project manager. Prior to the appointment, the HEI can comment on the proposed team composition, particularly regarding potential

conflicts of interest. All audit team members must complete FINEEC's training, and disqualification provisions under the Finnish Administrative Procedure Act are applied to ensure impartiality (see below).

The recruitment of experts is a central part of the audit process. FINEEC identifies potential experts through annual internal planning, open calls, and recommendations from HEIs, former auditors, student unions, and European quality assurance agencies. Experts may also be directly contacted, particularly representatives of labour market. FINEEC cooperates closely with national student unions (SYL and SAMOK), the European Students' Union, HEIs, and quality assurance agencies to identify qualified student and international experts. When composing teams, FINEEC considers the audit criteria, principles outlined in the audit manual, and the profile of the HEI. In addition, FINEEC also ensures broad institutional, geographic, and sectoral representation in the audit teams. An important principle is that experts from across the Finnish higher education system are involved. The audit team must collectively have expertise in the following areas:

- the Finnish higher education system
- quality systems
- strategic management
- planning, implementation, evaluation and development of HEIs' core functions
- student and labour market perspectives
- experience in evaluations or audits.

In addition, the chair must have prior experience in evaluating HEIs and possess a broad and in-depth understanding of the higher education system. All audit team members are equal in their role as evaluators. The team selects a vice-chair from among its members. A person is disqualified from serving on the audit team if they are involved in the matter or if their impartiality is otherwise compromised. The provisions on disqualification in the Administrative Procedure Act (434/2003, Chapter 5, Sections 27–29) apply. Good administrative practice requires that disqualified individuals do not participate in any way in the processing or evaluation of the matter. Disqualification may arise, for instance, if a person is employed by the HEI under audit or has previously served in one of its decision-making bodies. Auditors must inform FINEEC of any factors that may affect their eligibility.

The audit team must comply with the following operating principles and ethical guidelines in its work:

Fairness and impartiality:

- Auditors must act fairly and impartially.
- Auditors must be aware of their position of authority and the responsibility that comes with it.

Reliability and transparency

- The evaluation must be based on FINEEC's published criteria and the information collected during the audit.

Confidentiality and data protection

- All information obtained during the process, apart from what is published in the final report, is confidential.

- Materials containing personal data are treated as confidential.

Professionalism

- Auditors and FINEEC must act professionally and responsibly.

Respect and interactivity

- The audit is conducted in good cooperation and interaction with the HEI.
- All persons involved in the audit are treated respectfully.

In addition, FINEEC has recently introduced principles for the responsible use of AI in audits that apply also to peer experts. The principles are available on FINEEC's website.

During the third audit cycle (2018–2024), a total of 36 audits of Finnish HEIs and two cross-border audits of non-Finnish universities (the University of Graz, Austria, and the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) were conducted. Of the Finnish institutions, 22 were universities of applied sciences and 14 were universities. Seventeen audits were carried out by international audit teams. Most teams consisted of four members, while two teams had five members. Each team included representatives from the higher education sector, students, and the labour market. The Finnish experts represented various Finnish HEIs and regions. As a rule, representatives from the higher education sector came from the same sector as the HEI being audited.

In total, 146 experts (74 women and 72 men) participated in the third audit cycle. These included 106 national higher education experts (48 women and 58 men) and 40 international higher education experts (26 women and 14 men), as well as 36 labour market representatives (9 women and 27 men). Student perspectives were ensured through the participation of 27 national student representatives (13 women and 14 men) and 10 international student representatives (8 women and 2 men). International experts came from 16 countries, most commonly Sweden (9), Germany (8), Norway (4), Austria (2), and the Netherlands (2), with additional members recruited from other European countries. The relatively high number from Sweden reflects that FINEEC also conducts audits in Swedish.

FINEEC actively promotes diversity and gender balance in audit teams, although some variation remains across expert categories. Overall, a 50/50 gender balance was achieved in audit teams composed of four peer experts. Beyond gender balance, the composition of audit teams demonstrates diversity in terms of national and international representation, stakeholder background, and experience profiles. The inclusion of experts from 16 countries has strengthened the international perspective of the audits, although the geographical distribution remains somewhat concentrated in Northern and Central Europe. Broadening the geographical scope further could enhance the diversity of perspectives. The uneven gender distribution of the labour market representatives also requires attention. Similarly, ensuring a balanced representation of student experts, both nationally and internationally, remains important for capturing a wide range of learner perspectives. Expanding the international expert pool and further strengthening balance across expert groups have been identified as improvement areas for the fourth audit cycle.

FINEEC has continued the use of open calls for Finnish HEI experts introduced in the third cycle. Most recently, an open call was launched for students from UASSs, with support from SAMOK, to recruit new student experts for upcoming audits. This approach aimed to test a new recruitment method, increase openness, and improve the effectiveness of the recruitment process from the perspectives of both FINEEC and SAMOK. A corresponding call was not issued to university students, as most universities choose

international audits, which are scheduled for later in the cycle. The recruitment of labour market representatives also continues to present challenges, and FINEEC plans to test more systematic approaches to recruitment of labour market experts.

Peer experts are provided training and support by the FINEEC project managers throughout the audit process. This constitutes a key strength of FINEEC's audit process and is also evidenced by the positive feedback provided by peer experts on project managers' work in the third audit cycle (see Annex 1). Shared audit training materials, a systematic audit process, and the practice of experienced project managers working alongside new project managers ensure that the training of peer experts is carried out consistently across audit projects. As a follow-up action to audit feedback from some student experts, FINEEC produced concrete material *Tips for auditors* addressing the key issues from the auditor's perspective. The set of tips include:

- What do you need to know about audits?
- FINEEC audit framework
- Reading the audit material
- Evidence-based and criteria-based evaluation
- Interviews
- Reporting
- Key concepts for first timers
- Students' tips for preparing for the audit.

FINEEC staff also met with former student members of audit teams to learn from their experiences and to enquire on their views on how students could be better prepared for the audits. The tips for students were put together by the students as part of this process. In addition, FINEEC has explored, together with members of audit teams, possibilities for further strengthening advance preparation, including the potential use of short videos for the fourth audit cycle. These will be considered as part of the continued development of auditor training in the fourth cycle.

Areas improved

- Shared training material for audit project managers.
- Training material *Tips for auditors*.
- Open call for UAS students (mostly national audits in the first couple of years, university audits mainly international).
- Open call for HEIs to nominate experts.

Areas to be improved

- Recruitment of labour market representatives continues to be challenging. FINEEC plans to test more systematic ways, such as open calls, to recruit labour market representatives.
- Expanding the international expert pool and further strengthening the balance across expert groups in the fourth audit cycle. Open call for international experts is planned.

4.6 ESG Standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes - Institutional quality audit

Standard

Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

Institutional quality audit compliance

TABLE 2. Audit decisions 2018-2024 (third audit cycle)

HEIs	Pass	Fail
Finnish universities	14	0
Finnish UASs	22	0
Non-Finnish universities	2	0

The audit process and report are guided by the audit criteria. The assessment and judgments are based on criteria that have been published in the audit manual. Audit teams receive training on the criteria and are supported throughout the audit process by a FINEEC project managers. FINEEC project managers' role is to participate in audit teams' discussions and offer guidance in matters pertaining to the audit criteria. Project managers also have primary responsibility for editing the audit report, including ensuring that all audit criteria are adequately addressed, findings presented in a transparent manner and that judgements are firmly based on the evidence collected during the audit. In addition, the audit process includes an internal peer-reading in which an expert from the unit who has not been involved in the audit project reads and comments on the report. Furthermore, all audit reports are reviewed by FINEEC's Director and Head of Unit, providing an additional level of quality assurance.

Fourth-cycle audits include two evaluation areas that are both assessed on a four-point assessment scale of Excellent, Good, Satisfactory or Insufficient. Passing the audit requires HEIs to attain at least a Satisfactory rating in both evaluation areas.

Based on the unit staff's experience and discussions with stakeholders, the fourth-cycle planning team decided to expand the assessment scale by introducing a new Satisfactory rating. The previously used three-point scale consisted of Excellent, Good, and Insufficient. In practice, the Good rating proved too broad, encompassing HEIs ranging from those approaching Excellent to a few cases bordering on Insufficient. In addition, the gap between the Good and Insufficient levels was deemed too wide, with the description of Insufficient being particularly critical. A four-point assessment scale was also used in the first and second audit cycles.

The introduction of a Satisfactory rating allows for more nuanced differentiation in the assessment of HEI performance and includes also more follow up. Furthermore, the Insufficient rating has been revised to encompass not only the quality system but also the actual quality of activities. This change ensures that HEIs

with serious deficiencies in the quality of their activities can receive an Insufficient rating even if their quality management processes function at a satisfactory level.

Chapter four of the audit manual outlines criteria that must be met for an HEI to receive an assessment Good in either evaluation area.

To achieve a rating of Excellent, the HEI meets all the criteria for the level of Good and, in addition, has carried out strategic, long-term and effective development in the evaluation area. The development of the HEI's operations benefits both the institution itself and its internal and external stakeholders. This is underpinned by an innovative and widely inclusive organisational culture in which diverse forms of information are systematically used in the management and development of operations. The HEI serves as an example to other HEIs at the national or international level.

A Satisfactory rating means the HEI's operations partially meet the criteria for the level of good. However, in some sub-areas there are clear development needs requiring action to reach the level of good. In the case of an Insufficient rating, there are major shortcomings in the quality of the HEI's operations or its practices for ensuring and developing the quality of its operations are inadequate.

HEIs that receive a Satisfactory rating in one or both evaluation areas are required report to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee on development measures undertaken one year after the audit decision. The reporting concerns are specified by the committee in conjunction with the audit decision. If the HEI fails to submit its report, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee has the option to re-examine the outcome of the audit.

The audit decision-making process is structured to ensure consistent and transparent outcomes. First, audit teams evaluate whether HEIs provide sufficient evidence to pass the audit and, after reaching a consensus, present their conclusions in an audit report. The report is edited by FINEEC project manager to confirm that the audit's conclusions have been reached based on the provided evidence. The Head of Unit is the presenting official, who makes a proposal to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee. In making the proposal, the presenting official may differ from the assessment of the audit team. The Higher Education Evaluation Committee is responsible for the final decision on whether HEIs pass or fail. The chair or vice-chair of the audit team is also present at the Evaluation Committee meeting to answer any questions committee members may have. It is the Evaluation Committee's responsibility to ensure the audit has been conducted impartially and that the audit criteria are applied consistently. In making its decision, the Evaluation Committee may decide against the audit team and the presenting official. The Evaluation Committee follows the provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act to ensure that participating members do not have any conflicts of interest.

There are two possible audit decisions: pass (Satisfactory, Good, Excellent) and fail (Insufficient).

- If the HEI passes the audit, it receives a quality label and is included in the register of audited HEIs maintained on FINEEC's website. The quality label is valid for six years from the decision of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee. 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. The Higher Education Evaluation Committee will specify in its decision which areas the reporting concerns. If the HEI fails to submit its report, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee has the option to re-examine the outcome of the audit.
- If the HEI does not pass the audit, a re-audit is required within 2–3 years of the decision. HEIs commit to the re-audit process in the audit agreement with FINEEC. In its decision, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee specifies the sub-areas of the evaluation areas (I–II) to be re-evaluated. If the HEI passes the re-audit, it will receive a FINEEC Quality Label valid for six years from the date of the positive re-audit decision.

HEIs that pass their audits have their results entered into the audit register on FINEEC's website, receive an audit certificate as well as a FINEEC Quality Label, which is valid for six years. In cases where sufficient evidence is not provided and the HEI does not meet the criteria, a re-audit is required.

Since the completion of the third audit cycle, steps have been taken to strengthen the use of audit criteria in identifying excellence in HEIs. During the third cycle, a Quality Label for Excellence was introduced to recognise HEIs that had distinguished themselves through exceptionally high-quality enhancement work. The label was awarded based on a separate set of criteria and an assessment carried out by a four-member excellence panel appointed from the Higher Education Evaluation Committee. In the planning of the fourth audit cycle, a decision was made to integrate the recognition of excellence directly into the audit criteria and process. As a result, the Quality Label for Excellence was replaced by an Excellence Award, which HEIs receive automatically when they achieve an Excellent rating in one or both evaluation areas.

Areas improved

- The assessment scale has been expanded for the fourth-cycle audits. The level Good was overly broad in the third cycle. A new level Satisfactory has been added to the scale. The description for the level Excellent has been expanded. In addition, the level Insufficient now includes both major shortcomings in actual quality and quality management while it previously only included quality management.
- The Quality Label for Excellence has been replaced with the Excellence Award and the process for awarding excellence has been integrated in the audit process.

4.7 ESG Standard 2.6 Reporting - Institutional quality audit

Standard

Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.

Institutional quality audit compliance

FINEEC publishes HEIs' audit reports openly on its website, making them easily accessible to higher education institutions, stakeholders and other interested parties. The decision of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee on whether the institution passes the audit or is required to undergo a re-audit is presented in the summary, which forms part of the published audit report.

The audit team drafts a report based on the data collected during the audit process. In the report, the audit team evaluates the HEI's activities and their development in relation to the audit criteria and the gathered data, highlights strengths, and provides recommendations for improvement. The HEI may comment on any factual errors before the Higher Education Evaluation Committee's decision meeting. In the fourth cycle, FINEEC will provide information to HEIs on any corrections made to the report. The final report is published on FINEEC's website within three working days of the Evaluation Committee's decision.

If a HEI is required to undergo a re-audit, the report identifies the areas with essential development needs that are subject to re-audit. Similarly, 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 taken one year after the audit decision.

The outcome of the audit is communicated to the HEI immediately after the Higher Education Evaluation Committee's decision-making meeting. In addition, FINEEC publishes a press release in three languages on its website, which is distributed to key media and shared on social media. Higher education institutions also often issue their own press releases on the results.

FINEEC has introduced a new reporting tool on its website, which will be used for all FINEEC reports including the fourth cycle audit reports. The audit platform designed for the third cycle will be discontinued. The previous platform was separate from the main FINEEC website and had some technical maintenance challenges. Another change is that the HEI self-assessment will no longer be included in the final audit report. This is partly due to the transition to the new reporting tool, but also due to experiences in the third cycle. While integrating the institution's self-assessment with the audit team's assessment worked well for the final report's purpose, the online report's length restrictions led to rather generic self-assessments which did not always serve the needs of the audit teams. HEIs are encouraged to publish their own self-assessments.

Reporting will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

Areas improved

Increased transparency and accessibility of audit reports through online reporting.

Areas to be improved

See Chapter 5.

4.8 ESG Standard 2.7 Complaints and appeals - Institutional quality audit and EUR-ACE accreditation

Standard

Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.

ENQA 2022 review – substantially compliant

The agency is recommended to establish a formal complaints procedure. The procedure should be made known to all concerned parties.

Suggestions for further development

FINEEC is encouraged to open its appeal process in a way that all decisions can be appealed.

EQAR decision – partially compliant

- Since the registration of the agency on EQAR in 2011 the Committee has flagged for attention the lack of formal complaints system in the agency. The Committee has learned from the review report that the remarks on the review process are still given in an informal manner; hence there is no change of the status quo.
- The Committee has learned that no advancements have been made in regard to the appeals procedures, i.e. the institutions undergoing a review by FINEEC are still limited to make an appeal only in a case of a negative outcome.
- Following this, the Committee found that the earlier concerns have not been addressed and that the agency remains only partially compliant with the standard.

Institutional quality audit and EUR-ACE accreditation compliance

TABLE 3. Number of appeals 2020-2026 and complaints 2024-2026

EQA activity	Complaints	Appeals
Audits	0	0
EUR-ACE accreditations	0	0

FINEEC offers several channels through which HEIs may submit complaints or appeals. Following the recommendation from the ENQA external review, an appeal procedure was introduced in the second audit cycle. A complaints procedure was later introduced as a follow-up action to the ENQA external review 2021-22. Both procedures have been communicated to key stakeholders through email, newsletters, press releases and FINEEC's website. To strengthen communication about the procedures, HEIs will be informed about the complaint and appeal procedure during the audit's start up meeting, also referred to as the agreement negotiation, between FINEEC and the institution.

Complaint procedure for higher education evaluations

HEIs may submit a complaint concerning FINEEC's higher education evaluation activities, including audits and EUR-ACE accreditations. Complaints may address dissatisfaction with the conduct of the evaluation process or with the actions of the evaluators.

Principles for complaint procedure

- The complaint must concern either the evaluation process or the conduct of experts.
- Only HEIs may submit complaints. Anonymous submissions are not processed.
- Complaints must be submitted within six months of the publication of the evaluation, audit or accreditation.
- Only complaints that fall within FINEEC's statutory remit are processed.
- Complaints are processed within one month of receipt. A written response is provided, and the scope of the response is proportionate to the issue raised.

Complaints are initially handled by FINEEC's Director or the Head of the Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education Unit, who decides whether the response should be prepared by FINEEC staff or submitted to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee or the Committee for Engineering Education. FINEEC aims to address complaints in a constructive manner focused on improvement. HEIs may submit complaints through an online form available on FINEEC's website.

Audit appeal procedure

A HEI that has undergone an audit or re-audit may request a re-assessment of the audit result. The purpose of the appeal procedure is to ensure equal treatment of HEIs and fairness in the decision-making of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee.

Appeals may be submitted in cases where:

- the HEI does not pass the audit and a re-audit is required, or
- the HEI does not pass the re-audit.

The appeal must demonstrate that the audit was not conducted in accordance with the audit manual and that this may have compromised equal treatment. Appeals may only be submitted by the HEI concerned.

Decisions of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee are expert opinions rather than administrative decisions. They cannot be appealed under the Administrative Judicial Procedure Act. Instead, appeals are reviewed by an expert panel appointed by the Evaluation Council. The composition of the expert panel and a

description of the procedure are available on FINEEC's website. To date, one request for a review of an audit result has been submitted, relating to an audit carried out in September 2016 during the second audit cycle. In the fourth cycle, the audit appeals process has kept its focus on the audit outcome. FINEEC has not considered it necessary to extend the appeals process to other decisions of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee. The Evaluation Committee's only other decision in the audit process concerns the appointment of the audit team, whose composition the HEI can comment on prior to appointment. In addition, the complaints procedure provides HEIs with the opportunity to file complaints regarding all aspects of the audit process.

In addition to the formal complaint procedure, FINEEC systematically collects feedback from evaluation objects and evaluation teams after every evaluation, including audits. A broad stakeholder survey, which includes higher education stakeholders, is conducted biannually, and a general feedback channel is available on FINEEC's website. The FINEEC website also includes information on the external reporting channel maintained by the Office of the Chancellor of Justice for reporting suspected misconduct by authorities.

EUR-ACE engineering programme accreditation appeal procedure

A HEI that is not satisfied with the conduct of the accreditation process by FINEEC or with the accreditation result may use FINEEC's appeals procedure for Engineering Programme Accreditations, which is available on FINEEC's website. The same procedure applies to audits.

The procedure will be applied to accreditations performed in accordance with the Standards and Procedures for Engineering Programme Accreditation - the Updated Version 2025 (FINEEC, 2025b).

The request may be targeted at the following accreditation results decided on by the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education:

- The degree programme is conditionally accredited or
- The degree programme is not accredited.

The request may be based on the grounds that the accreditation has not been performed in compliance with the accreditation manual, and that the accreditation, as performed, brings into question the fair and equal treatment of HEIs and the degree programmes. The request is filed in accordance with the procedure described in a document on the FINEEC's website. The request can only be filed by the HEI and the degree programme whose accreditation result the request concerns.

FINEEC has an expert panel, whose task is to handle the appeals. The panel consists of three members, who represent both universities and universities of applied sciences. Composition of the expert panel is available on the FINEEC website.

Areas improved

A complaints procedure was developed for FINEEC's higher education evaluations after the last ENQA external review.

Areas to be improved

In future, the appeal and complaint procedure for audits should be mentioned in the agreement negotiations with HEIs.

1. [^]

The new expert panel for audit appeals for the fourth-cycle audits will be appointed by the FINEEC Evaluation Council at the beginning of its mandate period. The new Evaluation Council was appointed by the Government in June 2026.

5 Enhancement area – Reporting in quality audits

Reporting in quality audits was selected as an enhancement theme in the ENQA Targeted Review due to its central importance to the transparency, usability and overall impact of FINEEC's work. Audit reports are the primary means through which findings, conclusions, and recommendations are communicated and thus directly shape how effectively audits support higher education institutions in their development efforts. The theme is closely linked to FINEEC's core audit practices and its mission to advance enhancement-led quality assurance in Finnish higher education.

FINEEC's reporting practices are strongly aligned with ESG Standard 2.6 (Reporting), which emphasises clarity, accessibility and completeness. Audit reports are published in full on FINEEC's common publication platform, ensuring open and equal access for all stakeholders. The audit team produces the report based on the collected evidence, evaluating the HEI's activities against the audit criteria, identifying strengths and providing recommendations for improvement. HEIs are given the opportunity to verify the factual accuracy of the report prior to decision-making. The report integrates audit outcomes, as decisions on whether the institution passes the audit or is required to undergo a re-audit are systematically presented in the report summaries.

The main strengths of the current reporting system include its strong transparency and the systematic integration of decisions with the underlying evaluation findings. All audit reports feature abstracts in Finnish, Swedish and English. Trilingual press releases and social media communications further enhance the visibility and societal impact of the results. In addition, FINEEC's publication platform strengthens both the accessibility and comparability of reports.

The online format presents challenges in conveying complex evidence in a structured and accessible manner. Reports must remain clear and concise yet still provide sufficient analytical depth and evidence-based justification for evaluative judgments. Published reports have sometimes been a bit general in style, which can limit their usefulness for decision-making. Ensuring that key issues and problems are presented more clearly and prominently is an improvement area.

FINEEC has also observed that the enhancement-led approach may result in lengthy lists of improvement areas within audit reports spanning a wide range of issues. Such lengthy lists can dilute the focus and reduce the practical value of the recommendations. Some of the minor improvement areas identified in the reports reflect opportunities for further improvement rather than issues requiring corrective action. In the fourth cycle, greater emphasis will be placed on highlighting the most important recommendations, ensuring that the reports better support institutional development and decision-making.

The main target group for the audit reports is the HEIs. This reflects the objectives of enhancement-led evaluation, supporting the institution's continuous improvement, as well as the fact that the HEI commissions the audit from FINEEC. At the same time, there are opportunities to improve how the reports serve other important target groups, such as policymakers and other stakeholders. Tailoring summaries and key messages more explicitly to their information needs could strengthen the usability and impact of the reports.

Some members of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee have also suggested more structured ways of presenting findings. Strengthening the analytical depth and evidence base of the reports, such as by increasing the use of figures, tables, and other visual elements, could further enhance both clarity and usability for different audiences.

At the same time, meeting the needs of different target groups should not introduce unnecessary complexity or workload of the FINEEC staff or the external experts. Each audit report is produced by an independent audit team, which naturally results in some variation in language, style and emphasis. FINEEC staff will

continue to harmonise and standardise reporting practices while respecting the autonomy of audit teams, ensuring that reports remain both coherent and independent.

The continuous improvement of reporting practices is expected to further strengthen FINEEC's alignment with ESG 2.6 by enhancing the clarity, accessibility and usability of audit reports. Planned measures include refining report structures, improving language and readability, introducing more targeted summaries, and exploring possibilities for the use of visual elements. Together, these developments aim to ensure that audit reports more effectively support evidence-informed decision-making, institutional development, and the overall impact of external quality assurance.

Strengths	Opportunities	Areas to be improved
- Reporting is closely aligned with ESG Standard 2.6 (Reporting), which emphasises clarity, accessibility, and completeness. - Audit reports are published in full on FINEEC's shared publication platform, ensuring open and equal access for all stakeholders. - The reports demonstrate strong transparency, with a systematic integration of audit decisions and the underlying evaluation findings. - All reports are grounded in the audit criteria and based on evidence collected during the audit process, presenting the perspectives of different groups within HEIs and their stakeholders in a transparent manner. - Each report includes abstracts in Finnish, Swedish, and English, supporting accessibility for national and international audiences.	- Reports or summaries could be better addressed to different target groups in mind (e.g., the ministry, decision-makers/ Higher Education Evaluation Committee). - Figures and tables could be added to reports to highlight key issues and facilitate decision-making.	- Reporting can sometimes be quite general. Clarity could be improved by presenting key issues more clearly and ensuring recommendations are practical and actionable. - Enhancement-led evaluation can lead to long lists of improvement areas. In the fourth cycle, the focus will be on prioritising the most important recommendations - The online reporting format poses some challenges for evidence-based evaluations. Reports must remain concise and easy to read while still providing sufficient argumentation and evidence to substantiate evaluative judgments.

6 SWOT analysis of FINEEC

Self-assessment of FINEEC by the Management Team

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Basic funding is included in the state budget, and FINEEC has its own budget line. • FINEEC's duties and decision-making processes are defined in law. The Higher Education Evaluation Committee has an independent role that ensures the voice of the field is heard. • The organisation makes use of a wide expert network, which enhances the diversity of perspectives and the quality of evaluations. • FINEEC carries out evaluation activities that cover the entire education system, which enables a systemic perspective and allows HEIs to be assessed within the broader context of the education system. • Competent staff, a strong quality culture, and an enhancement-oriented orientation. • FINEEC has an independent status, and HEIs have shown continuous trust in its work, for example through repeated commissions of evaluations.	• The ageing population and the shrinking working-age population are forcing cost-saving reforms in education policy, which affects Finnish education system and FINEEC's operations. • Because FINEEC operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), the structural costs arising from administrative and support services are high, which affects the overall cost of cooperation. • FINEEC and EDUFI use many different digital systems and sets of guidelines, and staff may not always fully internalise how these should be applied or what their significance is. • FINEEC's various feedback systems and self-evaluations produce a large amount of information, but this information does not always lead to development actions or systematic follow-up in the best possible way.
Opportunities	Threats
• There is a strong need for research and evaluation information. All sectors of society aim for knowledge-based management and decision-making. • There is demand for FINEEC's services among its clients, which means that fee-based services have the potential to expand. • EU project funding offers opportunities to strengthen FINEEC's resources. • Finland and FINEEC have a strong country brand, which enables international activities. • As competition intensifies, FINEEC has an opportunity to develop its operations and processes. FINEEC has an agile operating model. • FINEEC has already digitalised parts of its operations, and the use of artificial intelligence offers opportunities for further efficiency gains.	• FINEEC is under-resourced in relation to its extensive statutory mandate. • The general political climate has tightened, and political steering in the field of education may increase. • The enhancement-led evaluation approach is being questioned in some education policy discussions. • As a separate unit within EDUFI, FINEEC is not always heard. • There is uncertainty in the national division of responsibilities: EDUFI also states that it conducts evaluations (not higher education), which may blur FINEEC's role. The Ministry of Education and Culture commissions a substantial number of evaluations from other actors. • The continued weakening of central government finances poses a threat to society.

Self-assessment of the institutional quality audits by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee

Standards	Self-assessment (summary)	Enhancement ideas (summary)
ESG 2.2. Designing methodologies fit for purpose	• The standard was implemented very well through a clear, fitness-for-purpose design of the fourth audit cycle. • The planning process was systematic, iterative, and transparent, with objectives and aims thoroughly examined. • HEIs were placed at the centre of the model, ensuring relevance and practical applicability. • Stakeholder involvement was extensive and multi-phased, and feedback had a genuine influence on the final design. • The framework was developed through concrete improvements, including better use of existing data, a refined evaluation scale, and strengthened impact mechanisms. • These developments enhance both the reliability and the developmental impact of the audit framework. • Relevant regulations and principles of good governance were duly considered.	• HEIs report to multiple contexts, which makes the effective use of information a key challenge in audits and requires systematic use of existing data as well as the integration of audit-specific and new information. • The fourth audit cycle builds effectively on experience from previous cycles, particularly addressing shortcomings identified in the third cycle. • Key development needs relate to the implementation of recent reforms, especially the consistent, comparable, and analytical use of data to support evaluation and longitudinal analysis. • The four-point assessment scale enhances differentiation, but its effective use requires shared interpretation of criteria and a strong, high-quality evidence base. • Strengthening the visibility of long-term audit impact requires more systematic follow-up of developmental effects, while maintaining a balance between comparability and sensitivity to institutional diversity.
ESG 2.4. Peer review experts	• The standard is very well implemented in audit teams, which consist of suitably qualified experts. • Audit teams ensure broad and balanced expertise from both higher education and labour market, supporting a well-rounded evaluation perspective. • Student members are systematically included in audit teams, promoting ESG-aligned inclusiveness and multi-voiced evaluation. • Peer review strengthens the developmental character of audits by bringing comparative perspective, practical experience, and constructive challenge. • The composition of audit teams is carefully prepared, justified, and reviewed by the Evaluation Committee, enhancing transparency and fitness for purpose.	• The quality of peer review should be safeguarded by ensuring sufficiently broad and well-balanced audit team compositions, with attention to the overall team profile rather than individual members alone. • A cautious expansion of the expert pool should be considered to ensure greater diversity of expertise and to address potential capacity and risk-related challenges, while maintaining high selection standards. • Consistency and comparability across audits should be further strengthened by maintaining and reinforcing the guiding role of experienced FINEEC staff in supporting audit teams and aligning interpretations of criteria. • The developmental character of peer review should be preserved by keeping dialogue, reflective discussion, and enhancement-oriented questioning at the core of the evaluation process.
ESG 2.5. Criteria for outcomes	• The outcomes and judgements of audits are based on clearly defined, explicit, and publicly available criteria, which enhances the transparency, predictability, and credibility of the audit process. • The criteria are generally clear and easily accessible to HEIs, while providing sufficient flexibility to take institutional diversity into account. • The assessment scale, including the clarified Excellent category, supports differentiation, although it has in some cases been perceived as relatively broad.	

	• Consistent application of criteria is ensured through a multi-level quality system, including audit teams, guidance by experienced staff, and committee-level review of results and justifications. • Audits are based on diverse and robust evidence, such as self-assessments, documentation, site visit observations, and increasingly also feedback and follow-up data.	• Audit reports could be streamlined by reducing unnecessary descriptive detail and presenting procedural information in structured formats (e.g. tables), thereby strengthening the analytical focus. • Consistent application of criteria could be further deepened by strengthening shared interpretations, using comparative examples, and making interpretation principles more explicit across the audit system. • Systematic use of data could be enhanced by better integrating multiple data sources, improving comparability, and supporting the identification of development trends. • The balance between comparability and contextual sensitivity could be clarified by more clearly distinguishing between common core evaluative elements and context-specific interpretations. • Transparency of judgements could be improved by making more explicit how different types of evidence are weighted and how conclusions are derived from the available evidence.
ESG 2.6. Reporting	• Audit reports are published in full and are openly accessible online, ensuring strong transparency for the academic community, external stakeholders, and the public. • The reports are well structured, clear, and systematic, covering key evaluation areas, analysis, conclusions, and recommendations, and they are well suited to support decision-making. • Despite being produced by audit teams representing diverse stakeholder backgrounds, the reports are of high quality and largely consistent in style and content. • Audit decisions are published alongside the reports in accordance with ESG requirements, supporting transparency and accountability. • The audit panel chair's summary of audit report's key findings presented to the committee further enhances the clarity, interpretability, and usability of the reports in decision-making.	• The accessibility and clarity of audit reports could be improved by complementing them with concise summaries, visual elements, and one-page briefs tailored to different stakeholder groups (e.g. higher education leadership, students, external partners). • The usability of audit reports could be enhanced by structuring key findings and conclusions more clearly and reducing non-essential descriptive detail that may obscure the main messages. • The analytical presentation of findings could be strengthened by improving the structuring of qualitative evidence and, where appropriate, developing more structured or comparative formats to support understanding and cross-institutional learning. • The impact of audit reports and decisions could be increased by supporting their active dissemination and use in institutional development and stakeholder dialogue, beyond mere publication.

7 Conclusions

FINEEC operates in a rapidly evolving European and national quality assurance landscape, where expectations for transparency, accountability and impact are continuously increasing. At the same time, the organisation benefits from a strong foundation: a legally established mandate, public funding, independent decision-making structures, evaluation processes free from external influence, a high level of trust among higher education institutions, and a well-established, enhancement-oriented quality culture. These strengths position FINEEC well to respond to both emerging European developments and domestic challenges.

As FINEEC moves into the fourth audit cycle, its overarching goal remains to strengthen the quality of Finnish higher education and to support institutions in anticipating and responding to change. Through its audits, FINEEC promotes continuous improvement and seeks to enhance the impact of higher education institutions' core functions, while also supporting cross-cutting priorities such as well-being, equity, internationalisation, openness and stakeholder engagement. The audits are designed to generate added value for higher education institutions and to serve both national and international quality assurance purposes.

A central strategic question for FINEEC concerns its positioning within the evolving European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Initiatives such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes and the emerging European degree label signal a gradual shift towards more integrated and transnational forms of quality assurance. These developments may also reinforce a broader European trend towards accreditation-type approaches, or at least towards stronger accountability-oriented elements within existing models. Emerging initiatives, such as the development of a European Degree Label, further highlight the need to reflect on and potentially develop new forms of external quality assurance in the future.

FINEEC is currently exploring the possibility of offering evaluations of Joint Programmes based on the European Approach framework. This will be discussed in the Higher Education Evaluation Committee during spring 2026. FINEEC is also closely monitoring developments related to the European Degree Label, which may also lead to the introduction of a new EQA activity.

The SWOT analysis conducted by the management team highlights several things that are particularly relevant for navigating this transition. FINEEC's extensive expert network, systemic perspective across all education sectors, and strong stakeholder trust provide a solid basis for maintaining legitimacy in a changing environment. At the same time, structural challenges, such as limited resources relative to the breadth of its mandate, fragmentation of information systems, and the need to better utilise evaluation data, require continued attention. Notably, the ability to translate rich evaluation evidence into systematic follow-up and demonstrable impact emerges as a key development priority.

The experiences from piloting the fourth audit cycle and the development of the audit manual provide encouraging evidence of FINEEC's capacity for renewal. The design process has been participatory, iterative, and clearly aligned with ESG principles, with higher education institutions placed at its centre. Improvements such as the refined assessment scale, stronger use of existing data, and enhanced impact mechanisms demonstrate responsiveness to previous feedback and a commitment to continuous improvement. At the same time, pilot experiences underline the importance of ensuring consistent interpretation of criteria, strengthening the analytical use of data, and making long-term impact more visible.

Looking ahead, FINEEC's strategic development can be seen to revolve around a few key directions. First, there is a need to further strengthen the systematic use of data and evidence across the evaluation cycle, including better integration of multiple data sources and more explicit articulation of how conclusions are derived. Second, enhancing the clarity, accessibility and usability of audit reports will be crucial for increasing their impact among different stakeholder groups. Third, maintaining the delicate balance between

comparability and sensitivity to institutional diversity remains essential, particularly if European developments move towards more standardised approaches.

Finally, FINEEC's continued success will depend on its ability to preserve the core strengths of its enhancement-led approach, dialogue, trust and developmental impact, while simultaneously adapting to a more complex and possibly more accountability-driven European quality assurance environment. In this respect, FINEEC is not only responding to change but also has the potential to actively shape emerging practices by demonstrating how enhancement-oriented quality assurance can remain relevant, credible and impactful in the years to come.

Acronymns

ARENE Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences

EDUFI Finnish National Agency for Education

ENQA The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

EQA External quality assurance

ESG Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

EUR-ACE European- Accredited Engineer

FINEEC Finnish Education Evaluation Centre

HEI Higher education institution

SAMOK Universities of Applied Sciences Students in Finland – SAMOK

SAR Self-assessment report

SYL National Union of University Students in Finland

UAS University of applied sciences

UNIFI Universities Finland

QA Quality assurance

Glossary of terms

Accreditation

Accreditation refers to an assessment based on criteria to determine if a higher education institution, a degree programme or some other programme meets the requirements for being granted a certain quality label or operating licence. An accepted accreditation is a public acknowledgement and proof of the higher education institution, degree programme or other programme meeting the criteria specified for the accreditation.

Audit

An audit refers to a process in which the higher education institution's activity and/or quality management is assessed systematically. FINEEC's audits focus on the procedures the HEI uses to ensure and develop its activities and their quality. Pre-determined criteria are applied in audits.

Criterion

A criterion refers to a framework for evaluation. It explains what kind of activity, result or quality level the aim is. A criterion may be quantitative or qualitative, and it is usually defined prior the evaluation. The activity to be evaluated or quality management is assessed against the criteria. Based on this, conclusions can be drawn regarding how well the activities or quality management meet the set criteria. The criteria can be defined as a scale or levels, for example insufficient–good–excellent.

Enhancement-led evaluation

Enhancement-led evaluation emphasises a participatory approach, trust between the implementer and participants of the evaluation, and the HEIs' responsibility for developing its activities. The methods can be tailored to the objectives and themes of the evaluation. Enhancement-led evaluation focuses on the process and outcomes with the purpose of supporting the development of activities. The HEIs receive feedback on areas requiring development and strengths in their activities.

A central aspect of the approach is the participation of different parties, such as HEIs, teaching staff and other personnel, students, labour market and stakeholder representatives, in planning the evaluation, producing evaluation data and interpreting the results.

Evaluation

Evaluation means assigning a value to something. It comprises an interpretative analysis of information about the evaluation object, and a valuation based on it. It includes systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of information on the object and an assessment of how an activity or issue is realised in relation to the set targets, norms, criteria or outcomes.

Peer review

Peer review is based on collegial assessment in which independent external experts provide feedback on the higher education institution's activities. The peer reviewers often represent an organisation or community like the one being evaluated.

Quality culture

Quality culture determines how the quality of activities is defined in the organisation, how quality and its significance are understood, and how the quality of activities is maintained and developed. It describes the

atmosphere and individual's and community's commitment to the quality of activities and their development. Quality culture is created and developed in its context. It is the outcome of an open and participatory process.

Quality label

A quality label indicates that a higher education institution has passed an external evaluation based on specified criteria, for example an audit.

Quality management

Quality management refers to the practices, processes or systems the organisation uses to plan, implement, maintain, evaluate and develop the quality of its activities. Quality management can be understood as a general concept that includes the steering, control, assurance and development of quality.

Quality system

A quality system refers to a system consisting of the quality management organisation, division of responsibilities, procedures and resources. Each organisation decides on the objectives, structure, operating principles, methods used and development of its quality management in its quality system.

Quality work

Quality work refers to the concrete actions an organisation takes to maintain and improve the quality of its activities. Quality work is quality management in practise.

Self-assessment

Self-assessment is the organisation's assessment of its activities and how it improves them. Through this process, the organisation identifies its strengths as well as areas in need of development. The insights gained enable the organisation to set meaningful objectives and to guide the further development of its operations accordingly.

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[FINEEC Strategy 2024-2027](#)

Fourth cycle audits <https://www.karvi.fi/en/evaluations/higher-education/4th-cycle-audits-higher-education-institutions-2025-2030>

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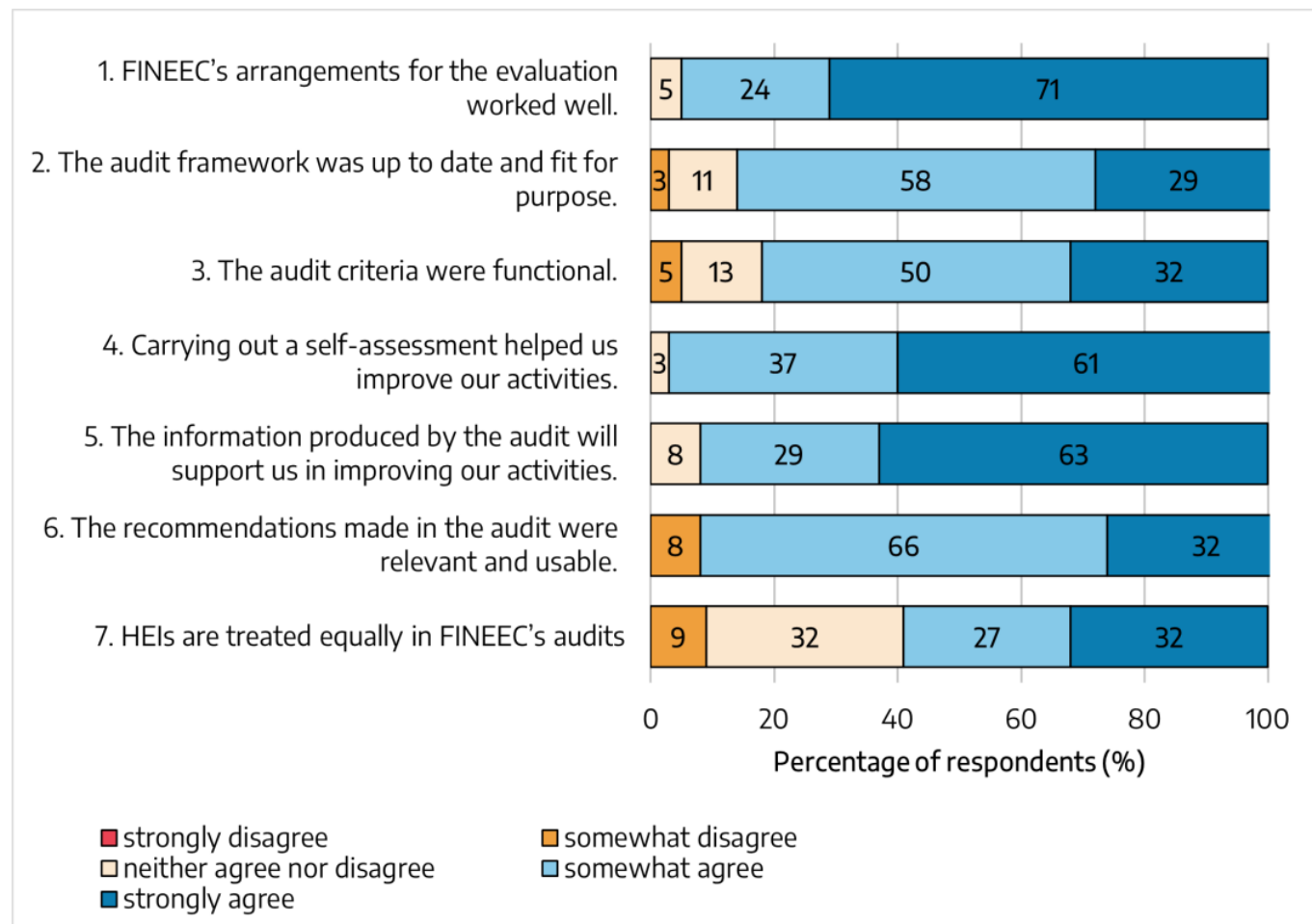
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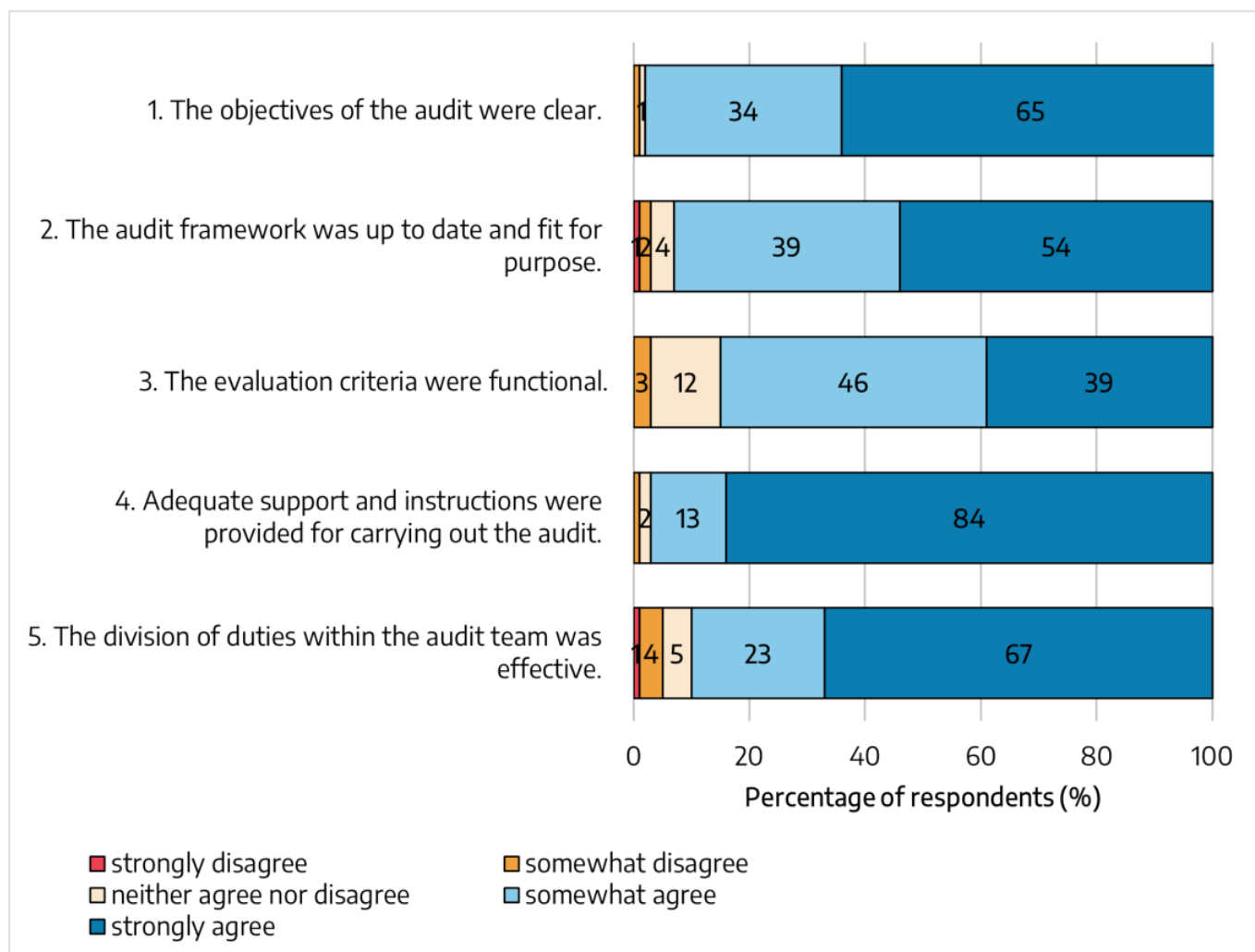
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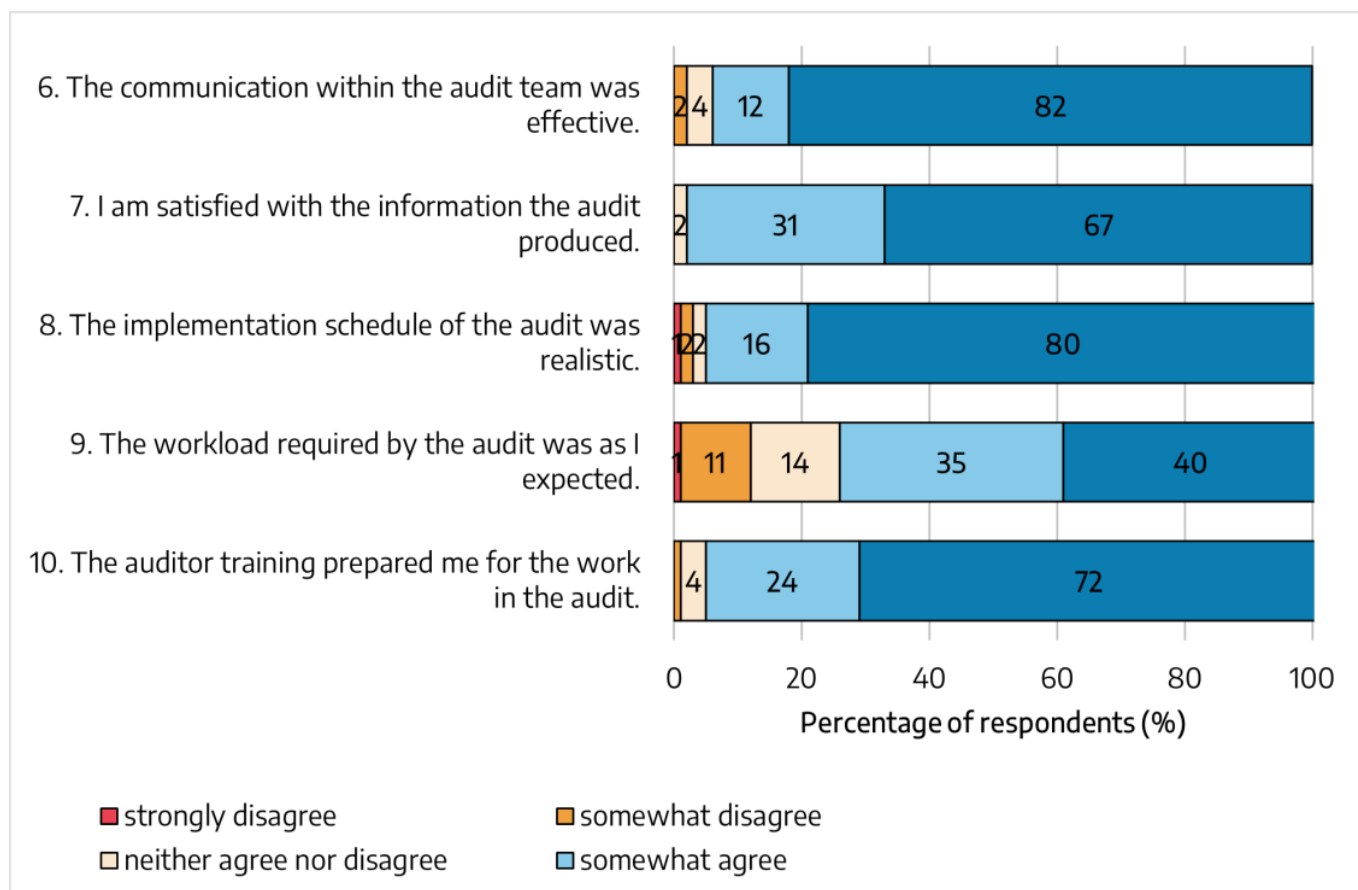
Annex 1 Third cycle audit feedback 2019-2024



Third cycle feedback from audited HEIs (Finnish & cross-border), n=38



Third audit cycle audit team feedback, 38 audit teams, n=113 (statements 1-5)



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