

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

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.