



FINNISH EDUCATION  
EVALUATION CENTRE

# Quality in focus

Quality audits of Finnish  
higher education institutions  
2012–2018

SUMMARIES 9:2020

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# 1 Introduction

The second cycle of Finnish higher education institution quality audits was conducted between 2012 and 2018. In this publication, we present the results of a meta-synthesis of the second cycle quality audits. The objective of the meta-synthesis was to form an overall picture of the strengths and enhancement areas in quality management at Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS).

Quality audits of higher education institutions (HEIs) have been conducted in Finland since 2005 by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) and its predecessor, the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC). Since the first cycle, the Finnish approach to quality audits has been holistic, covering all the activities of the HEIs and focusing on enhancement instead of control or compliance. The principles of enhancement-led evaluation are embedded in the different phases of the audit process. The audits engage HEIs' staff, students and stakeholders in identifying strengths, good practice and enhancement areas in the HEIs' activities.

The Universities Act and Universities of Applied Sciences Act mandate Finnish HEIs to participate in external evaluations of their operations and quality systems. A total of 40 HEIs participated in the second cycle of quality audits in Finland.

The key principle of FINEEC audits is respect for the autonomy of HEIs. The HEIs have developed their quality systems for their own purposes, based on their own goals and needs. The HEIs are also responsible for the quality and enhancement of their activities. The objective of the second audit cycle was to support Finnish HEIs in developing quality systems that correspond with European quality assurance standards and guidelines (ESG), and the continuous improvement of the HEIs' activities. The audits also aimed to support the HEIs in achieving their own goals.

The quality audits in the second cycle produced information about the quality management of the assessed HEIs. The data of the meta-synthesis consisted of the audit reports of the second cycle<sup>1</sup>, excluding the re-audit reports. The reports were analysed by assessment area (audit target), using a qualitative content analysis method. The results presented in this publication are based on the views, arguments and evidence provided by the audit teams in their reports.

## 2 Assessment areas and criteria

The FINEEC second cycle audit model and criteria were drafted in a participatory process with representatives of higher education institutions, students and stakeholders. The audits' main focus was on the procedures used by each HEI to maintain and enhance the quality of their activities. The functionality of the HEI's quality system was assessed in six assessment areas (audit targets). The second cycle audit placed more emphasis on the quality management of educational provision than the first. In the audits, a sample of degree programmes was assessed as examples of how the HEI's quality management of degree education worked at the level of degree programmes. The second cycle audits also emphasised the role strategic management and steering play in the quality system and operational development. The audit was connected to the profile and strategic objectives of each HEI with an assessment area chosen by the institution.

The FINEEC audits are conducted in Finnish, Swedish and English. The HEIs may choose either a Finnish or an international audit team to conduct the audit. Around half the audits in the second cycle were conducted by an international audit team. Every audit team included representatives of universities, universities of applied sciences, students and working life outside the higher education sector. Every audit also had an assigned FINEEC project manager.

Predefined national criteria are used in the audits, and audit teams' assessments are evidence-based. The material used in the audits consists primarily of the HEI's self-assessment report, additional material (including the HEI's intranet), interviews and other data collected during the site visit. The audit process and criteria of the second cycle of audits are described in the Audit manual for the quality systems of higher education institutions<sup>2</sup>.

# Assessment areas

1. Quality policy

2. Quality system's link with strategic management

3. Development of the quality system

4. Quality management of the higher education institution's core duties

- Degree education
- Research, development and innovation activities, as well as artistic activities
- Societal impact and regional development work
- Audit target chosen by the HEI

5. Samples of degree education: degree programmes

6. Quality system as a whole



# 3 Audits in numbers

## FINEEC AUDITS 2012–2018

**40** audits  
26 UASs 14 universities

**4** re-audits  
2 UASs 2 universities

**120** audited  
degree programmes

**797**  
audit interviews

 **214**  
auditors

### Audit visit interviewees:

 **102**  
rectors and vice-rectors

 **2 960**  
staff members

 **1 410**  
students

 **370**  
stakeholder representatives

 **230**  
HEI board members

Table 1 presents the results of the second audit cycle by assessment area (audit target) and the level of quality management for universities of applied sciences (UAS) and universities (UNI) on a scale of absent-emerging-developing-advanced, excluding any re-audits. Most of the audit targets were assessed as developing, indicating a good level of quality management. None of the audit targets was assessed as absent in any of the audited HEIs.

**Table 1.** HEI (n = 40) results by audit target and assessed level of quality management

AUDIT TARGET	EMERGING		DEVELOPING		ADVANCED	
	UAS	UNI	UAS	UNI	UAS	UNI
Quality policy	1	1	22	12	3	1
Quality system's link with strategic management	3	1	17	11	6	2
Development of the quality system	5	2	17	10	4	2
Degree education	3		21	13	2	1
RDI-activities and artistic activities	3		21	13	2	1
Societal impact and regional development work	5	4	19	10	2	
Audit target chosen by the HEI	8	7	17	7	1	
Degree programmes – samples	7	14	48	19	22	10
Quality system as a whole	1	1	24	12	1	1

The audit teams could propose that an audit is a pass if none of the audit targets was assessed as absent, and the audit target Quality system as a whole was assessed at least as developing. Each audit's outcome was decided by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee, members of which are representatives of universities and universities of applied sciences, students and working life. In the second cycle of audits, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee required four HEIs to undergo a re-audit. Three of these HEIs passed the re-audit during the audit cycle. The HEIs that passed the FINEEC audit and received the FINEEC quality label are listed in the audit register on FINEEC's website<sup>3</sup>.



# 4 Quality policy, quality system and strategic management





## **Quality system and operational management forms a functioning whole**

Based on the results of the audits, Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) feature well-functioning quality systems. The assessment areas Quality policy, Quality systems link with strategic management, and the Quality system as a whole were assessed as developing for most of the HEIs, indicating a good and solid level of quality management at Finnish HEIs.

Almost every HEI had integrated its quality and management systems. Quality policies had been clearly linked with each HEI's values, strategy and operational management. The HEIs' quality systems were based primarily on the cycle of continuous improvement (the PDCA cycle) or a modified version, and process descriptions. The HEIs also used various frameworks to guide their quality management, such as the ISO, EFQM, CAF and Balanced Scorecard. International accreditations had a steering effect on quality management, especially in the field of business and economics. Agreements between HEIs and the Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as internal performance agreements, also played a significant role in operational management, monitoring and evaluation.

The quality policy of the HEI, as well as the responsibilities, processes, goals and resources assigned to quality management, were usually well defined as part of the quality system. The president/rector or vice president/rector was responsible for the quality policy and system, and they were supported by a quality manager (or equivalent), as well as one or several quality enhancement committees. The heads of unit within the HEIs also played an important role in quality work. Other parties might also take responsibility for quality management. Each staff member was responsible for the quality of their own work. The audit reports indicated that the management and staff with assigned responsibilities were often very committed to quality work.

Most quality policies had been communicated clearly. At its best, the quality work was well documented, and the related communication activities considered the needs of different internal and external stakeholders. The key communication channel for internal

communication was the institution's intranet. The HEIs used various information and reporting systems to support their operational management and quality work.

The key performance indicators had been defined at the HEIs. Most HEIs had linked their performance indicators to the target and performance negotiations conducted within the institution. The indicator data was used in strategic management and operational development processes. Some HEIs had also linked their indicators to staff performance assessments. Various feedback systems, internal and external evaluations and audits, and reports also produced information for strategic management.

## **Variation in quality management within the HEIs**

Many HEIs featured a strong and open quality culture based on continuous improvement. In most cases, the staff was invested in their institution's strategy and quality work. However, the audit reports indicated that this commitment to quality work and policies might vary between the different parts and units of the institution or staff members.

The language used in quality management might be seen as distant and difficult to comprehend. The concepts related to quality management might sometimes be left undefined within an institution, or they were used imprecisely.

The responsibilities were not always clear at the unit level, even if these seemed to function well at the level of upper management. Dividing responsibilities between too many parties might also cause uncertainty in the implementation of quality management.

There were differences between HEIs, and in some cases within HEIs, in how effectively information produced by the quality system indicators was used in strategic management. In some institutions, the indicator data did not adequately serve the level of the degree programmes. Furthermore, qualitative results produced by the indicators were not processed with the same accuracy as quantitative results. The Ministry of Education and

Culture's funding indicators played a central role in many HEIs, but they did not always serve the implementation of the institution's strategic objectives. Moreover, the institution's strategic objectives were not systematically monitored at every HEI. For example, strategic internationalisation objectives were not always visible in the institution's activities and quality management.

Quality management documentation could sometimes be difficult to find in the HEI's intranet site or other sources. It might be difficult to locate the correct information if large quantities of documents and instructions were available. Quality management documentation was often available only in the national languages, even if it was also intended for international staff and students. In general, better communication with students and external stakeholders on issues related to quality management was required.

The quality system might also be perceived as heavy if it comprised several different feedback and audit processes.

The quality management of societal engagement, artistic activities and the documentation of feedback from working life were commonly identified by the audit teams as quality system enhancement areas. From the perspectives of strategic management and operational development, insufficient information was collected concerning doctoral education and artistic activities. A lack of qualitative indicators was also evident in many HEIs. Moreover, systematic ways of disseminating good practice were yet to be developed at some HEIs.



# 5 Degree education



## **The quality management of degree education is at a good level in the Finnish HEIs**

The quality audits in the second cycle confirmed that the quality management of degree education was good at most Finnish HEIs. Overall, the HEIs showed evidence of systematic and well-functioning quality management which supported the planning, implementation, evaluation and enhancement of their educational provision. In several of the audited HEIs, the staff felt that clear responsibilities as well as common and clearly defined procedures supported the quality work and ensured students were treated equally. Curriculum planning and development and student feedback processes were especially key and established practices of the HEIs.

The audits revealed that the quality culture among teaching staff was strong at several Finnish HEIs, and that quality work was part of the institutions' everyday activities. In general, the staff were committed and engaged in activities to enhance the quality of the educational provision in various committees, working groups, and national and international networks.

In majority of Finnish HEIs, the evidence provided to the audit teams indicated that educational provision was continuously improved based on information collected. This especially applied to changes made based on student feedback. The Ministry of Education and Culture's quantitative funding indicators were monitored systematically at different levels of the HEIs. The indicator data had been used, and it had led to various improvement measures. For example, the information had improved guidance and counselling practices for students.

The students had good opportunities to influence their education and its development. Collaboration between HEIs and student unions usually functioned well. Students were well represented in the HEIs' various organisational bodies, as well as in various working groups.

Students also had good opportunities to provide both anonymous and direct feedback about their studies. A common HEI feedback system was seen as ensuring equal treatment of students in providing feedback on their studies. Some of the audit teams also emphasised the significance of the information produced by the feedback systems for the needs of management. The institution-wide feedback systems were increasingly used to identify quality deviations, and measure the success of educational provision and teaching activities.

## The effectiveness of student feedback systems should be improved

As many as two thirds of the Finnish HEIs were given recommendations by the audit teams concerning their student feedback system. The reasons varied by HEI. The key challenges were the following:

- **Online feedback systems had low response rates.** Due to the low number of responses, the feedback data did not provide an accurate picture of students' experiences. In turn, this made it difficult to interpret the results and use the feedback.
- **Too much student feedback was collected.** Some HEIs collected feedback from their students in multiple ways and on multiple occasions, which affected students' willingness to respond to feedback surveys. Furthermore, if feedback was collected too frequently, and several different feedback instruments were used, using the collected feedback effectively for the development and enhancement of the HEI's activities became a challenge because of the amount of feedback information available.
- **The common student feedback systems did not produce relevant information for the enhancement of teaching and educational provision.** From teachers' perspective, the challenge with common feedback systems was the quality of the questions used. Questions tended to be general and did not produce useful information for the improvement of individual courses or degree programmes.
- **Direct feedback was not appropriately processed and documented.** How direct feedback was processed was rarely transparent. In some cases, direct feedback might not be processed at all. The effects of the feedback could also remain low. In general, the individual methods used by teachers to collect student feedback were not visible in the institution's systematic quality management. These individual methods could also create a heavy workload for the individual teachers who employed them. However, many students valued an open discussion culture in which it was easy to give direct feedback to staff members. The audit teams considered direct feedback as a feedback channel that could be used to supplement the systematic collection of student feedback at the HEI.
- **Feedback-on-feedback (counter feedback) was not systematically given to students.** Ways to provide feedback-on-feedback either varied within the HEIs or were missing entirely. Several audit teams emphasised the significance of feedback-on-feedback – for example, as a tool for motivating students to provide feedback. According to the audit teams' recommendations, improvement measures based on the student feedback must be made visible to the students. Students must feel that their feedback had an effect.
- **The methods used to collect and process feedback might vary** between units, fields of study, degree programmes and teachers. Based on the audit reports, substantial variation in practices did not form a functioning quality system. For example, differences in practices could put students from different fields of study in an unequal position. Yet many audit teams were positive about more tailored feedback collection methods if they were used to complement the HEI's common feedback system.

## Stakeholder collaboration requires a more systematic approach

The audits showed numerous good examples and practices on collaboration with working life and stakeholders. Universities of applied sciences were more active than universities where the engagement of external stakeholders in the planning, evaluation and enhancement of their curricula and other activities were concerned. For example, several universities of applied sciences had good structures or methods to engage stakeholder representatives, especially from working life, in quality work with the aid of advisory boards. A common challenge for both universities and universities of applied sciences was the **systematisation of stakeholder collaboration**.

- **Stakeholder collaboration was often based on personal contacts**, and the collection of feedback depended on the efforts of individuals. While stakeholder collaboration based on personal contacts might be a well-functioning practice, it was vulnerable to staff changes. Some of the contacts and accumulated tacit knowledge related to the collaboration and contacts could disappear once a person left the organisation. From this perspective, it was important for the HEIs to define their most important collaboration partners. In general, collaboration with working life and stakeholder relationships should be developed more systematically.
- **A systematic approach to stakeholder feedback was missing**. Typically, feedback from external stakeholders was received in connection with informal situations, and the feedback was neither documented nor connected to curriculum development, for example. The role of external stakeholders and working life in the HEI's quality management was not always described in sufficient detail. Much like students, stakeholders were also likely to receive too little systematic feedback-on-feedback. That is, the party providing the feedback was not informed of the impact that their feedback had had.
- **The lack of common models, instructions and practices** was often one reason for the differences in the amount and quality of stakeholder collaboration present within HEIs. More attention should be paid to the dissemination and systematisation of good practice between different units, fields of study and degree programmes within the HEIs.
- **The alumni of the HEIs were an underutilised resource**, and alumni collaboration should be developed further. Based on the audit interviews, several stakeholder representatives and alumni were motivated and interested in a more active role in the development and enhancement of the HEIs' activities.



A grayscale background image of a library. In the foreground, there are rows of bookshelves filled with books. On the right side, a person wearing a plaid shirt and a dark bag is partially visible, looking at the books. The overall scene is a well-lit, organized library environment.

## **More unified practices in quality management should be developed**

A challenge for some of the HEIs was to have quality management procedures that worked coherently in different campuses, units and degree programmes. The reasons for the challenges varied between HEIs.

- The educational provision offered at geographically different locations might hinder the development of unified procedures for quality management in education.
- The commitment to quality management could vary by unit and degree programme – for example, due to factors related to different disciplines.
- There might be a lack of institution-wide policies and procedures for quality management, or the policies and procedures were not systematically applied.

In the above cases, the audit teams recommended that common and systematic quality management procedures should be promoted and developed further. Some of the audit teams emphasised that the specific needs of each discipline should also be taken into account. However, any field-specific procedures should complement the HEI's common procedures.

## **New ways to disseminate good practice and to use expertise of the higher education community were needed**

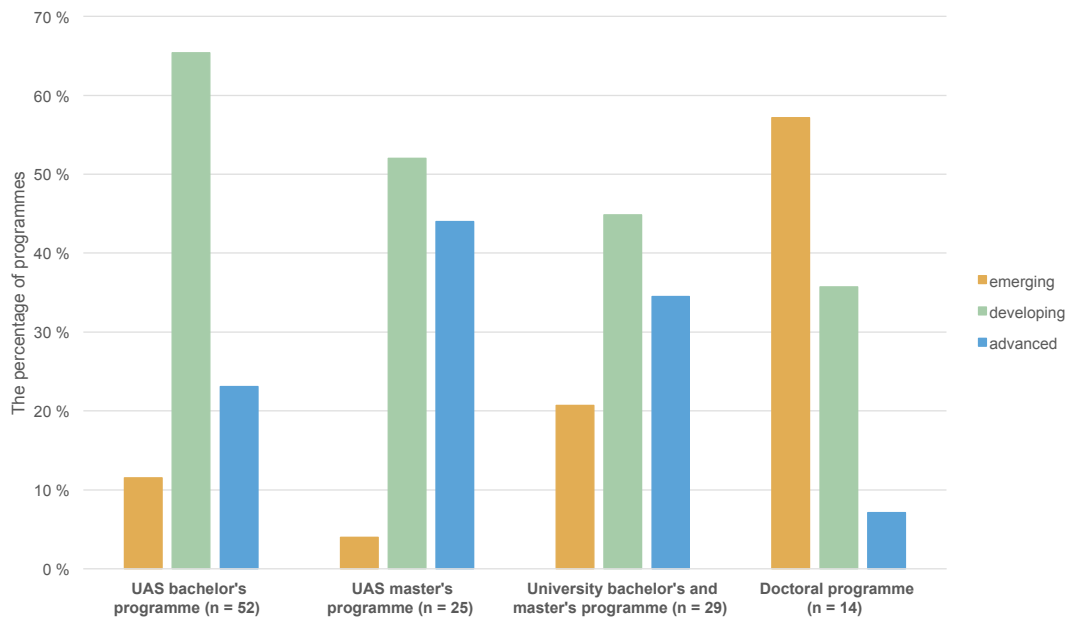
Every Finnish HEI audited showed examples of well-functioning and good practice. The general challenge for HEIs was to find ways to systematically disseminate good practice and use the expertise of its staff in the development of its activities.

- The audit teams recommended that HEIs create structures that help to promote and support learning, interaction within the higher education community, the use of staff expertise, and the dissemination of good practice among different programmes, fields and units.

## Degree programmes

### Variation in quality management between degree programmes

The quality management of 120 degree programmes was assessed in the second cycle of FINEEC audits. Most programmes were assessed as developing, and a notable number were also assessed as advanced. University of applied sciences' master's degree programmes were especially prevalent in the group that was assessed as advanced. The quality management of a notable number of doctoral programmes was assessed as emerging (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The assessed level of quality management by degree type (n = 120)

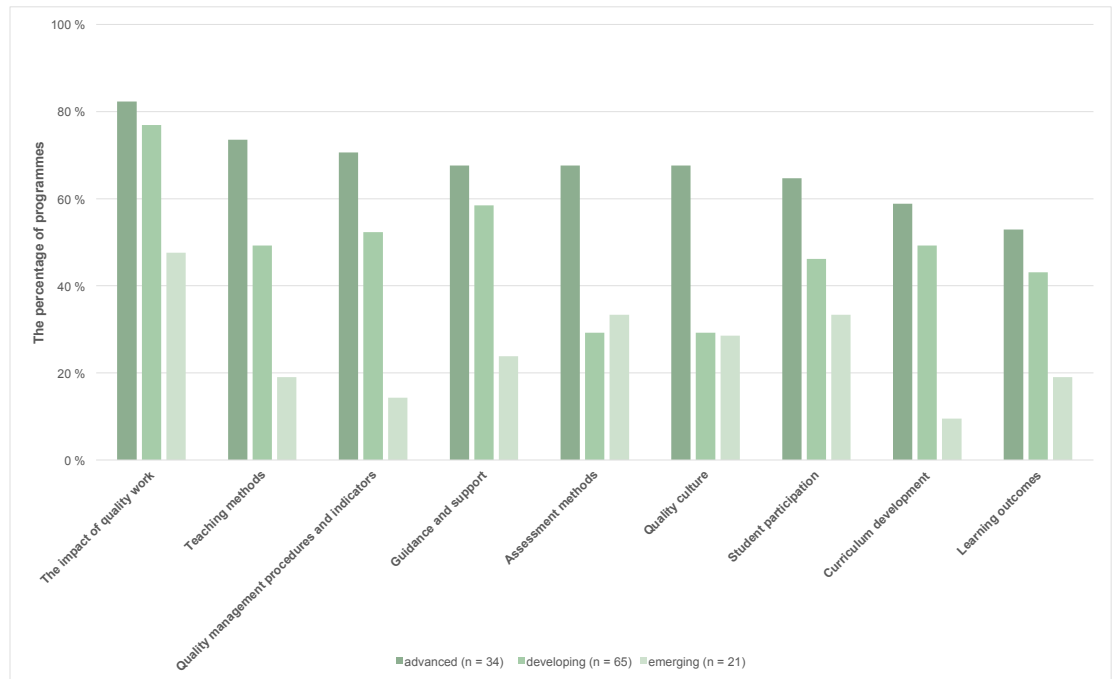




## The quality management of doctoral programmes must be developed further

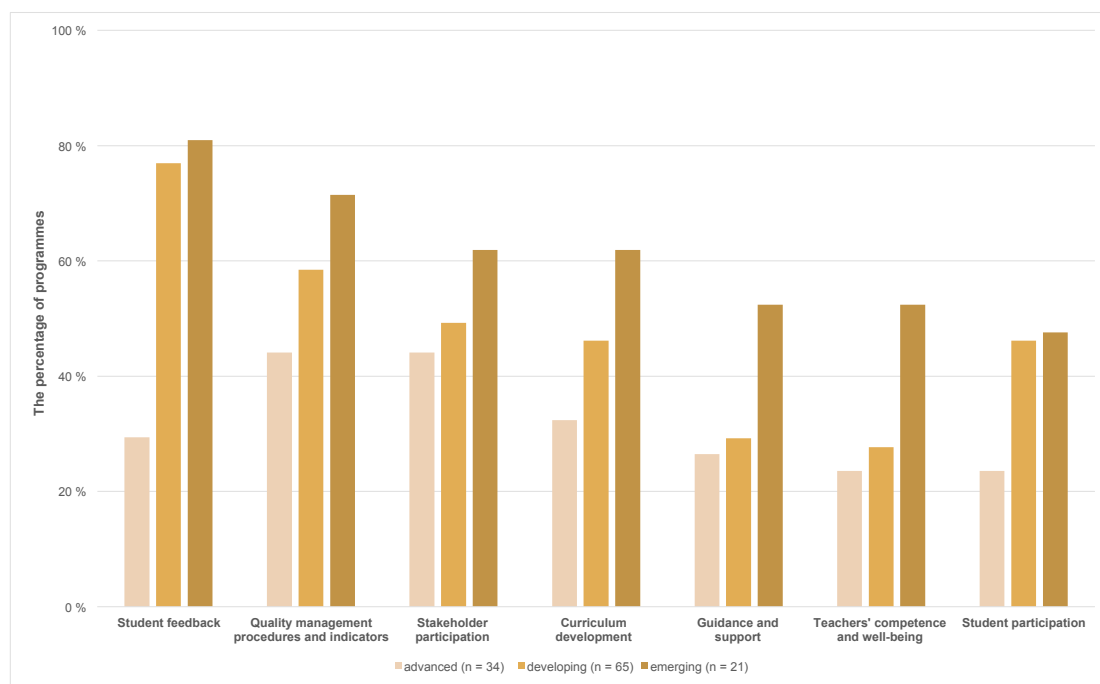
- The quality management of most of the audited doctoral programmes was at emerging level.
- More clearly defined goals, indicators and performance monitoring processes would enable the adoption of the well-functioning quality management models typical of bachelor's and master's programmes in doctoral programmes.
- The division of responsibilities in the planning, implementation, and quality management used in doctoral education should be clarified further.
- The harmonisation of guidance practices in doctoral programmes was vital to guarantee the equal treatment of doctoral students.
- Attention should also be paid to the guidance of doctoral students writing their doctoral dissertations part-time outside any research groups.
- The guidance expertise of staff guiding doctoral students for the first time should be developed more systematically.

Based on the audit reports, the programmes that were assessed as advanced and developing had largely well-functioning practices for the different quality management areas. The audit reports also emphasised each programme's strength areas. The highest number of strengths highlighted by the audit teams concerned the impact of the quality work, as well as the procedures and indicators used in quality management. In addition, teaching and assessment methods, as well as student guidance, were also often mentioned as strengths. Figure 2 presents the most common themes where strengths could be identified by the assessed level of quality management.



**Figure 2.** The most common strength areas by assessed level of quality management (n = 120)

The audit teams identified enhancement areas and gave recommendations for the improvement of quality management in all audited programmes. The recommendations most often concerned student feedback, which required action in programmes assessed with emerging and developing quality management. The recommendations for programmes assessed with advanced quality management mainly concerned the participation of stakeholders in quality work. Figure 3 presents the most common enhancement areas by the assessed level of quality management.



**Figure 3.** The most common enhancement areas by assessed level of quality management (degree programmes n = 120)

## **A student-centred approach was best achieved in programmes with advanced quality management**

- Students were more likely to receive personal guidance in degree programmes with advanced level quality management, and the degree programmes were more likely to emphasise flexibility in their curricula and teaching methods.
- Degree programmes with advanced level quality management were praised for their well-planned assessment criteria, fairly applied assessment and its connection with intended learning outcomes, and the use of more than one assessor.
- The procedures and indicators used in quality management focused more on the degree programme and less on ensuring the quality of individual students' experiences.
- Student feedback played an influential role in quality management, but the feedback systems contained flaws.
- In degree programmes with emerging quality management, the development requirements concerned student guidance and support practices.
- More attention must be paid to the quality management of student assessment, especially in programmes with emerging quality management. The assessment should be more clearly connected to the intended learning outcomes and fairly applied to students. In addition to their grades, students should receive feedback on their learning more frequently.

## 6 Research, development and innovation activities





## **The quality management of research, development and innovation activities has been evaluated systematically since 2005**

The FINEEC audits cover all the core duties of HEIs, and it differs in this respect from many of the external quality assurance approaches in other European countries. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG)<sup>4</sup> has focused on the quality management of educational provision. In Finland, the quality management of research, development and innovation activities (RDI) as well as societal impact have been evaluated as part of the FINEEC quality audits since 2005. The purpose has been to support the systematic quality management and improvement of these areas.

In the second cycle audits, most of the HEIs were assessed as developing in the quality management of their research, development and innovation activities. Based on the results of the audits, the quality management of Finnish HEIs promoted the improvement of research, development and innovation activities, as well as the achievement of the objectives set for the activities.

### **Quality management of research is at a good level at universities**

- The objectives and processes of quality management of research were sound: the strategy, vision, mission, and innovation and quality policies had all been defined.
- The support structures for research work functioned well at most universities: the Scientific Advisory Boards (SAB), research councils, various advisory boards, research ethics committees and other working groups had been appointed and were active.
- Every university utilised a research information system, and they helped monitor e.g. publication data, reference indexes and information related to research funding.
- Many universities conducted their own research assessment projects (RAE), and participated in national and international research assessments and benchmarking projects.
- Some of the universities actively monitored rankings and set objectives for the success of their research activities based on them.
- Universities emphasised the strong connection between teaching and research.
- Research services and other services supporting research – such as project management services, innovation services, IT services and libraries – helped manage practical matters related to research. The audits showed that university representatives were largely satisfied with these services.

## **The quality management of research and artistic activities at universities should be further improved**

- The development of qualitative and multidisciplinary indicators for research activities was often still in progress.
- The Ministry of Education and Culture's funding indicators were used to define various activities, and Finnish universities rarely modified them for their own activities.
- More emphasis could be placed on the management of research activities in research groups, and more training could be offered on the subject.
- Good practice established in research projects were transferred unsystematically between different research groups and units.
- Research and publication activities could be better planned at the unit level by using information from the staff development discussions.
- The research funding application process could be increasingly coordinated at the unit level to ensure research group and unit managers were aware of any funding applications, how much funding had been applied for and their success rates.
- The results of the universities' own research activity assessments (RAE) could be better used in the enhancement of their activities.
- There was still room for improvement in the specification of the impacts of the university's research activities.
- More emphasis should be placed on the communication of research results to ensure it was more tightly integrated with the HEIs' societal engagement and collaboration with companies.
- The quality management and monitoring of artistic activities was often challenging: the universities' descriptions of the quality management used in artistic activities were often work in progress, and the feedback received on artistic events was inadequately used in enhancement activities.

## Advanced level quality management in research activities at the universities – how to stand out from the crowd?

- The strategy and objectives of all research activities have been defined clearly. The collected indicator data and enhancement activities support the achievement of objectives.
- Key responsibilities and resources have been allocated to different enhancement areas.
- Research activities are reported annually and assessed periodically. The university participates in various national and international research assessments.
- Formal and informal events related to research are arranged regularly for stakeholder representatives.
- Responsibilities in the quality management of research are clear. There is a functioning committee structure at the university level.
- The university features an international scientific advisory board, as do some faculties and units.
- The university monitors research activities using its own indicators in addition to the Ministry of Education and Culture's funding indicators.
- The support services for research function well and have been provided with enough resources.

## **Project management is emphasised in the quality management of RDI activities at the universities of applied sciences**

- The structures, objectives and processes of the quality management of RDI activities at universities of applied sciences mostly functioned well: the responsible parties had been appointed, the goals for quality management had been defined, and descriptions of the processes had been drafted.
- The key areas of quality management included a well-functioning cycle of continuous improvement (the PDCA cycle), quality manuals, various instructions and quantitative indicators, as well as appropriate feedback systems.
- Various databanks, research or project information systems and project portfolios were widely used.
- RDI activities included projects that featured external funding, and thus project management-related support materials and regional collaboration were vital from the perspective of quality management.
- RDI activities were strongly connected to education (study credits, theses, internships), as well as societal engagement and corporate collaboration. Parties from various fields contributed to these activities as partners.
- Attention had been paid to developing the skills and preparedness of staff, as well as recruitment procedures.
- Some universities of applied sciences had strongly involved their external stakeholders in their RDI activities.
- The application process for RDI projects might involve internal procedures to select and approve projects at universities of applied sciences. In addition, during the final stages of a project, the process often included feedback and assessment discussions.
- Attention had been paid to how RDI activities were communicated, which had placed an increased emphasis on the role that communication services played as a support service. Other essential support services included laboratory and library services.

## **Variation in practices hinders the quality management of RDI and artistic activities**

- The scope of and emphasis placed on RDI activities varied by UAS.
- The RDI activities might not be in line with the strategic policies of a UAS, although the projects had been selected through an internal application process.
- RDI activities could be understood in various ways in the different parts of a UAS, which in turn resulted in differences between the procedures used for quality management.
- The quality management of artistic activities was often based on informal situations.
- Customer feedback was not always collected, analysed and used systematically.
- Some teachers might not have enough resources to participate in RDI projects.
- Student and stakeholder participation in RDI projects varied between UASs and fields.
- The Ministry of Education and Culture's funding indicators significantly affected the selection of focus areas in RDI activities.
- RDI activities were not always separated from regional development, and not all universities of applied sciences had defined their own processes for RDI activities.
- Advisory boards played a small role in the quality management of RDI activities.





## Advanced quality management in RDI activities at universities of applied sciences – how to stand out from the crowd?

- Procedures used for the quality management of RDI activities are systematic and well established. They support the objectives of RDI activities and the achievement of the overall strategy of the UAS.
- Responsibilities related to quality management of RDI activities are clearly defined, and students are strongly involved in RDI activities and quality management processes.
- Quality management procedures used at the different stages of RDI projects have been defined and are used.
- Information systems and tools used to collect data on RDI activities are well developed and openly available to staff.
- Information on RDI activities has been collected systematically for a long period, and it has been used effectively in the improvement of the activities.
- RDI activities are conducted in collaboration with external stakeholders, and stakeholders regularly provide feedback on the RDI activities.
- RDI activities are assessed periodically.
- The support services and their quality management function well. Communication services play a key role in RDI activities.



# 7 Societal impact

A black and white photograph of a large audience seated in a conference room, viewed from behind. A large projection screen is visible at the front of the room.

## **Setting objectives for societal impact is vital**

The quality management of societal impact was assessed as developing in most Finnish HEIs. In general, the audits demonstrated that the activities of the HEIs were more strongly oriented towards society than was the case in the first audit cycle. Some examples of this included versatile forms of collaboration and partnership with actors outside the HEIs, as well as collaboration with working life in degree education. Open university/UAS education and continuing education were assessed as part of this assessment area. At many HEIs, open university/UAS education and continuing education had many good practices in relation to quality management and the anticipation of education and training needs in society and working life.

The audits encountered some difficulty in the assessment of the quality management of societal impact because of the lack of clarity in terms of the concept nationally. The assessment's starting point was the definitions and objectives of each HEI. The audits also showed challenges in the quality management of societal impact. Several of the self-assessment reports of HEIs contained insufficient descriptions of how the objectives set for societal impact were monitored and evaluated, and how activities were continuously improved based on collected information.

The goals the HEI sets for societal impact describe the institution's understanding of what is desirable for them from a societal perspective, and how the HEI understands its position in society. The audited HEIs defined their objectives for societal impact in various ways. The audits showed that institutions with more developed quality management of societal impact had concrete and clearly defined objectives for it. The HEIs assessed at an emerging level of quality management lacked clear and concrete objectives, and a systematic approach in quality management. The audits showed that having concrete and clear objectives made it easier to plan concrete measures and activities, as well as to monitor, evaluate and enhance the societal impact of the HEI's activities.

HEIs assessed as emerging, and several institutions assessed as developing, featured no widespread and shared understanding of the objectives related to societal impact and the mechanisms for achieving societal impact. Other enhancement areas were internal communications and the dissemination of the information and expertise related to partnerships and networks within the institution.



## **Collaboration with working life is based on trust and dialogue**

The development of the collaboration with working life was a goal that united both universities and universities of applied sciences. In the audits, Finnish HEIs featured wide-ranging stakeholder collaboration and many partnerships. The key characteristic of HEIs assessed as advanced was that their partnerships served and benefited all parties, and developed the activities of both the partner and HEI. There also appeared to be a shared interest among all parties involved in the development of the HEI. According to the audit reports, the basis of a successful collaborative relationship was a culture that valued mutual trust within the partnerships, and a good dialogue between stakeholders and HEIs. As a result of a well-functioning collaboration, staff expertise was developed, students acquired working life experiences and contacts, and services and expertise were provided to the partners. In HEIs assessed as advanced and in some of the HEIs assessed as developing, stakeholder collaboration was strategic, and the partnerships were used in the strategic development of the HEI. Partnerships were also sought on a long-term basis.

## **Societal impact of HEIs' activities promoted through institutional and cross-sectoral collaboration**

In HEIs whose quality management of societal impact was assessed as developing and advanced, the societal impact of their activities were closely linked to activities in education and RDI. Students and staff were seen as vital actors in the enhancement of the societal impact of educational provision.

HEIs with advanced or developing quality management of societal impact promoted their societal impact by collaborating with other higher education institutions and upper secondary education providers. Higher education institutions assessed as advanced had particularly effective approaches to collaboration with other institutions. Among other things, the national and regional collaboration networks supported higher education institutions in meeting education and training needs in society and working life.

The development of digital solutions for education, such as the implementation of various online study modules, was one method that could increase the societal impact of educational provision. The relevance of higher education for working life was promoted by emphasising generic skills such as interaction, management and entrepreneurship skills in the learning outcomes of degree programmes. According to the audit teams, Finnish HEIs should focus more on the possibilities presented by multidisciplinary studies and the expansion of the cross-sectoral collaboration. Individual study paths and flexibility in studies should also be better supported.

### **Enhancement of the impact of RDI requires a stronger strategic focus**

Impact was built on the high quality of research, development and innovation activities. Enhancing the impact of research, development and innovation activities required a strategic approach, targeting the activities at new and developing fields, and serving the expertise needs of working life. For example, the impact of the research, development and innovation activities might be promoted by multidisciplinary or cross-sectoral RDI activities, developing entrepreneurship and the expertise of new businesses, and being active in local innovation systems.

Based on the audits, the realisation of HEIs' objectives for societal impact in their research, development and innovation activities was a common challenge. In addition to teaching and publishing research results, researchers could also have an impact by participating in various expert tasks, societal debate, the development of products and services, and writing study books and generally accessible articles. Several HEIs had developed good communication strategies for research and development activities, as well as open science operating models.





## More work to be done in the monitoring, evaluation and enhancement of societal impact

Finnish HEIs monitor the societal impact of their activities with the help of several indicators and evaluation and feedback instruments. Based on the audit reports, success in the service to society and region requires an analysis of the operating environment, monitoring the results and effects of the activities, and collecting, analysing and using the feedback received from partners for enhancement. The majority of the HEIs must do more to improve their systematic collection and use of information related to societal impact. The development of good indicators for societal impact is a challenge for HEIs. The audit teams emphasised that HEIs should develop follow-up instruments to identify the actual societal impact an activity has had.

Examples of the HEI indicators used to measure societal impact based on the audit reports:

- employment and placement of graduates
- employer feedback
- amount of business collaboration and feedback from collaboration partners
- number and scope of research networks
- large conferences and events arranged
- external expert group memberships and expert statements
- commercialisation of innovations
- number of new companies, start-ups and spinoff companies
- memberships in boards of companies and other organisations
- positions of trust
- media visibility
- consultation of researchers in political decision making.



# 8 The key strengths and enhancement areas of HEIs

## Strengths

- 1.** Finnish HEIs have externally evaluated and well-functioning quality systems that meet European standards and guidelines (ESG).
- 2.** Quality systems are connected with the strategic management of HEIs. There is a strong link between the quality management processes and the institution's strategic objectives. Information-based development and decision making have become an established practice in HEIs.
- 3.** Quality management of degree education in Finnish HEIs is the result of years of work. HEIs have adopted systematic and well-functioning procedures that support the planning, implementation, evaluation and enhancement of their educational provision.
- 4.** The quality culture among teaching staff at most of the HEIs is strong. Staff are committed and participate extensively in activities to enhance the quality of educational provision in various committees, working groups, and national and international networks.
- 5.** The structures, objectives and processes of the quality management of research, development and innovation activities function well, and the HEIs have adopted various research monitoring systems.

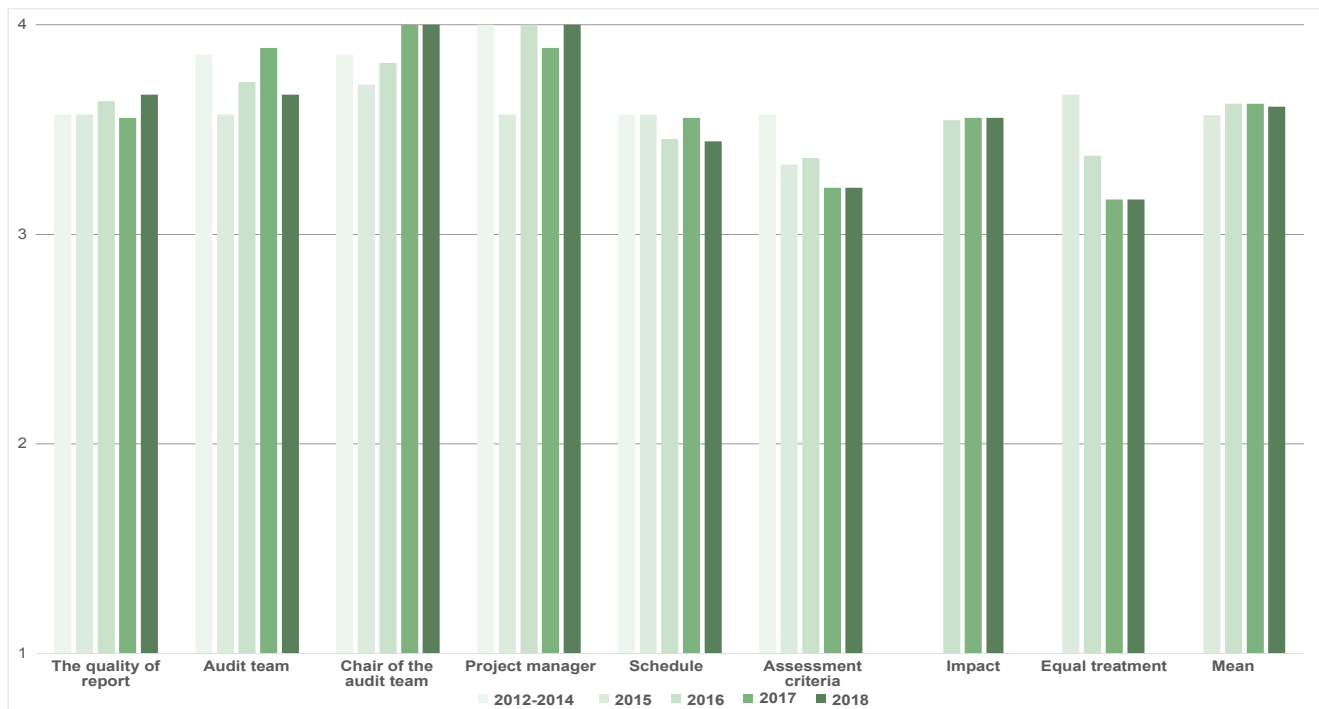
## Enhancement areas

- 1.** Student feedback systems are the main enhancement area in the quality management of degree education. Problems related to student feedback are especially connected to the low response rates in feedback surveys, which affects the reliability and usability of the feedback. Another challenge is the usability of the information produced by the feedback systems at the degree programme level. The information collected is not always useful for the enhancement of teaching and learning.
- 2.** The quality management of the assessed doctoral programmes was in many cases emerging, and not at the same level as bachelor's and master's degree programmes. Doctoral programmes are not developed as programmes, and the quality management does not support the implementation and enhancement of doctoral education.
- 3.** HEIs should place more emphasis on cross-sectoral collaboration in the planning and implementation of their educational provision to increase their societal impact. Individual study paths and flexible studies should also be supported.
- 4.** A common enhancement area for the HEIs is the monitoring of societal impact, the identification of the societal impact of its activities and the systematic use of collected information.
- 5.** The quality management of artistic activities is often based on incomplete procedures, and the feedback collected is not sufficiently documented.

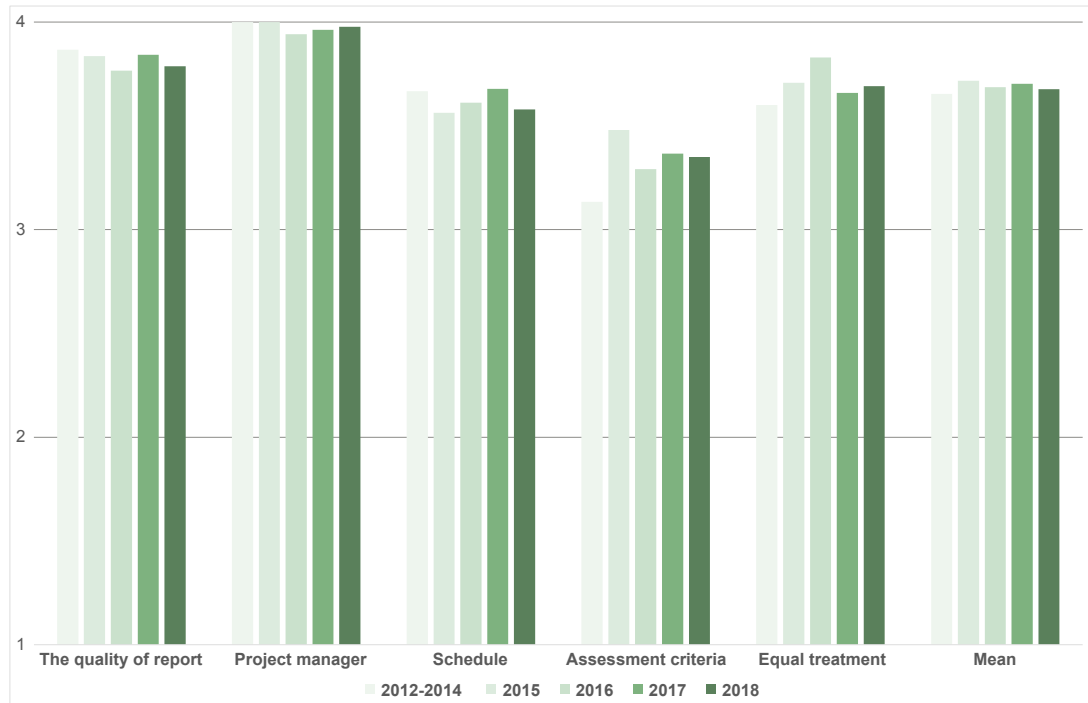
# 9 Audit feedback

## The audit process functions well and supports enhancement activities

FINEEC collected audit feedback from both the audited HEIs and the audit teams. During the second audit cycle, feedback was collected using a survey in which respondents were asked to provide their opinion on positive statements concerning the audit process. The respondents provided their opinions using a four-point scale, in which 1 meant that they completely disagreed, and 4 that they completely agreed with the statement. The survey also featured open questions that were used to support the enhancement of the audit process. The following figures present the averages of answers given by the HEIs and audit team members by year. The audits conducted between 2012 and 2014 have been combined because of the low number of audits conducted in that period.



**Figure 4.** The audited HEIs' satisfaction with the audit process based on the feedback collected between 2012 and 2018 on a scale of 1 to 4 (n = 44)



**Figure 5.** The audit team members' satisfaction with the audit process based on the feedback collected between 2012 and 2018 on a scale of 1 to 4 (n = 171)

The figures 4 and 5 include audits and re-audits of Finnish HEIs and one cross-border audit. Based on the open questions, the key strengths of FINEEC's audit process are the impact of the audits, the expertise of the audit teams and the professional skills of FINEEC's project managers, and the continuous improvement of the audit process based on the collected feedback. The enhancement areas are connected to the workload caused by the process, the terminology used in the audits, and ensuring that the HEIs are treated equally in the assessments.

# 10 Follow-up study: The attitudes of HEI staff to quality work and audits

Timo Ala-Vähälä from the University of Jyväskylä and Jasmin Overberg from the University of Oldenburg conducted a follow-up study based on a survey conducted by Ala-Vähälä in 2010<sup>5</sup>. The survey<sup>6</sup>, which was conducted in 2017, focused on how the attitudes of staff from universities and universities of applied sciences to quality work and quality audits have changed during the first and second cycle of audits. The survey was conducted in four universities (283 respondents) and five universities of applied sciences (112 respondents). The observations presented below are based on an unpublished report that was submitted to FINEEC<sup>7</sup>.

## Trust in evaluations, audits and quality work has grown

- **Attitudes to quality work were more positive at universities of applied sciences than at universities.** The most critical opinions concerning quality work were expressed by researchers working at universities. Academic members of staff whose duties included teaching or teaching and research expressed neutral or mildly critical opinions. The most positive attitudes to quality work were expressed by those working in managerial and expert tasks. The attitudes of those working in support services had become more positive since the first survey.
- **Common procedures supported the daily work at the HEIs.** Staff from both universities and universities of applied sciences expressed generally positive opinions concerning the notion that quality work could help harmonise the procedures used within HEIs.

- **Quality work supported the enhancement of the educational provision, and audits supported the development of HEIs.** Staff from both universities and universities of applied sciences felt that quality work and the audits contributed to the improvement of their activities. Respondents from universities of applied sciences felt more strongly than those from universities that the audits served HEIs.
- **There was a significant reduction in the negative perceptions of the burden** caused by quality work and the audits. This positive change in perceptions was especially marked at universities. All staff groups were more likely than before to disagree with the notion that quality work negatively affected daily work at HEIs. However, at the universities, the average responses of academic staff still leaned towards a more critical attitude.
- The audits and different evaluations **provided a reliable image of the university's or university of applied sciences' activities.** This indicated a change to a more positive attitude. Respondents' trust that universities and universities of applied sciences presented their situation to their audit teams truthfully remained the same and at a relatively high level.
- **The interest of university staff in the audits seemed to have decreased.** University staff felt that the first audit cycle generated more interest than the second.
- According to the staff of both universities and universities of applied sciences, **passing the audit affected their credibility in international collaboration, reputation and their position in agreement negotiations** with the Ministry of Education and Culture. Concerning international credibility, the opinions of university representatives had become more positive. In addition, respondents felt that external stakeholders valued the fact that the institution had passed the audit.



# 11 Conclusion

The second cycle of FINEEC audits (2012–2018) provided an overview of the quality management in Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences. The key result of the second audit cycle was that the HEIs had quality systems that largely functioned well. In general, the audits provided a positive image of the quality work at HEIs. Quality management has a firm foundation in Finnish HEIs, and a lot of work lies behind the achievements made since the first cycle of audits. Several of the audit reports highlighted that staff felt that quality work was part of their everyday activities. Quality systems are not separate from other activities. Quality management is connected to HEIs' operational management and strategic objectives. Quality systems produce information that supports the continuous improvement and targeting of institutions' activities.

The HEIs have achieved a good level of quality management, but there are still several areas with room for improvement, as this summary highlights. The audit teams' recommendations to the HEIs often contained similar themes: quality management requires a more systematic approach; procedures must be harmonised; and variations in quality management within institutions require action by HEIs. Concerning monitoring and feedback information, it should also be considered that the information collected supports the achievement of strategic objectives and operational development. In all HEIs, there are excellent practices and expertise that could be better disseminated and used within the institutions. The participation of external stakeholders and students in the enhancement activities of the institutions could also be further improved.

The focus is now on the third cycle of FINEEC audits (2018–2024)<sup>8</sup>, which differs from the previous audit cycles in some respects. Student-centred teaching, studying and learning, which are emphasised in the European standards and guidelines (ESG 2015), are strongly emphasised in the third cycle audits. The continuous improvement of educational provision and the societal impact of the HEI's activities are also strongly present in the model. The goal is also to encourage HEIs to be innovative and involved in co-creation and enhancement-focused initiatives, as well as projects with their external and internal stakeholders and partners. Nonetheless, the methods HEIs use to maintain and enhance the quality of their activities remains the audits' main focus.

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**Quality in focus**

Quality audits of Finnish higher education  
institutions 2012–2018

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