



FINNISH EDUCATION  
EVALUATION CENTRE

**FINEEC**

# **SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT FOR THE ENQA AGENCY REVIEW 2021**

**FINEEC**

**SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT FOR  
THE ENQA AGENCY REVIEW 2021**



Finnish Education Evaluation Centre  
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# Acronyms

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Arene	Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences
EDUFI	Finnish National Agency for Education
ENAAE	European Network for Accreditation of Engineering 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
ESU	European Students' Union
EUR-ACE	EUROpean- ACcredited Engineer
FINEEC	Finnish Education Evaluation Centre
FINHEEC	Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council
HEI	Higher education institution
MEC	Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland
SAMOK	Universities of Applied Sciences Students in Finland – SAMOK
SAR	Self-assessment
SYL	National Union of University Students in Finland
UAS	University of applied sciences
Unifi	Universities Finland

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The history of systematic evaluation of education and higher education in Finland dates back several decades. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is a newer actor on the scene. At the time of writing this self-assessment, FINEEC celebrates its seventh year in operation. The agency was formed in 2014 by merging the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC), the Finnish Education Evaluation Council and the National Board of Education's Unit for Evaluation of Learning Outcomes. Since the beginning of its operations, FINEEC's activities have been guided by clear strategic objectives to support the quality of education and higher education and its improvement in Finland, as well as the learning and competences of all from early childhood to adult education.

The agency has made conscious efforts to improve the impact of its evaluation activities. This has involved co-development activities internally with staff and decision-making bodies, as well as engaging in a dialogue with external stakeholders and collecting feedback from them. From the start, it has been clear that to achieve its strategic objectives, evaluation objects, participants and stakeholders from different levels of the education system will need to be engaged in the agency's evaluation activities. During recent years, there has been increasing focus at FINEEC in widening and deepening the collaboration with various actors in society. This has been achieved through engaging stakeholders in different phases of the evaluation process and other activities of FINEEC. Emphasis has also been put on communication activities.

Although a degree of accountability is present in all external evaluation activities also in Finland, the improvement orientation strongly guides the activities of FINEEC. The enhancement-led evaluation is prescribed as an operational principle in the legislation concerning the agency. FINEEC staff has actively been building a common understanding of the approach within the agency. An open culture for testing new methods has allowed staff to test new participatory methods for collecting data and engaging stakeholders in audits and thematic evaluations. Particularly the thematic evaluations provide a good ground for finding new ways of engaging the evaluation objects and stakeholders in the planning and implementation of education as well as in discussing the results of the evaluations.



In terms of evaluating higher education, the third cycle of quality audits is under way mainly following the same purposes and objectives as in the two previous cycles, but in many ways with a new spirit and elements integrated into the framework. The three cycles of quality audits have evolved along with the development of quality management in Finnish higher education institutions. The relevance of the framework for higher education institutions is central, and therefore it has been important to connect the framework and its criteria to the needs and development areas of the sector. In addition to quality audits, thematic evaluations remain the other key evaluation type of higher education institutions in Finland. FINEEC also offers evaluations as a fee-based activity, of which EUR-ACE accreditation of engineering programmes is one example.

As an organisation, we are now well into our merger, and we warmly welcome an external view on our activities at this point. This is a great opportunity for us to learn from our strengths, challenges and areas needing further improvement. From the ENQA review panel, we welcome fresh and new insights that will support us in the future development of our activities.

Harri Peltoniemi  
Director

Helka Kekäläinen  
Head of Unit

## Development of the self-assessment report

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The self-assessment report (SAR) was produced collaboratively by the staff of FINEEC's Unit of 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, the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education, and the FINEEC management team. The self-assessment with the Higher Education Evaluation Committee was conducted in connection with a wider discussion concerning the future of external quality assurance of higher education in Finland. The self-assessment of the unit staff focused on the quality audits and thematic evaluations. The self-assessment concerning the EUR-ACE engineering programme accreditations was conducted with the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education. In their self-assessment exercise, the FINEEC management team focused on the general aspects of FINEEC activities, especially from the viewpoint of ESG Part 3.

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 were given the opportunity to comment on the report. The report was edited by a core team.

The outcomes of the self-assessment exercise will be integrated into the annual development cycle of the unit. The outcomes of SAR will be discussed, and improvement actions are taken if needed.

# Higher education and QA of higher education in the context of FINEEC

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## 3.1 Higher education institutions in Finland

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Finland has a dual higher education system and an extensive network of higher education institutions (HEIs) covering the whole country. Universities conduct scientific research and provide higher education based on research. In carrying out their missions, universities are expected to engage with the surrounding society and strengthen the impact of research findings and artistic activities on society. The universities of applied sciences (UASs) are professionally oriented higher education institutions. The UAS system was established in the early 1990s through mergers of former vocational and higher post-secondary colleges. The first universities of applied sciences began to operate on a permanent basis in 1996. The UASs offer professionally oriented education in response to labour market needs as well as conduct research, development, and innovation (RDI), which supports education and is geared to the needs of business and industry.

Finland is geographically large in relation to its population and offering opportunities for higher education in the whole country has been a part of overall regional policy and is also linked to equal opportunities. Higher education is offered by 14 universities and 24 universities of applied sciences (UASs). Most of the HEIs operate under the governance and steering of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC). The Åland University of Applied Sciences in the self-governing Province of Åland, Police College under the steering of the Ministry of Interior, and National Defence University under the steering of the Ministry of Defence.

The universities are prescribed in the Universities Act (558/2009). The UASs have operating licences awarded by the MEC. The UASs are limited companies. Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences enjoy rather extensive autonomy. The operations of the higher education institutions are built on the principles of freedom of education and research. The HEIs decide on their internal organisational structure as well as steering, funding, and quality systems.

The Finnish higher education sector has been subject to major reforms during the past decades. The number of higher education institutions has declined between 2008 and 2021 from 50 to 38 through mergers (universities from 21 to 14 and UASs from 29 to 24). In addition to structural changes, in the last decade both sectors of higher education have undergone several big reforms: they have received new legislation (Universities Act 558/2009, Universities of Applied Sciences Act 932/2014), and new legal status (universities are no longer state institutions, UASs became limited companies), in addition to undergoing organisational changes (e.g. in management and decision-making systems). Furthermore, the performance-based funding systems for both sectors have been revised several times, with the latest revisions for the both sectors became effective from the beginning of 2021.

### 3.2 Higher education policy and vision

The key objective of Finland's higher education policy is to have internationally competitive institutions that also respond to the needs of the regions. The national policy objectives for HEIs (MEC 2021a) clearly outline the role of HEIs as key actors in promoting competitiveness, well-being, education and culture, and sustainable development of the Finnish society. The HEIs are expected to anticipate and support the renewal of society, education, culture, and working life while meeting the needs of the labour market in terms of a qualified workforce. The national objectives also underline stronger collaboration and division of responsibilities among the Finnish HEIs but also with research institutes in terms of education, research, support services, structures, and infrastructure. One of the prerequisites of the collaboration is that HEIs should have stronger profiles based on their strength areas. The general objective is to further increase the quality, internationalisation, effectiveness and impact of Finnish HEIs. In line with this, HEIs should develop their activities as international and attractive learning and research environments. (See MEC 2021a.)

In 2017, a vision for higher education and research in 2030 and a roadmap for implementing Vision 2030 were drawn up by the Ministry of Education and Culture together with the higher education community and stakeholders. The implementation of the development programmes of the road map began in 2019. From the perspective of higher education, the most important objectives are increasing the proportion of those with a higher education degree to 50% of the cohort, strengthening continuous learning, and increasing cooperation with upper secondary education institutions. The realisation of the vision also involves strategy work carried out by the higher education institutions on a harmonised schedule. The higher education institutions' strategies are also prepared for a longer period than before to cover the years between 2021 and 2030. (MEC 2017a.) The Vision 2030 work gave continuous learning a strong impetus as a key objective of future higher education. It is seen as the HEI's responsibility to organise continuous learning opportunities and to offer educational content relevant to working life flexibly throughout a person's career (MEC 2017b). Under legislative amendments, 1367/2018 (universities) and 1368/2018 (UASs), which entered into force at the beginning of 2019, both universities and UASs must offer opportunities for continuous learning as part of their duties.

### 3.3 Quality assurance, steering and funding of higher education

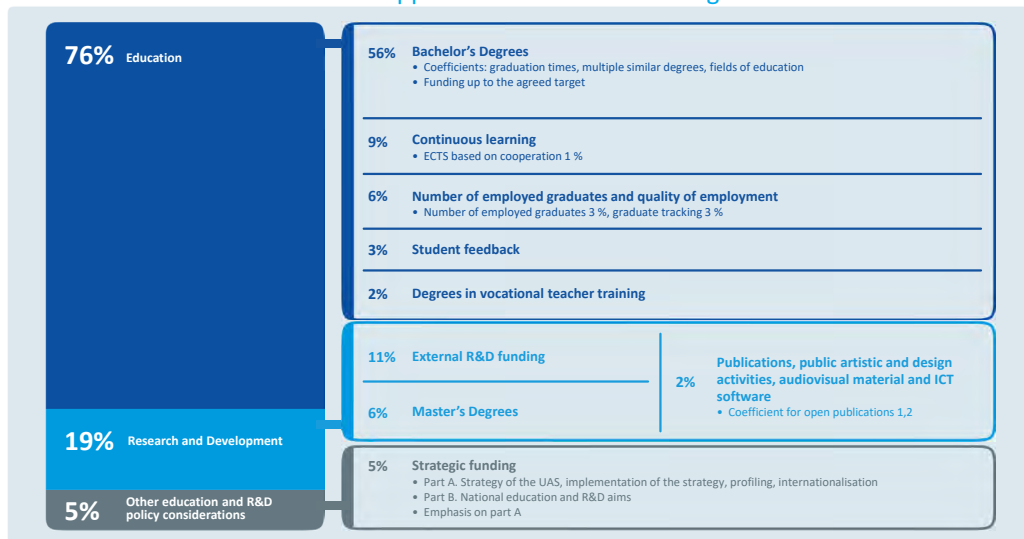
The Finnish national quality assurance framework of higher education comprises three actors. The higher education institutions, FINEEC and the Ministry of Education and Culture. Higher education institutions carry the main responsibility for the quality and development of education, research, and other activities. The Universities of Applied Science's Act (932/2014) and the Universities Act (558/2009) state in similar and general terms the responsibilities of the HEIs in terms of the external evaluation and quality assurance: The universities and universities of applied sciences must regularly participate in external evaluations of their activities and quality assurance systems. The universities and universities of applied sciences must publish the results of the evaluations they have organised.

The legislation does not specify the agencies qualified for the task of external evaluation of Finnish HEIs. That is, the HEIs have the option to choose another agency to conduct their external evaluations. However, so far, all Finnish higher education institutions (except one in the second cycle) have participated in the first and second cycle of quality audits conducted by FINEEC (and its predecessor FINHEEC). The role of FINEEC is to assist higher education institutions in the development of higher education and quality management by conducting external evaluations. The main external quality assurance mechanism of Finnish HEIs has been the quality audits implemented since 2005.

The Ministry of Education and Culture is responsible for steering higher education institutions. The most important policy instruments are the educational responsibility regulation, the agreements between the higher education institutions and the ministry that are made every four years, and the performance-based funding. (See MEC 2021b.) The HEIs' tasks, focus areas, profiles and degree targets are set out in the agreements with the MEC. In the FINEEC evaluations of higher education in business, humanities, social sciences and engineering (Pyykkö et al. 2020), the performance-based funding system and the regulation of educational responsibility were found to be the strongest steering methods. The impact of the performance-based funding on the internal quality systems and quality management was also found to be strong in the meta-synthesis of the second cycle of quality audits (Nordblad et al. 2020).

Universities and universities of applied sciences receive most of their funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture and the activities of HEIs. There have been new funding models for universities and universities of applied sciences since 2021 (see figures 1 and 2). The core funding is allocated mainly based on the HEIs' education and research/RDI performance. Part of the financing is strategy-based, aimed at supporting HEIs' own strategies and the government's higher education and science policy objectives. One of the priorities of this strategy-based funding is the internationalisation of HEIs. (See MEC 2021b.)

## Universities of Applied Sciences Core Funding From 2021



**FIGURE 1 The core funding model of the universities of applied sciences 2021 (MEC 2021b)**

## Universities Core Funding From 2021



**FIGURE 2 The core funding model of universities 2021 (MEC 2021b)**

In addition to state funding, competitive research funding is an important source of additional financing especially for the universities. Competitive funding for scientific research is provided and evaluated by the Academy of Finland, which is an agency within the administrative branch of the MEC. In addition, HEIs receive supplementary funding, e.g. from paid services, donations, foundations, enterprises, Business Finland, the European Union, and other international sources.

### 3.4 Higher education degrees and regulations

The Act on the National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules (93/2017) entered into force in 2017. The degrees, curricula and other extensive competence modules referred to in the Act are divided into eight reference levels based on their learning outcomes. The competence required for each reference level is described in the Government Decree on the Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules (120/2017). The levels of the Finnish framework are in line with the European Qualifications Framework. Rather than including the descriptions and learning outcomes of each specific field in the decrees or the framework, the higher education institutions are responsible for their interpretation in each individual field. Although the national qualifications framework was adopted quite late in Finland compared to many other European countries, national regulations for universities and universities of applied sciences have defined the structure, extent and objectives of degrees. The Rectors Conference of Universities of Applied Sciences, Arene defined in 2006 based on the European Qualifications Framework a framework of common generic competences for graduates and degree specific competence for UASs (Arene 2010). This framework is still used by the UASs.

Finland does not have a degree programme accreditation system. Making decisions on educational responsibilities falls within the Government's duties and is as a core area of the higher education policy. Provisions on the universities' educational responsibilities are laid down in the Government Decree on University Degrees (794/2004 with later amendments) and the Decree of Ministry of Education and Culture on Specifying Educational Responsibilities (1451/2014 with later amendments). For opening degree education in a totally new field, universities must make a proposal to the Ministry of Education and Culture. The educational responsibilities of universities of applied sciences are set down in their operating licences. HEIs decide on the detailed contents and structure of the degrees they award. They also decide on their curricula and forms of instruction. Some fields have detailed regulations for the structure and/or content of the degrees awarded, such as medical education and teacher education.

**Universities** provide bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees. A pre-doctoral degree of licentiate may be taken before a doctoral degree, although nowadays is rare. A bachelor's degree consists of at least 180 ECTS (3 years of full-time study). A master's degree consists of at least 120 ECTS (2 years of full-time study). In the fields of medicine, veterinary medicine and dentistry the second-cycle degree is called a licentiate. In the fields of medicine and dentistry, universities may arrange the education leading to the second-cycle licentiate degree without including a first-cycle university degree in the education. In medicine the degree consists of 360 ECTS (six years of full-time study) and in dentistry the degree consists of 330 ECTS (5.5 years of full-time study). Once

students have been admitted to a bachelor's programme, universities offer them direct access to a master's programme in the same field. However, this is dependent on the university's decision. Students can apply for doctoral studies after the completion of a relevant second-cycle degree. The doctor's degree consists of 4 years of full-time study after the second-cycle degree or 2 years following the pre-doctoral degree.

**Universities of applied sciences** provide bachelor's and master's degrees. The UAS bachelor's degree consists of 180, 210, 240 or 270 ECTS (3 to 4,5 years of full-time study) depending on the study field. The UAS master's degree consists of 60 or 90 ECTS (1 or 1.5 years of full-time study). Applicants eligible to apply for a UAS master's degree programme must hold a relevant bachelor's degree and at least 2 years of relevant work or artistic experience. The focus of the educational provision of universities of applied sciences is on bachelor's degrees. Several UASs also offer vocational teacher education leading to a teacher qualification. The teacher education is aimed for those who already have a higher education degree from the relevant field.

Both universities and universities of applied sciences can also offer professional specialisation studies, degree modules as open higher education studies or other types of non-degree studies as well as continuing education. Specialisation studies impart competence in areas of expertise in which no education provided on a commercial basis is offered. Continuing education is organised on market terms or as labour market training without central government funding. (MEC 2021b.)

HEIs select their own students. Different types of entrance examinations are commonly used. However, national regulations (Universities Act and Universities of Applied Sciences Act) prescribe general principles for student admission (e.g. the equal treatment of applicants). Also, the eligibility for studies leading to the different HE degrees is prescribed at the national level. The application procedure is arranged through a national electronic application system. In certain cases, HEIs can also arrange separate admissions if defined in the national regulations. HEIs are obliged to reserve an admission quota for the applicants who do not yet have a HE degree from a Finnish HEI or a right to study for a degree in a Finnish HEI. Exceptions are possible when the student intake is very small. Applicants can accept only one study place per year.

HEIs are obliged to recognise prior studies and learning. However, as the legal obligation has been defined only in broad terms, the processes, methods as well as level of recognition may vary in practice. The recognition decisions are made by HEIs. HEIs decide on their own regulations concerning recognition.

HEIs award degree certificates to graduates as stated in the Government Decree on University Degrees and the Decree on Universities of Applied Sciences. In addition to this, HEIs are obliged to award an international certificate (in practise the Diploma Supplement) to each graduate as an attachment.

A lot of statistics are annually collected from HEIs and publicly published. Key statistics on degree education, placement of students after graduation, research etc. are available to the public in the national Vipunen database maintained jointly by the MEC and the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI). The data and information in the Vipunen database are produced and gathered by Statistics Finland, MEC and EDUFI.



# Profile, history and activities of FINEEC

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## 4.1 Duties and activities

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The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is an independent 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 also operate across borders.

FINEEC's tasks according to the Act are:

- to implement evaluations related to education and early childhood education and care, and the activities of early childhood education and care providers, education and training providers, and higher education institutions in accordance with the education evaluation plan;
- to carry out evaluations of learning outcomes in accordance with the national core curricula and qualification requirements issued under the Basic Education Act and General Upper Secondary Schools Act, the Vocational Education and Training Act and the Act on Basic Education in the Arts;
- to support early childhood education and care providers, education and training providers, and higher education institutions in matters concerning evaluation and quality management;
- to develop the evaluation of education; and
- to take care of other tasks that are issued or given to FINEEC.

In addition to thematic, learning outcome and field-specific evaluations free of charge, FINEEC also provides 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. Examples of FINEEC's fee-based services include quality audits and EUR-ACE engineering programme accreditation. The audits of higher education institutions

are services subject to public law and their pricing is based on a Decree of Ministry of Education and Culture (87/2020). Audits of Finnish HEIs which are not under the steering of the Ministry of Education and Culture and international HEIs are priced according to commercial principles.

The key documents guiding the activities of FINEEC are the FINEEC strategy 2020–2023 (Annex 1) and the National Education Evaluation Plan 2020–2023 (FINEEC 2021). FINEEC draws up its strategy and the national evaluation plans for four-year periods. The first national plan for education evaluation drawn up by FINEEC was implemented in 2016–2019. The evaluation plan is drawn up in a participatory process in which stakeholders, FINEEC staff and 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.

Since the beginning of its operations, FINEEC has strived to increase the impact of its evaluations both at the level of organisations as well as locally, regionally and nationally. The clear target is that the evaluations that the agency produces should support the development of education in Finland. The evaluations and their results should support decision-makers and developers at all levels of the education system. According to the current strategy of FINEEC (2020–2023), FINEEC aims to

- produce educational knowledge, understanding and competence that enhance trust and lead to wise decisions.
- conduct evaluations that orient to the future, and that are enhancement-led, diverse and participatory.
- foster society's ecological, cultural, social and economic sustainable development.

FINEEC's specific goals for impact are to advance learning and the building of competences, increase equality in education, improve the education system's functionality, and develop the quality of education. The evaluations in the current National Education Evaluation Plan 2020–2023 are structured based on these four focus areas. Key values set out in the strategy to guide the work of FINEEC are trustworthiness, independence, openness and boldness.

Enhancement-led evaluation is the central operating principle of FINEEC, and it is also mentioned in the Government Decree on Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (1317/2013). The enhancement-led principle has been applied since the evaluations of higher education became systematised in 1996 with the establishment of the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC, predecessor of FINEEC) (Pyykkö et al. 2013).

## 4.2 Organisation

FINEEC operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) with complete independence in terms of its operations. 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: General Education and Early Childhood Education Unit, Vocational Education Unit, Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education Unit, and Development Services Unit. FINEEC has approximately 50 staff members of which 8 are engaged in evaluations of higher education. The main office and most of the staff are in Helsinki, and some staff are located 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 tasks of the Council are the following:

1. To take part in strategic planning of the Centre's activities;
2. To decide on important statements and proposals with far-reaching implications;
3. To prepare a proposal for the National Education Evaluation Plan and changes to it;
4. To prepare a proposal for the Ministry of Education and Culture on Committees under the Council.

The Director formally decides, after consultation with the Council, on all project plans for evaluations and compositions of planning and evaluation teams for all education sectors apart from higher education. The Council members are representatives from different educational sectors, teacher education, research, working life and students. The Council selects the chair and vice-chair from among its members. The composition of the Council for the term 7 September 2018–31 May 2022 is presented on the FINEEC website.

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 Council. According to the Government Decree, the Council proposes members for the 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 also selects the chair and vice-chair from among its members. The Evaluation Committee decides on:

1. Project plans and compositions of planning and evaluation teams for evaluations of higher education institutions;
2. Outcomes of audits of higher education institutions.

Composition of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee for the term 1 December 2018 to 30 November 2022 is available on the FINEEC website.

## 4.3 History

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) started its operations in 2014 when three previous organisations, namely the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC), the Finnish Education Evaluation Council and the National Board of Education's Unit for Evaluation of Learning Outcomes, were merged. One of the key objectives of the merger was to strengthen the evaluation of education in Finland and to emphasise the independent status of activities in the field of external evaluation of education (MEC 2012).

FINEEC was first established as an independent authority but was in 2018 made a separate unit of the Finnish National Agency for Education together with the Office of Matriculation Examination Board. The argument behind this move was to create synergy and effective use of resources while ensuring the operational independence of FINEEC and the Matriculation Examination Board (MEC 2017c). As a separate unit, FINEEC has kept the independence of its evaluation operations.

FINEEC's predecessor in higher education, FINHEEC operated from January 1996 until April 2014. Before FINHEEC was established, the Higher Education Council (HEC) worked from 1966 to 1996 as an advisory body to the Ministry of Education in matters related to the development of the higher education system. HEC had a broad mandate to prepare and handle important matters dealing with planning and developing Finnish higher education. In the 1990s, the steering of higher education shifted towards performance agreements between the ministry and HEIs, and the need for expert opinion changed.

The systematic external evaluations of higher education can be dated back to the 1990s when the first institutional evaluations of universities were conducted (1992–1999), legislative requirements of internal and external evaluation were introduced for UASs (1995) and universities (1997), and Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) was established in 1996 (see Pyykkö et al. 2013; Salminen 2004). FINHEEC tasks and goals remained largely unchanged throughout the lifespan of the organisation for nearly two decades. One of the key purposes was to ensure the independence of evaluations by separating external evaluations of higher education from the activities of the MEC.

The institutional audits of HEIs were introduced in 2005 as the main external quality assurance scheme. The Committee for Quality Assurance of Higher Education, which was tasked with drafting a proposal for the development of the Finnish national quality assurance system for higher education in 2003, advocated for an institutional audit approach. According to the Committee, audits were better suited than accreditations for the mature Finnish higher education system. The Finnish HEIs also advocated for the enhancement-led approach that at that point had already become a practice in the external evaluation of Finnish HEIs. (Jäppinen et al. 2004; Salminen 2004.) In Finland, the Bologna process, and particularly the Berlin Communiqué of 2003, can be argued to be the strongest reason for the adoption of an external quality assurance scheme in the form of quality audits. A new instrument for external evaluation of HEIs was introduced because there was a need for a more systematic and transparent mechanism that would enhance the international trust in the Finnish system and improve its attractiveness (Salminen 2004).

The history of FINHEEC and FINEEC encompasses much of the history of external evaluation of higher education in Finland. The evaluation types of the agencies are listed in Table 1.

**TABLE 1 Types of evaluation conducted by FINEEC and its predecessor FINHEEC**

Evaluation type	Duration
Evaluations for granting UAS operating licenses	1995–1999
Accreditation of professional courses	1999–2007
Institutional evaluations of institutions	1992–2004
Centres of Excellence evaluations	1996–2012
1 <sup>st</sup> cycle of quality audits	2005–2011
2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle of quality audits	2012–2018
3 <sup>rd</sup> cycle of quality audits	2018–2024
Thematic evaluations, including evaluations of fields of study	1997–
EUR-ACE accreditations of engineering degree programmes	2014–

# Higher education quality assurance activities of FINEEC

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The main characteristics of the Finnish approach in external quality assurance of HEIs are its consistent and long-term trust in the improvement-oriented approach, but also the consistency in terms of the quality audits as the main scheme of external quality assurance and enhancement combined with thematic evaluations. FINEEC (and FINHEEC) has a long experience in conducting thematic evaluations, and the role of thematic evaluations in the external evaluation of education has been further emphasised since FINEEC was established. EUR-ACE engineering programme accreditations are offered as a fee-based service and are voluntary to the HEIs.

The three key evaluation types of higher education are:

1. Quality audits of higher education institutions (HEIs)
2. Thematic evaluations
3. EUR-ACE engineering programme accreditations.

## 5.1 Quality audits

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Quality audit is the main external quality assurance mechanism of Finnish HEIs. The focus of the Finnish audit framework has been holistic and covered not only educational provision but also research/RDI and societal engagement and impact since the beginning of the first cycle of audits (2005-). The Finnish approach has been to support the continuous development and improvement of the activities of HEIs as a whole. The Finnish approach has been consistent, yet, the emphases of audit frameworks have changed and been developed for each audit cycle. The areas audited and assessment criteria have been modified along with the development of quality management at HEIs. The audit frameworks and criteria have been planned and developed together with representatives of HEIs, students and working life. Feedback has also been systematically collected from the audit teams and HEIs to support the development of the agency's evaluation activities.

The third cycle of audits is now under way and ends in 2024. The pilot audits were conducted between 2018 and 2019, and the cycle started after the pilot phase in autumn 2020. At the end of August 2021, seven audits of HEIs have been conducted with the new framework. One of the seven is a cross-border audit.

The timetable for third cycle audits of HEIs is available on the FINEEC website.

The purpose of the third cycle audit framework is

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

A central premise for the audit is the autonomy of HEIs to develop their activities and quality systems according to their own profile, needs and goals. Its aim is to involve staff, students and stakeholders of the HEI in recognising strengths, good practices and enhancement areas in the HEI's activities. The focus of the audit is on the procedures used by the HEI to maintain and enhance the quality of its activities.

The evaluation areas in FINEEC's current audit framework are broad. One of the key starting points of the planning was to meet the standards of ESG 2015. The aim was also to link the themes assessed in audits more strongly with HEIs' current focus areas of development. A lot of new elements were introduced in the audit framework and process. These include new evaluation areas, criteria and assessment scale, benchlearning, digital audit platform for reports, and Quality Label of Excellence.

Based on the Decree on FINEEC, the agency can conduct international evaluation activities. Quality audits in line with the third cycle audit framework can currently be commissioned from FINEEC by international higher education institutions.

Results of the SWOT on quality audits conducted by the unit staff are presented in Chapter 13.

## 5.2 Engineering programme accreditations

Engineering programme accreditation is a degree programme specific evaluation leading to the international EUR-ACE Label. The accreditation aims to support the development of quality in engineering degree programmes and increase international comparability and recognition of Finnish engineering degrees in industry. Higher education institutions may

utilise engineering degree programme accreditations to get an external view of how well the students in a programme receive the knowledge and skills required by their respective industries. In addition, higher education institutions typically use the accreditations in their marketing of the degree programmes.

The accreditation method is based on the European Accredited Engineer (EUR-ACE) standard administered by the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAAE). Accredited programmes are granted the EUR-ACE Label, which is valid for six years from the accreditation decision. It is also possible to award conditional accreditation, where the degree programme is expected to meet the conditions set in a specified timeframe. The quality label shows that the programme has passed an internationally recognised accreditation in the field of engineering. Accreditations are voluntary for the HEIs and a fee covering the costs is charged.

To be eligible to grant the EUR-ACE Label, an agency must undergo an external review conducted by the ENAAE, including two observed accreditation site visits. FINEEC passed this review for the second time in summer 2020 and currently has the right to grant the EUR-ACE Bachelor Label to four-year UAS bachelor's degree programmes. FINEEC also aims to attain the right to grant EUR-ACE Master quality labels to master's degree programmes. FINEEC's concept for engineering programme accreditations is described in the Standards and Procedures for Engineering Programme Accreditation. Principles of the online accreditations are described in the addendum to the accreditation manual. Due to the Covid-19 situation, online accreditations are possible for the time being, when travel limitations, the local situation or quarantine measures prevent on-site visits.

In autumn 2021, FINEEC will conduct one engineering programme accreditation. Furthermore, the aim is to start the pilot accreditations on the master's degree programmes in 2022.

Results of the SWOT on engineering programme accreditations conducted by FINEEC's Committee for Engineering Education are presented in Chapter 13.

### 5.3 Thematic evaluations

Thematic evaluations of FINEEC are conducted according to the National Education Evaluation Plan (FINEEC 2016; 2021). The themes often cover areas that are important from the perspective of educational policy. The aim of thematic evaluations is to produce information to support decision-making and the development of education in Finland. A thematic evaluation may focus on a single field of education or cover the whole higher education sector. In addition, FINEEC implements thematic evaluations covering various educational levels (such as general upper secondary education and higher education).

As mentioned above, FINEEC (and FINHEEC) have long experience in conducting thematic evaluations in the university and UAS sectors. The role of thematic evaluations has been further emphasised since FINEEC was established in 2014. In the National Education Evaluation Plans



(FINEEC 2016; 2021), the evaluations of higher education in different fields of study is currently the main type of thematic evaluations conducted by the Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education. The evaluations of higher education in fields of study produce an overall picture of the strengths and development areas in the examined degree programmes and the field in general in relation to the competence produced by the qualifications and their relevance to working life and continuous learning. The evaluations also produce information about the capacity of higher education institutions to develop the education they offer to correspond to the changing requirements for competences and the future operating environments.

Since 2016, FINEEC has been conducting thematic evaluations on the following themes. (See Table 2.)

**TABLE 2. Thematic evaluations 2016–2021**

Completed thematic evaluations 2016–2021	Duration
Impacts of the exceptional teaching arrangements on the realisation of equality and equity at different levels of education (Covid-19)	2020–21
Unesco IIEP Projects on Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education. Finland's country case study	2018–21
Evaluation on field of study: Humanities	2018–20
Evaluation on field of study: Business	2018–20
Evaluation on field of study: Technology	2018–20
Evaluation on field of study: Social sciences	2018–20
Students with an immigrant background in higher education	2019
Entrepreneurship in vocational education and training and in higher education	2017–18
Evaluation of Teacher Education Forum	2016–18
Evaluation on field of study: Undergraduate medical education	2017–18
International comparison of the integration of immigrants into the education system	2016–18
Evaluation of education in the maritime sector	2015–17
Evaluation of teacher education qualifying to teach Swedish as the second national language in Finland	2015–17
<b>Ongoing thematic evaluations in 2021</b>	
Follow-up on Covid-19 pandemic in higher education	
Evaluation on field of study: Social and health care	
Evaluation on field of study: Law	
Evaluation of education in the maritime sector	
Ability of education system to respond to challenges of continuous learning in sudden structural changes	
<b>Upcoming thematic evaluations in 2021–2023</b>	
Evaluation on field of study: Natural sciences	
Evaluation on fields of study: Natural resources and the key bioeconomy sectors	
The state and reform of higher education pedagogy	

Results of the SWOT conducted by the unit staff on thematic evaluations are presented in Chapter 13.

# Quality assurance processes and their methodologies

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## 6.1 Quality audits

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The audit process, including the criteria and principles for audit teams, is described in the Audit manual for higher education institutions 2019–2024 (FINEEC 2019). In September 2020, an addendum to the audit manual was published on Principles of online implementation. FINEEC audits through the end of the third cycle can be implemented fully or partly online. Online implementation is possible at all stages of the audit process. FINEEC conducts audits in Finnish, Swedish and English. The HEI chooses the language of the audit and whether the audit is conducted by a national or international team.

The audit process is led and supported by the FINEEC project manager. The project manager participates in the team's work as an expert on audits.

### Process

The step by step process of audits:

- The higher education institution registers for the FINEEC audit no later than two years before the quality label of the HEI expires.
- The HEI selects a partner and target for benchlearning and signs an agreement with the benchlearning partner. The HEI and its partner plan and implement the benchlearning. The topic of benchlearning needs to be connected to one or several evaluation areas I-IV.
- FINEEC signs an agreement on the audit with the HEI no later than a year before the audit visit.
- The HEI conducts the self-assessment by engaging the HE community in identifying strengths and enhancement areas in its activities. The self-assessment and the benchlearning report are uploaded onto FINEEC's digital audit platform three months prior to the audit visit.

- The FINEEC project manager of the audit recruits the audit team.
- The Higher Education Evaluation Committee appoints the audit team.
- FINEEC trains the audit team for its task. The audit team analyses the materials and prepares for the site visit.
- The audit team may ask the HEI for additional material deemed necessary prior to or during the audit visit.
- FINEEC sends the audit visit programme to the HEI no later than one month prior to the visit.
- FINEEC arranges a briefing and discussion event on the audit in cooperation with the HEI (optional).
- The audit team visits the HEI on site or online (based on an agreement with the HEI). The visit lasts 2–3 days depending on the size of the HEI. The audit team gives preliminary feedback to the management of the HEI.
- The audit team writes the audit report. The report is edited by the FINEEC project manager. The final report is sent to the HEI for factual checking.
- The chair of the audit team presents the audit result to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee and the Evaluation Committee decides on the result of the audit based on the report.
  - If the HEI passes the audit, it will receive a quality label and will be entered in the register of audited HEIs which is maintained by FINEEC. The quality label is valid for six years.
  - If the HEI does not pass the audit, it is required to undergo a re-audit. The re-audit will be conducted in 2–3 years.
  - An HEI audited or re-audited by FINEEC may request a review of the assessment outcome.
- The audit report is published on FINEEC’s digital audit platform. The audit report consists of the HEIs self-assessment and the audit team’s assessment.
- The HEI arranges in cooperation with FINEEC a seminar at the HEI to discuss the audit results.
- The HEI and audit team members give feedback to FINEEC on the audit process.
- The Higher Education Evaluation Committee reviews the proposal for recipients of the Quality Label for Excellence annually and awards the labels.
- Three years after the audit, the HEI writes a follow-up report and presents improvements made since the audit to the peers in the annual FINEEC quality seminar for HEIs.

The process and methodology in cross-border audits are the same as in the audits of Finnish HEIs. In cross-border audits, it is possible to consider some changes in the audit framework and process, for instance, if there are specific national requirements ascribed in the legislation. Changes in the framework and process are discussed and decided during the agreement process between FINEEC and HEI.

## Methodology

The main data in the audits consist of the self-assessment, other materials requested by the audit team, and the data collected during the audit visit interviews and workshops with various actors (management, staff, students, board and stakeholders). The audit team also has access to the HEI intranet.

Some new methodology has been introduced in the third cycle of audits. Benchlearning is a method applied in the audit. This was introduced because FINEEC wants to encourage HEIs in this type of activity. The purpose of benchlearning is for the HEI to receive feedback on its activities and to learn from the good practices of another organisation. The HEI selects a target and a partner for benchlearning. The partner can be an HEI or any other type of cooperation organisation.

During the site visit, it is of crucial importance to hear and involve different groups of staff and students as widely as possible. Workshops are now used in parallel with interviews to diversify the data collection and to increase the interaction between the participants of the site visit. As a rule, a student workshop is always integrated into the site visit. During the Covid-19 pandemic, audit visits have been organised fully online. The experiences of online interviews, and especially online workshops, have been very positive.

## 6.2 Engineering programme accreditations

### Process

The accreditations are conducted in accordance with the principles set in the FINEEC standards and procedures for engineering programme accreditation document (FINEEC 2015).

The review process step by step is the following:

- The HEI makes a request for accreditation of a particular engineering degree programme.
- FINEEC and the HEI make a contract on the accreditation.
- The degree programme to be accredited prepares a self-assessment report along with the appendices.
- The accreditation team is appointed by the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education.
- FINEEC trains the accreditation team members.
- The degree programme to be accredited submits the self-assessment report to FINEEC one month prior to the on-site or online visit. In addition, the HEI provides the access to its intranet for the accreditation team members and a FINEEC project manager.
- The accreditation team examines the self-assessment material and decides whether there is a need for additional material. If additional material is required, the FINEEC project manager informs the degree programme about this.

- The accreditation team agrees on the on-site/online visit programme. The project manager informs the degree programme about it.
- The degree programme invites the interviewees to the interviews to be carried out during the on-site/online visit
- The accreditation team prepares the interview questions jointly for the on-site/online visit.
- The degree programme prepares the evidence room for the on-site/online visit. For an online visit, the evidence room is offered in electronic form.
- The degree programme plans the facilities tour to be conducted during the on-site visit. In case of an online visit, the degree programme is required to produce a recorded video tour of its key facilities (e.g. labs, library, classrooms).
- The two-day on-site or online visit is carried out in the HEI of the degree programme to be accredited.
- The accreditation team drafts the report and agrees on the team's proposal on the outcome of the accreditation (accredited, conditionally accredited, not accredited).
- FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education decides on the outcome of the accreditation. The chair of the accreditation team presents the key results to the Committee.
- FINEEC informs the degree programme about the decision.
- FINEEC publishes the accreditation report on its website.
- FINEEC adds the information on the accreditation to the register of the accredited programmes on its website.
- FINEEC adds the information on the accreditation to the ENAEE database.
- FINEEC gathers feedback from the HEI and the accreditation team members.

If the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education decides on the conditional accreditation, FINEEC informs the degree programme on the conditions as well as the timeframe set for meeting the conditions. The degree programme is required to submit the report to FINEEC on the corrective actions made related to the conditions set. FINEEC delivers the report to the accreditation team chair, and the chair examines the report and writes the statement based on it. The FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education decides, based on the degree programmes report and the chair's statement, whether the conditions are met and whether the accreditation is extended to the full duration of six years.

## Methodology

The accreditation is based on the knowledge, skills and competences that students in engineering degree programmes should attain in order to perform successfully in working life. These reference programme outcomes are interpreted from the perspective of the requirements of the field of the degree programme under review. The focus is on the functioning of the degree programme as a whole—organisation, implementation and development—from the perspective of the attainment of programme learning outcomes. Thus, the accreditation evaluates whether the degree programme functions so that the students attain the intended programme learning outcomes

set. In addition, it highlights the strengths and good practices of the degree programme while giving recommendations on how to develop the degree programme.

FINEEC uses the pre-defined standards and reference programme outcomes in the EUR-ACE accreditations. There are 18 standards and they are divided into the following categories: (1) Planning of the programme, (2) Implementation of the teaching and learning, (3) Resources and (4) Quality management. In addition, the reference programme learning outcomes are described for the following categories: (1) Knowledge and understanding, (2) Engineering practice, (3) Investigations and information retrieval and (4) Communication and teamwork.

The accreditation team has some flexibility when designing the on-site or online visit programme. Recently, FINEEC has tested a model in which the visit includes two meetings with the academic staff: one traditional interview and one demo session. In the demo session (held online), teaching staff are asked to demonstrate the teaching and learning methods as well as student assessment methods in use for the accreditation team. Both sessions include the possibility to ask questions to the teaching staff. In online demos, it is easy to demonstrate the electronic platforms in use, study materials, exams, assessed exams, student feedback practices and results as well as course contents linked to the teaching and learning methods. The degree programme is asked to provide examples both from the basic sciences as well as engineering subjects.

The accreditation team also reviews assessed work regarding the standard and modes of assessment as well as the learning achievements of the students. In case of the online visit, the evidence room is offered in electronic form. The accreditation team visits the most relevant facilities, such as laboratories and libraries. In case of the online visit, the degree programme is required to produce a recorded video tour of its key facilities.

## 6.3 Thematic evaluations

The FINEEC thematic evaluations cover many types of evaluations with a different evaluation focus, such as system-level evaluations and evaluations on fields of study. The thematic evaluations conducted by FINEEC are defined in the National Education Evaluation Plan. The topic and focus are defined in very general terms in the evaluation plan, emphasising the importance of the planning phase of the evaluation. In the planning phase, the evaluation framework, questions, target groups, and data collection methods are chosen. Thematic evaluations are usually quite long projects (1–3 years), which include many different phases and processes and involve a multitude of different actors. A project manager of a thematic evaluation project has a wide array of tasks that relate to managing the actual evaluation process as well as various tasks relating to internal project administration.

In 2016–2017, an internal working group produced the Manual for Thematic Evaluations to support FINEEC's evaluation experts and the external teams in planning and implementing thematic evaluations. The manual was updated in 2018–2019 and recently in February 2021 on data protection.

## Process

According to the Manual for Thematic Evaluation, there are the following phases in FINEEC's thematic evaluation process:

1. Preparation
  - setting up a project team (FINEEC experts)
  - collecting background information
  - defining the expertise required by the project
  
2. Planning and designing
  - recruiting and nominating a planning team (FINEEC experts, external experts and representatives of education providers/HEIs)
  - stakeholder hearings
  - operationalisation of the evaluation theme and targets
  - defining the evaluation questions
  - selecting data collection methods
  - defining and choosing criteria
  - designing data collection
  - designing the project schedule and project plan for evaluation
  
3. Implementation
  - recruiting and nominating the evaluation/implementation team (FINEEC experts, external experts and representatives of education providers/HEIs)
  - data collection (participatory methods are often used)
  - coding the data
  - analysing the data
  - writing up results and recommendations
  - publishing the evaluation report
  - disseminating (and distributing) the results and recommendations
  
4. Feedback and follow-up
  - collecting feedback from the evaluation team and education providers/HEIs
  - possible follow-up evaluation.

## Methodology

The methods in thematic evaluations are always tailored according to the objectives and theme of the evaluation. The key is to consider the perspectives of various stakeholders, study the phenomenon critically and profoundly, and form a comprehensive understanding of the evaluation targets.

During the last years, the experts in the unit have paid more attention to combining different methodologies in carrying out the thematic evaluations (fitness for purpose). The main data usually consists of the self-assessment of higher education institutions (or degree programmes), other materials requested by the evaluation team, data collected during the site visit or data collected in seminars from participants of the evaluation. Depending on the focus of the evaluation or the number of evaluation objects, it is not always possible or relevant to organise site visits.

Compared to the thematic evaluations carried out in FINHEEC (–2014), a wider range of data is now used in thematic evaluations. The evaluations are based on data obtained by using a number of qualitative and quantitative methods and by working together with higher education institutions, students and stakeholders. The role of participatory methods has increased. As in audit projects, workshops are used in parallel with interviews to diversify the data collection. Sometimes it is challenging to use all the data collected in a meaningful way in the report.

Here are some examples of different data collection methods and data used in the thematic evaluations mentioned in Chapter 5:

### Evaluations on fields of study 2017–2021 (business, humanities, social sciences, technology, law, social and health care, medical education)

- National feedback surveys (Bachelor’s graduate survey, Master’s degree career monitoring survey, AVOP surveys)
- statistical data from Statistics Finland
- a field-specific and degree-level self-assessment survey
- curricula (medical education)
- site visits (medical education and law)
- focus group interviews/workshops
- case studies (business, humanities, social sciences and technology)
- the seminars/webinars to present and discuss preliminary conclusions of the evaluation and collaboratively come up with ideas on how to respond to the development challenges.



## Entrepreneurship in vocational education and training and in higher education, 2018

- student questionnaires
- thematic group interviews
- data collected from the Yhdessä yrittämään! events.

## Evaluation of the Teacher Education Forum, 2018 (Evaluation of Prime Minister Sipilä's Government Key Project on Teacher Education Reform)

- analysis of the documentation of the Teacher Education Forum
- interviews with the steering group for the Teacher Education Forum
- evaluation questionnaires to representatives of teacher education at the HEIs, members of the Forum and development projects
- workshop for development project representatives
- observation of the Forum's events
- focus group interviews with teacher educators and key national-level actors and policy-makers.

## IIEP-UNESCO Project on Flexible Learning Pathways (FLPs) in Higher Education. Finland's country case study, 2021

- national and institutional level interviews
- focus group discussions with students and alumni
- analysis of available national statistics on access, progression, transfer, completion and transition to the labour market
- consultation on a legislative framework for FLPs, procedures for the ECTS monitoring and the renewal process of principles for recognition of prior learning with experts at the Ministry of Education and Culture and coordinators of respective national development projects.

Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, new and innovative methods have been used in gathering the data. Since autumn 2020, the site visits and data collection seminars have been implemented partly or fully online. FINEEC supports the competence development of its staff, especially in relation to skills and competences that relate to evaluation projects. Training has focused on software (e.g. Nvivo and R), participatory methods, and media and communication.

# FINEEC's internal quality assurance

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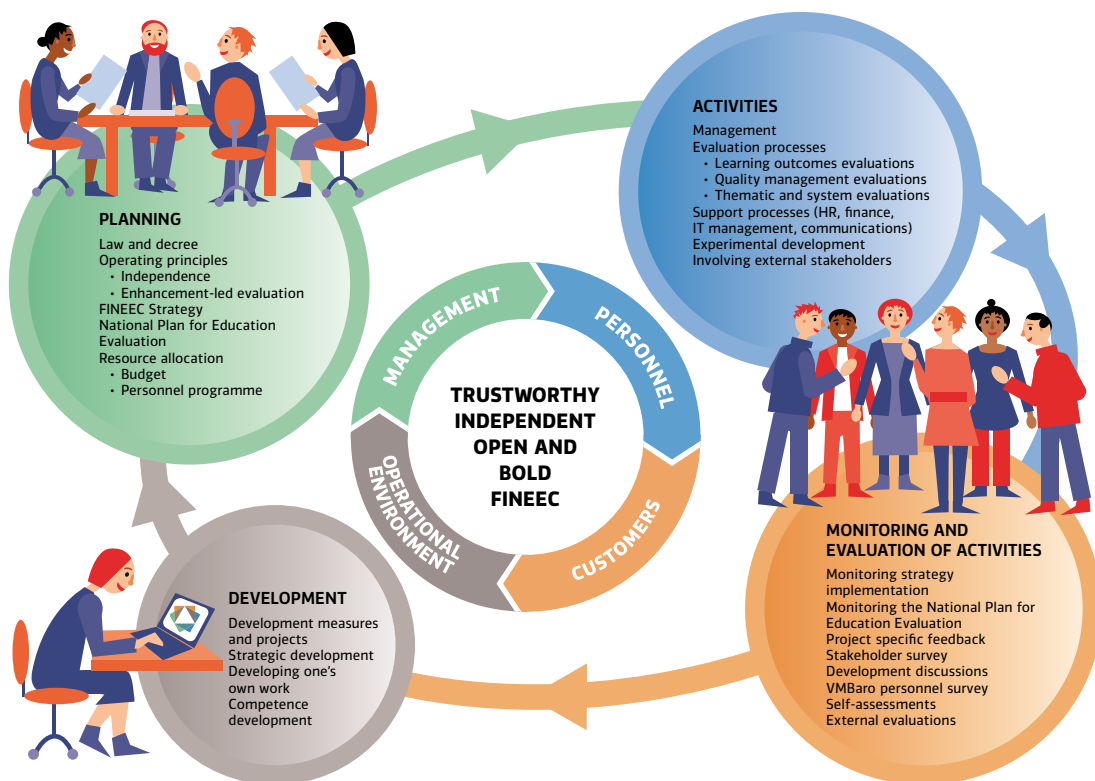
## 7.1 FINEEC's quality system

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Quality management is an integral part of FINEEC's management and steering of its activities. Quality management supports FINEEC's strategy and the achievement of its strategic goals. The implementation of the strategy, activities and the achievement of goals are systematically evaluated. FINEEC's activities are continuously developed and improved, utilising information obtained from evaluation projects, feedback systems and external evaluations.

FINEEC does not have a separate quality system or manual. Instead, quality management is built into FINEEC's steering of activities and the intranet, which brings together the key elements of quality management. The purpose is to maintain the agility of quality management in an organisation FINEEC's size. Another purpose is to make quality management a natural part of the daily activities of FINEEC's staff. Manuals, process descriptions and other support documentation support the quality management of evaluation activities.

The quality management is based on Deming's cycle of continuous improvement – the so-called PDCA cycle (Plan, Do, Study, Act). The model is a spiralling cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and development of activities. The goal is continuous learning and improvement in the organisation. In addition to the areas based on the cycle of continuous improvement, the key elements of the quality management are the external steering of activities, FINEEC's strategy and its management system. The key elements of FINEEC's quality management have been visualised in the cycle of continuous improvement in Figure 3.



**FIGURE 3. The quality system of FINEEC**

## 7.2 Responsibilities in terms of quality and development

The responsibilities in ensuring and improving the quality of activities at FINEEC are presented below.

The Director of FINEEC

- manages, supervises and develops the activities of FINEEC,
- is responsible for the performance of the activities and for the achievement of the objectives set for FINEEC and the implementation of the National Plan for Education Evaluation,
- is responsible for internal control, quality management, document management, risk management, data security and data protection,
- is responsible for the process management system as part of the management system.

## The Head of Unit

- is responsible for achieving the objectives of FINEEC and for the effectiveness, performance and development, finances, quality of outputs and services of the unit he or she manages,
- directs the work of staff under his or her immediate authority and acts as his or her immediate supervisor,
- is responsible for the consistent implementation of processes in the unit.

## The Process Manager

- is responsible for the process descriptions being up to date and the continuous improvement of the process,
- ensures that feedback on evaluation projects is collected in accordance with the feedback system, the feedback is analysed and processed, and development measures are followed up,
- ensures that the project managers and others involved in the evaluation are briefed and introduced to the evaluation process.

## Each FINEEC staff member

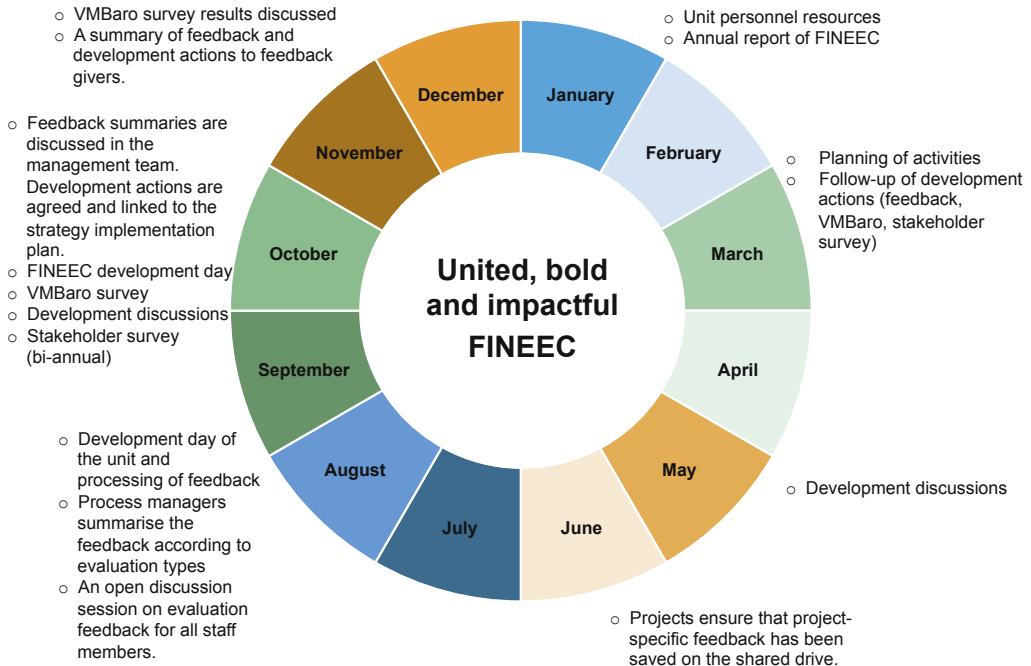
- is responsible for the quality of their own work and its development and participate in the development of the work community,
- operates in accordance with commonly agreed procedures and process descriptions,
- is obliged to provide information in a transparent and timely manner on matters he or she is responsible for,
- is obliged to inform not only the supervisors but also the Director of FINEEC about any issues that arise and are pending that are important for the FINEEC activities.

## 7.3 Feedback system and annual clock of operations development

During the past few years, FINEEC's quality system and feedback system have been renewed. An internal Operations Development Group with members from all FINEEC units was operational between 2018 and 2020. One of the main tasks of the group was to develop the feedback system of FINEEC. Common feedback questionnaires for all evaluation projects and a stakeholder survey were introduced. Another aim of the operations development was to strengthen the process management and development of FINEEC's evaluations. One of the actions taken was the nomination of process managers for different evaluation types in 2019. The feedback process, including its organisation and development, is a key responsibility of the process managers.

A unit-level annual clock (Figure 4) was created in 2020 by the process managers in collaboration with unit staff and FINEEC management. The purpose of the annual clock is to visualise the operations development at the unit level. Another key purpose of the annual clock is to strengthen the systematic process of using the information produced by the FINEEC quality system, especially ensuring that the development actions agreed are followed up systematically across the organisation.

### Unit annual clock for operational development



**FIGURE 4. Unit annual clock for operational development**

FINEEC has three main feedback mechanisms: (1) evaluation project feedback, (2) stakeholder survey and (3) VMBaro personnel survey.

In terms of higher education evaluations, FINEEC and its predecessor FINHEEC have been systematically collecting and using feedback from evaluation projects for improvement since 2006. Feedback has been gathered with an online survey both from the higher education institutions that have taken part in the evaluations and the evaluation team members. The feedback from the second-cycle audits and third-cycle pilot audits are presented in Annex 3. The audit feedback from autumn 2020 and spring 2021 will be processed in August 2021.

At FINEEC, feedback is collected from all evaluations using common online questionnaires for evaluation objects (such as higher education institutions) and for evaluation teams. Most of the questions on the feedback questionnaires are the same regardless of evaluation type, producing monitoring data as well as information on strengths and improvement areas across FINEEC. Based on the annual clock, each project manager of an evaluation project is responsible for collecting the feedback from the evaluation object(s) and evaluation team. Process managers are responsible for annually summarising the feedback for the evaluation type, such as audits of higher education institutions. The feedback is discussed in August/September within units (unit development day)—possible development actions, responsible persons and timelines are agreed, and counter feedback is given to feedback providers. A summary of the feedback for the evaluation type is presented to the FINEEC management team that decides on FINEEC-level development actions based on the feedback summaries. The FINEEC-level development actions are integrated into the follow-up procedures of the FINEEC strategy carried out by the management team. The new aspect integrated into the annual clock is the follow-up of the development actions in February/March.

The FINEEC stakeholder survey covering all education sectors, including higher education, is conducted bi-annually. The survey has been designed with Aula Research, a company that has also been commissioned to conduct the stakeholder survey in 2018 and 2020. The topics covered in 2020 included the brand and image of FINEEC, FINEEC's activities, use of information produced by FINEEC, stakeholder cooperation and communication, and FINEEC activities during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of the stakeholder survey are discussed together at the FINEEC level and in units when it concerns the sector-specific results.

VMBaro is an annual job satisfaction survey for personnel working in governmental organisations. VMBaro measures and monitors the job satisfaction of personnel, the success of the leadership and immediate superiors, and the functioning of the salary system. The survey provides average scores for job satisfaction at the FINEEC level and the unit level. The average results are also provided, in which FINEEC's results are compared with EDUFI and the average for governmental organisations. The results are discussed at the FINEEC level and the unit level. Based on the results, annual development areas are selected together by the unit staff.

## 7.4 Other quality assurance and enhancement procedures and practices

There is a strong culture of co-development and sharing good practices within the Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education and at FINEEC as a whole. The organisational culture is improvement-oriented and supports innovation and testing of new ideas and methods. Co-development takes place as part of the everyday activities, in ad hoc meetings and workshops in which processes and methods are shared, discussed and collaboratively refined and developed. Examples of such processes and methods are the meta-synthesis of audits, online site visits, the workshop method to name a few. Several collaborative meetings and sessions have been held within the unit, e.g. to discuss different aspects of the new audit framework with the aim to induct all unit staff members but also to create a common understanding of the framework, principles, criteria and process. The free exchange of ideas and experiences in the unit also fosters internal

quality management and ensures uniformity of the evaluation practices from one audit to the next. When possible and relevant, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee and/or external stakeholders are involved in the improvement of activities.

Development discussions with staff are organised twice a year to agree on individual work duties and competence development targets as well as to have a feedback dialogue between the staff member and his or her superior. Based on the individual discussions, collective FINEEC-level improvement areas are also defined, and development actions are agreed on as part of the management team's annual cycle. A FINEEC development day is organised annually to support the development and enhancement of topics that relate to strategic objectives of FINEEC or other key improvement areas.

Self-assessments have been conducted bi-annually since 2018. The self-assessment of 2018 was conducted with the Evaluation Council, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee and the management team to assess the achievement of the FINEEC strategy for 2016–2020 and to plan the 2020–2023 strategy. The self-assessment of 2020 was organised for all FINEEC staff. The topics were connected to the strategic objectives of 2020–2023 and concerned leadership, self-management (expertise, boldness and continuous improvement) and competence development. Based on the self-assessment workshop of 2020, the following key strengths and development actions were identified.

#### Strengths

1. Improvement-orientation. The participation of staff in development activities has been well-ensured.
2. A lot of effort has been made to support well-being at work, a sense of community and staff development.
3. Customer-orientation has improved at FINEEC.

#### Development actions

1. Drafting and implementing a strategic communications plan that provides clear structures, responsibilities and focus areas. Further staff training and support in communications to be organised.
2. Re-organisation of internal development activities and decreasing workload related to the internal development of activities ('less is more'). Prioritising development targets and ensuring that development actions have had an effect.
3. Promoting the sharing of competences across units and doing things together. Creating new cross-sectoral possibilities for teamwork and improving the use and visibility of staff competences.

The development actions were connected to the strategy implementation and its follow-up.

In order to safeguard the evaluation process from sudden or unexpected illness—or other causes disabling staff from managing the process—FINEEC (and its predecessor FINHEEC) has used a backup system of project managers. The backup system is standard practice, especially in audits of higher education institutions. In each audit project, the project manager is assigned a colleague who acts as his or her backup in the project, usually attending all meetings of the audit team. The backup person also participates in the site visit. The backup system also has additional benefits. It provides a natural way for project managers to share experiences and best practices without an added mechanism. The backup system also functions as an induction mechanism for new staff members. New staff members are not normally assigned evaluation projects of their own. Ideally, they will first act as a backup for a more experienced colleague who will train them on the job. Process managers also have the responsibility to introduce new staff members to the process of the specific evaluation type.

FINEEC also has a training procedure that is followed by each staff member, which includes necessary practical information a new employee needs to know about working at FINEEC. The members of a new Higher Education Evaluation Committee are likewise provided with comprehensive training at the beginning of their term.

There are a number of sites and documents, such as principles for composing evaluation teams, that support the maintenance and assurance of quality in evaluation projects. The FINEEC intranet site is well-developed and has a lot of information to support the daily activities of the staff. Process descriptions for different evaluation types are available on the FINEEC intranet. The audit project manager's guide is another key document which includes, in detail, all phases of an audit project from the project manager's perspective. The main aim of this guide is to support new staff members and to transfer some of the tacit knowledge related to audits. A comprehensive guide for project managers of thematic evaluations has also been developed by an internal working group.

FINEEC has an internal quality assurance procedure in place for its evaluation reports. All FINEEC reports are read by the Head of Unit and Director of FINEEC before publishing the report. An internal peer-reading process has also been introduced for the third-cycle audits in which one colleague from the unit (not involved in the audit project) reads and comments on the audit report. This process is intended to promote the quality and consistency of reports.

It is a part of good administration that a person with a conflict of interest does not in any way participate in the handling or evaluation of a matter. According to the Administrative Procedure Act, the provisions on the disqualification of officials also apply to members of multi-member bodies and other persons participating in the decision of a matter, as well as inspectors in their inspection duties (Section 27.2). These include the chairpersons and members of evaluation and audit teams. Thus, the disqualification of committee members, unit employees and evaluation team members is based on the Administrative Procedure Act, which for its part contributes to the credibility and objectivity of evaluation activities. The members of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee—and the members of the evaluation and audit teams appointed by it—do not participate in the evaluation of their own HEI or decision-making pertaining to it in any way.



# FINEEC's international activities

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Internationalisation has been a long-term strategic aim for FINEEC and its predecessor FINHEEC. International evaluation activities and cooperation are also laid out as an operational principle in the Government Decree on FINEEC. During the latest strategy process, FINEEC activities were considered to have reached the point where internationalisation is considered a cross-sectional and cross-cutting principle of all activities and is integrated into all strategic evaluation areas. For this reason, internationalisation is no longer mentioned as a separate topic in the current FINEEC strategy.

Internationalisation is important from many perspectives. The international evaluations and activities of FINEEC and the Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education promote the awareness, trustworthiness and brand of the agency but also the evaluations it conducts. In addition, international evaluations are a means to support the internationalisation of Finnish higher education institutions. FINEEC experts also play a role in national and international higher education policy forums. International forums and collaboration provide great opportunities for sharing, learning and building of competences.

FINEEC's international activities can be divided into five categories: (1) international/cross-border quality audits, (2) international events organised and hosted by FINEEC, (3) international projects, (4) long-term cooperation and networking with international organisations and QA agencies and (5) FINEEC staff participation in international online seminars and conferences.

1. **International/cross-border quality audits:** As mentioned in Chapter 6, quality audits may be commissioned from FINEEC by international HEIs. FINEEC has conducted one cross-border audit in Austria in the second cycle and is currently in the process of implementing one audit in Austria (2021) and one in Slovenia (2022) based on the FINEEC third-cycle audit framework. The international evaluations and audits of Finnish HEIs have also contributed to the internationalisation of FINEEC and its evaluation activities. Half of the audits in the second cycle of audits were conducted by an international team. In the third cycle, four out of the seven audits conducted by June 2021 were international. In addition, FINEEC has conducted five engineering programme accreditations leading to the international EUR-ACE label since 2017.

2. **International events organised and hosted by FINEEC:** Besides international evaluations, international guests and study groups frequently visited FINEEC's premises until spring 2020. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all on-site visits came to a halt and were replaced by online communication. Furthermore, FINEEC has hosted a few international online seminars since spring 2020. Examples of events include a webinar on lessons learned from institutional reviews organised by FINEEC and the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education in November 2020; a World Bank study visit for the Belarus Ministry of Education delegation in connection with the Belarus Higher Education Modernisation Project in December 2019; a meeting between FINEEC and NVAO on new audit models in June 2019; hosting a visit of the Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) in the framework of the Erasmus project, Modelling External Quality Assurance in the Changing Context, in October 2019; and hosting a visit by the Swedish Higher Education Authority in 2018 and 2019.
3. **International projects:** The Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education has been involved in the following international projects since 2017.

***Twining projects:***

- 2021–2023 – Further support for the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework in the Republic of North Macedonia in partnership with Croatia (bending).
- 2019–2021 – Project title: Enhancing the quality and effectiveness of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system in Moldova.

FINEEC has previously carried out twinning projects in Azerbaijan with Estonia (2015–2017) and in Armenia with Germany (2014–2016).

***Nordic and European projects:***

- 2021–2024: Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance (bending)
- 2021– ENQA Working Group on Microcredentials
- 2020–2021: MICROBOL project: Micro-credentials and the Bologna Key Commitments (FINEEC representative participating in the QA group and national consultation team)
- Ongoing: Bologna Process Implementation reporting in the framework of the European higher education area (FINEEC representative consulting the Ministry of Education and Culture regarding national QA procedures)
- Annual project by the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA)
- 2015–2018 Nordic Council of Ministers Ad Hoc Group for Quality in Higher Education

***Other international projects:***

- 2018–2021: IIEP-UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4 project: Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education. The IIEP-UNESCO research project included eight country case studies from different regions. FINEEC was responsible for Finland's country case study. The project enabled international benchmarking of good practices and mutual learning. Finland was invited to comment on Jamaica's country case study and vice versa. IIEP will organise an international policy forum in summer 2021.

4. **International networks and memberships:** The Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education is involved in long-term cooperation with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA, including Baltic agencies bi-annually), the Quality Audit Network (QAN), the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF).
5. **FINEEC staff participation in international seminars and conferences:** The staff of the unit are encouraged to participate and present papers at international seminars and conferences related to the fields of the agency. Participation in these events is strongly supported by the Head of the Unit.

The Unit has been able to establish itself well within the European context. The Unit works as an important link between the European framework and Finnish quality assurance stakeholders. Different projects are an effective means to develop the capacity of the staff. Available resources (human, financial, etc.) are studied before the start of each project to avoid excessive workloads and to verify that the project can be implemented as planned. This is a good practice that also enhances the motivation of the staff. International online webinars and meetings have increased during the pandemic, providing new opportunities for FINEEC to interact, learn from others and share its experiences more widely than before.

# Compliance with European standards and guidelines (Part 3)

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## 9.1 ESG STANDARD 3.1. Activities, policy and process for quality assurance

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### Standard:

*Agencies should regularly undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work.*

### FINEEC Compliance:

The activities, policies and processes of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre in line with Part 2 of the ESG are described in chapters 4, 10 and 11 of this self-assessment report.

Provisions on the duties and organisation of FINEEC are laid down in Act 1295/2013 and Government decree 1317/2013. The mission and strategic objectives of FINEEC are publicly available on the FINEEC website. FINEEC's strategic goals for impact are to advance learning and the building of competences, increase equality in education, improve the education system's functionality, and develop the quality of education. All evaluation projects in the National Education Evaluation Plan 2020–2023 produce evaluation information for one or several of the four impact goals. In addition to individual evaluation projects, FINEEC conducts thematic analyses of its evaluations—from early childhood education to higher education—that are structured around the four impact goals. Human resources have been allocated to create a systematic process in the whole FINEEC and to carry out this work.

Key values set out in the strategy to guide the work of FINEEC are trustworthiness, independence, openness and boldness. FINEEC bases evaluation activities on collected data and treats education providers equally. Independence is ensured on the organisational, operational and decision-making levels. (See the analysis of ESG 3.3.) FINEEC also acts openly and makes operating principles and practices transparent. Boldness is a new value in FINEEC. The aim is that FINEEC evaluation experts and management take an active role in societal discussions, including social media. They are encouraged to express their opinions and to bring forward the expertise of the agency in discussions that relate to its activities. In general, FINEEC has taken a more active role in communicating about its activities to the wider public especially through social media.

FINEEC as an agency does not bend from choosing its own path or making decisions independently concerning its activities. As an example, on the brink of the Covid-19 crisis, FINEEC partly diverted from the National Education Evaluation Plan and prioritised the evaluation of the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on Finnish education at all levels because it was considered important. Nonetheless, all the higher education evaluation activities have been implemented as scheduled in the plan.

As mentioned, enhancement-led evaluation is the central operating principle of FINEEC, and it is also mentioned in the Government Decree on Finnish Education Evaluation Centre. FINEEC has compiled the premise, definition and underpinning values of enhancement-led evaluation in a single publication to create a common understanding and support the implementation of enhancement-led evaluations.

FINEEC's role in the Finnish higher education system is that of an evaluation body. FINEEC does not offer consultation services for Finnish HEIs. All information that is published by FINEEC is equally open to all institutions. When selecting experts for evaluations, FINEEC strives for equal treatment of institutions.

Stakeholders have a permanent position in FINEEC's governing bodies. Three of the members in the Higher Education Evaluation Committee come from universities, three from the universities of applied science, two from the national student unions (SYL & SAMOK) and one from working life outside of HEIs. The Evaluation Committee is nominated for a four-year period, and thus the composition is renewed every four years. All higher education evaluation teams include experts that represent the higher education sector, students and working life.

FINEEC has a regular dialogue with decision-makers such as the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and Education and Culture Committee of the Parliament of Finland. FINEEC effectively communicates the results of evaluations to decision-makers and takes their views into consideration when designing new evaluations and further actions. The Covid-19 pandemic is a recent example when FINEEC provided up-to-date information for decision-makers. Central labour unions and labour market organisations are among the bodies engaged in evaluations and other activities of FINEEC.

FINEEC has well-established partner relations with Universities Finland (Unifi), Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (Arene), National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) and Universities of Applied Sciences Students in Finland (SAMOK). These organisations provide expert candidates for FINEEC's activities and cooperate in various matters. FINEEC cooperates with research institutes for education research. Latest joint publication is with the Finnish Institute for Educational Research, University of Jyväskylä (Moitus, Weimer & Välimaa 2020).

FINEEC collects and analyses the feedback and opinions of stakeholders to see that the goals and key values are realised in daily activities (see Chapter 7). Improvements are made to ensure that the goals and values are met.

## 9.2 ESG STANDARD 3.2 Official status

### Standard:

*Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.*

### FINEEC Compliance:

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre is formally recognised as the primary organisation in charge of the evaluation of higher education in Finland. Its position and tasks are stipulated in the Act on FINEEC (1295/2013) and Government Decree on FINEEC (1317/2013).

The Act states that:

#### Section 1. Mandate

1. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre operates in the capacity of an independent expert organisation for external evaluations of education. It produces information to serve decision-making in education policy and for the purpose of fostering education.
2. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre operates within the branch of government of the Ministry of Education and Culture.

#### Section 2. Mission

3. The mission of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre is to:

(1) conduct evaluations related to education and teaching and to the providers of education and the activities of higher education institutions in accordance with an evaluation plan referred to in section 5;

While the Act on FINEEC stipulates:

#### Section 1. Operating principles of the Evaluation Centre

4. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre shall apply principles of independent and enhancement-led evaluation in its operations.
5. It shall publish the evaluation criteria used and the results of evaluations as well as communicate with its stakeholders. Educational institutions, providers of education and training and institutions of higher education subject to an evaluation shall be informed of their evaluation results.
6. It shall participate in international evaluation activities and cooperation.
7. It shall participate in international evaluation of its own activities on a regular basis.

Furthermore, the mandate and the status of FINEEC are reflected both in the Universities Act (558/2009) and the Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014).

Together, this legislation provides a solid foundation for FINEEC's operations in the evaluation of higher education institutions in Finland and the mandate to participate in international evaluation activities and cooperation.

### 9.3 ESG STANDARD 3.3 Independence

#### Standard:

*Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third-party influence.*

#### FINEEC Compliance:

The Independence of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre is stated in the law. That gives the backbone to all declarations of independence in all FINEEC communications: web pages, training of experts, training of the new Evaluation Council and Higher Education Evaluation Committee members, the introduction of new staff members and discussions with the Finnish National Agency for Education, ministries and other stakeholders.

The independence statement in the law is adopted in FINEEC's activities so that FINEEC decides independently on the implementation of the evaluations, the methods used, the members of the evaluation teams, timetables, content of reports and other decisions pertaining to higher education evaluations. Other interested parties (such as higher education institutions, ministries and stakeholders) have no effect on FINEEC's decisions or evaluation results.

The Higher Education Evaluation Committee is responsible for the decisions concerning higher education: (1) Project plans and composition of planning and evaluation teams for evaluations of higher education institutions and (2) Outcomes of higher education institutions.

The Higher Education Evaluation Committee is selected from the candidates put forward by the HEIs and student unions. The Evaluation Council proposes the composition to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which then appoints the Committee. Three of the members come from universities, three come from the universities of applied science, two are student members and one is a working life representative. The composition of the Committee is balanced as to gender and regional and official languages. The language balance means that at least one member comes from the Swedish-speaking minority. In case of a need to dismiss a committee member, the Evaluation Council takes the proposal to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which then acts upon it.

The independence of the Committee's decisions is reinforced by the emphasis on the policy that members of FINEEC's Higher Education Evaluation Committee are not representatives of their employers (e.g. the HEIs or the unions) but represent the whole field of Finnish higher education as independent experts. In addition, FINEEC has a non-conflict-of-interest policy, which is common to all Finnish civil services, whereby no person with a personal interest in the matter can have any role in the conduct of its evaluation or making decisions about it.

FINEEC operates as a separate administrative unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education. The financial independence from the host organisation is guaranteed by a separate sub-item in the state budget, which the agency can independently decide how to use.

FINEEC conducts its staff recruitment independently, utilising a recruitment database for governmental organisations. All positions longer than 6 months must be filled by open call. The Director decides on opening a new position and appoints the new employee. The financial constraints on the state budget do limit the right to appoint new staff. FINEEC's management team decides on the recruitment team that will carry out the interviews. Formally, the Head of the Unit proposes to the Director the result of the recruitment process.

## 9.4 ESG STANDARD 3.4 Thematic analysis

### Standard:

*Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.*



## FINEEC Compliance:

Thematic analyses have been a key development area of FINEEC. It is clear that there is a need for the agency to produce analysis and summaries that go beyond the individual evaluation reports. There is a demand for information that summarises trends, strengths and areas for improvement on the system level to support policy-making, decision-making and improvement of education at all levels of the education system. The information is also important for indicating important topics for future evaluation projects and to support the development of national evaluation systems. It is also clear that the pace at which thematic analyses have been conducted (for instance, at the end of an audit cycle) is too slow. Moreover, it has been discussed at FINEEC for several years that its evaluation projects collect a lot of data that could be better utilised across different evaluation projects to produce new analysis and information. The thematic analyses have been incorporated into the current National Education Evaluation Plan, which has been structured around key impact/focus areas. During the evaluation plan period, the aim is that FINEEC produces thematic analyses of these four focus areas.

FINEEC has been producing agency-level thematic analyses in the form of summary publications covering all education sectors as well as thematic analyses focusing on specific evaluation types. Examples of such analysis of higher education are the thematic analysis of the second cycle of audits (Nordblad et al. 2020) and the summary of the evaluations of higher education in business, humanities, technology and social sciences (Pyykkö et al. 2020). The thematic analysis of the second cycle of audits was based on audit reports of the 40 HEIs audited during the cycle. The analysis was conducted by four FINEEC experts and covered all assessment areas. The analysis focused on the strengths and improvement areas as well as characteristics of different levels of quality management (especially the advanced level). The results were published in Finnish, and the publication was subsequently translated into Swedish and English.

The agency's process for implementing agency-wide thematic analyses of the strategic focus areas is currently being finalised. A system is being set up in which all project managers have a responsibility to produce summaries on the focus area(s) covered in the evaluation project. The information produced is analysed at the FINEEC level, and summaries on the four key focus areas are published. This process concerns all FINEEC evaluation types. However, in terms of the third-cycle audits of higher education institutions, a slightly different process has been designed and agreed on. In addition to the four focus areas, the thematic analysis concerning audits will also cover other key topics that relate to the evaluation criteria of audits. Due to a big interest in conducting thematic analyses among unit experts, it was agreed that each expert in the unit is responsible for the analysis of a specific topic. Data will be analysed in a cumulative manner, and summary publications highlighting specific evaluation areas of the audit are published annually. The analysis will highlight specific enhancement areas of the Finnish HEIs, which will then be connected as topics to FINEEC events. The first analysis of audit reports in which the new process is applied will be conducted in summer 2021.

## 9.5 ESG STANDARD 3.5 Resources

### Standard:

*Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.*

### FINEEC Compliance:

The activities of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre are funded in the state budget by a separate sub-item under the branch of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The overall budget of the Centre in 2021 is approximately 4.5 million euros, of which 3.2 million euros account for labour costs. The labour costs of the Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education are approximately 640 000 euros in 2021.

The Unit comprises the Head of Unit, four Counsellors of Evaluation and five Senior Evaluation Advisors. All Counsellors and Senior Evaluation Advisors are expected to have a master's degree. Four employees of the unit currently hold a PhD, and one is a doctoral student. At the time of writing this SAR, there are two Counsellors of Evaluation and four Senior Evaluation Advisors working in the unit. The duties of experts in the unit cover a wide spectrum of tasks, and there is little administrative support available in evaluation projects. The unit's human resources are sufficient but occasionally affected by study and other leaves of absence. At times, the unit's staff have a heavy workload, conducting audits and other evaluations simultaneously and taking care of other administrative, internal development and evaluation-related tasks. These issues have come up in the annual VMBaro survey and in the SWOT of this SAR. The possible reorganisation of FINEEC staff is currently discussed in the FINEEC management team.

The Higher Education Evaluation Committee includes members from both sectors of the higher education system in addition to student and working life representatives. They have extensive experience in evaluation, quality assurance systems and higher education. The Unit's staff have also gathered substantial experience during the last 25 years of higher education evaluation which is then passed on to newer colleagues in the unit. Opportunities to conduct different types of evaluations, systematic training in evaluation methods and quality management processes, as well as international work, have greatly strengthened the skills and expertise of the Unit as a whole. FINEEC has a working group for staff competence development, which plans and organises training for the personnel.

FINEEC is in the process of ensuring resources for the future. Parts of FINEEC's activities are funded with annual development grants from the Ministry of Education and Culture. From FINEEC's perspective, the work would be more sustainable if those annual grants would be part of the regular budget. Even if FINEEC's wishes are not met, the audits of higher education institutions are not threatened, since they are funded with fees from the institutions and from

the regular budget. The Covid-19 pandemic will have a negative effect on the state budget in the coming years, and therefore it is important that FINEEC is firmly able to demonstrate the value of its work and effective use of resources.

## 9.6 ESG STANDARD 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

### Standard:

*Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.*

### FINEEC Compliance:

FINEEC's internal quality system is described in detail in Chapter 7. Quality management is an integral part of FINEEC's management and steering of its activities, but it is also more widely a part of the daily activities of staff and the agency. FINEEC quality management is based on Deming's cycle of continuous improvement – the so-called PDCA cycle. Its core is the systematic planning, implementation and follow-up of the strategic objectives and evaluations, and the continuous improvement of activities.

The Director of FINEEC is responsible for the quality of the activities and their development. Every FINEEC staff member is responsible for the quality of his or her own work and its development, to act in accordance with the common procedures and to participate in the development of the work community. Each head of unit participates in the management of FINEEC and is responsible for achieving the objectives of FINEEC and for the effectiveness, performance and development, finances, quality of outputs and services of the unit he or she manages.

FINEEC has systematic procedures for training new staff members, which includes the same training procedures for all new FINEEC staff, evaluation-type specific training organised by process managers and a backup system for project managers. The FINEEC working group for competence development is currently updating FINEEC's personnel evaluation competence development plan. The plan has been discussed in the management team, units and the quality evaluation team. Audit and EUR-ACE manuals, systematic and documented process descriptions for evaluation processes and project manager guides (audits and thematic evaluations) support—together with continuous internal dialogue and co-development activities—the systematic implementation of the evaluation processes. FINEEC also trains all external experts and the Higher Education Evaluation Committee members.

FINEEC has a non-conflict-of-interest policy, which is common to all Finnish civil services, whereby no person with a personal interest in the matter can have any role in the conduct of its evaluation or making decisions on it. As Finnish government officials, FINEEC's employees are

bound by the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014). The Act states, among other things, that it is the duty of authorities to promote equality and non-discrimination in all their activities. The Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education aims to maintain a gender balance of at least 2:3 in all its evaluation teams, but in recent years, the balance has been very close to 1:1, although the engineering programme accreditations tend to challenge the balance slightly.

FINEEC has not used subcontractors in higher education evaluations but would expect them to conform to the ESG should the services of external actors be required.

FINEEC has conducted one cross-border audit so far in 2013, and two cross-border audits will be conducted 2021–2022. In cross-border audits, the same principles and processes are applied concerning internal quality assurance and professional conduct as in the audits carried out in Finland.

## 9.7 ESG STANDARD 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies

### Standard:

*Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.*

### FINEEC Compliance:

FINEEC has taken part in external reviews cyclically and intends to do so in the future. The previous ENQA review in 2016–2017 was postponed for a year due to the merger of Finnish evaluation bodies. The current review is conducted within the five-year framework.

Regarding the engineering programme accreditations, FINEEC takes part in additional external reviews conducted by ENAEE. The last ENAEE review was completed in 2020.

# Compliance with the European standards and guidelines (Part 2)

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As part of this SAR, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee made a self-assessment against the Part II of ESG and its overall assessment of FINEEC's activities was 4,6 in a scale from 1 (insufficient) to 5 (excellent). The grade 4 (good) were given to FINEEC's ability to address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG, and to FINEEC's success in designing methodologies fit for purpose. To constantly improve in these areas is a positive challenge for FINEEC.

## 10.1 ESG STANDARD 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

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### Standard:

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

### FINEEC Compliance:

### Quality audits

The evaluation areas of audits are:

I HEI creates competence

- The planning of education
- The implementation of education
- The evaluation and enhancement of education
- Examples of successful enhancement activities

## II HEI promotes impact and renewal

- Managing societal engagement and impact
- Research, development and innovation activities and artistic activities with impact
- Promoting renewal through the organisational culture
- Examples of successful enhancement activities

## III HEI enhances quality and well-being

- Using the quality system in strategic management
- Supporting the competence development and well-being of the staff
- Functionality and development of the quality system
- Examples of successful enhancement activities

## IV HEI as a learning organisation

- An evaluation area selected by the HEI

Table 1 illustrates how the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG is addressed in FINEEC audits. The descriptions provided below are based on the assessment criteria for the level good required for passing the audit, except for 1.8 and 1.10.

**TABLE 3. Consideration of internal quality assurance in FINEEC audits**

Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance	How FINEEC audits address the ESG Part 1
<p><b>1.1 Policy for quality assurance</b>            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.</p>	<p><b>Quality policy</b>            The principles, objectives and responsibilities of the quality system constitute the HEI's quality policy, which is public. The quality policy forms a common basis for the quality work.</p> <p><b>Quality system's link with strategic management</b>            The information generated by the quality system is used in the management of the HEI. The system supports the profile of the HEI, the achievement of its objectives related to the core duties and the implementation of its strategy.</p> <p><b>Development of the quality system</b>            The HEI has a functioning quality system which covers its core duties. The quality system helps the HEI to recognise development needs and to enhance its activities in a goal-oriented manner. There is evidence of the functionality and impact of the quality system on the enhancement of the core duties. The system is developed in a systematic manner. The quality culture of the HEI is participatory and open.</p> <p><b>Participation in enhancement activities</b>            Staff, students and external stakeholders participate in the enhancement of the HEI's activities in a purposeful manner.</p>
<p><b>1.2 Design and approval of programmes</b>            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.<sup>7</sup></p>	<p><b>Quality management of degree education and other provision</b>            The degree programmes and other provision are planned with clearly defined learning outcomes. The planning process ensures that the educational provision is in line with the HEI's strategy and relevant for working life. Aspects concerning internationalisation and continuous learning needs are ensured in the planning process. In terms of degrees, it is ensured that they correspond with the National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules.</p> <p>Research, development, innovation, and artistic activities are integrated in the education in a way that links research-based information to the education in a relevant way.</p> <p>The students' workload is defined according to the principles of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). The HEI has systematic procedures for approving the plans for degree programmes or other study entities.</p> <p><b>Involvement of staff, students, and external stakeholders in quality work</b></p> <p>The HEI systematically collects and uses feedback data on the needs of students, the implementation of the education and the progress of studies to enhance the education. Feedback-on-feedback, i.e., information on changes introduced based on student feedback is provided to students in an appropriate manner.</p> <p>Feedback and evaluation data are used systematically in the enhancement of education. The needs of staff and students are considered in the development of support services.</p>

<p><b>1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment</b> 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.</p>	<p><b>Student-centred approach</b> The education is implemented in a manner that supports target-oriented learning and the active role of students in their own learning process. Students receive feedback on their learning which helps them achieve the learning outcomes. The procedures connected with the implementation of education support the efficient progress and completion of studies as well as the integration of students with professional life.</p> <p>The education is planned so that the teaching methods, assessment of learning, and learning environments support the achievement of the learning outcomes. Students and external stakeholders participate in the planning of education in a purposeful manner.</p> <p>The well-being and equality of students are promoted throughout the student's study path. The HEI provides adequate resources, counselling and other services to support the progress of studies and learning.</p>
<p><b>1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification</b> 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.</p>	<p><b>Regulations</b> The HEI applies the provisions and regulations concerning student admission, the recognition of prior learning, progress of studies and completion of degrees consistently and transparently.</p>
<p><b>1.5 Teaching staff</b> 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.</p>	<p><b>Staff competence development and well-being and transparent recruitment procedures</b> The HEI has functioning procedures to identify development needs concerning staff competence and to support the development of staff competence.</p> <p>The HEI has transparent procedures for staff recruitment.</p> <p>The HEI has systematic procedures to support the well-being, equality and non-discrimination of staff.</p>
<p><b>1.6 Learning resources and student support</b> Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.</p>	<p><b>Support, counselling and guidance services</b> The HEI provides adequate resources, counselling and other services to support the progress of studies and learning.</p> <p>The needs of staff and students are considered in the development of support services.</p>
<p><b>1.7 Information management</b> Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.</p>	<p><b>Monitoring and information use for development and enhancement</b> The HEI monitors and evaluates the degree programmes and other provision to ensure that they are up to date with regard to the latest research findings as well as the changing needs of the society and working life.</p> <p>In the degree programmes and other provision, how well the intended learning outcomes are achieved is analysed.</p> <p>Information produced by the HEI's analysis of its operational environment is used to set the direction for its activities.</p> <p>The information generated by the quality system is used in the management of the HEI. The system supports the profile of the HEI, the achievement of its objectives related to the core duties and the implementation of its strategy</p>



<p><b>1.8 Public information</b> Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.</p>	<p>The audit team visits the audited HEI's website and intranet site as part of the assessment process.</p> <p>In general, the Finnish HEIs have well-developed websites with all key information on their activities and programmes. All degree programmes offered by the Finnish HEIs are also published on Studyinfo.fi where the applications to programmes are also made.</p> <p>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. The HEIs deliver their data once a year.</p> <p>Vipunen.fi reporting portal include HEI data, e.g. on applicants, enrolled students and graduates, placement after graduation, research publications, international activity, feedback and career monitoring.</p>
<p><b>1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes</b> 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.</p>	<p><b>Monitoring and evaluation of degree programmes and other provision</b> The HEI monitors and evaluates the degree programmes and other provision to ensure that they are up to date regarding the latest research findings as well as the changing needs of the society and working life. Opportunities for continuous learning are ensured in the educational provision. In the degree programmes and other provision, how well the intended learning outcomes are achieved is analysed.</p>
<p><b>1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance</b> Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.</p>	<p>Finnish HEIs are required to regularly participate in external evaluation of their activities and quality systems. HEIs decide how they meet their statutory obligation. FINEEC conducts institutional audits in line with the ESG 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.</p>

## Cross-border audits

FINEEC is commissioned to conduct a cross-border audit of the University of Graz, Austria, in 2021 and the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 2022. FINEEC also conducted the audit of the University of Graz in 2013. As a principle, the same audit framework is applied in the cross-border audits as in the audits of Finnish higher education institutions. However, it is possible to make some small adjustments in the framework or process, for example, to comply with the national legislation. Any changes to the framework or process are subject to negotiations.

## Engineering programme accreditations

The following table explains how FINEEC's engineering programme accreditation standards address the ESG Part 1. A self-assessment template for the institutions addresses the standards, and a report template for the accreditation team helps in concentrating on the right questions and finding sufficient evidence. The accreditation standards and both templates are available on the FINEEC website.

**TABLE 4. Consideration of internal quality assurance in FINEEC engineering programme accreditation**

Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance	How FINEEC Engineering programme accreditation standards address the ESG Part 1
<p><b>1.1 Policy for quality assurance</b> 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.</p>	<p>15) The quality management procedures of the programme are consistent with the quality policy of the higher education institution. 16) The organisation and decision-making processes of the programme are fit for effective management. 17) In the education programme, the programme aims, curriculum, teaching and learning process, resources and partnerships and quality management are reviewed and developed in a systematic and regular manner, taking into account analysis of results of student admissions, students' study progress, achieved learning levels, feedback from students, graduates and employers, and graduate's employment data. 18) In the programme, up-to-date public information is provided about its objectives, teaching and learning process, resources, quality management procedures and results.</p>
<p><b>1.2 Design and approval of programmes</b> 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.</p>	<p>1) The programme aims, which describe the educational task and purpose of the programme, are consistent with the mission of the higher education institution and reflect the identified needs of employers and other stakeholders. 2) 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, and these are linked to relevant national qualification frameworks (if applicable) and with the FINEEC reference programme learning outcomes (defined in the accreditation manual). 3) The course-level learning outcomes, including thesis work and possible practical training, aggregate to the programme's learning outcomes. 8) 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.</p>
<p><b>1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment</b> 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.</p>	<p>8) 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.</p>
<p><b>1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification</b> 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.</p>	<p>6) 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. 7) Students are informed of regulations and guidelines that concern recognition of prior learning, the progress of studies and graduation.</p>
<p><b>1.5 Teaching staff</b> 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.</p>	<p>9) The academic staff are sufficient in number and qualification to enable students to achieve the learning outcomes of the programme. There are arrangements in place to keep the pedagogical and professional competence of the academic staff up to date. 10) 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.</p>

<p><b>1.6 Learning resources and student support</b> Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.</p>	<p>11) The students are provided with adequate and accessible support services to enable the achievement of the programme's learning outcomes. 12) The classrooms, computing facilities, software, laboratories, workshops, libraries and associated equipment and services are sufficient and accessible to enable students to achieve the programme's learning outcomes. 13) The HEI and the programme have external partnerships that are adequate for achieving the programme's learning outcomes. 14) The financial resources are sufficient to implement the learning process as planned and to further develop it.</p>
<p><b>1.7 Information management</b> Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.</p>	<p>17) 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, taking into account analysis of results of student admissions, students' study progress, achieved learning levels, as well as student, graduate and employer feedback and graduate employment data.</p>
<p><b>1.8 Public information</b> Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, that is clear, accurate, objective, up to date and readily accessible.</p>	<p>18) The programme provides up-to-date public information about its objectives, teaching and learning process, resources, quality management procedures and results.</p>
<p><b>1.9 Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes</b> 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.</p>	<p>1) The programme aims, which describe the educational task and purpose of the programme, are consistent with the mission of the higher education institution and reflect the identified needs of employers and other stakeholders. 17) 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, taking into account analysis of results of student admissions, students' study progress, achieved learning levels, as well as student, graduate and employer feedback and graduate employment data.</p>
<p><b>1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance</b> Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.</p>	<p>The engineering programme accreditation is a voluntary external quality assurance method for the institutions. The accreditation is valid for six years.</p>

## Thematic evaluations

In thematic evaluations, the focus of the project is usually a topic that is not directly related to the internal quality assurance of HEIs (see chapters 5 & 6). The thematic evaluations of FINEEC are guided by the National Education Evaluation Plan, and as such, they do not follow ESG Part 1. The way thematic evaluations are planned and implemented in Finland enables FINEEC as a national evaluation agency to address topics that are important to the development of the Finnish higher education sector. It is also important that the different national external evaluation mechanisms are not too similar but rather complement each other. This way, the different mechanisms produce different types of information addressing different issues and more broadly highlight the strengths and improvement areas of the Finnish HEIs.

## 10.2 ESG STANDARD 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

### 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.*

### FINEEC Compliance:

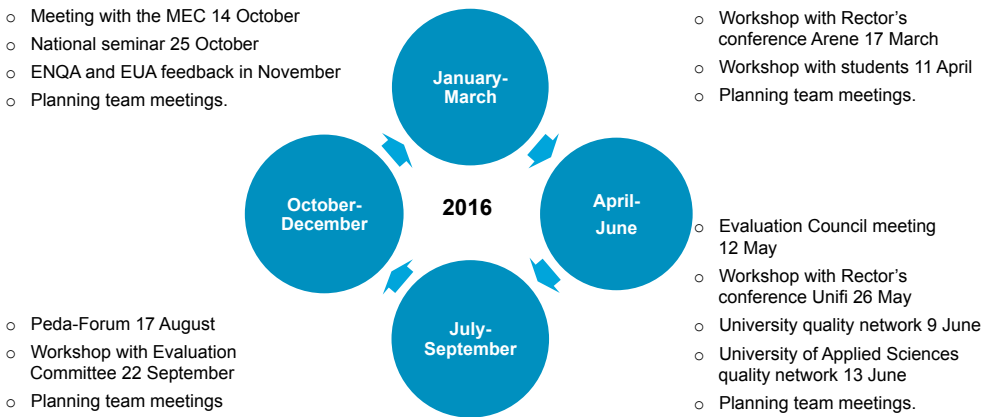
#### Quality audits

The audit method is based on respecting the autonomy of HEIs and having trust in the institutions' intentions regarding their statutory responsibility for the quality of their operations. The participating HEIs have decided on the development and form of their quality systems. The HEIs decide what they strategically aim for, how they go about achieving their aims as well as following up and improving their activities. FINEEC audits, within the framework of the evaluation criteria, assess how well the HEIs succeed in their work. The goal is to help HEIs to recognise the strengths, good practices and areas in need of development in their activities. The institutions are supported in their efforts to reach their strategic objectives and in directing future development activities in order to create a framework for the institutions' continuous development.

The planning of the third-cycle audit framework was conducted in a participatory process in which representatives of key stakeholders were engaged and heard. A planning team with eight members was nominated to plan the new framework. Six of the members represented the university and university of applied sciences sectors, students and working life outside the HEIs. The Head of the Unit and an evaluation expert, also participated in the work of the planning team. The main tasks for the planning team were assigned by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee. These included incorporating ESG 2015 into the new framework as well as drafting the evaluation areas and criteria and procedures for the new framework, criteria for the selection of audit teams, follow-up and reporting procedure.

The planning team started its work in December 2015 and finalised its work by December 2016. Many different workshops and hearings were organised as part of the planning process in 2016 with Arene, Unifi, SYL, SAMOK, Peda-forum, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the quality networks of universities and UASs. A national seminar with participants from the higher education institutions, students and the labour market and other stakeholder organisations was organised in October 2016. The aim of the seminar was to inform about the planned framework and provide the participants with an opportunity to influence the future framework. The framework was also sent for comments to ENQA and EUA to get external and international views on it.

The main hearings are listed in Figure 4.



**FIGURE 4. The hearings of stakeholders during the planning process of third-cycle audits**

FINEEC experts in the unit and members of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee were also given the opportunity to comment and discuss the framework during different phases of the planning process. The audit framework for the third cycle of audits was approved by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee in January 2017, and the audit manual was approved in June 2017. The Swedish and English manuals were approved in August 2017. A good practice was to work on the three language versions of the manual simultaneously.

The feedback from the pilot HEIs and audit teams was very valuable for the further development of the audit framework. Feedback from the two pilot audits was collected through an online questionnaire in spring 2019 from the audit teams and pilot HEIs. Feedback was also provided verbally by the audit team members as part of the audit process. In addition to the feedback questionnaires, a workshop was organised with pilot HEI and Higher Education Evaluation Committee representatives. Based on the feedback and the FINEEC experts' experiences, changes were made in the audit manual. The changes especially concerned the criteria, assessment scale and self-assessment guidelines. The changes made to the criteria after the pilots were aimed at clarifying and removing overlaps in the criteria. The revised audit manuals were then discussed and approved by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee (Finnish in September, English in November and Swedish in December 2019).

During the second cycle of audits, FINEEC (and its predecessor, FINHEEC) systematically collected feedback from all audited HEIs and audit teams. HEIs also wrote follow-up reports three years after their audit in which questions related to the impact of the audits were covered. Based on the overall feedback from the sector, it was clear that more extensive changes to the framework were needed. Some voices were raised about the utility of the audits and audits not producing new information. On the other hand, the maturity of the HEIs' quality systems may also have been another reason for such results. It was also realised during the second cycle that the audit

procedure was too heavy for the HEIs as well as for FINEEC. Therefore, one of the aims in the planning of the new framework was to make it less heavy. There are now four evaluation areas compared to six (eleven in practice) in the second cycle. Also, thanks to the new report structure, the reporting process has speeded up the reporting process and seems to have positively affected the workload of audit team members and the project manager in the reporting phase. However, it is yet to be seen if the workload of the audit for HEIs has been decreased.

There is a systematic feedback process in FINEEC, described in Chapter 7, in which feedback is systematically collected from all audited HEIs and audit teams, analysed and discussed, and used for further improvement of the audits.

## Engineering programme accreditations

The engineering programme accreditation method of FINEEC follows the EUR-ACE framework coordinated by ENAEE. In addition, the current ESG have been taken into account in the design of the method. The preparation of the method in 2014 included two pilot accreditations, observed by an external evaluation panel assigned by ENAEE. The external panel focused on assessing the method's fitness for the purpose set by ENAEE. The design phase was conducted by a planning team that consisted of representatives of higher education institutions, students, engineering associations and working life. In addition, FINEEC organised two open seminars in 2011 and 2012 for HEIs that provide engineering education. In this way, the stakeholders were involved in the design and in defining the aims and objectives of the current accreditation method.

Stakeholders are involved in the continuous improvement of the model via two channels. Firstly, the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education consists of representatives of higher education institutions, students, engineering associations and working life. Secondly, FINEEC collects feedback from all HEIs that participate in the accreditations and from experts on the accreditation teams.

As a result of continuous improvement, the accreditation standards were updated in autumn 2015. The update was based on the ENAEE's external evaluation report, on the feedback gathered from the pilot accreditations, and on the requirements of the new EUR-ACE standards and the new ESG.

FINEEC was authorised by ENAEE to award the EUR-ACE labels for the second time in summer 2020. ENAEE is in the process of reviewing its standards and guidelines in 2021. Subsequently, FINEEC shall update its EUR-ACE manual to comply with the revisions. Updating needs have also been discussed in the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education for the first time in 2020. The identified needs for the update are as follows:

- More detailed clarification of the preconditions of the degree programmes that are possible to be accredited.
- The reference programme outcomes should be all assessed individually, as they are currently assessed as a whole under Standard 8. This has also been recommended by the ENAEE external review team.

- More detailed clarification of the contents of the evidence room. The HEIs have given feedback that they would benefit from this when preparing the evidence room prior to the on-site/online visit.
- Establishment of a standardised form to support the documentation of the findings when the accreditation team obtains evidence that the learning outcomes have been achieved.
- Limitation of the number of appendices attached to the self-assessment report compiled by the degree programme to be accredited.
- Submission of the self-assessment report to FINEEC two months prior to the on-site/online visit (currently one month).

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, FINEEC has established the principles for the online implementation of the EUR-ACE accreditations as an addendum to the EUR-ACE manual. These principles shall be included in the updated manual.

The next round of feedback from the HEIs and the accreditation teams is collected in autumn 2021, including three accreditations carried out in 2020–2021.

## Thematic evaluations

The thematic evaluations conducted by FINEEC are decided in the participatory planning process of the national education evaluation plan in which key stakeholders are involved. The planning process is described in Chapter 4 and 12.

The national education evaluation plan includes only short descriptions of the thematic evaluation projects. Therefore, the planning of the evaluation and hearing different stakeholders and various interest groups as part of the planning process is central. Often a separate planning team is formed with a representation of the HEIs, students and stakeholders to ensure that the project focuses on the most crucial aspects of the topic. Evaluation methods are tailored according to the objectives and theme of the evaluation.

The FINEEC feedback process is followed in thematic evaluations. Feedback is always gathered from the evaluation objects, usually HEIs, and evaluation teams. The information is used in the future planning of thematic evaluations and improving the evaluation processes.

## 10.3 ESG STANDARD 2.3 Implementing process

### 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.*

### FINEEC Compliance:

#### Quality audits

All the essential documents related to the audit process, applied principles, evaluation areas and criteria, outcomes of assessment and self-assessment guidelines are provided in the audit manual, which is available in Finnish, Swedish and English on the FINEEC website. The other central process descriptions, such as the online implementation of audits, re-audit process, appeals and complaints procedure, Quality Label of Excellence process and criteria are also available on the FINEEC website in three languages.

By carrying out its audits consistently and transparently, FINEEC ensures that its audits are widely accepted by Finnish HEIs and other stakeholders. The different steps of the audit process are described in Chapter 6 and the audit manual.

#### Benchlearning

Benchlearning is a method applied in the audit in which the focus is on the peer learning process. The purpose of benchlearning is to receive feedback on the organisation's activities and learn from the good practices of another organisation. The HEI selects a topic and a partner for benchlearning. The topic of benchlearning should be included in one or several of the four evaluation areas. The partner can be an HEI or any other type of organisation. The HEI selects the participants in the benchlearning process from within its higher education community and decides on the method of benchlearning with its partner. HEI writes a benchlearning report that follows the guidelines given in the audit manual.



## Self-assessment and other material

The audited HEI conducts the self-assessment by following the guidelines in the audit manual. The same structure and guidelines are also in the audit platform self-assessment templates. The HEIs are given access to the FINEEC audit platform after the audit agreement has been signed with FINEEC. The HEI decides on the method for conducting its self-assessment. FINEEC encourages the HEIs to engage the HE community as widely as possible in identifying strengths and enhancement areas in its activities. The self-assessment, additional documentation listed in the guidelines and the benchlearning report are compiled and submitted in FINEEC's digital audit platform three months prior to the site visit. The material is prepared in the language of the audit, as agreed in the audit agreement.

The feedback concerning the new digital audit platform from HE users has been mostly positive. However, the web format has some limitations. Self-assessment text in the web format must be concise, having implications on the information provided to the audit teams in the self-assessment. On the other hand, 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.

## Audit visit

The purpose of the audit visit is to verify and supplement the observations made of the HEI's quality system and activities based on the audit material. The goal is to create a supportive and respectful atmosphere that supports the development of the institution's activities. The visit usually lasts two days.

The team members and FINEEC project manager prepare for the site visit by drafting the site visit programme and a question list and preparing workshops. During the visit, the team interviews or organises workshops with representatives of the institution's management, teaching and other staff groups, students and external stakeholders. The aim is to involve as widely as possible different groups of students and staff. The topics for the hearings are guided by the criteria. The visit ends with a meeting with the management, in which the audit team gives the institution preliminary feedback on the strengths and enhancement areas of the four evaluation areas. The FINEEC project manager and backup project manager also participate in the visit.

## Report

The audit team draws up a report based on the material accumulated during the evaluation and the analysis of that material. The teams are composed in a way that the team members complement each other with their expertise. Therefore, it also comes naturally that the team members divide the writing responsibilities according to the evaluation areas. However, all team members contribute to all evaluation areas during the process, there is a continuous dialogue during the audit process within the team about the different evaluation areas, and the report is the whole team's report.

The audit team is provided with a report template that includes the key questions from the criteria that the audit team should address in the report chapters. In accordance with the enhancement-led principle, the report points out the strengths and good practices of the HEI's activities and quality system in addition to giving the institution recommendations for further improvement of its activities.

Prior to the Evaluation Committee's decision-making meeting, the institution is given the opportunity to fact-check the report.

The digital audit platform functions as a template for the self-assessment and audit report. All audit reports of Finnish HEIs are published on the platform as web pages. Print copies are no longer made. The final audit report consists of the HEI's self-assessment and the audit team's assessment of the evaluation areas. 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.

### Quality Label of Excellence

The audits include the opportunity to be awarded the Quality Label for Excellence. In order to qualify for the Quality Label for Excellence, the HEI must provide evidence of exceptionally high-quality enhancement activities in connection with the evaluation area in question and criteria of excellence. The process and criteria for the Quality Label of Excellence are available on the FINEEC website. The first Quality Label of Excellence was awarded in May 2021.

### Follow-up

The audit process does not end with the report by the experts. The HEI organises together with FINEEC a final seminar, usually within one month of the Evaluation Committee's decision. The seminar gives the institution's staff and students the opportunity to openly discuss the audit results and conclusions with representatives of FINEEC and the audit team.

If the HEI is required to undergo a re-audit, the areas that are in essential need of development and which will be subject to the re-audit are recorded in the Evaluation Committee's decision. The re-audit is conducted two to three years after the decision on the initial audit. The re-audit process description is available on the FINEEC website.

FINEEC organises quality seminars for HEIs annually. One of the key goals of the seminars is to give feedback on post-audit enhancement work to HEIs whose audits were conducted three years earlier. Another goal is to offer institutions the opportunity to discuss and exchange experiences and good practices related to quality work. Before the seminar, HEIs presenting at the seminar prepare a short report on their post-audit improvement. The report is read by another HEI representative who is also presenting at the seminar. At the seminar, HEIs present the enhancement activities and development since the audit, which is then commented on by another HEI representative.

This method of peer feedback has been appreciated by the HEIs. The seminars and follow-up reports also provide information on the impact of the audit. The seminars are open to all HEIs and other stakeholders.

## Engineering programme accreditations

The standards and procedures for engineering programme accreditation are publicly available on the FINEEC website. The different steps of the accreditation process are described in Chapter 6.

### Self-assessment

The HEI compiles a self-assessment report for the accreditation using the self-assessment template available on the FINEEC website. The HEI submits the self-assessment report to FINEEC within enough time before the accreditation team's visit to the HEI. The exact deadline for the report is included in the agreement between the HEI and FINEEC. Typically, the deadline would be at least four weeks prior to the visit.

In addition to the self-assessment report, the accreditation team is allowed to request the HEI to provide other materials deemed necessary before or during the visit. The institution is also requested to give members of the accreditation team the opportunity to study electronic materials that contain necessary evidence regarding the fulfilment of the accreditation standards.

### Visit to the HEI

The accreditation team visits the HEI and the degree programme in question to verify the information given in the self-assessment report and gain more information to support the compilation of the report and the eventual decision on the result of the accreditation. Currently, the visits can be implemented online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is based on the temporary decision made by ENAEE, letting the authorised agencies implement online procedures as far as needed.

The length of the visit is at least two days. During the visit, the team discusses with representatives of at least: programme management (head of programme / department / faculty / institution), academic staff members, support staff members, current students, alumni and external stakeholders (employers / industry / representatives of professional engineering organisations).

The accreditation team has temporary access to the HEI intranet during the review process. Intranet contents are used as review material aside from the self-assessment material. The team also reviews assessed work with regards to the standard and modes of assessment as well as to the learning achievements of the students. The HEI is expected to have samples of the following available for study during the site visit:

- Thesis works, representing the whole scale of grade evaluation
- Project works
- Assessed project reports
- Examination papers
- Continuous assessment
- Other assessed coursework
- Entrance examinations
- Recent research publications relevant to the programme.

In case of the online visit, the evidence room is offered in electronic form. The electronic evidence room has been used twice so far. The experiences are promising, as the electronic evidence room allows the accreditation team members to examine material more flexibly than in the traditional one.

In addition to the interviews and reviews, the accreditation team visits the most relevant facilities, such as laboratories and libraries. The degree programme is required to produce a recorded video tour of its key facilities if the visit is organised online. In the engineering field, the laboratories play a key role concerning the facilities and learning environments. In case of the online visit, the visit programme includes a session where the accreditation team has the possibility to pose questions on the facilities presented in the recorded video tour.

At the end of the visit, the accreditation team gives preliminary feedback to the programme management.

## Report

The accreditation team prepares a review report. The report is based on the self-assessment report, background material provided by the degree programme, and the observations the team makes during the visit to the HEI. It represents a consensus among the accreditation team.

The report follows a given structure:

1. Description of the review process and the programme
2. Evaluation of the fulfilment of the accreditation standards
3. Recommendation to the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education.

The report template is available on the FINEEC website. The accreditation report, without the recommendation for the accreditation result, is submitted to the HEI so it can check the report for factual errors. The accreditation team then finalises the report and formulates its recommendation based on the results of the accreditation for the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education. After the Committee's decision, the decision is published together with the report.

## Follow-up

If the degree programme is accredited with conditions, the programme must fulfil the set conditions within the timeframe specified in the decision. Within the specified time period, the HEI must submit an interim report to the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education on how the programme has fulfilled the requirements. The Committee may decide that a site visit is needed to confirm the extent to which the requirements have been fulfilled. The Committee may also consult the accreditation team on the matter. The Committee decides on the continuation of the accreditation based on the HEI's report and possible site visit and possible consultation with the review team. If the programme fails to meet the conditions on time, the validity of the accreditation will lapse.

The HEI is expected to inform FINEEC if it has made significant changes to an accredited programme. Significant changes include, but are not limited to, a major redefinition of the programme learning outcomes, the removal of current (or the introduction of new) focus areas and major subjects, or changes to the degrees awarded to graduates. In such a case, the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education reconsiders whether or not the changes affect the validity of the accreditation.

FINEEC has introduced a monitoring procedure where the accredited degree programmes are annually asked to report to FINEEC, whether or not they have implemented the below-mentioned significant changes. The first reporting shall take place in autumn 2021.

If the HEI desires to renew the accreditation, the programme must be re-accredited before the end of the valid accreditation. The re-accreditation follows the same process, with special attention paid to how the programme has developed since the previous accreditation. The reports of engineering programme accreditations are available on FINEEC's website.

## Thematic evaluations

Thematic evaluations are usually planned on an individual basis since the topics and scope of the evaluations vary considerably. The focus may be on one or both of the higher education sectors and on broad or more limited phenomena or topics. However, the evaluations of different fields of study (see Chapter 6) are an example of an evaluation type in which a similar framework is applied.

The methods used in the thematic evaluations vary. HEIs taking part in the evaluation often contribute with a self-assessment report. This may be a separate document using a structure provided or an online questionnaire on the activities in question. The HEIs are informed about their expected contributions well in advance since producing them does require some work. FINEEC thematic evaluation teams are increasingly using existing reports and databases for information and are mindful of not burdening the HEIs with reporting that they have already reported elsewhere.

The thematic evaluations, as a rule, always include site visits or interviews. Interviews are organised differently, for example as regional focus group interviews at selected HEIs or at FINEEC. The rationale for the site visits and interviews is to supplement and broaden the understanding created by the self-assessments. Representative samples are usually selected for practical reasons since visiting each HEI is often not possible. Due to the exploratory nature of the thematic evaluations, the visits often include facilitated group discussions or workshops where the evaluation team members and HEI representatives collaborate and tackle issues together.

The results of thematic evaluations are published in reports on the FINEEC website. The language used may be Finnish, Swedish or English, depending on the topic and composition of the evaluation team. During the past years, a lot of effort has been put into improving the communication of evaluations and evaluation results, both in FINEEC as a whole and by the experts in the unit. Multiple channels for the dissemination of the evaluation results are used, such as events of FINEEC or external actors, publications, social media, blogs, articles, videos, etc. When the evaluation report has been finalised, a concluding seminar is always organised and a press release is published. Concluding seminars are usually organised as interactive events and more recently as webinars. The main results are always presented to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee and the higher education unit of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The dissemination of the results usually does not end when the project ends but may continue for several years. FINEEC project managers present the findings of evaluations at national and international seminars and conferences and write articles and blogs. In some cases, the evaluation team members have also been active in writing blogs and articles. Social media, especially Twitter, is used in different phases of the evaluation process. Thematical analysis of evaluation data comprising several projects is also conducted by some of the FINEEC experts, creating new information to be published through different channels. There is also a FINEEC-wide thematical analysis process in place for evaluations covering all education sectors. The process is described in Chapter 9.4.

## 10.4 ESG STANDARD 2.4 Peer review experts

### Standard:

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

### FINEEC Compliance:

#### Quality audits

Higher education institutions may choose either a Finnish or an international team to carry out the audit. An international audit team always includes Finnish members. Audit teams usually have 4 members, including representatives from the higher education sector (2–3 members), students

(1 member) and working life outside of HEIs (1 member). An international team usually has 2–3 international team members. A FINEEC project manager participates in the team's work as an expert of audits.

The recruitment of experts to the audit teams is an important part of the audit process. At least once a year, the unit staff has a planning session in which experts to the upcoming audits are sought. The idea is to get an overview of the teams and to collaboratively come up with possible candidates. When recruiting experts for the team, the criteria in the audit manual and the profile of the HEI are considered. A variety of channels are used to find external experts for audit teams. In autumn 2020, FINEEC sent an open call to HEIs to nominate experts to the panels in order to get new names and widen the expert pool. Recommendations for experts may also be directly asked from individual HEIs, former experts or other EQA agencies in Europe. Experts with the right profile and experiences may also be directly contacted, which is often the case with working life representatives. FINEEC also closely cooperates with the national student unions SYL and SAMOK, ESU, HEIs and other EQA agencies to find student representatives. FINEEC has kept track of experts used in audits and their HEIs since the first cycle. An important principle for FINEEC is that experts from all Finnish HEIs are used.

The audit team must possess experience in the following areas:

- knowledge of quality systems
- good knowledge of the higher education system
- insight into societal impact
- experience in management, enhancement of the core duties of HEIs, development of staff competence, and expertise in the field of teaching and learning
- previous evaluation or audit experience or experience in quality work
- in addition, at least one team member must also possess expertise in the evaluation area selected by the HEI.

It is also required that the chair of the audit team has previous experience in evaluating the activities of HEIs and possesses extensive and in-depth knowledge of the higher education system. All members of the audit team have equal status as evaluators.

A person is disqualified from acting as an audit team member if he or she is an interested party or if confidence in his or her impartiality in relation to the HEI subject to the audit comes under question. Disqualification is determined in compliance with the provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act (434/2003, Chapter 5, sections 27–29). According to good administrative practice, a disqualified person may not participate in any way in the processing or evaluation of a matter. Such situations may arise, for example, if the person is employed by the HEI subject to the audit or has acted in a position of trust in a decision-making body of the HEI. Auditors must take it upon themselves to inform FINEEC about any aspects that may have a bearing on their conflicts of interest.

Prior to the appointment of the audit team, the HEI has an opportunity to comment on the composition of the team, especially from the perspective of disqualification. The Higher Education Evaluation Committee appoints the audit team and its chair. All audit team members are required to take part in training arranged by FINEEC.

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

- **Impartiality:** Auditors must take an impartial approach towards the audited HEI, as well as recognise their position of power and the responsibility related to it.
- **Transparent and evidence-based evaluation:** The audit must be based on FINEEC's criteria as well as on material collected in connection with the audit.
- **Confidentiality:** All of the information acquired during the process is confidential, except for that published in the final report.
- **Interaction:** The audit is carried out through good cooperation and interaction with the HEI.

## Engineering programme accreditations

The basic principles regarding accreditation teams' operating principles and disqualification are the same as those described above for the quality audits.

In engineering programme accreditations, the team comprises at least three members who have relevant experience and expertise. At least one member of the accreditation team must be an academic expert, at least one a practising engineering professional and at least one a student. In recent years, the teams have mostly been comprised of four members (two academic representatives, one working life representative and one student).

FINEEC uses the following criteria to select the accreditation team members:

- Good knowledge of the higher education system and engineering education
- Good knowledge of the field of the target programme
- Experience with evaluations, accreditations or audits.

The HEI is given the opportunity to comment on the team's composition before FINEEC appoints the team, especially as to conflicts of interest. FINEEC does not distribute any confidential documentation to the accreditation team before possible disqualifications have been determined and the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education has appointed the accreditation team.

FINEEC arranges training for accreditation team members and requires that each team member completes the training. The training currently consists of self-study of the materials provided by FINEEC, a short electronic test to ensure that the team members have examined the provided materials, and short training sessions along with the materials integrated into the team meetings.



## Thematic evaluations

According to FINEEC's internal Manual for Thematic Evaluations (*Teema- ja järjestelmäarvioinnit – mallinnuksia, jäsenyyksiä ja tukimateriaalia arviointihankkeiden toteuttamiseen, 2016*), there are four alternative models for the project organisations in FINEEC:

1. a planning team plans the evaluation and an evaluation team implements the evaluation (2 different teams)
2. an evaluation team plans and implements the evaluation
3. a steering group / project group implements the evaluation
4. a team of FINEEC's evaluation experts implements the evaluation.

In higher education evaluations, models 1 and 2 are the most typical. The most frequently used model is to have separate teams responsible for planning and implementing the evaluation. This has been the case especially in the international evaluations, where a national viewpoint on the context of the evaluation is seen as crucial in the planning phase. Recently, thematic evaluations have also been implemented with one evaluation team responsible for both drawing up a project plan and implementing the evaluation. There are advantages to both models. The challenge with the two-team model is that the actual evaluation team often has its own ideas on the best ways to approach the issue at hand, while the planning team perhaps does not take into account the amount of actual work involved with the execution of the laid plans.

The Higher Education Evaluation Committee appoints both planning teams and evaluation teams and their chairs. These teams usually have 5–7 members, including representatives of the higher education sector, students and working life outside the HEIs. When the topic of the evaluation is cross-sectoral, there are experts both from universities and universities of applied sciences sectors on the team. The evaluation is always managed by 1–2 FINEEC project managers who also act as evaluation experts on the team.

## 10.5 ESG STANDARD 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

### Standard:

*Any outcomes or judgments 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.*

### FINEEC Compliance:

#### Quality audits

The FINEEC project manager supports the audit team's activities by taking part in the team's discussions as an expert in FINEEC audits and by instructing the team on matters concerning the audit criteria. Consistent application of the criteria is also supported by auditor training provided to all audit teams.

The assessment and decisions are based on clear criteria published in the audit manual. The evaluation areas I–III are each assessed as one entity using the scale excellent, good, insufficient.

In order for the HEI to pass the audit, the evaluation areas I–III should reach at least the level of good. The level of good for evaluation areas I–III is described in Chapter 3 of the audit manual.

The level of excellent means that the HEI shows evidence of long-term and effective enhancement work. The HEI's enhancement activities also create substantial added value for the HEI, stakeholders, or both. The HEI presents compelling examples of successful enhancement activities.

The level of insufficient means that the HEI shows an absence of or major shortcomings in systematic, functioning and participatory procedures in the evaluation area (I–III). There is no clear evidence of the impact of quality management in the enhancement of activities.

The audit team assesses whether the HEI should pass the audit or whether it should be required to undergo a re-audit. The Higher Education Evaluation Committee decides on the result of the audit based on the presenting official's proposal. The task of the Evaluation Committee is to ensure that the audit decisions are fair. The Evaluation Committee will use the audit team's report in making the decision. In addition, the chair or vice-chair of the audit team will present the main results of the audit at a meeting in which the decision will be made and will answer the Evaluation Committee's questions on the report. The Evaluation Committee's decision may deviate from the assessment by the audit team or the proposal by the presenting official.

In its decision-making, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee follows the provisions of the Administrative Procedure Act regarding conflicts of interest of its members, which in turn supports the credibility of the decisions.

HEIs that pass the audit receive an audit certificate and FINEEC Quality Label, which is valid for six years from the decision of the Higher Education Evaluation Committee. The HEI will also be entered into the Audit Register, which is maintained on FINEEC's website.

The audits include the opportunity to be awarded the Quality Label for Excellence. A higher education institution can be nominated as a candidate to receive the Quality Label for Excellence if the audit team grants the level of excellent in at least one evaluation area (I–III). The Higher Education Evaluation Committee annually selects an evaluation panel consisting of 3 or 4 members of the Committee. The evaluation panel scores the candidates and presents its proposal on the recipients of the Quality Label for Excellence to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee. The Committee will review the proposal and awards the Quality Labels for Excellence annually.

## Engineering programme accreditations

The accreditation team assesses the extent to which the programme fulfils the individual accreditation standards that are defined in Chapter 2 of the accreditation manual, using a three-point scale:

- Acceptable – the programme fully meets the standard, even if improvements are still possible;
- Conditionally acceptable – the standard is not fully met but the programme can amend it within three years;
- Unacceptable – the programme does not meet the standard and cannot amend it within three years

Based on the assessment of the individual standards, the accreditation team recommends to the FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education that the programme should be either:

- Accredited without reservation, if all individual standards are acceptable;
- Accredited with conditions, if any of the standards are conditionally acceptable and none are unacceptable;
- Not accredited, if any of the standards are unacceptable.

A report template supports the accreditation team in applying the standards. The report template is publicly available on the FINEEC website. The FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education decides on the accreditation result based on the report and the recommendation of the accreditation team. The accreditation decision defines the exact period of validity of the accreditation and, in the case of a conditional accreditation, the timeframe in which to fulfil the conditions.

## Thematic evaluations

Thematic evaluations are usually not criteria-based evaluations. The focus of the evaluation is on topical themes or fields, and the thematical evaluations often cover the whole higher education sector. There are no outcomes other than the information presented in the report.

### 10.6 ESG STANDARD 2.6 Reporting

#### 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.*

#### FINEEC Compliance:

### Quality audits

FINEEC publishes its audit reports in full on the audit platform. The Evaluation Committee's decision on whether the institution passes the audit or must be subject to a re-audit is recorded in the abstract and on the site. If the HEI is required to undergo a re-audit, the areas that are in essential need of improvement and are subject to a re-audit are recorded in the report.

The digital audit platform makes the audit more transparent and the results easier to use. It also makes the reporting process more effective. In cross-border audits, the audited HEI is entitled to decide on the publicity of the self-assessment.

The outcome of the audit is communicated to the HEI immediately after the Evaluation Committee's decision-making meeting. A press release is also published on FINEEC's website in three languages and also distributed to relevant media and shared on social media.

### Engineering programme accreditations

The engineering programme accreditation reports are published on the FINEEC website. FINEEC Committee for Engineering Education's decision is recorded in the report.

The same process for communicating evaluation results as described for audits apply for engineering programme accreditations.

## Thematic evaluations

The findings of thematic evaluations are published in reports, which are available in full-length on FINEEC's website. In addition, a summary publication is usually published in which the main results of the evaluation are briefly presented and more easily accessed.

In addition to the report, a press release is published on FINEEC's website in three languages and also distributed to relevant media and shared on social media.

## 10.7 ESG STANDARD 2.7 Complaints and appeals

### Standard:

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

### FINEEC Compliance:

## Quality audits

If an HEI is unsatisfied with the Higher Education Evaluation Committee's decision, it can make use of FINEEC's appeals procedure. The objective of the procedure is to ensure equal treatment of the audited institutions and to guarantee that the Higher Education Evaluation Committee operating under FINEEC makes fair decisions about audit results.

Higher education institutions may request a review of the result of an audit or re-audit conducted by FINEEC. The request may be directed at the following audit results decided on by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee:

1. The higher education institution does not pass the audit, and a re-audit is required; or
2. The higher education institution does not pass the re-audit.

The request may be based on the grounds that the audit has not been performed in compliance with the audit manual, and that the audit, as performed, brings into question the fair and equal treatment of higher education institutions.

The request is filed in accordance with the procedure described in a document titled Procedure to request a review of an audit result 2019–2024 published on FINEEC's website. The request can only be filed by the higher education institution whose audit result the request concerns. The

decisions concerning audit results, issued by the Higher Education Evaluation Committee, are considered expert opinions. They are not administrative decisions, and appeals pursuant to the Administrative Judicial Procedure Act cannot be filed to challenge them.

The request is processed by an expert team appointed by the Evaluation Council that operates under FINEEC for the duration of the Council's term of office. A description of the appeals procedure and the composition of the Expert Team are available on the FINEEC website. So far, only one request to review the result of a re-audit has been filed with FINEEC in September 2016. The decision by the Expert Team was not to return the re-audit decision to the Higher Education Evaluation Committee for re-processing.

## Engineering programme accreditations

An HEI unsatisfied with the conduct of the accreditation process by FINEEC, or with the accreditation result, can make use of FINEEC's appeals procedure for Engineering Programme Accreditations that is available on FINEEC's website. The procedure is the same as it is in the case of audits.

## Thematic evaluations

No formal decisions or outcomes are made in thematic evaluations, so a complaint or appeal procedure is not available for these projects.

# Information and opinions of stakeholders

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## FINEEC partnerships: stakeholders, partners and networks

FINEEC has identified partnerships that support its strategy. Partnerships are divided into four levels according to the type of collaboration: (a) stakeholders, (b) tactical partners, (c) strategic partners and (d) national and international networks.

- a) FINEEC has a continuous dialogue with **stakeholders** in order to find and analyse national evaluation needs. FINEEC discusses the utilisation and impact of evidence-based evaluation information with its stakeholders.
- b) **Tactical partners** include evaluators and HEIs, education providers, schools and educational institutions, which FINEEC involves in the planning and implementation of evaluation and the utilisation of evaluation results. FINEEC has a permanent, collaborative relationship with these partners, which produces added value to both parties. Partnerships can be formed with other service producers, businesses, associations and customers.
- c) With its **strategic partners**, FINEEC carries out joint evaluations and/or development projects, simultaneously developing its own evaluation processes and evaluation methodology. FINEEC primarily participates in collaboration with national and international actors when it produces added value to the development of the quality of education as well as the development of the Finnish education system.
- d) **National and international networks** consist of organisations where FINEEC is actively involved and has a membership. Being active in networks strengthens the visibility of Finnish evaluation activities and enables FINEEC to influence the development of European evaluation activities.

Partners in each of these categories have been identified for each of FINEEC's four units. Annex 2 shows all the recognised partners of the Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education.

## Opinions of the stakeholders and partners

In the previous ENQA self-assessment report, one recognised development task for FINEEC was to widen its feedback mechanism to also cover external stakeholders. This work has been undertaken, and stakeholders' opinions and views are collected and processed systematically.

In autumn 2020, FINEEC conducted a nationwide stakeholder survey covering all education sectors. The previous survey was conducted in 2018. 274 representatives of FINEEC's target groups responded to the survey (a 21% response rate). 221 out of the 274 respondents represented the education sector, and 31 out of 221 respondents represented higher education. The key results are presented below.

- The results overall had improved compared to the survey conducted in 2018. Overall, FINEEC was considered a professional, reliable and cooperative actor. FINEEC's activities were best-known among education administration and organisations in which 100% of the respondents knew FINEEC's work very or rather well. This was experienced in the same way by 75% of social actors and 78% of education providers. Compared to the survey conducted in 2018, awareness of FINEEC had especially increased in the early childhood and higher education sectors (100% knew FINEEC's work very or rather well). FINEEC's reputation was estimated as good or rather good by 84% of the respondents.
- As areas needing enhancement at the FINEEC level (not specific for higher education), stakeholders specified heavy and long surveys, communication of evaluation results, and clear and concise summaries of evaluations. Respondents also felt that FINEEC could take a more active role in social debate.
- Respondents considered FINEEC as producing evaluation information on current and important topics (81%), communicating it clearly (74%), promoting the development of the education system (76%) and producing useful enhancement recommendations (69%). Most of the evaluation information had been used by education administration (100%) and educational federation/unions (95%). The usability of the information was perceived to be best in the higher education sector (average 4/5).
- Almost 80% of the stakeholders were very or rather satisfied with the cooperation with FINEEC. In the education administration, the proportion of those who were very satisfied had risen from 17% to 58% in two years. The most satisfied were the representatives of the higher education sector (63% very satisfied and 33% rather satisfied).
- In terms of communication, more than half (59%) found the communication useful, while less than half (42%) found it interactive. The most satisfied were the representatives of the higher education sector (average 4.3/5).

In addition to the stakeholder survey, FINEEC has gathered information from its stakeholders and customers in several other forms to support continuous strategy development. The strategy is based on the idea of continuous enhancement, and engagement of stakeholders in this process is one of the key features. Understanding the opinions, needs and ideas of the field is central while responding to the challenges of a changing education environment.



As an example, in 2019, FINEEC commissioned Future Lab to conduct in-depth interviews (n=53) covering the entire education sector. The interviews provided FINEEC with information from the stakeholders' viewpoint, for example about the cooperation, the value and impact of FINEEC's evaluations, and the wishes and development ideas for the future. FINEEC was seen as a forerunner and influential actor, which was also highly appreciated (HE units averages 4.1–4.6/5). FINEEC's operating culture was also found to be enhancement-led and the agency a desired and well-liked partner. HEIs wished for deeper cooperation and stronger internationalisation, as well as more active usage of social media. The HEI respondents gave FINEEC an overall rating of 8.1 out of 10.

### Staff competence and development

Staff communication competences and their connection to FINEEC's strategic values have been recognised and strengthened in workshops led by communications company KasKas media and other training. Common policies and operating principles have been supported by shared guidelines (e.g. the toolkit for influential communication). The Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education has also recently organised its own development session on stakeholder communication. As a result, the unit now has guidelines about why, to whom, how, when and by whom the unit is communicating. During the process, it was recognised that the interactive communication with the stakeholders could be promoted even more.

## Recommendations and main findings from the previous review and the agency's resulting follow-up

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In the previous external review report of 2017, FINEEC was given the following recommendations:

### ESG 3.1

*To increase the relevance of its work also for other actors beyond the HE institutions, the panel recommends FINEEC to consider how it could strengthen the involvement of social partners in its governing bodies and ensure a transparent and systematic dialogue and coordination with key stakeholders at the national level, especially the most important labour market organisations, and even with the relevant officials in the Ministry of Education and Culture.*

### Actions taken by FINEEC:

Since the last external review by ENQA, there has been an increasing focus at FINEEC in widening and deepening collaboration with various actors in society. FINEEC has increased the use of interactive methods as part of a systematic development of evaluation methods. An open culture for testing new methods in evaluations has allowed staff to test new participatory methods for collecting data and engaging stakeholders in audits and thematic evaluations. Recently, online workshops, hearings, focus-group discussions and seminars have been organised as part of the planning and implementation phases of evaluation projects, not only at the end of the evaluation process. These have led to more versatile evaluation data and increased networking.

In the planning process of the National Education Evaluation Plan 2020–2023, FINEEC actively involved several stakeholders including relevant officials in the Ministry of Education and Culture and the labour market organisations. Several hundred evaluation initiatives were collected from education providers and stakeholders through hearings, seminars and an online questionnaire.

FINEEC has intensified its contacts with key stakeholders, especially the Ministry of Education and Culture, in connection with evaluation projects. Evaluation results have been presented to key officials (sometimes before the general publication of the results) in order to increase the use of evaluation information in national decision-making as well as policy and steering processes. FINEEC's timely reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic was appreciated by the Ministry of Education and Culture.

Emphasis has also been put on communication activities related to evaluations. The use of various communication channels and forms of reporting—such as summary reports, article-based reporting, blogs and social media accounts—have increased in order to improve how evaluation results are communicated to higher education institutions and stakeholders.

FINEEC has twice conducted a wide stakeholder survey (in 2018 and 2020) to gather stakeholder feedback on its activities. The survey responses were discussed at FINEEC, and development actions were taken based on the results. In addition, FINEEC has commissioned other studies conducted by Future Lab to find out about stakeholder views on its activities, communication as well as evaluation use. Kaskas Media organised training workshops for FINEEC staff and management to enhance expert communication in line with the strategic values.

#### ESG 3.4

*The panel recommends FINEEC to quickly initiate the planned thematic analyses and allocate the necessary resources to this activity so that the development of the audit model for the third round can be based on solid knowledge and reflections on the results and experiences from the second round.*

Actions taken by FINEEC:

FINEEC has completed the planned thematic analysis covering all audit targets and audit reports of the second cycle of quality audits (2012–2018). A publication presenting the main findings was published in Finnish, Swedish and English (Nordblad et al. 2020). The results of the analysis have been presented at different seminars, conferences and other events. The latest event was an international webinar with Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education: *What did we learn from a cycle of institutional reviews?* in November 2020.

The experiences and feedback from the second audit cycle were incorporated in the planning of the third cycle of audits. The new audit criteria include several areas that were considered as areas to be developed in HEIs in the second cycle of audits, for example the quality management of societal engagement and impact.

New processes for thematic analyses of all FINEEC evaluations and quality audits of HEIs have been designed. (See Section 9.4.) Thematic analyses will be conducted on an annual basis. Summaries will be published presenting the main results of the analysis.

#### ESG 2.1

*The panel recommends that FINEEC actively supports initiatives that would lead to Finland's adoption of a national qualifications framework as soon as possible, as expected in the Bologna Process. The panel also recommends FINEEC to take into account the new ESG when developing the new audit model for the third round so that a clear link between the audit targets and ESG Part 1 is established.*

Actions taken by FINEEC:

The Decree on the National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules in Finland came into force in March 2017. FINEEC advances the implementation of the degree in the third cycle audit framework. Evaluation area HEI creates competence is very much in line with ESG 2015 and the new Decree. In audits, it is assessed how HEIs ensure that their degrees correspond with the National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules.

ESG 2.2

*The panel recommends FINEEC to supplement its comprehensive efforts in engaging the broad higher education community in the development of the next audit model with more direct consultations with the main stakeholders at the national level, e.g. the rectors' conferences, the social partners and the Ministry, in order to ensure support and consensus about the model.*

Actions taken by FINEEC:

The main stakeholders were consulted during the planning of the new audit framework in 2016. (See Section 10.2.) Numerous consultation meetings, seminars, workshops and other events were organised during the planning phase and later to present and discuss the framework. The new audit framework has also been introduced and discussed at annual seminars organised by FINEEC (2016–2020). The participants of these national seminars included a multitude of HE representatives, such as quality managers, rectors, students and other external stakeholders.

# 13

## SWOT analyses

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FINEEC conducted its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of four themes: (1) quality audits, (2) engineering programme accreditations, (3) thematic evaluations and (4) other activities of the organisation – ESG Part 3.

The SWOT analyses on audits and thematic evaluations were conducted by the staff of the Unit of Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education in January 2021. An exercise was conducted with the Higher Education Evaluation Committee in December 2020 and January 2021 to assess strengths and weaknesses in relation to ESG 1, 2 and 3. All the committee members also completed a brief survey on challenges in terms of quality management and the future purpose and approach of the external quality assurance of Finnish HEIs (post-2024). FINEEC's Committee for Engineering Education and the FINEEC process manager produced the SWOT analysis of EUR-ACE accreditations in March 2021.

All the exercises described above were conducted online. The exercises were considered useful by everyone participating in the analyses, and the results will be used in the future work of FINEEC.

## 13.1 SWOT analysis of quality audits

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The framework has kept up with development and renewed itself. It complements the previous two audit cycles and applies ESG 2015 where applicable. It challenges HEIs in a good way and has a positive future-oriented approach.</li> <li>• A long-term, enhancement-led approach in which developing the HEIs' activities is at the core. The framework genuinely considers the specific needs and development objectives of HEIs.</li> <li>• The framework covers the core duties of HEIs.</li> <li>• The framework is flexible and offers opportunities for diverse information collection using different methods.</li> <li>• Engagement and participation of various actors and stakeholders in the audit. Students' experiences and opinions matter.</li> <li>• A holistic evaluation. Excessive attention is not paid to details and it does not simplify phenomena.</li> <li>• The audit can also be carried out partly or fully online.</li> <li>• The evaluation can be conducted by either a Finnish or an international team and in different languages.</li> <li>• Manuals and report abstract published in three languages.</li> <li>• A more concise reporting by the audit team.</li> <li>• The audits have covered the whole HE system in Finland and applied the same model to universities and universities of applied sciences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The guiding questions for self-assessments provided in the manual could produce more reflection.</li> <li>• The recommended character numbers in the template for the online self-assessment report limit the volume of text, and the self-assessments remain at a rather general level. This is a particular challenge for large HEIs. The need for additional documentation may have increased.</li> <li>• The report cannot comprehensively take a stand on all details.</li> <li>• The scale for the level of 'good' in the assessment scale is perhaps too broad. It does not necessarily differentiate sufficiently between HEIs.</li> <li>• Finding working life representatives who have sufficient time and expertise to participate in audit teams is challenging. This especially applies to the private sector.</li> <li>• Producing evaluations of a consistent quality relying on evaluation criteria that leaves room for interpretation is a challenge.</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many good practices have been learned from online implementations of audits, which can also be used once the Covid-19 pandemic is over.</li> <li>• Systematic analyses and summaries can help draw more attention to the findings and promote the impact of audits at the national level. This also provides an opportunity to engage HEIs, students and stakeholders in the discussion on system-level outcomes.</li> <li>• The chosen data collection methods, such as workshops, can be used to further improve the participatory nature and interactivity of the audits, following the principles of enhancement-led evaluation.</li> <li>• Some foreign universities have already commissioned FINEEC audits based on the current framework as a fee-based activity. FINEEC's framework offers an interesting alternative to more traditional methods of external evaluation.</li> <li>• FINEEC as an international pioneer of enhancement-led evaluation – approach, methods and process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the approach too general? Do some of the themes receive too little attention? Or is there too much variation between the teams regarding the themes they concentrate on in their work?</li> <li>• The assessment criteria have a lot of content. Do interviews and workshops cover all areas sufficiently, e.g. RDI activities?</li> <li>• Does the framework meet the HEI's need to be an internationally recognised actor (e.g. joint degree projects) if the approach differs greatly from the tradition of quality assurance in partner countries?</li> <li>• A public self-assessment may affect the openness of the reflective approach.</li> <li>• Does the concise reporting model provide enough data for producing meta-analyses of numerous sub-themes, or do we only scrape the surface?</li> </ul>

## 13.2 SWOT analysis of engineering programme accreditations

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-development of education in the field of engineering.</li> <li>• Good experiences of the quality and impact of EUR-ACE accreditation processes at several HEIs.</li> <li>• The process uses good practices from a streamlined and established audit process.</li> <li>• International experts on accreditation teams bring accreditation experience.</li> <li>• Common European framework as a basis for accreditation.</li> <li>• External evaluation conducted by the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education ENAEE guarantees quality and has been used to develop the model.</li> <li>• Feedback from institutions and experts gives useful information for developing the model and for identifying the added value of the accreditations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited number of accreditations conducted so far.</li> <li>• So far, the activities have only focused on universities of applied sciences.</li> <li>• The small number of Finnish experts with strong accreditation experience.</li> <li>• Marketing of the voluntary process has been insufficient.</li> <li>• FINEEC currently has limited resources to respond to the demand for accreditation.</li> <li>• From the HEI's perspective, the process from the agreement to the implementation of the review is slow. Delivering the service within the requested timeframe is important from the customer's viewpoint.</li> <li>• A superficial and underdeveloped culture of external evaluations and accreditations in the field of engineering in Finland.</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universities' growing interest in commissioning EUR-ACE accreditations.</li> <li>• Decision to pilot the accreditation of master's degrees.</li> <li>• Enhance the HEI's quality management procedures as well as the quality and internationalisation of education.</li> <li>• Stronger dissemination of good practices between engineering degree programmes in Finland.</li> <li>• International attractiveness of the programmes can be enhanced with the accreditations.</li> <li>• Institutions use the accreditations to ease comparability of degrees within Finland and with European institutions.</li> <li>• Institutions use the accreditations to enhance education export, double degree activities and international RDI cooperation.</li> <li>• Accreditations can also advance the quality of education in addition to quality in process.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EUR-ACE accreditation will lose its attraction if it is not continuously strengthened and developed as an internationally recognised and desirable procedure.</li> <li>• FINEEC does not receive sufficient added value from the activities and will be unable to direct resources to it if HEIs' interest remains low and the volume of activities in Finland does not increase.</li> <li>• A low number of accreditations does not make the process cost-effective for FINEEC.</li> <li>• Tough economic situation lowers the motivation for any voluntary paid-service processes.</li> <li>• The institutions could feel that not enough added value is produced related to the overall process cost.</li> </ul>

### 13.3 SWOT analysis of thematic evaluations

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensures extensive participation of the HE field in evaluations. Strengthens FINEEC's expert networks and opens new opportunities for stakeholder cooperation. Improves awareness of FINEEC among new actors.</li> <li>• There is plenty of demand for thematic evaluations. The focus is mostly on topical themes.</li> <li>• Different staff expertise and competences from FINEEC's sectoral units can be utilised in the cross-sectoral evaluations.</li> <li>• Different methods of enhancement-led evaluation can be tried and tested.</li> <li>• FINEEC has a high level of expertise in thematic evaluations, and the process of thematic evaluations has been developed for a long time.</li> <li>• Systematic approach with a four-year National Education Evaluation Plan. Stakeholders involved in identifying evaluation topics and focus areas.</li> <li>• Short thematic evaluations can also be carried out as fee-based projects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The development recommendations of thematic evaluations are often too general. Too many themes are often covered in a single evaluation.</li> <li>• Thematic evaluations risk becoming too broad, which means that the focus is lost.</li> <li>• Often lengthy processes.</li> <li>• The evaluators often have a heavy workload.</li> <li>• Thematic evaluations tend to pick up new content and methods midway (as the needs are partly only discovered during the project).</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thematic evaluations as an export product of Finnish evaluation activities, both as a method and in terms of contents.</li> <li>• Many expectations are placed on the evaluations in the field: an opportunity for interesting, creative and impactful evaluation work.</li> <li>• Thematic evaluations are part of FINEEC's stakeholder cooperation: a possibility to also find partners outside the so-called traditional actors directed by the evaluation project themes.</li> <li>• An opportunity to experiment extensively with different forms of communication and stakeholder work/peer assessment.</li> <li>• In addition to general recommendations, evaluation feedback can be given directly to individual HEIs.</li> <li>• Focus the evaluations on themes that have not been assessed previously. Promote the participation of actors in new fields.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thematic evaluations based on an overly cumbersome concept (e.g. methods/project organisation), with an excessive overall length that eat up a great deal of human resources.</li> <li>• Coping by the project managers when working on several overlapping evaluations simultaneously. Occasional personnel shortage of the Unit.</li> <li>• Development recommendations prepared by the evaluation team are too general or irrelevant from the beneficiaries' point of view.</li> <li>• The impact of the evaluations may be modest. In thematic evaluations, HEIs are typically given joint recommendations not directly targeted at anyone.</li> <li>• Evaluation fatigue in the field.</li> <li>• The stakeholders and the Ministry of Education and Culture place high expectations on thematic evaluations that will not automatically solve difficult education policy issues.</li> <li>• The benefits of reports/evaluations for developing activities probably vary.</li> </ul>



## 13.4 SWOT analysis of other activities of FINEEC

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FINEEC's basic funding is included in the state budget, in which it has an item of its own.</li> <li>• FINEEC's finances have a solid foundation as they are based on the long-term general government financial plan.</li> <li>• From the point of view of its core duties, FINEEC has the required expertise and a good employer image.</li> <li>• FINEEC's tasks and decision-making processes are defined in legislation. The Higher Education Evaluation Committee has an independent role, in which the voice of higher education can be heard.</li> <li>• There is an agreement with EDUFI in which details of the service processes are specified.</li> <li>• FINEEC's quality policy is publicly available.</li> <li>• Material and instructions defining the responsibilities, obligations and ethical issues have been drawn up for recruitment processes and induction of new employees and external experts.</li> <li>• FINEEC has a shared feedback system and methods have been defined for monitoring the feedback. Feedback has been effective with regard to the implementation of audits, for example.</li> <li>• EDUFI has a shared equality plan and instructions against discrimination and intolerance. Information on them has been communicated systematically.</li> <li>• FINEEC has strong quality and self-reflection culture and an ability to conduct self-assessments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The additional projects proposed to FINEEC and the expanding range of tasks are not always fully funded.</li> <li>• The large proportion of development cost appropriations and projects funded with separate appropriations in FINEEC's total budget affect the independence of its operation as they are granted for commissioned evaluations in which the targets and methods of assessment may have been defined in advance (not specific for higher education).</li> <li>• FINEEC and EDUFI have a number of different instructions and employees may not always be familiar with how to apply them.</li> <li>• The processing of internal feedback from personnel constantly remains half-complete (e.g., equal division of duties).</li> <li>• Different feedback systems and self-assessments provide a lot of information, but they do not always result in development measures and changes in activities in the best possible way, and this process is not fully monitored.</li> </ul>
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project funding from the EU could enable some of the activities to continue.</li> <li>• As FINEEC's services are in demand among customers, fee-based services could be expanded.</li> <li>• FINEEC's reputation at the Ministry of Education and Culture is good.</li> <li>• As competition is intensifying, FINEEC has the opportunity to develop its own activities and processes.</li> <li>• Finland and FINEEC have a good country brand, which makes international activities possible.</li> <li>• Good practices could be disseminated more within FINEEC.</li> <li>• All reforms do not take place in accordance with the PDCA cycle only. External influence may also change activities unexpectedly. FINEEC's operating method is agile.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The after-care of the COVID-19 situation threatens all actors operating within the scope of central government finances.</li> <li>• Operation as an independent unit within EDUFI may increase the price of administrative and support services.</li> <li>• As an independent unit within EDUFI, the image of FINEEC's independence may be at risk as the impression of its independent role may be obscured and FINEEC may no longer be heard as an independent unit to the same extent.</li> <li>• The MEC may commission more evaluation services from independent actors in future.</li> <li>• EDUFI also says it conducts evaluations, which may lead to confusion about FINEEC's role.</li> <li>• Finding a balance in the competitive situation is important.</li> <li>• The activities and the enhancement work may become less flexible as a result of quality management.</li> </ul>

## Current challenges and areas for future development

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A practical challenge that FINEEC is facing in the latter part of 2021 is the move to a new office that has a multipurpose space solution without permanent rooms or desks for individuals. This move coincides with the return to the office after the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost the entire FINEEC switched to remote work in March 2020. The staff will return to something different from what they left behind. The increased remote work will continue to some extent, but a lot of new common practices need to be created in the new office space. Work supervision and management are challenged in the manifold expectations and demands of the new environment.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Finnish education system switched to distance learning mode, too. The exceptional teaching arrangements have affected the equality and equity of learning in many ways. New methods of teaching and student guidance have been developed at all levels of education. Digital pedagogy took a giant leap. The changes in the education system will affect the education evaluation and the national steering. FINEEC needs to maintain its active role in coping with the short-term and far-reaching effects of the crisis.

Naturally, FINEEC and Finland are not alone in the post-pandemic situation. The role of internationalisation and international cooperation will be redefined. New online modes of communicating and sharing experiences, such as webinars and meetings, indicate new forms of internationalisation for the external quality assurance agencies, and part of them are likely to remain after the pandemic. The online modes are an easy and resource-effective way of communicating. They widen the reach of activities and in some ways provide more equal communication between different actors. But how satisfactory are the online modes of communicating in the long run? Experience seems to suggest that one can maintain existing relations online, but can one build trust and create new partnerships online? Meeting in-person and networking with colleagues from Europe and elsewhere in the world is important for the agency's activities and their renewal also in the future.

It is now one year into the third audit cycle after the pilot phase. After three cycles of quality audits of HEIs, we are at a crossroad in Finland. What to do next? What is the future approach of external quality assurance of HEIs in Finland? How to best meet the needs of the higher education institutions? In December 2020, the Higher Education Evaluation Committee members were surveyed about their views on the future approach of external quality assurance in Finland. The improvement-orientation was strongly supported by the members, and it was considered responding well to the needs of HEIs. Engaging the higher education community in identifying their strengths and improvement areas as part of the evaluation was also considered important. In addition, the wide approach in external evaluation covering not only educational provision but also quality management of research/RDI activities as well as societal engagement was supported by the members. Increasing international cooperation in degree education seems to also raise the demand for programme accreditation-type evaluations. External evaluations focusing on achieving minimum quality standards in degree programmes were supported by some of the committee members. In terms of topical issues challenging quality management, the digitalisation of teaching and digital pedagogics was, not surprisingly, high on the agenda. Continuous learning, flexible and individual learning pathways and working life relevance of education were some other areas mentioned as challenges or issues that quality management need to address also in the future. During the evaluation plan period (2020–2023), preparations will be made to reform the system of audits and evaluation of higher education in Finland. The discussion will continue within FINEEC and the Higher Education Evaluation Committee but also more widely among the higher education community, stakeholders and the Ministry of Education and Culture.

All in all, enhancement-led evaluation continues to be a good response to the evaluation of higher education. It builds on the ideas of engagement, participation and respect for the ownership of the HEI activities. Enhancement-led evaluation is focused on the processes and outcomes of evaluations. While the purpose of FINEEC and its external evaluations of higher education is geared towards supporting the continuous improvement of the HEIs activities, external quality assurance and enhancement with its methodology need to support this purpose. The quality of higher education is built from the inside, not from the outside. We believe that trust, participation, multiple perspectives, supporting the objectives of the institutions and learning from others continue to play a key role in the future evaluation activities of the agency.

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## 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.

## Benchlearning (peer learning)

Benchlearning is a method in which an organisation learns from the good practices of another organisation. At best, it is a reciprocal learning process in which organisations or communities share information, competences and experiences. In benchlearning, the organisation receives and gives peer feedback as well as gains new insights and ideas for developing its activities.

## Criterion

A criterion refers to a ground for evaluation. It explains what kind of activity, result or quality level is the aim. 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 their 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 higher education institutions, teaching staff and other personnel, students, working life 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 topic 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 similar to 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.

## 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 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 a form of assessment helping an organisation to identify existing strengths and development areas in its activities. Through self-assessment, the organisation can set targets for its activities and initiate development measures to reach those targets.



## Annex 1 Strategy of FINEEC

**FINNISH EDUCATION EVALUATION CENTRE**

**WE WANT TO**

- advance learning and the building of competences
- increase the equality in education
- improve education system's functionality
- develop the quality of education.

**WE produce** educational knowledge, understanding and competence that enhance trust and lead to wise decisions.

**Our evaluations orient to the future, and they are** enhancement-led, diverse and participatory.

**We foster society's** ecological, social, cultural and economic sustainable development.

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE**  
**PRE-PRIMARY AND BASIC EDUCATION**

**GENERAL UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION**

**VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

**LIBERAL ADULT EDUCATION**

**HIGHER EDUCATION**

**BASIC EDUCATION IN THE ARTS**

**INDEPENDENT** We act independently, and our outcomes and conclusions are free from a third-party influence.

**OPEN** We work in an interactive manner, and our principles, criteria and processes are made known.

**BOLD** We tackle difficult matters, take stand and participate in public debate.

**TRUSTWORTHY** We base our evaluation activities on strong expertise and systematically collected data.

**FINEEC**

## Annex 2 Key stakeholders of the Higher Education and Liberal Adult Education Unit

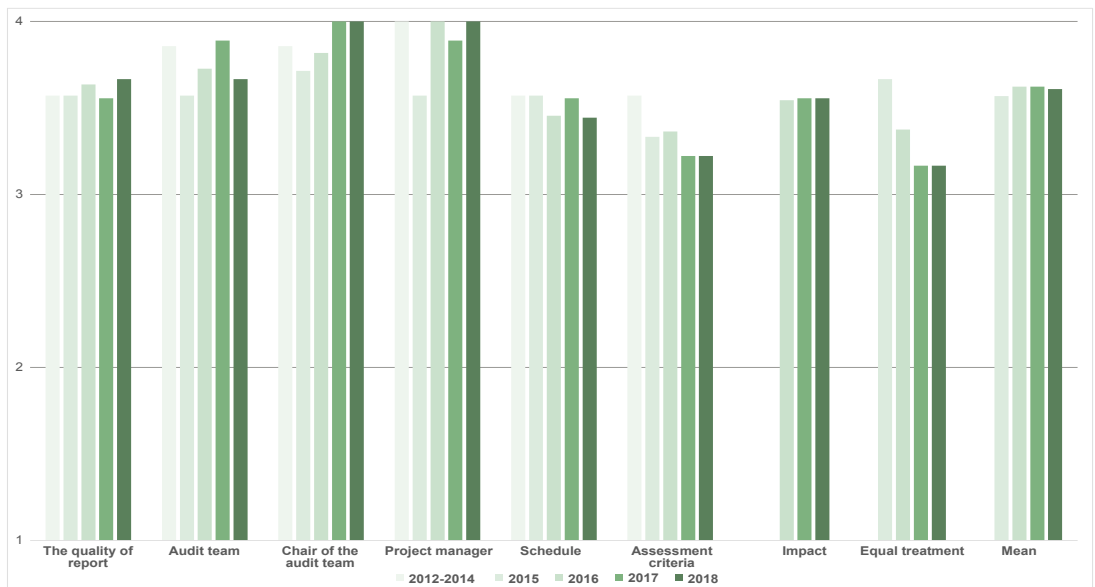
Stakeholders	Name of the stakeholder
Decision-makers	Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) Education and Culture Committee of the Parliament of Finland
Partners	Universities Finland (UNIFI) Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (Arene) National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK) Research institutes for higher education research Central labour unions Labour market organisations National research and innovation funds Ministry for Foreign Affairs Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities
Tactical partners	Higher Education Institutions
Strategic partners	Partners in the EU-funded Twinning projects Evaluators Academy of Finland
Domestic and international networks	Pedaforum European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) Quality Audit Network (QAN) International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) European University Association (EUA) European Network for Universities of Applied Sciences (UASNET) European Association for Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) European Students' Union (ESU) European Higher Education Society (EAIR) European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) Nordic Council of Ministers European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAE)

## Annex 3 Feedback from second-cycle audits and third-cycle pilot audits

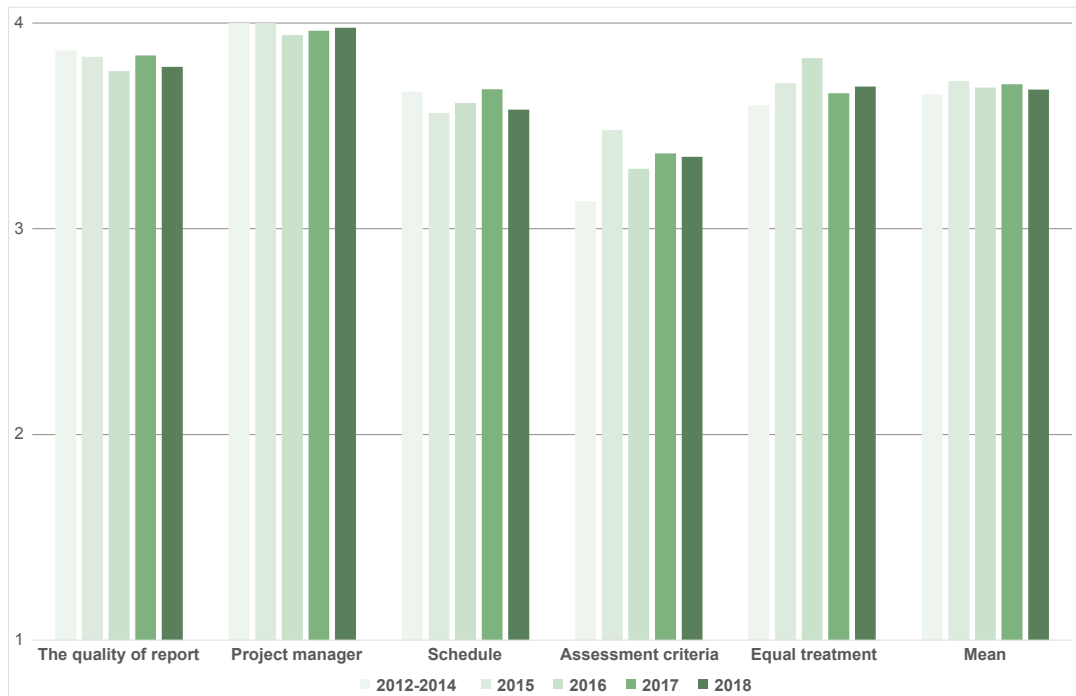
### Second cycle of audits 2012–2018

FINEEC and its predecessor FINHEEC collected audit feedback from both the audited HEIs and the audit teams. Feedback was collected using an online 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.

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 1** The audited HEIs' satisfaction with the audit process based on the feedback collected between 2012 and 2018 (n = 44)



**FIGURE 2 The audit team members' satisfaction with the audit process based on the feedback collected between 2012 and 2018 (n = 171)**

The figures 1 and 2 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.

### Third cycle pilot audits 2018–2019

Feedback was collected from the two pilot HEIs and audit teams using an online survey. The respondents provided their opinions using a five-point scale, in which 1 meant that they completely disagreed, and 5 that they completely agreed with the statement. The survey questionnaires also included open questions.

The audit team members (median of responses) fully or somewhat agreed with statements that the objectives of the audit were clear, the audit framework was up to date and fit for purpose, the assessment criteria were functional, adequate support and instructions were provided for carrying out the audit, the division of duties within the audit team was effective, the communication

within the audit team was effective, I was satisfied with the information the audit produced, the implementation schedule of the audit was realistic, the workload required by the audit was as I expected, and the auditor training prepared me for the work in the audit.

The HEIs fully or somewhat agreed with the statements that FINEEC's arrangements for the evaluation worked well, the audit criteria were functional, carrying out a self-assessment helped us in improving our activities, the information produced by the audit will support us in improving our activities, and recommendations made in the audit were relevant and usable. 'The audit framework was up to date and fit for purpose' received a bit lower rating of 3.5/5.

**T**he Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is evaluated in 2021 by an external review panel nominated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ENQA. The ENQA review focuses on assessing whether and how FINEEC as an agency and its higher education evaluations meet the expectations of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA. This self-assessment report has been produced by FINEEC staff for the external review.

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is an independent agency responsible for the evaluation of education. It operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education. It implements system and thematic evaluations, learning outcome evaluations and field-specific evaluations. Moreover, FINEEC supports providers of education and training and higher education institutions in matters related to evaluation and quality assurance, as well as advances the evaluation of education.

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