



FINNISH EDUCATION  
EVALUATION CENTRE

# THE STATUS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROVIDERS' QUALITY MANAGEMENT 2022



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# INTRODUCTION

This summary publication describes the key results and development recommendations of the *Ammatillisen koulutuksen järjestäjien laadunhallintajärjestelmien arviointi* ('The Evaluation of Vocational Education and Training Providers' Quality Management Systems') project carried out by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). The quality management and quality management systems of vocational education and training (VET) providers were evaluated for the first time in 2015 (Räisänen et al., 2015). The evaluation carried out in 2021–2022 and described in this publication is the second of its kind and based on the Act on the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (1295/2013) and FINEEC's four-year evaluation plan (2020–2023) approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The actual evaluation was preceded by the development of an evaluation model and criteria in collaboration with VET providers and other VET actors in 2018–2020.

The subjects of the evaluation included all Finnish VET providers (n = 142) that, at the time of the evaluation, provided vocational education and training and awarded qualifications in accordance with the Act on Vocational Education and Training (531/2017) and the authorisation to award qualifications and provide VET issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Of these VET providers, a total of 137 participated in the evaluation, as a result of which the response rate was nearly 97%.

This summary publication is based on the report *Ammatillisen koulutuksen järjestäjien laadunhallinnan tila 2022* ('The Status of Vocational Education and Training Providers' Quality Management 2022', Korpi et al. 2022). The target group of the publication include the management, staff, students and working life representatives of VET providers and other VET actors and interested parties.

## BACKGROUND

Vocational education and training (VET) plays a key role in the Finnish education system. It is one of the two main paths to higher education alongside general upper secondary education. VET students also have the option of completing both general upper secondary studies and a vocational qualification at the same time (appendix 1).

From the perspective of students, it is crucial that the quality of studies and the smoothness of study paths are ensured with quality management cooperation between education and training providers and other actors when students transition from one level of studies to the next and on to the employment market or further studies. In Finland, quality management and evaluation is carried out at all levels of education, from early childhood education and care to higher education, although the various education sectors are currently at different stages in regard to the development of quality. In VET and higher education, quality management has been developed and quality management evaluations have been carried out for some time now. In early childhood education and care, primary and lower secondary education and general upper secondary education, the focus is currently on quality management support.

The obligation of VET providers to evaluate their own operations was first laid down in the Act on Vocational Education and Training in the late 1990s, and in 2018 the obligation was extended to also apply to the evaluation of quality management systems. This strengthening of the role of quality management and evaluation was part of the vocational education and training reform, the purpose of which was to renew VET to make it competence-based and customer-oriented, increase learning at workplaces and individual study paths and reduce regulation and overlaps.

The development and evaluation of quality management in VET has also been steered by national and international policies, such as the national quality strategy and quality management recommendations for vocational education and training and the Lisbon and Copenhagen Processes. Finland's current national policies, quality management development measures and quality management system evaluations are based on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training.

The quality management of VET in Finland is promoted at both the national and local level by five parties, which all have their own roles: the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, the Finnish National Agency for Education, VET providers and working life committees (appendix 2).

## OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

The objective of the evaluation was to provide information on the status of VET providers' quality management and quality management systems and the implementation of the national quality strategy for vocational education and training 2030 (Aiming for excellence). In addition to this, the aim was to provide VET providers with motivation and support for the continuous development of their own quality management and quality management systems, develop quality and evaluation competence and highlight and share the good quality management practices of VET providers.

The evaluation questions were as follows.

- To what extent do the VET providers have a well-functioning quality management system in place, when the system is analysed as a whole and by evaluation area?
- How does the effectiveness of VET providers' quality management systems vary with different background variables?
- What are the key strengths and development needs in VET providers' quality management systems?
- What are the most typical features of VET providers' quality management systems?
- How has the implementation of the national quality strategy for vocational education and training progressed?

## SUBJECTS OF THE EVALUATION

The evaluation model was based on the PDCA cycle, a continual improvement approach consisting of four phases: Plan (establishing objectives and processes), Do (carrying out the planned objectives), Check (evaluating results) and Act (implementing corrections and improvements). After the Act phase, the cycle repeats from the Plan phase. This approach conceptualises development as a spiral-like continuous process in which each cycle brings you closer to the objective.

The performance of VET providers' quality management systems was evaluated in the following areas: management, prerequisites for awarding qualifications and providing VET, awarding of qualifications and provision of VET, and the results of operations. The evaluation scales used (operations and results) were two-dimensional and involved examining operations and results from different perspectives on a four-step scale: absent, emerging, developing and advanced.

## EVALUATION MATERIAL

In accordance with the principles of enhancement-led evaluation, the evaluation emphasised the participation of different VET actors in the planning of the evaluation, the generation of evaluation data and the interpretation of results. Thus, the key data collection methods selected were self-evaluation by the VET providers and development seminars.

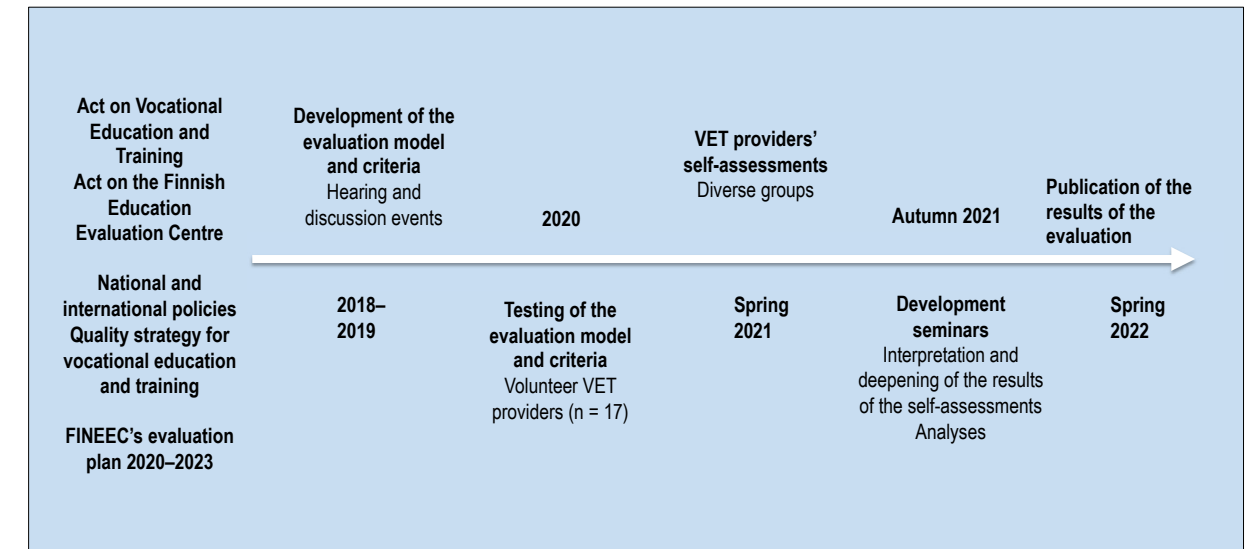
The VET providers carried out their self-evaluation in diverse groups that included representatives of the educational institution's management, staff, students, working life and stakeholders.

The information obtained through the self-evaluation was deepened in development seminars organised by FINEEC.

In connection with the self-evaluation, the VET providers were also asked to provide suggestions concerning good quality management practices.

## EVALUATION PROCESS

The evaluation process is described below (Figure 1). The first phase of the evaluation process (2018–2020) consisted of the preparation of the evaluation model and criteria and the testing thereof. This was followed by the actual evaluation (2021–2022).



**FIGURE 1. The evaluation process of the evaluation of quality management systems**

# RESULTS

## 1. The status of VET providers' quality management is good

According to the evaluation, the status of VET providers' quality management is good overall. 86% of VET providers evaluated their quality management and quality management system to be at least at the developing level. In 2015, the corresponding share was 85%, based on the criteria used in the evaluation at the time (Table 1).

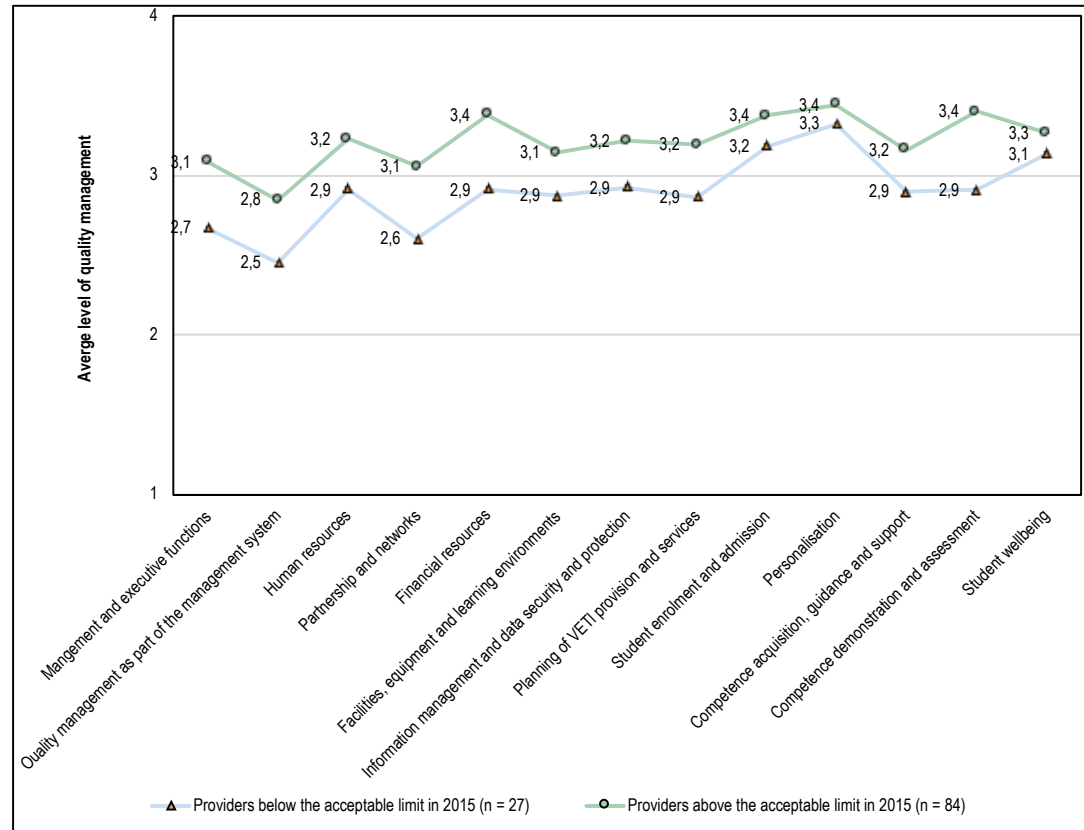
Most of the providers (87%) had been developing their quality management systematically for more than six years and the majority (79%) had been participating in national or regional quality networks for more than six years.

**TABLE 1. Overall distribution of VET providers' responses across the evaluation scale categories in 2021 (N = 137) and 2015 (N = 111 \*). \*VET providers that were still authorised to provide VET at the time of the evaluation in 2021**

	Absent (% of claims)	Emerging (% of claims)	Developing (% of claims)	Advanced (% of claims)
2021	1.1	13.6	57.5	27.8
2015	0.7	14.6	56.2	28.5

## 2. Participation of students and staff in the development of quality and quality management has increased

The majority of VET providers evaluated student and staff participation in the development of quality and quality management to be at least at the developing level. Compared to FINEEC's evaluation of quality management systems in 2015 (Räsänen et al., 2015), VET providers have improved student and staff participation in the development of quality and quality management. By contrast, working life, stakeholder and guardian participation in the development of quality and quality management remains an area in need of development.



**FIGURE 2. Differences between VET providers have remained the same from 2015 to 2021**

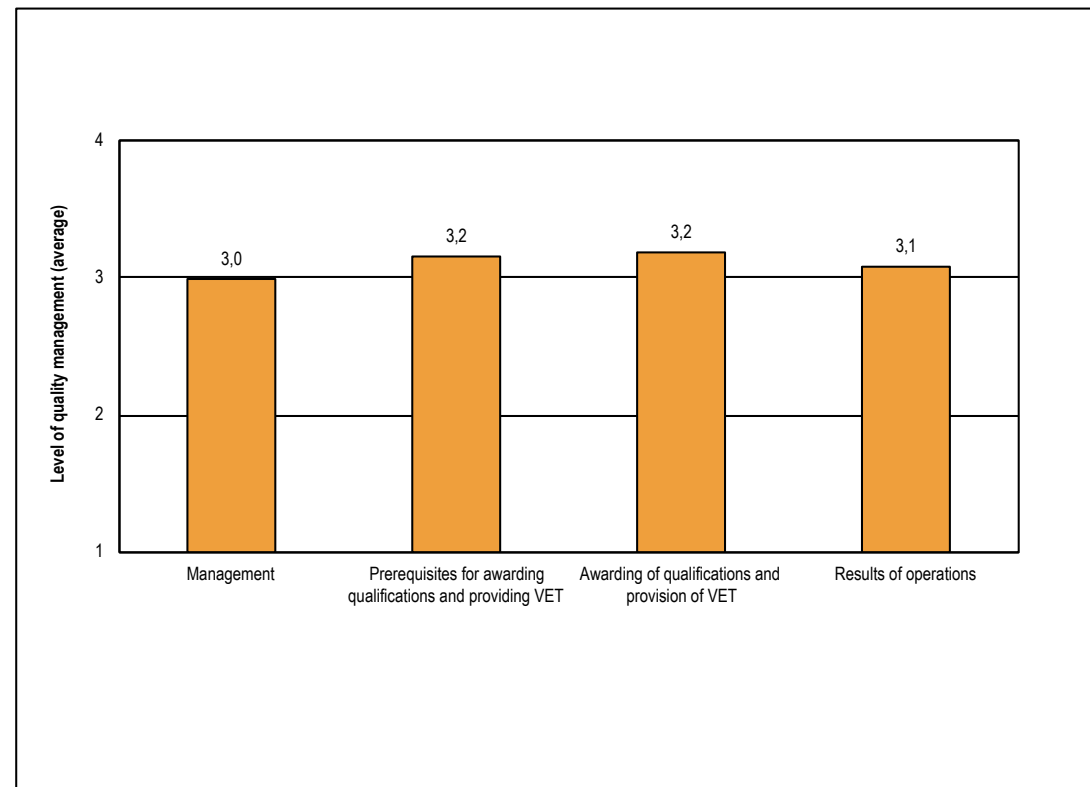
### 3. Differences between VET providers in the level of quality management remain unchanged

The differences in quality management between VET providers have not significantly narrowed compared to the evaluation of quality management systems carried out in 2015 (Räsänen et al., 2015). The only areas where differences have narrowed are personalisation and student wellbeing. By contrast, there are still major differences in the quality management of management, partnerships and networks, financial resources and competence demonstration and assessment (Figure 2).

There are also differences between providers based on type of educational institution and Regional State Administrative Agency area. Furthermore, there are differences in how fully quality management is integrated into the management system, how advanced quality culture is and the ratio of factors promoting and hindering quality management in the provider's operations.

**4. Level of quality management better in the areas of awarding of qualifications and provision of VET and prerequisites for providing VET than in other evaluation areas**

Overall, the level of quality management is highest in the evaluation areas of prerequisites for awarding qualifications and providing VET and awarding of qualifications and provision of VET (Figure 3).



**FIGURE 3. Overall level of quality management (N=137)**

**5. VET providers' evaluations varied the most by type of educational institution, language of instruction and Regional State Administrative Agency area**

Examined by type of educational institution, the variation in VET providers' evaluations is highest among music schools and specialised educational institutions. Among music schools, variation is greatest in human resources, and among specialised educational institutions, it is greatest in personalisation and student wellbeing. Examined by language group, variation is greatest among Swedish-language VET providers in the areas of competence acquisition, guidance and support. Examined by Regional State Administrative Agency area, variation is greatest in the area of the Regional State Administrative Agency for Lapland in facilities, equipment and learning environments.



**TABLE 2. Strengths and development needs of quality management systems**

Evaluation area	Strengths	Development needs
Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objective orientation</li> <li>• Promotion of quality culture</li> <li>• Responsibilities and structures supporting quality management and management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing the participation of different groups in the development of quality management</li> <li>• Integrating quality management more closely into the management system.</li> </ul>
Prerequisites for awarding qualifications and providing VET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management of financial and human resources</li> <li>• Management of partnerships, particularly from the perspective of long-term cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Data management</li> <li>• Management of human resources</li> <li>• Management of partnership and stakeholder cooperation</li> </ul>
Awarding of qualifications and provision of VET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible enrolment in and starting of VET</li> <li>• Personalisation</li> <li>• Competence acquisition, guidance and support</li> <li>• Cooperation with working life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competence acquisition, guidance and support, including special and intensive special support</li> <li>• Working life cooperation</li> <li>• VET provided at workplaces and ensuring related competence</li> </ul>
Results of operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systematic evaluation system</li> <li>• Knowledge management</li> <li>• Key performance and human resource results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social responsibility results</li> <li>• Reporting, processing, presentation, monitoring and benchmarking of results</li> <li>• Results related to students and working life</li> </ul>

**6. The strengths and development needs of quality management are similar across groups with different levels of quality management**

As part of their self-evaluation, VET providers defined the strengths and development needs of their quality management in the different evaluation areas (Table 2).

Comparing the self-evaluation of two groups, one with a level of quality management of at least developing level and the other with a level of quality management of no higher than emerging level, the results show that both groups saw similar things as strengths and development needs in quality management.

**7. The role of staff and stakeholders should be strengthened in VET providers' objective setting, and communication about results should be increased**

Approximately one quarter of VET providers have not defined participation methods for staff, students, working life and stakeholders. In addition, a corresponding share of providers have not defined targets and metrics for the performance, effectiveness and quality of their operations in collaboration with staff and stakeholders.

Furthermore, a quarter of VET providers feel that they face challenges in defining social responsibility objectives and tasks and in promoting related activities. The level of communication about results is no higher than starting among nearly 40% of providers, even though communicating about the key results of evaluations has been their statutory task since 1998.

## **8. Quality management of VET provided at workplaces and other learning environments, working life cooperation and partnerships in need of development**

The quality management of VET provided at workplaces remains one of VET providers' most notable development needs from the perspective of quality management. In particular, there is room for improvement in the identification of and preparation for critical points in VET provided at workplaces, the management and implementation of VET provided at work as a process, the orientation and support of workplaces and workplace instructors and in ensuring that they have the guidance and assessment competences that they need. Some VET providers also have room for improvement in ensuring the availability of the support (including intensive and special support) that students need at the workplace and other learning environments and in ensuring the accessibility of learning and demonstration environments.

Furthermore, the development of VET provision and services with different operators is not yet carried out in accordance with the principle of co-creation, and some VET providers face challenges in securing flexible access to VET services for working life. From a quality management perspective, there are also challenges related to how the quality of operations and services is ensured in shared processes and the interfaces of VET<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These interfaces may include e.g. cooperation between knowledge-based and workplace VET, cooperation between vocational institutes and general upper secondary schools related to parallel studies to complete two or more qualifications, cooperation with universities and universities of applied sciences and cooperation between labour administration and VET providers in the field of labour market training.

## **9. The majority of VET providers evaluate their quality management systems as a whole**

More than half of VET providers evaluate their quality management systems annually, and more than one third evaluate theirs every two to five years. The most frequently used methods are external audits and evaluations, management reviews and peer reviews. Compared to FINEEC's evaluation of quality management systems in 2015 (Räsänen et al., 2015), evaluation culture has developed in a positive direction. However, approximately one fifth of VET providers estimate that they need to develop the evaluation of the functionality and effectiveness of their quality management systems as a whole in the future.

## **10. VET providers have made progress in implementing the quality strategy**

VET providers have made progress in implementing the development measures defined in the quality strategy for vocational education and training (Ministry of Education and Culture 2019).

VET providers have made the most progress in integrating the competence assessment implementation plan into the quality management system, ensuring statutory data security and protection in data processing and the provision of VET and services that meet changing customer needs and enable individual solutions. On the other hand, there is room for improvement in working life, stakeholder and guardian participation and communicating performance, effectiveness and quality results to different target groups.

# DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

## VET providers

### **Quality management should be more closely integrated into the management system.**

The more closely quality management is integrated into the management system, the better the level of quality management. It is therefore important to ensure that:

- management has a clear role in the development of quality,
- resources have been allocated for development work,
- the organisation has competence and understanding related to quality management, and
- the organisation is committed to shared objectives, operating methods and their implementation.

In addition, it is important to utilise peer learning through networks in development work.

It is also important to promote quality culture with appropriate methods and tools (e.g. the Q-KULT tool).

### **Cooperation between providers should be increased to reduce differences in quality management.**

Cooperation with other VET providers should be increased in an appropriate manner, e.g. by type of educational institution, nationally or regionally, by way of sharing good quality management practices, learning from them and carrying out peer reviews. This applies especially to those VET providers who have development needs in regard to quality management.

Efforts to reduce differences in quality management should focus particularly on the areas of management, partnerships and networks, financial resources and competence demonstration and assessment, where the differences between VET providers are greatest.

### **Operational objectives and metrics should be defined in collaboration with key parties and results should be communicated to different target groups.**

Objectives and metrics related to the performance, effectiveness and quality of operations should be defined in collaboration with staff and stakeholders. It is also necessary to clarify the content and significance of social responsibility in the VET provider's operations, define objectives and metrics for it and collect monitoring data based on them. The ways in which results are communicated to different target groups should also be clarified.

The opportunities of staff, students, working life and stakeholders to influence and participate in the development of educational institutions' operations must be ensured.

It is important for management to define the objectives and methods for staff, student, working life and stakeholder participation and make sure that working life, stakeholders and guardians can participate in the development of the educational institution's quality and quality management.

**The functioning and effectiveness of quality management systems should be evaluated systematically.**

The functioning and effectiveness of quality management systems should be regularly reviewed. In addition to this, VET providers need to ensure that they have procedures in place for the comprehensive evaluation of their quality management systems utilising internal and external evaluation, for example.

**The quality management of VET provided at workplaces and other learning environments needs to be further developed.**

The quality management of VET provided at workplaces should focus particularly on the training of workplace instructors and ensuring sufficient guidance and assessment know-how. It is important for VET providers to have systematic procedures for assessing the competence of workplace instructors and carrying out the training of workplace instructors.

The accessibility of learning and demonstration environments must be ensured, as must the availability of the special and intensive support needed by students in different learning environments.

In order to ensure the quality of VET provided at workplaces, it is important to utilise material produced in national development projects.

**Working life, student, partner and stakeholder participation in the joint planning of VET provision and services and the quality assurance of services should be increased.**

VET provision and services should be planned in collaboration with working life, students, stakeholders and partners based on the principle of co-creation. The quality of students' study paths and service processes should also be ensured through quality management cooperation with basic education, general upper secondary education, higher education, working life, TE Offices and other parties.

**The Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education**

**The implementation of the national quality strategy for vocational education and training should be monitored and decisions should be made about the next evaluation cycle for the quality management systems of VET providers.**

The results of this evaluation should be utilised in the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the quality strategy for vocational education and training at the end of the current three-year period in 2022. Special attention should be paid to the quality management of VET provided at workplaces and other learning environments, working life cooperation and partnerships.

The objectives, timing and cycle of the next evaluation of the quality management systems of VET providers should be decided upon in cooperation with FINEEC and the Ministry of Education and Culture.

**VET providers at different levels should be provided with support for developing quality management.**

It is important to develop appropriate incentives for VET providers that are at different stages of development regarding quality management.

**VET providers' management should be provided with support for developing quality know-how.**

The management of VET providers must be provided with support for developing quality management know-how and quality culture so that quality management can be more closely integrated into the management system and to facilitate the participation of students, working life, guardians and stakeholders in the development of quality and quality management.

**Networking between VET providers should be promoted to develop quality management.**

The effectiveness of existing quality networks and VET providers' opportunities to participate in them should be evaluated. In addition to this, an evaluation should be carried out to determine which networks, such as national, regional, sectoral or thematic networks, best support the development of VET providers' quality management.

## IN CONCLUSION

The results of the evaluation indicate that the status of vocational education and training providers' quality management is good overall. The budget cuts made in recent years and the reform of vocational education and training seem to have had little impact on the level of quality management. However, there are differences between VET providers that have remained unchanged.

The student orientation of education providers has improved, but there is still notable variation between VET providers in the quality management of working life cooperation and VET provided at workplaces.

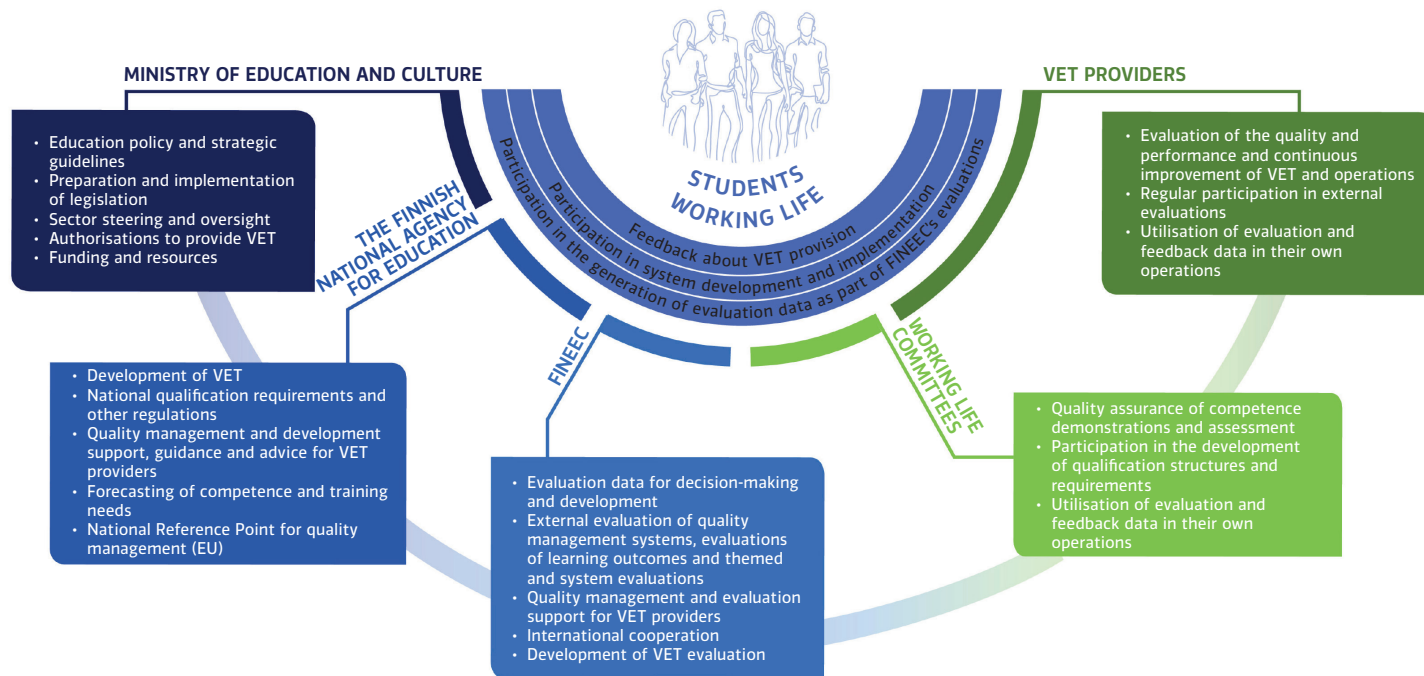
The development of quality management has been supported both nationally and locally with various measures. However, when it comes to outlining development work and planning quality management support, particular attention should be paid in the future to supporting those VET providers that have the greatest development needs in regard to quality management and that are not yet involved in quality networks. Furthermore, steps should be taken to ensure that more providers raise their level of quality management to the advanced level in the future.

The role that the evaluation of quality management systems plays in the overall quality management and evaluation of vocational education and training and in the implementation of the national quality strategy for vocational education and training must be defined at the national level. Developing quality management and quality management systems and monitoring the status of quality management are only possible as long as evaluation data is regularly generated and this data is systematically utilised at different levels of vocational education and training.

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 2: The roles of different parties in the quality management of VET

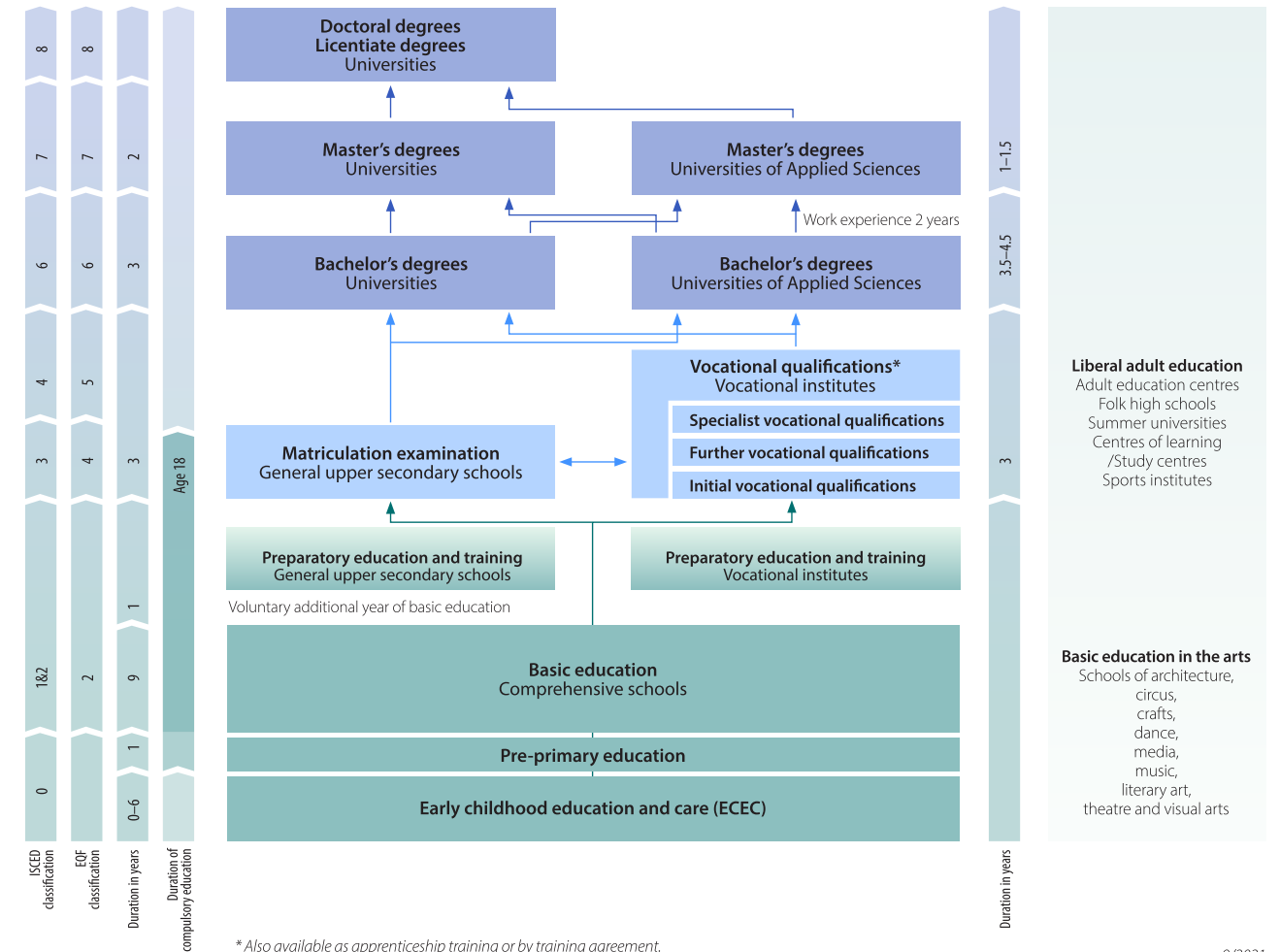
### QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING



Source: The Finnish National Agency for Education

## APPENDIX 2: The roles of different parties in the quality management of VET

### EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FINLAND





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