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Author(s): Moitus, Sirpa; Weimer, Leasa; Välimaa, Jussi

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FINNISH EDUCATION EVALUATION CENTRE

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

International Institute for Educational Planning

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
FINNISH INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Finland's country case study for the IIEP-UNESCO SDG4 project in 2018–2021

Sirpa Moitus | Leasa Weimer | Jussi Välimaa

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Finland's country case study for the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO) SDG4 project in 2018–2021

Sirpa Moitus
Leasa Weimer
Jussi Välimaa

Finnish Education Evaluation Centre
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Abbreviations

AKAVA	Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland
ARENE	The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EDUFI	Finnish National Agency for Education
EK	Confederation of Finnish Industries
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
FIER	Finnish Institute for Educational Research
FINEEC	Finnish Education Evaluation Centre
FiNQF	Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules
FLP	Flexible learning pathway
HEI	Higher education institution
LLG	Lifelong guidance
MOOCs	Massive open online courses
PSPs	Personal study plans
RDI	Research, development and innovation
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
SAMOK	Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences
SYL	National Union of University Students in Finland
UAS	University of applied sciences
UNIFI	Universities Finland

Executive summary

1

In March 2019, Finland accepted the invitation to join the IIEP-UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4 project: *Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*. The IIEP-UNESCO research project, 2018–2021, includes an international baseline survey and eight country case studies from different regions around the world. This report presents findings from the Finnish national case study.

The overarching objective for this national case study was to provide a holistic picture of flexible learning pathways in Finnish higher education, a topic of national interest. In addition, the case study offers evidence-based policy recommendations for the Ministry of Education and Culture and higher education institutions to further develop policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments and practices to support flexible learning pathways. As one of eight national case studies, the project also facilitates international benchmarking of best practices.

The Finnish national case study focused on five specific aspects of flexible learning pathways, as agreed with IIEP-UNESCO. These included: 1. flexibility in admissions; 2. transfer and mobility between programmes and institutions; 3. recognition of prior learning; 4. guidance and counselling, including personal study plans, and 5. combining work and higher education studies.

Primary data was collected via interviews and focus group discussions with 43 respondents in autumn 2019. The respondents included national level actors (11), representatives of higher education institutions (17) and students and alumni (15) from two case higher education institutions, one representing the university-sector and the other representing the universities of applied sciences sector.

The Finnish case study findings suggest that flexible learning pathways have been on the national agenda for approximately 10 years. Over this time period, national governments' political agendas and policy objectives have varied in their support and focus on flexible learning pathways. An overarching objective is to improve the accessibility and availability of higher education. Specific FLP objectives include development of alternative pathways in the

context of student admissions reform, updating principles for recognition of prior learning, development of transfer procedures, and definition of equity groups and drafting a national plan for accessibility of higher education.

The findings suggest that the most influential national instruments driving flexible learning pathways were the funding model which financially rewards institutions for open studies credits and cross-studies, legislation supporting cross-studies and co-operation with the secondary level, and government-funded key projects that created new tools and practices to support the institutional level implementation of flexible learning pathways.

While numerous projects and preparatory training supported the access of students with an immigrant background into Finnish higher education, the data indicated that they were still an underrepresented group in higher education and more efforts are required. As regards to other equity groups, there was some evidence that they did not always benefit from practices related to flexible learning pathways as much as other students. However, in line with the current Government agenda, efforts had been initiated to address the equality and equity aspects in higher education during 2020.

The study indicated that the most important enablers for flexible learning pathways in Finland include free education and study grant systems; increased emphasis on flexible learning pathways and continuous learning; ongoing curricula reform at the institutional level; and trust and cooperation between higher education institutions enabling mutual development and sharing of good practices.

Good practices at the national level consist of the government-funded projects focused on developing flexible learning pathways, e-learning platforms, legislation and agreements on cross-institutional study, and the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre thematic evaluations that inform especially policy development. At the institutional level, good practices included the development of open studies admissions pathways, elective studies embedded in the Bachelor–Master study structures, policies and processes to facilitate the recognition of prior learning, and personal study plans as tools for supporting students in study and career planning.

Recommendations for further development include formulating a national definition for the concept of flexible learning pathways as well as equity groups. More focused national monitoring and more effective use of existing data could advance the development of flexible learning pathways. At the institutional level, recommendations include further developing the open studies pathways; the internal pathways and specialisation choices and transfer pathways for students; and development of guidance to support students in increasing FLPs. Finally, it is recommended that institutions facilitate and manage the internal change needed to support flexible learning pathways, taking into account the central role of teachers in the change.

2

Introduction

2

This chapter gives an overview of the IIEP-UNESCO project, *Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*, including the research objectives and questions guiding the project. The focus and scope of the Finnish national case study is also introduced, along with a presentation of the methodology used in the case study.

2.1 IIEP-UNESCO project on Flexible learning pathways in Higher Education

The IIEP-UNESCO research project, 2018–2021, includes an international baseline survey and eight country case studies from different regions around the world: Chile, the United Kingdom, Finland, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Morocco and South Africa. The study includes countries with different sizes, from different geographical areas, operating in contexts with diverse interplays between state steering, institutional autonomy and market forces.

Finland joined as one of the country case studies in March 2019 based on discussions between the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) and taking into account the national interest in flexible learning pathways (FLPs). Finland's role in the project was to produce a country case study and to participate in a joint analysis of the results and dissemination of results. In addition, Finland's participation in the IIEP-UNESCO project was considered as an opportunity – not only to gain international comparative data on different approaches – but also to develop a national overview of FLPs. Although there had been several individual research projects investigating different aspects of FLPs, the phenomenon as a whole had not been previously studied in Finland from the policy perspective.

The international background for this project is described in the IIEP-UNESCO research plan: higher education is increasingly expected to adapt to different learning requirements, which means offering well-articulated and flexible learning pathways that can facilitate good outcomes for all. Well-articulated and flexible education systems that provide multiple learning pathways

help higher education systems become **more effective** in fulfilling their missions and goals. A well-articulated higher education system can also result in **improved efficiency**. For example, learners can have their prior learning recognised and used for course exemptions or when transferring between study programmes. This can help reduce the time and costs that it takes to complete a degree. Allowing students flexible study options may also result in lower dropout rates and better retention and completion rates. It can also reduce dead-ends in the study process, giving individuals the opportunity to advance to higher levels of learning. Third, creating FLPs in higher education can be an important mechanism to **enhance equity**. Finally, the wider benefits of having a well-integrated higher education system for the **public good** must also be recognised. An integrated and flexible higher education system that provides different study pathways fosters a culture of learning in society, which can in turn strengthen social cohesion and prosperity for all individuals (IIEP-UNESCO, 2018).

2.2 Research objectives and questions

The overarching objective of the IIEP-UNESCO project is to produce knowledge and provide evidence-based policy advice to ministries of (higher) education in different development contexts that are considering building or strengthening FLPs as an area of reform. Another objective is to help higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly in highly decentralised contexts, to understand the measures that they could adopt to provide more flexible learning opportunities to students.

The research questions include:

1. What are the **policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments and practices** that support FLPs in higher education?
2. How **effective** are these policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments and practices in establishing FLPs and building closer linkages between and within higher education levels and institutions?
3. How does the establishment of FLPs **influence** the access, progression, transfer, completion and transition to the labour market of those identified as **disadvantaged** groups in the case countries?
4. What lessons can be learned from the experience of case countries regarding the **key enablers** and **factors lacking** in the implementation of FLPs in higher education?

The IIEP-UNESCO definition of FLPs refers to learning pathways that **lead to a qualification**. It comprises three phases: 1) pathways for **getting into** higher education (for the first time but also later on in life); 2) pathways for **getting through** higher education (progression and transferability); and 3) pathways for **getting out** of higher education (completion and transition to the labour market or further study). Therefore, these three phases are linked to facilitate lifelong learning opportunities.

While investigating these three phases, the IIEP-UNESCO project also focuses on the role of regulatory and policy frameworks and instruments that support FLPs and alternative admissions pathways and opportunities for transfer between and within institutions. The IIEP-UNESCO research setting and the dimensions of FLPs studied are illustrated in *Figure 2.1*.

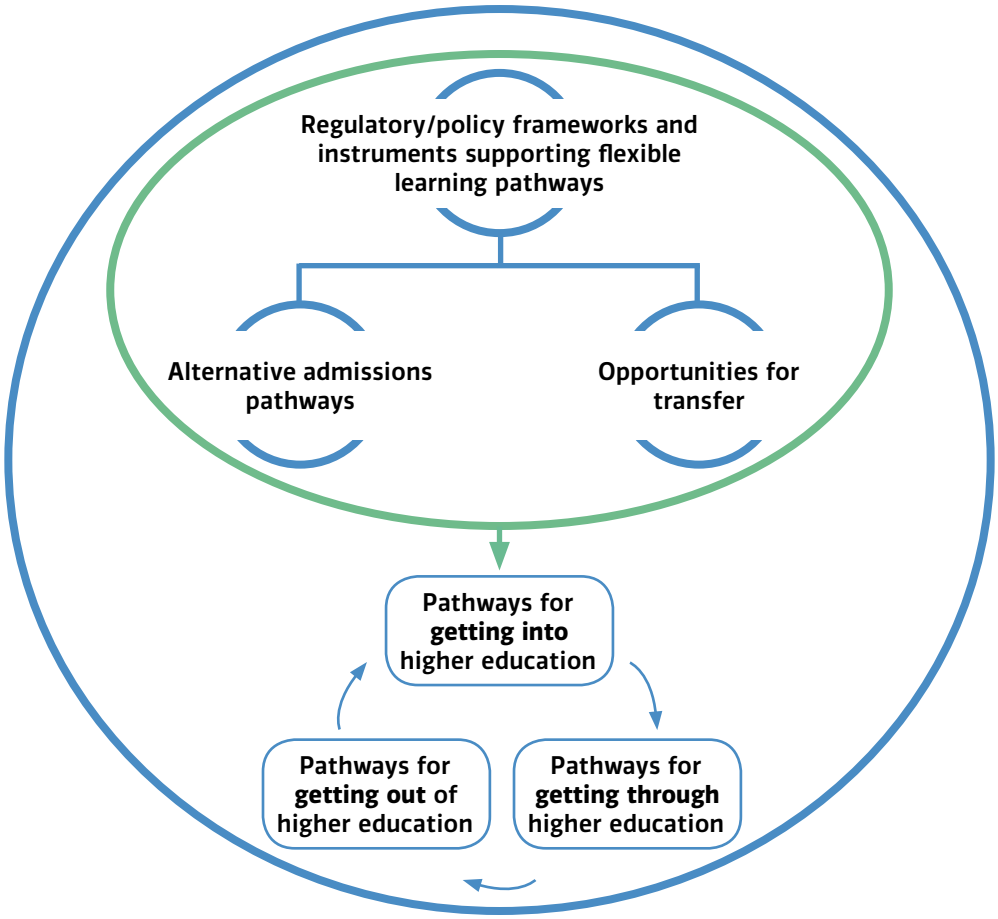

FIGURE 2.1. Dimensions of FLPs covered in the IIEP-UNESCO project. *Source:* IIEP-UNESCO, 2018.

The conceptualisation of the Finnish FLP framework

When implementing the Finnish country case study, it became evident that the conceptual framework of FLPs in higher education had not been previously defined as a whole. Therefore, for this country case study, the national team created a Finnish interpretation of the concept of FLPs. This conceptual framework includes three levels: policies for FLPs, national instruments supporting FLPs and practices supporting FLPs (see *Figure 2.2.*). The framework is based on a wide

interpretation of FLPs, covering not only for instance flexibility related to individual study paths but also tools that support and enable individual choices, such as recognition of prior learning and study and career guidance.

The structure of the report and the results of this study presented in chapters 4 and 5 follow this framework.

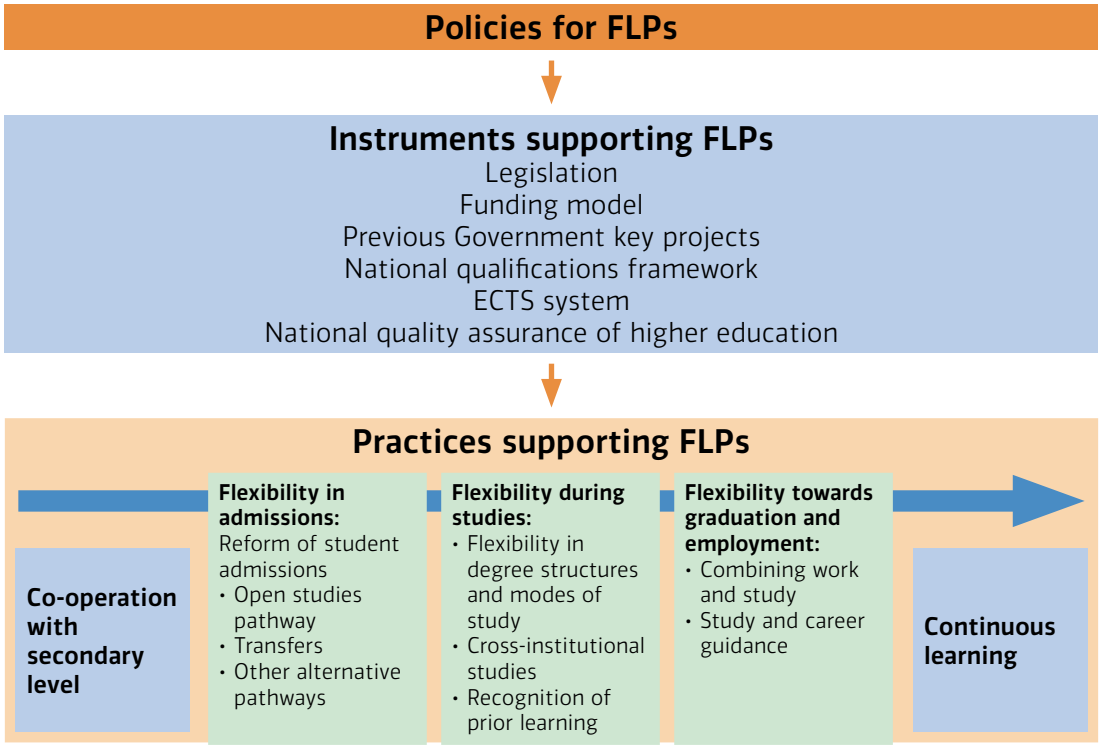

FIGURE 2.2. The Finnish framework of FLPs created for this country case study

The Finnish country case study mainly focuses on flexibility concerning university and university of applied sciences (UAS) Bachelor and Master's degrees belonging to ISCED levels 6 and 7. However, as there was a national emphasis to increase cooperation between higher education and the secondary level, as well as to further develop lifelong learning (or continuous learning), both these aspects are included in this framework.

The primary goal of the Finnish country case is to contribute to and participate in the IIEP-UNESCO project. At the national level, the main beneficiaries of the project are the Ministry of Education and Culture as well as universities and UASs. The project supports the decision-making of educational policy and steering and more specifically informs the drafting (in 2020) of the Government Education Policy Report to Parliament. Furthermore, the project informs

the participating two case institutions as it highlights good practices and potential areas in need of developing FLPs. The results of the country case study can be utilised also by other Finnish universities and UASs and other stakeholders, such as the Rectors' Councils, student organisations, employer and employee organisations.

Focus and scope of the Finland case study

Within the framework of the IIEP-UNESCO research project on FLPs, each participating country was encouraged to choose the focal areas that best support the country's own development work. In August 2019, after consultation with representatives of the Ministry, the national team decided on five focus areas for the case study, including both well-established practices and topical developmental challenges:

1. **Flexibility in admissions.** A reform of student admissions has taken place between 2018 and 2020. The country case study explores the open studies pathway being developed as part of a wider student admissions reform, good practices and obstacles.
2. **Transfer and mobility between programmes and institutions.** The key instrument for transfer and mobility between programmes and HEIs is the transfer student application process. The study produces quantitative data on transfers, if available, and the functioning of the transfer procedure from the student's perspective. Additionally, the research examines how the university and UAS two-cycle degree structure work as one form of flexibility within study paths. The report also highlights various forms of cross-study, such as e-learning and possibilities to take courses or minor subjects from other programmes/faculties/HEIs.
3. **Recognition of prior learning (RPL).** As a result of long-term development work, all Finnish HEIs have well-established RPL processes and practices, however, having some differences in their application. The study highlights the current state of RPL implementation in Finland; good practices and challenges.
4. **Guidance and counselling, including personal study plans (PSPs).** In addition to guidance and counselling services, all students in Finnish HEIs draft personal study plans. Although there are several good practices related to guidance, career monitoring of all students and guidance of immigrants have been included as policy level development targets. The case study investigates guidance, counselling and PSPs from the perspective of flexible pathways.
5. **Combining work and higher education studies.** Developing recognition of work-based learning and integrating it as part of university and UAS studies has been recently emphasised as one of the areas of national interest. The study will highlight combining work and higher education studies as a form of flexibilisation of studies and enhancing graduates' smooth transition to employment.

2.3 Research process

Overall schedule of the research project

The IIEP-UNESCO project on FLPs is being implemented between 2018 and 2021. *Figure 2.3.* presents the overall timeline of the project and its related activities.

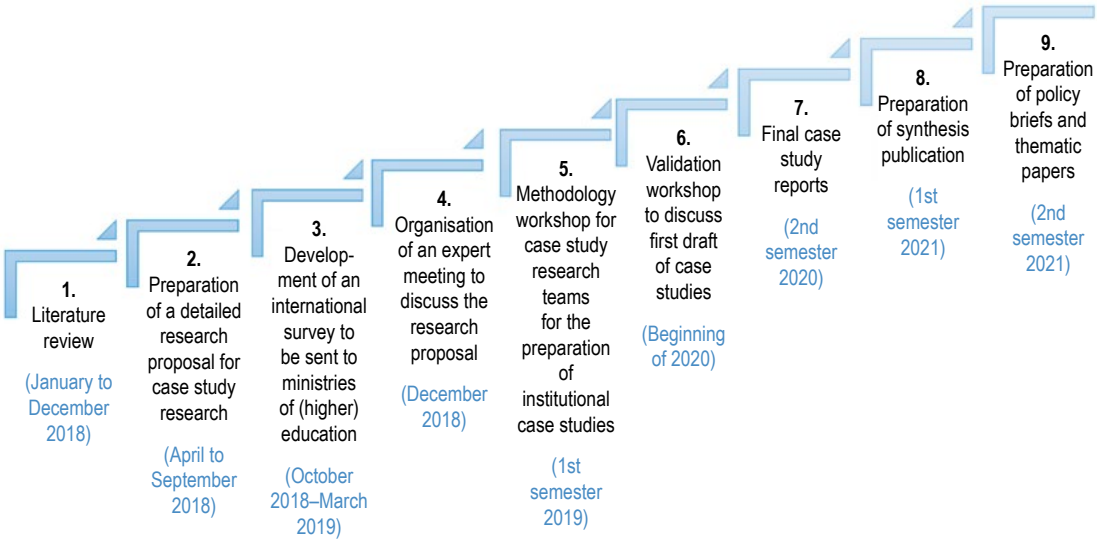

FIGURE 2.3. Overall timeline of the IIEP-UNESCO project and its related activities. ***Source:*** **IIEP-UNESCO, 2018.**

National team

It was recommended by the IIEP-UNESCO that the national team in each participating country include representation from the national evaluation agency and a research institution. Following this recommendation, it was agreed that the Finnish country case study would be conducted in cooperation between the FINEEC and the Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER) at the University of Jyväskylä. The project also serves as a pioneer for a first joint research project between these two actors.

The responsible researchers of the Finnish country case study were Counsellor of Evaluation **Sirpa Moitus** from FINEEC, who acted as a Project Manager of the Finnish team, and Researcher **Leasa Weimer** from FIER.

2.4 Research data and its analysis

Data collection

The country case study in Finland followed the research framework and research instruments developed by IIEP-UNESCO. Prior to the data collection phase, the national team members attended a methodology seminar organised by IIEP-UNESCO in June 2019 in Paris. In addition, IIEP-UNESCO provided guidance to the national team throughout the research process.

Primary data for this country case study consisted of:

- 11 national level interviews with key actors in terms of FLPs;
- 17 institutional level interviews with representatives of the two case HEIs; and
- focus group discussions with a total of 15 students and alumni.

Table 2.1 provides a general overview of the interview data. A more detailed description of the national and institutional level interviews and the selection criteria of the two case study HEIs is available in chapters 4.1. and 5.1.

TABLE 2.1. Overview of the interviews for the Finnish country case study

Time	Interviewed stakeholders
September-October 2019	• National-level interviews (N=11)
September-November 2019	• Case UAS interviews (N=8) • Case UAS focus groups (N=13 students and alumni)
	• Case university interviews (N=9) • Case university focus groups (N=2 students and alumni)

Based on the mutual agreement of division of work, Sirpa Moitus was responsible for conducting, analysing and reporting the national level interviews. Leasa Weimer conducted, analysed and reported the case university interviews, while Sirpa Moitus was responsible for the case UAS interviews.

The interviews were audio-recorded. The data collection complied with EU data protection legislation, the GDPR (EU 679/2016). All respondents gave written consent prior to interviewing. The case institutions and interviewees are anonymised in this report.

Secondary data for the country case studies included:

- An analysis of available statistics on access, progression, transfer, completion and transition to the labour market. The raw data for the country case study was partly produced by the statistics expert at the Ministry of Education and Culture.
- Vipunen national database was utilised as a main source for national statistics. Senior Advisors **Otto Leppänen** and **Mira Huusko** from FINEEC supported the national team in producing and editing the figures for chapters 3, 4 and 5.
- The desk research phase included further consultation on legislative framework for FLPs, procedures for the ECTS follow-up and the renewal process of principles for RPL with experts at the Ministry and coordinators of respective development projects.
- Director **Jussi Välimaa** from FIER contributed to chapter 3.

Data analysis

The national level interviews produced 68 pages and case institution interviews 83 + 64 pages of notes. A joint coding system based on the reporting topics was created by the national team. During the coding process, attention was paid to overarching interpretations such as links between policies and practices, links between funding models and practices, contradictions, lacks, good practices and strengths and synergies. Throughout the process both Moitus and Weimer discussed and analysed findings together.

As a part of the FINEEC and FIER co-operation, the first version of the report was modified in December 2019 based on feedback received from Jussi Välimaa**, Jaana Kettunen, Helena Aittola and Raimo Vuorinen** from FIER and **Harri Peltoniemi** from FINEEC.

In April 2020, the report was substantially modified based on IIEP-UNESCO project management feedback. In June 2020, IIEP-UNESCO organised a series of peer review webinars with the eight research teams. The report was then finalised based on the peer feedback from the Jamaican team and IIEP-UNESCO. The report is published in FINEEC series by consent of IIEP-UNESCO.

2.5 Structure of the report

The structure of the report is based on the IIEP-UNESCO guidelines. The structure of the report and the main contents of each chapter are presented in *Table 2.2*.

TABLE 2.2. Structure of the report

The report by chapters	Main contents of each chapter
1. Executive summary	• The most important findings, good practices and recommendations
2. Introduction	• Introduction to the case study report • Overview of the methodology and data sources
3. The higher education context for FLPs	• General description of the Finnish higher education system • Key features of FLPs' in the Finnish higher education system
4. System-level approaches for supporting FLPs	• Analysis of the system-level policies, instruments and practices that support FLPs in higher education • Evaluation of effectiveness of policies and instruments • Enablers, factors lacking and priorities for the future
5. FLPs in practice: An in-depth study of HEIs	• Role of national policies and instruments in supporting FLPs at the institutional level • Enablers, factors lacking and priorities for the future
6. Comparative analysis of policies and practices for FLPs, conclusions and recommendations	• Analysis on linkages between policies, instruments and practices for FLPs at the national level and institutional level • Summary of the key findings: strengths, good practises and areas in need of improvement

The context for flexible learning pathways in Finnish higher education

3

This chapter provides an overview of the Finnish higher education system, its history and core values that form the basis for flexible learning pathways (FLP). It then describes the main features of flexibility in accessing higher education, during studies and towards graduation and work placements. The chapter ends with a presentation of the steering and financing framework for higher education.

3.1 Short history of the Finnish higher education system and its values

The long-term objectives of the Finnish education system can be characterised with four core principles: equality, free education, no dead-ends when proceeding from one educational level to another, and a strong emphasis on lifelong (continuous) learning.

Finland's development towards a Nordic type welfare society and increasing participation in higher education began after the 1920's. This meant a radical higher education policy change in Finland with the first national higher education policies introduced in the late 1950s. During this time, educational equality was established as the cornerstone of the Finnish welfare system. The policies resulted in a state-driven expansion of universities in the 1960s and 1970s leading to the establishment of new universities in the 1980s. Another continuation of this policy was the establishment of the universities of applied sciences (UAS) sector in the 1990s. (Välimaa, 2019.) (see *Figure 3.1.*)

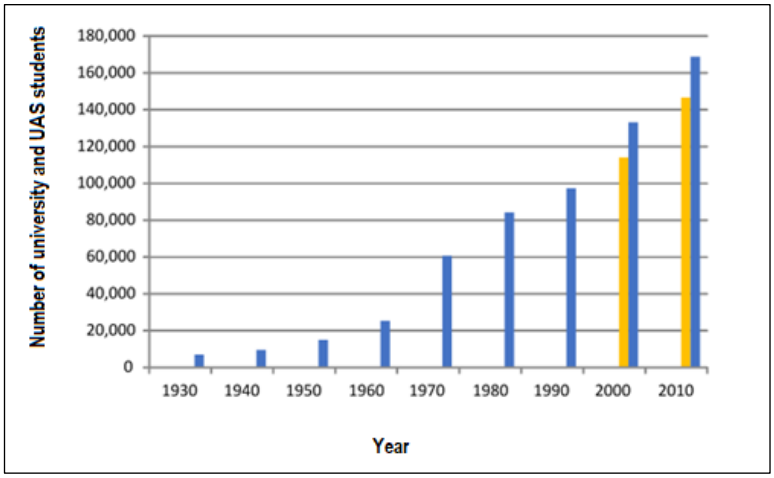

FIGURE 3.1. Number of university students 1930–2010 and UAS students 2000–2010. ***Adapted from:*** **Välimaa 2019. (Blue columns=university students, yellow columns=UAS students)**

The expansion of higher education was based on and aimed at creating equal educational opportunities for all citizens independent of their gender, socio-economic background or geographical location. The massification of higher education was motivated by macro-economic perspectives aimed at recruiting the talent reserves of the country. More importantly, expanding higher education was seen both as a political goal and an instrument for creating an equal society.

An important Finnish education policy goal related to regional accessibility was the establishment of a university or a UAS or both in every region of the country from the 1960s onwards. Now higher education institutions (HEIs) can be found geographically located throughout the country, from south to north and east to west. This policy goal has been important because Finland is a rather large country (338.000 km^2) with a relatively small population. Today, accessibility of higher education is on the agenda again, not only the regional location of HEIs, but also accessibility of higher education from the viewpoint of various equity groups, such as students with various ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds.

At the end of 2019, the official total population of Finland was 5,5 million persons. Statistics Finland reports three trends in the population structure. First, the population structure is ageing; there were about 875,000 persons aged at least 70 in Finland at the end of 2019. Second, the birth rates are decreasing, leading to smaller age groups. Third, Finland is becoming increasingly international, as the proportion of foreign-language speakers exceeded 400,000 persons, 7% of the total population. Year 2013 stands out as a peak with more than 31,000 immigrants in one year. These changing demographics impact the Finnish higher education system.

3.2 Higher education institutions as a part of the Finnish education system

The Finnish education system consists of early childhood education and daycare, pre-primary, basic and general upper secondary education, vocational education and training and higher education. (see *Figure 3.2.*)

Compulsory schooling consists of one-year pre-primary education for 6-year-olds and nine-year basic education for children aged 7–16. Post-compulsory education consists of three-year general and vocational upper secondary education and training. General upper secondary education leads to a matriculation examination and vocational education to a vocational qualification.

The Finnish higher education system consists of universities (ISCED levels 6–8) and universities of applied sciences (ISCED levels 6–7). There are no short-cycle higher professional programmes (ISCED level 5) in the Finnish education system.

There are 13 public universities in Finland. Two of them are run by foundations whereas the other 11 are defined as independent legal entities. The Universities Act (558/2009) together with the Finnish constitution emphasise the autonomy of universities and academic freedom in research.

Additionally, there are 22 publicly funded UASs under the Ministry of Education and Culture. Two other UASs include the Police Academy (operating under the Ministry of Interior) and Ålands Yrkeshögskola (under the autonomous area of Åland). Furthermore, the Finnish National Defense University, operating under the defence administration, provides military officers vocational education and doctoral education. University consortia supplement the Finnish university network in regions that do not have their own universities.

The tasks of universities and UASs are based on *the dual model*, defined by the University Act and the UAS Act. While the universities are tasked with engaging in scientific research and providing the highest level of education based on it, UASs have a strong regional and working life orientation. Besides educating professional experts, UASs are expected to carry out research, development and innovation (RDI) activities serving regional needs and contribute to the renewal of the industrial structure of the region.

As a member country in the Bologna process, Finland has since the early 2000's implemented structural reforms and adopted common European higher education tools, such as the three-cycle (Bachelor-Master-Doctor) degree structure, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in measuring students' workload, a learning-outcome and student-centred approach in teaching and learning, and external quality assurance that covers all HEIs (EHEA, 2020).

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FINLAND

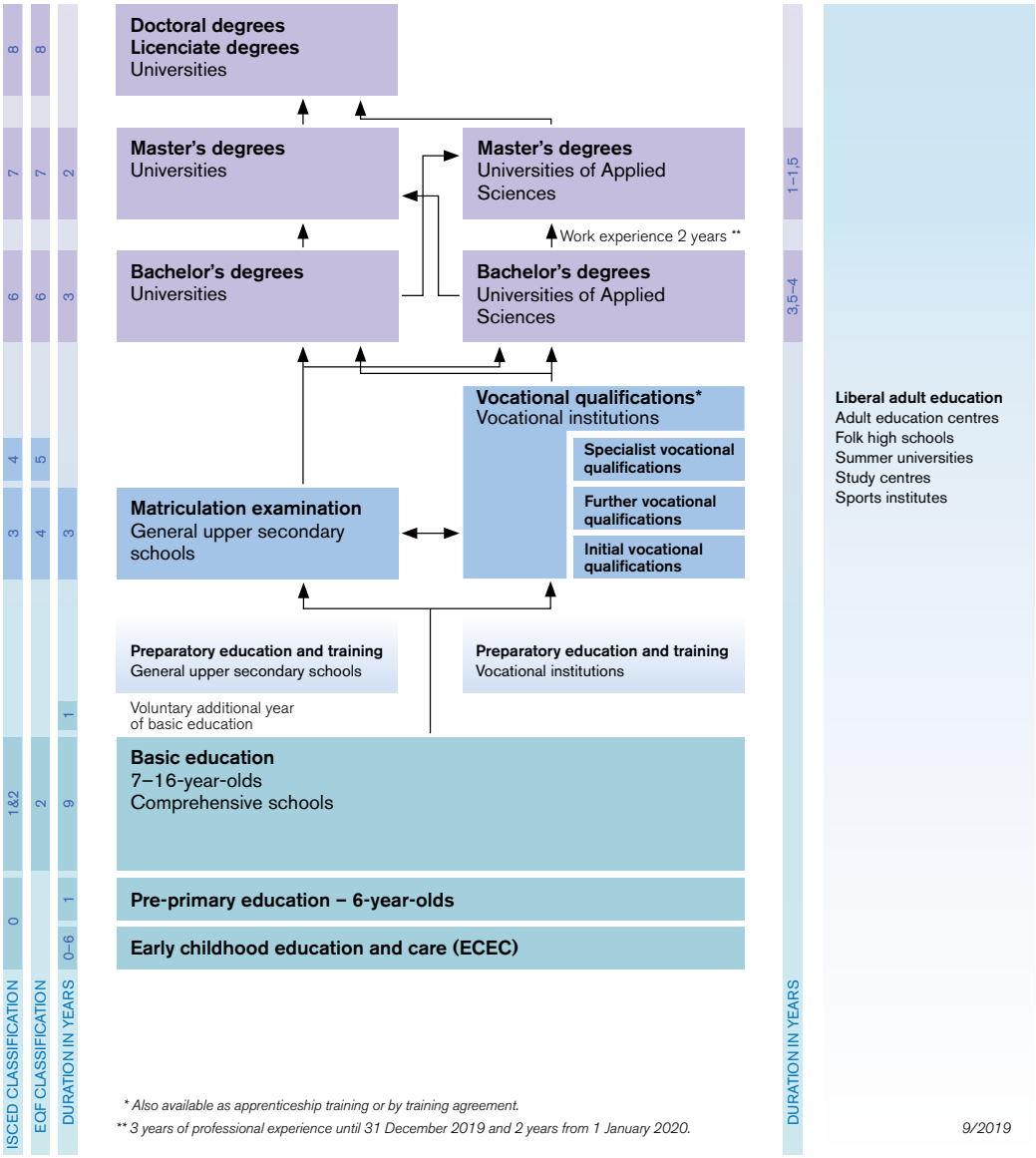

FIGURE 3.2. The education system in Finland

Higher education degrees

Universities offer Bachelor's and Master's degrees and academic, artistic and third-cycle postgraduate degrees. UASs provide Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Both sectors also offer international degree programmes.

The student is admitted to a university with a study right to complete both a Bachelor's (minimum of 3 years, 180 ECTS credits) and a Master's degree (minimum of 2 years, 120 ECTS credits). The vast majority of students have a Master's degree as their first goal and very few students leave university after the Bachelor's level. Finnish students often study more than six years to get their Master's degree.

A university Bachelor's degree usually consists of basic and intermediate studies in the major subject, including a Bachelor's thesis, studies in one or more subsidiary, or minor subjects, and language and communication studies. In addition to these, a Master's degree includes advanced studies and a Master's thesis.

After graduating from the Master's level, students can apply for post-graduate studies. The two levels of postgraduate studies are Licentiate and Doctorate. The Licentiate degree is quite rare. In most fields of university study, it is possible to start working for a doctorate directly after completing a Master's degree.

In UASs the basic degree is a Bachelor's degree (210–240 ECTS, taking 3,5–4 years). The requirement for access to Master's curricula in UASs is two years (previously three years) of experience in working life.

First and second cycle higher education studies are measured in (ECTS) credits. Study courses are quantified according to the workload required. One year of full-time study is equivalent to 1600 hours of student work on average and is defined as 60 credits. The Finnish credit system complies with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

Access to higher education

The Finnish higher education regulations define the educational responsibilities, degrees and degree titles conferred by each university (Government Decree on University Degrees 794/2004) and by each UAS (the education licence of each UAS). On the basis of foresight, the Ministry of Education and Culture sets quantitative targets for education and agrees with the HEIs quantitative objectives for degrees to be completed in a four-year agreement period.

In *the Vision for Higher Education and Research in 2030* (shorter: Vision 2030), a policy aim was set to have at least 50% of young adults (25 to 34-year olds) complete a higher education degree. The HEIs may also decide to increase student intake by their own decisions and outside the national funding scheme.

Furthermore, the legislation regulates the national joint (online) admissions system and defines the general eligibility criteria to apply for Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes at universities and UASs (see *Box 1.*)

BOX 1. Eligibility criteria to apply for Bachelor's degree programmes. ***Source:*** **Studyinfo.fi**

Based on law, **to be eligible to apply for Bachelor's degree programmes**, an applicant needs to have completed at least one of the following:

1. the Finnish matriculation examination;
2. an International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma;
3. a European Baccalaureate (EB) diploma/a Reifeprüfung (RP) diploma or Deutsche Internationale Abitur (DIA) diploma;
4. vocational qualifications of three years or more in duration;
5. a Finnish vocational upper secondary qualification or a further specialist vocational qualification as a competence-based qualification;
6. a comparable previous qualification defined by the HEI; or
7. a foreign qualification that provides eligibility for higher education studies in the awarding country.

Within these regulative frameworks, the Finnish HEIs have a high level of autonomy in defining the procedures for student selection and deciding on the number of new study places for admissions. Additionally, each HEI decides independently on which students it admits as well as on the admissions criteria. The HEIs also decide on the quota for different groups and availability and quota for alternative pathways, such as the open studies pathway and transfer pathway. In the application process, applicants may be divided into separate applicant categories based on their educational backgrounds. According to the national regulations, the admissions criteria applied must be consistent for all applicants belonging to the same category.

Reform of the student admissions systems

Based on a recent Education at a Glance survey, students in Finland begin tertiary education later than on average in OECD countries and the proportion of students starting tertiary education in young cohorts is slightly lower than the OECD average. Due to these factors, the share of tertiary graduates in Finland is lower than the OECD average. The average age of new entrants (to Bachelor's degree programmes) is 24 years in Finland, compared with the OECD average of 22 years. By contrast, the tertiary graduation rate in Finland is higher than the OECD average. In Finland, 43% of students completed a Bachelor's degree within the theoretical duration of the programme (the OECD average was 39%) and 73% completed a degree either within the theoretical duration period or during the following three years (the OECD average was 67%) (OECD, 2019).

It is also noteworthy that two thirds of applicants are left without a place in tertiary education every year. This is the highest rate of rejection among the reference countries, except for Sweden (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019b). In other words, there are annually about 50,000 higher education study places available in universities and UASs. There are annually about 150,000

applicants, some of them being first-time applicants; some of them many-times applicants, trying to access competitive fields such as medicine and law; while others have already a previous right to study at a HEI but have changed their plans and are trying to apply for a new degree programme. This phenomenon has been called *the matriculation backlog* – a problem that prohibits smooth and quick transition from secondary to tertiary education.

In order to solve these challenges, the Ministry of Education and Culture has been developing student admissions systems for a long time: both a digital admissions system and new policies. The national objectives of the student admissions reform include ensuring that HEIs make wider use of secondary education qualifications in their student admissions and no longer organise entrance examinations that require sustained preparation. To accelerate transition to higher education studies, cooperation with secondary education providers is to be improved. The percentage of students studying towards their first higher education degree among new student admissions will be raised by reserving more places for first-time applicants and updating the admissions procedures for transfer students. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020a.)

At the beginning of 2010, as result of the long-term development work, a nationally unified, joint online application system was created. *Studyinfo.fi* is the official and up-to-date website with all the information about study programmes leading to a degree in Finland. The service can be used to find different study options and to apply for the studies online.

Implementation of the jointly set objectives and student admissions reform is based on the mutual agreements between the Ministry and Finnish HEIs. In recent years, all HEIs have renewed the admissions criteria, increased the use of secondary-level grades and certificates in student selection and developed entrance exams that do not require long preparation. This all is expected to speed up the study placement of first-time applicants.

Applying to higher education study programmes takes place either in *joint application* or *separate application*. Applications that relate to FLPs, i.e. the open pathway or transfer student applications, belong to separate applications. (See *Box 2.*)

BOX 2. Two ways of applying to higher education study programmes. ***Source:*** **Studyinfo.fi**

- **Joint application** means that a student can apply up to six study programmes with one application and place them in order of preference. If a student applies through a separate application, they apply directly to an institution's study programme. There are three joint applications per year, two that offer study programmes in English and one that offer study programmes only in Finnish and Swedish.
- Examples of **separate applications** to universities are Master's degree programmes for applicants with Bachelor's degrees, degree programmes conducted in English, transfer student applications and selection of students via the open university or open UAS pathway. In this case, one applies directly to a HEI study programme. Separate application forms are filled out separately for each study programme or institution. The application periods and application method vary from one study programme to another.

3.3. Flexibility in higher education studies

Different aspects of flexibility in Finnish higher education studies can be summarised by three phases of study: flexibility in accessing higher education, flexibility during studies, flexibility towards graduation and employment. Figure 3.3. separates those aspects of FLPs that have existed for a longer period of time from those that are relatively new development initiatives from the last five years. The figure also introduces the main tools supporting flexibility: recognition of prior learning (RPL) and study and career guidance.

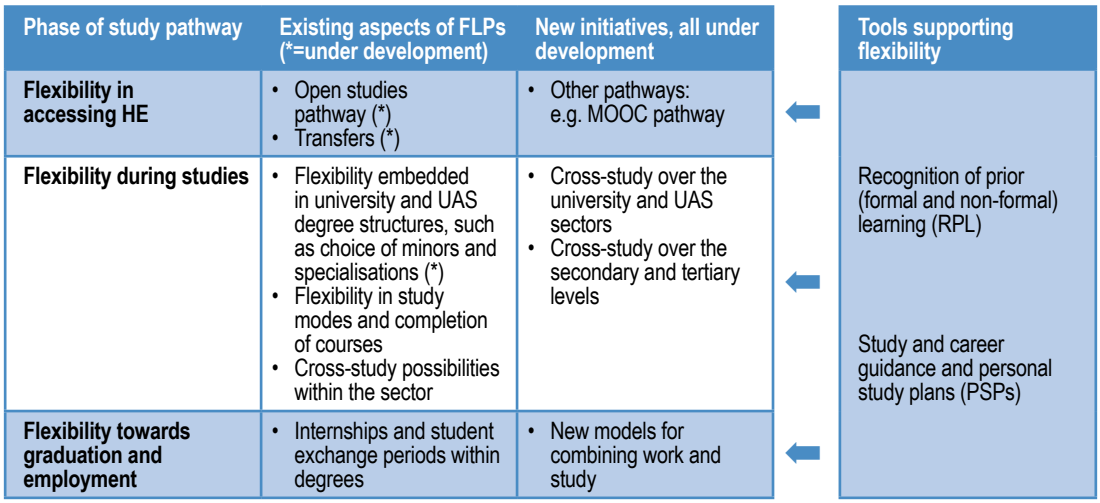

FIGURE 3.3. Main aspects of FLP in Finnish higher education

Next, the main features of these FLP aspects and related policy objectives are described in more detail. In light of this country case study, the current situation in each area and study results are discussed further from national perspective in chapter 4 and from the institutional perspective in chapter 5.

3.3.1 Flexibility in accessing higher education

Open studies pathway

Connected to the student admissions reform, there is a national policy objective to develop the open studies pathway and increase its share as an alternative pathway.

Open studies are offered in the daytime, evenings, weekends and on the web at all HEIs all across Finland, open to anyone. The goals, content and requirements for the offered courses are the same as with university or UAS degree studies. Open studies do not lead to a qualification, however gaining a certain number of open studies (ECTS) credits can contribute towards a degree at the same HEI. (See *Box 3*.)

BOX 3. Open studies pathway to higher education

- **Open studies pathways** to higher education are available in universities and UASs.
- However, not every degree programme offers an open pathway, especially those programmes that are highly competitive (e.g. teacher training, medicine)
- The HEIs decide on the quota and criteria for open pathways (ECTS requirements, previous study success, etc.).
- The minimum amount of open studies needed to apply for higher education degrees varies between 15–60 ECTS, most often being 60 ECTS.
- There is a national project aiming to develop the open studies pathway in 2018–2020 (Alternative path to university, 2020).

Transfers within the higher education

The legislation on the transfer student procedure came into force in 2016. The aim was that, by opening the transfer pathway, there would be less demand for study places meant for first-time applicants. By definition, a transfer student is a student whose study right is transferred either to a different degree programme or a different HEI.

There are two types of transfers: the national transfer student procedure and internal transfers (see *Box 4*.). The transfer student application procedure is applied in both universities and UASs, but not in every education or degree programme.

BOX 4. Two types of transfer procedures. ***Source:*** **Studyinfo.fi**

1. **The national transfer student application procedure** can be used if a student wants to change their degree programme to the same or similar study field within one's own education institution or to a different institution. HEIs can arrange transfer student applications once or twice per year or they can have an ongoing application period. The open transfer study places are announced at the national Studyinfo.fi online platform.
2. **Internal transfers** mean that in some cases, the HEIs use their own practices in transfer applications. These opportunities and the relating practicalities are available directly from the HEI in question.

Transfer students are selected based on the admission criteria set by the HEIs. Examples of these include previous study right, the equivalence of completed studies and study success.

Other alternative pathways

As indicated earlier, a HEI may use basically any admissions criteria that it finds relevant. For instance, some degree programmes admit a small number of students based on success in science competitions. Most recently, the use of massive open online courses (MOOCs) in student admissions has been piloted (see chapter 4.4.1.).

3.3.2 Flexibility during studies

Flexibility during studies can be divided into flexibility embedded in degree structures and flexibility in modes of study (see Table *3.1.*). This study focuses especially on those forms of flexibility that are under development: specialisation choices built into degree structures and cross-study possibilities.

TABLE 3.1. Forms of flexibility during studies

Higher education degree	Examples of flexibility in degree structures	Examples of flexibility in modes of study
University Bachelor's degree **University Master's degree**	• Elective studies (or minors) within the degree structure • Specialisation choices built into Master's degrees • Practical training/ internships • International exchange period	• Lectures, seminars, pair/group work, virtual learning, independent study • Cross-institutional study possibilities • Possibility to take open studies from one's own institution (Open University, Summer University)
UAS Bachelor's degree	• Specialisations built into Bachelor's degrees • Elective studies within the degree structure • Practical training/ internships • International exchange period • Participation in research, development and innovation (RDI) projects	• Day-time or evening studies (the latter for adult learners) • Individual learning, group work and project learning • E-learning and on-line platforms (enabling also study during summer) • Cross-institutional study possibilities • Possibility to take open studies from one's own institution
UAS Master's degree	• Master's Thesis to be conducted in the organisation in which the Master's student is employed	• Blended learning: lectures, seminars, workshops, individual learning

3.3.3 Flexibility towards graduation and employment

A topical development trend in Finnish higher education is combining work and study. For instance, since 2017, the Finnish HEIs have been developing a new model – *studification of work* – including a process for students to gain credits towards his/her degree in working life or in a workplace-oriented learning environment. These developments are discussed further in chapters 4.4.3 and 5.4.3.

3.3.4 Continuous learning

The Finnish system of education is strongly rooted in the idea of lifelong learning.

Besides the Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral degree education, HEIs may also provide continuous learning: such as professional specialisation studies, education consisting of modules in the form of open studies or other types of separate studies, and preparatory courses for immigrants. (See *Box 5.*)

BOX 5. Examples of forms of continuous studies in higher education

- **Specialisation studies:** Universities and UASs offer specialisation studies (at minimum of 30 ECTS) that are targeted to professionals who have completed a degree and are already in working life, wishing to deepen their expertise. The objective of professional specialisation programmes is to generate competence for which no market-based provision of education is available.
- **Open studies:** Open university and open UAS teaching are open for everybody all over the country. The teaching is state-subsidized, but the student needs to pay a fee is 15 euros per ECTS credit. The open HEIs have a double mission: the aim of the open HEIs is to help lifelong learning and increase equality in educational opportunities. The open HEIs also provide an alternative route to higher education.
- **Continuous education:** Universities and UASs can provide continuing professional education in the form of commission-based training and development programmes for enterprises and labour market. The HEIs may also offer degree-education modules as fee-paying continuous education.
- **Higher education preparatory courses for immigrants:** Courses preparing immigrants for UAS and higher education studies – free of charge – are intended for immigrants who live in Finland and aim to study in Finnish at higher education. Commonly, the Finnish language skills requirement is at least level B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The courses are taught in Finnish.

Open studies are offered in daytime, evenings, weekends and summertime as contact teaching, blended teaching or e-learning in practically all Finnish HEIs. Open universities and open UASs are normally organised as independent institutes within the HEIs. In 2019, there were 97,000 students participating in open university courses (72% females) and 28,000 students in open UASs (66% females).

Open studies are open to everyone and there are no entrance requirements. Students can register non-stop and study self-paced. Open studies are not full-time and do not lead to a qualification, but the course goals, content and requirements are the same as with university or UAS degree studies. Teaching is organised in degree students' teaching groups or groups designed for open university or UAS students. In other words, students in degree education may also take open studies, for instance during the summer, which enables flexible planning of learning schedules. Finnish universities also offer open studies in cooperation with other educational institutions such as adult education centres, folk high schools and summer universities which improves their regional availability.

Besides the higher education provision, there are a great number of adult educational establishments, practically in every Finnish municipality. In 2019, there were 178 liberal adult education centers that offered courses for adults in languages, music, theatre, sports and a variety of practical skills. In 2019, there were 650,000 students participating in the courses (Keto, 2019). One of the new tasks assigned for adult educational establishments is the Finnish language training for immigrants.

3.4 Key figures of the higher education sector in Finland

In 2019, the total number of full-time equivalent (FTE) university degree students in Bachelor's programmes was 59,900, in Master's degree programmes 44,900 and in doctoral degree education 8,600. The total number of university students was 113,500. The fields with the largest student numbers are arts and humanities; business, administration and law; engineering, manufacturing and construction; and social sciences, journalism and information (see *Figure 3.4.*).

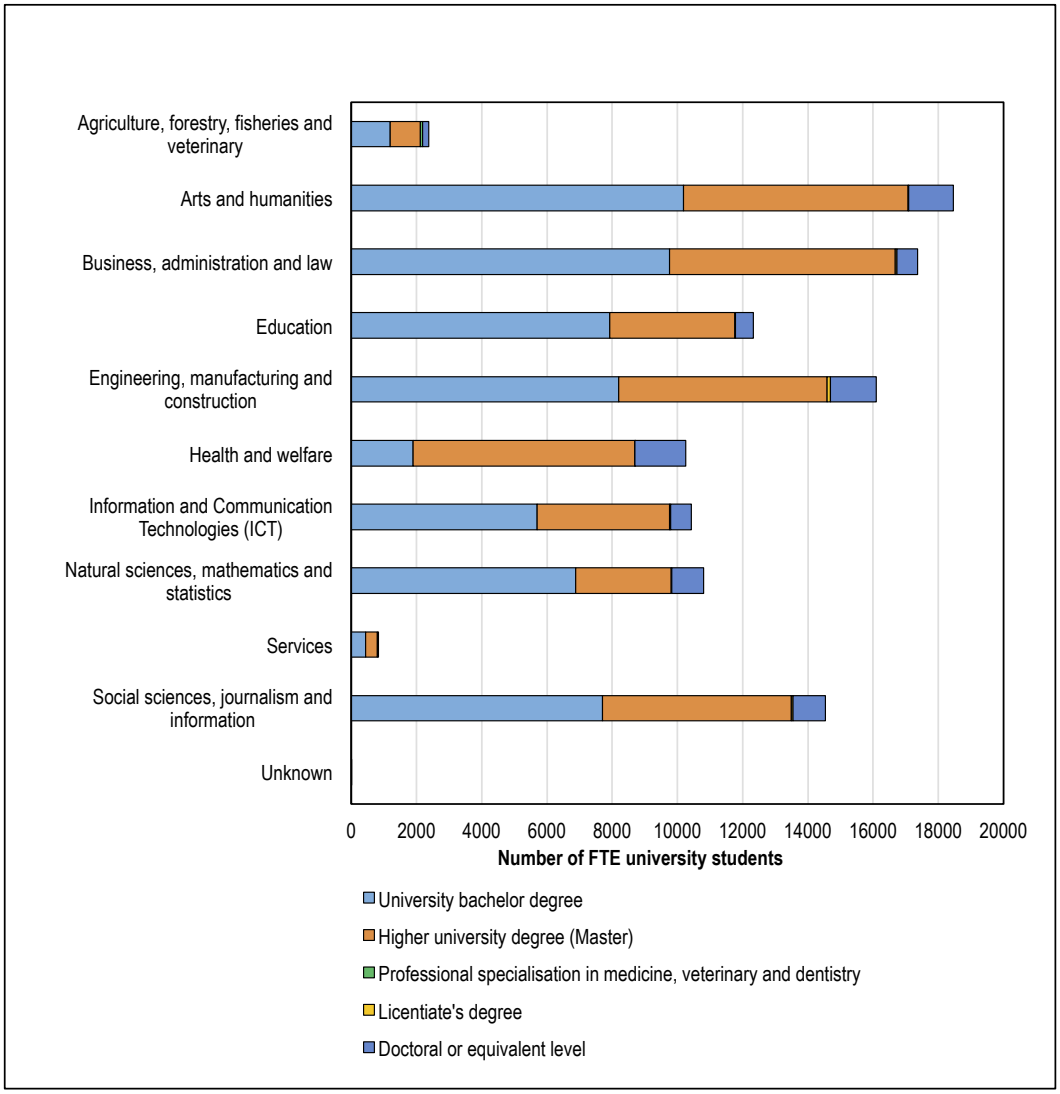

FIGURE 3.4. Full-time equivalent students in university education in 2019. ***Source:*** **Vipunen database.**

In 2019, the UAS sector enrolled 110,300 full-time equivalent (FTE) students in UAS Bachelor's degree programmes and 6,900 students in UAS Master's degree programmes. Thus, there was a total of 117,200 UAS students in the country. The three largest fields of UAS education were health and welfare; engineering, manufacturing and construction; and business, administration and law. (see *Figure 3.5.*)

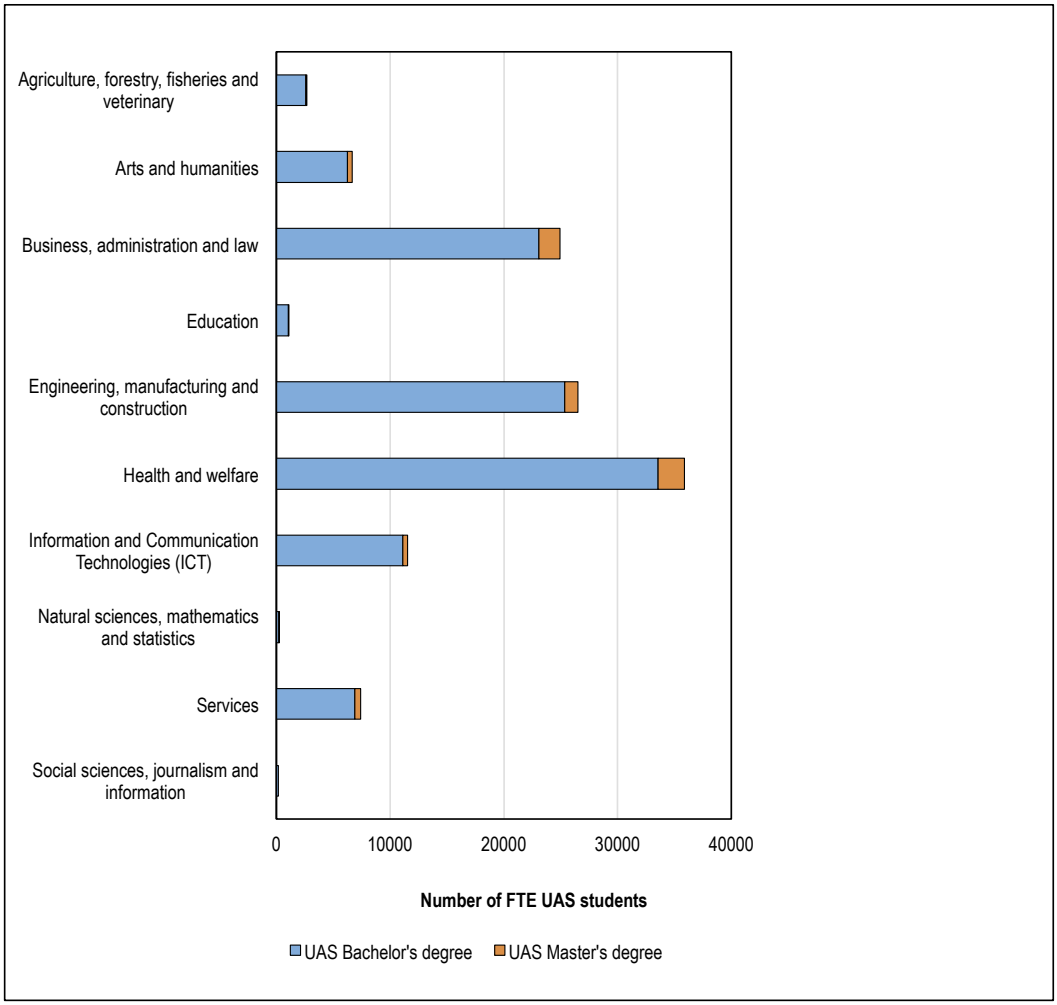

FIGURE 3.5. Full-time equivalent students in UAS education in 2019. ***Source:*** **Vipunen database.**

Based on recent statistics, completion of higher education studies accelerated. In 2018, 53% of those having started UAS Bachelor's degrees passed in the target time (4.5 years), while in 2014 the share of students having passed in the target time was 45%. In the university sector, 65% of students completed a Master's degree in at most the target time (5.5 years). In five and a half years, the pass rate for university education has increased by 12 percentage points. (OSF, 2019.)

3.5 Steering, governance and financing of higher education

The Ministry of Education and Culture promotes the Government's higher education and science policy targets. The Ministry as part of the Government steers and finances the activities of HEIs. Targets for development are based on the Government Programme and the Government Action Plan as well as other strategic objectives set by the Parliament and Government for HEIs.

The overall objective of Finland's higher education policy is to develop HEIs as internationally competitive entities where each institution also flexibly responds to regional needs. The activities of universities and UASs are expected to promote Finnish competitiveness, well-being, education and learning as well as sustainable developmen. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). Policy objectives set for FLPs are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.2.

HEIs are autonomous actors that are responsible for the content of their education and research as well as the development of their own activities. The steering of HEIs consists of three elements (see *Box 6*).

BOX 6. The higher education steering instruments. ***Source:*** **Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020**

1. **Legislation:** All Finnish HEIs are regulated by the Finnish state (Universities Act 558/2009 and UAS Act 932/2014) and other relevant legislation and regulations.
2. **Funding models:** The institutions and the Ministry hold negotiations at the start of each four-year agreement period, covering for instance common goals for the higher education system, key measures for each HEI and quantitative objectives of the degrees to be completed.
3. **Steering by information and feedback:** The Ministry also conducts steering by information, aiming to encourage and engage HEIs in other action that require mutual interaction. These steering tools include for instance funding of joint development projects, supporting the activities of higher education networks and organisation of national events for actors and key stakeholders. Every year, each HEI receives statistical data on their ranking among other HEIs. The Ministry also periodically gives written feedback to the institutions on their activities and development needs.

There are national funding models for universities and UASs. The models aim to be transparent and used as a basis for allocating national resources to HEIs. Both funding models were revised in 2018 and will be adopted from 2021 onwards, but in practice, the HEIs are already taking these changes into account in directing their activities. The funding will be based on education (the degrees completed in target time), research/RDI and strategic tasks. The share of continuous learning in funding will grow, and as a new element, ECTS taken in institutional co-operation will be rewarded. (see *Figures 3.6. and 3.7.*)

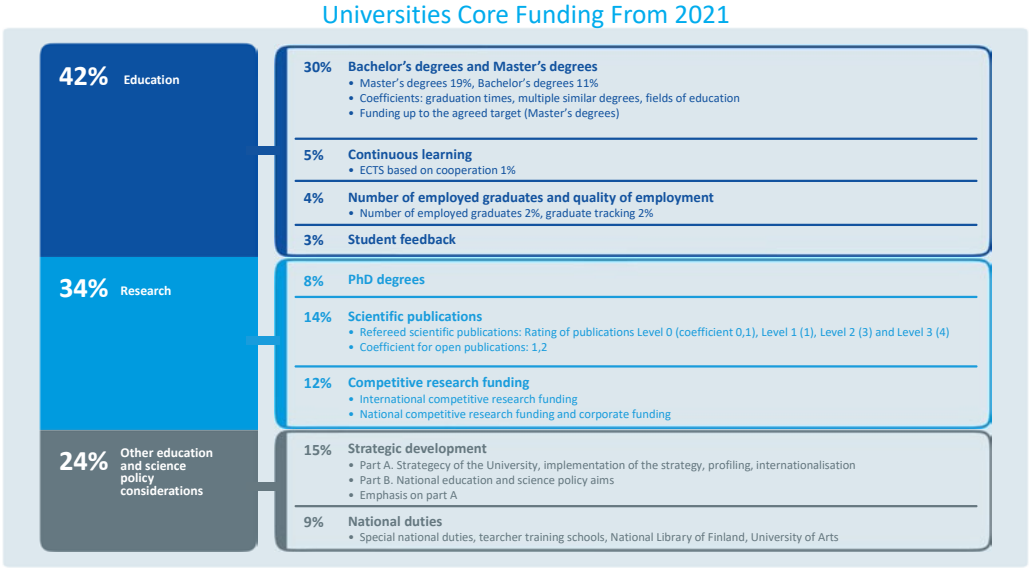

FIGURE 3.6. Universities Core Funding Model for 2021–2024. ***Source:*** **Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019.**

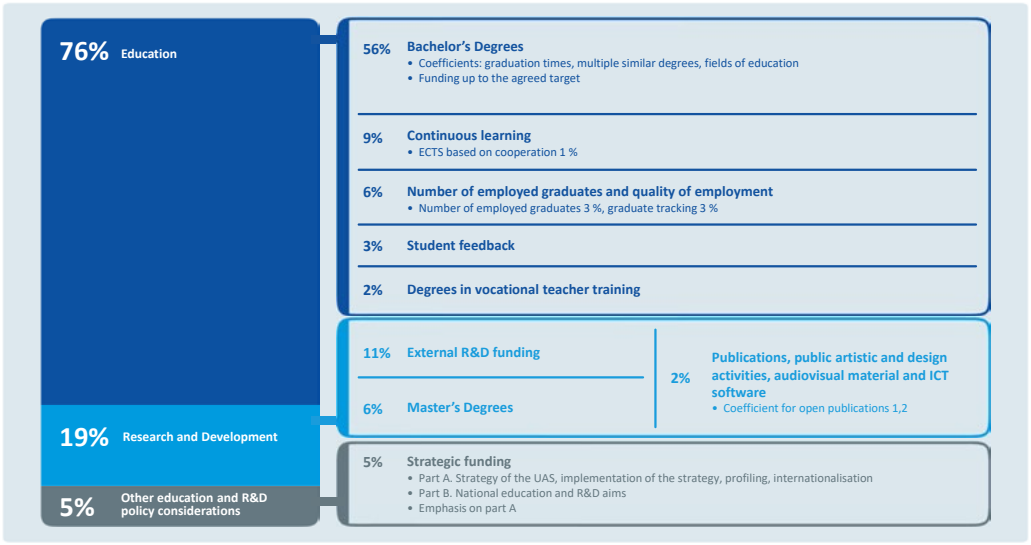

FIGURE 3.7. UAS Core Funding Model for 2021–2024. ***Source:*** **Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019.**

As for the financing of education, the budget of the Ministry of Education and Culture was 6,4 billion euros (11,6 % of the state budget) for 2019. The total sum allocated to higher education was €3,7 billion. This sum was divided between universities, UASs, student study support (including students grants, support for student loans and student housing) and the funding of research. (see *Table 3.3.*)

TABLE 3.2. State funding of higher education in 2019 (including universities, UASs, research funding and student support). Source: Vipunen database.

Higher education functions	State support (M€)	External funding (M€) (the proportion of external funding %)
Universities	1 770,0	796,4 (31,1%)
UASs	834, 9	106,0 (11,3%)
Research support of Science	534, 1	
Student support	587,1	
Total	**3 726,1**	

In addition to direct state funding, universities managed to collect €685,2 million of external funding in 2018. The UASs, in turn, were able to gain €106 million external funding in 2018. This means that state funding covers 69% of the universities' costs, whereas in UASs it covers as much as 89% of total costs.

Financing of studies

Education is free at all levels, from primary to tertiary education. Higher education is free of charge for Finnish students and for citizens of the European Union and the European Economic Area. Tuition fees for international students coming from outside Europe were introduced in 2017.

Finnish society provides a system of student support through grants and loans for Finnish students, thus supporting students even from lower socio-economic backgrounds to enter higher education. The support of studies is available for all students including adult students. In 2017, the Finnish government reformed student support to increase the proportion of financing provided as student loans guaranteed by the state and to decrease the proportion covered by student grants.

In higher education the maximum length of state support is 48 months. Monthly financial aid consists of the student grant, the housing supplement (this covers 80% of housing expenses depending on hometown) and the student loan. Total monthly financial aid depends on the student's age, housing circumstances, marital status and parents' income (Kela, 2017).

4

Results: system-level approaches supporting flexible learning pathways

4

This chapter presents an analysis of **the system-level approaches** supporting flexible learning pathways (FLP). First, the data sources for this chapter are presented (chapter 4.1). Then follows the actual analysis, presented in three parts: analysis of the national policies (chapter 4.2), national level instruments (chapter 4.2) and practices (chapter 4.3) in terms of FLPs.

Special attention is paid to the five areas defined as the scope of the Finnish country case study: 1. flexibility in admissions; 2. transfer and mobility between programmes and institutions; 3. recognition of prior learning (RPL), 4. combining work and higher education studies and 5. study and career guidance together with personal study plans (PSPs).

4.1 National level interviews and other data sources

The national level interviews were conducted in September–November 2019 with 11 experts, representing key players and stakeholders in terms of FLPs in Finland. The interviewees included three policy experts from the Ministry of Education and Culture: an expert in higher education policy, an expert in the student admissions reform and an expert in higher education statistics. Furthermore, an expert in the Finnish Qualifications Framework (FiNQF) from the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) and an expert in higher education evaluations from the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) were interviewed.

Two respondents represented employer and employee organisations: Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) and Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (Akava). In addition, two rectors' council representatives from Universities Finland (UNIFI) and the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (Arene) were interviewed. As student unions have an important role in the Finnish higher education system, representatives from the National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) and the Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK) were also interviewed. (See *Table 4.1.*)

TABLE 4.1. Interview summary at the national level

Body/Organisation	Date	No.	Role of interviewee	Type of interview
Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC)	September 2019	1	Expert in higher education policy	In-person interview
	October 2019	1	Expert in student admissions reform	In-person interview
	September 2019	1	Expert in higher education statistics	In-person interview
Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI)	September 2019	1	Expert in the Finnish National Qualifications Framework	In-person interview
Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC)	October 2019	1	Expert in higher education evaluations	In-person interview
Confederation of Finnish Industries – EK	September 2019	1	Expert in higher education policy	In-person interview
Akava – Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland	September 2019	1	Expert in higher education policy	In-person interview
Universities Finland UNIFI	October 2019	1	Expert in higher education policy	In-person interview
The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences – Arene	October 2019	1	Expert in higher education policy	In-person interview
National Union of University Students in Finland – SYL	October 2019	1	Expert in higher education policy	In-person interview
Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences – SAMOK	October 2019	1	Expert in higher education policy	In-person interview

The interview questions followed the IIEP-UNESCO guidelines, but special attention focused on questions relevant for Finnish policies and practices. The respondents could choose the interview language of their preference, which in most cases was Finnish. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English and coded by the national team.

In addition to the interviews, other data sources for this chapter included consultations with a lawyer specialised in higher education legislation at the Ministry of Education and Culture, a national European Credit and Transfer System (ECTS) expert at the Finnish national agency for education, and an expert from the Network of Universities Study Affairs Units. This chapter also utilises existing statistical, research and evaluation data.

4.2 National policy level objectives related to FLPs

This chapter provides an overview to the topical policy level objectives set for FLPs. Based on the interviews, this chapter also analyses the roles of different actors – rectors' councils, student unions and labour market organisations – in policy definition and implementing policies.

4.2.1 Description of the current policy objectives

Topical policy level objectives are expressed in the current and previous Government's Programmes and *The Vision for Higher Education and Research in 2030* (shorter: Vision 2030). An overarching objective is to make higher education available for everyone. The aim is that at least 50% of young adults (25 to 34-year old) will complete a higher education degree, while the current rate is 41%. Another central objective is the reform of continuous (lifelong) learning with the aim of developing and renewing competences throughout one's life and at different stages of one's career.

Other topical policy level objectives – including implementation of student admissions reform, increasing co-operation with the secondary level, updating transfer procedures, development of learning environments and career guidance – are encapsulated in Box 7.

BOX 7. Topical policy objectives defined by the Ministry of Education and Culture

- **Student admissions reform:** To enhance admission procedures, cooperation between different scientific fields will be carried out. The percentage of students studying towards their first higher education degree among new student admissions will be raised by reserving more places for first-time applicants.
- **Co-operation with the secondary level:** To accelerate transition to higher education studies, cooperation with secondary education providers will be improved.
- **RPL:** The institutions will provide more flexibility in studies and improve the recognition of prior learning.
- **Transfer procedures:** The institutions need to update the admissions procedures for transfer students.
- **Equal opportunities:** The higher education institutions must support equal opportunities. The institutions assume responsibility for identifying the competence and educational needs of immigrants and improving their potential for accessing the labour market.
- **Development of learning environments:** The higher education institutions aim to improve the quality of education by revamping education content, teaching methods, learning environments and the competence of teachers, as well as to increase cooperation. The institutions make full use of the possibilities offered by digitalisation.
- **Guidance:** Guidance will become more versatile and cooperation with working life will be closer. Effective career and recruitment services make it easier to graduate quickly and find a job. The institutions will also introduce national career monitoring.

Source: Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019 (bolded titles added by the writers of this study)

Over the years, there have been different approaches and interpretations of the concept of FLPs: wider and narrower. Also, the policy level emphasis has varied. The current Government strongly emphasises continuous learning, employability and equality and equal accessibility of higher education. (see *Box 8.*)

BOX 8. Emphases on FLPs in the Government Programme 2019

- **Access to education:** We plan to introduce clear and measurable targets to facilitate access to education and boost the rate of completion among the underrepresented groups.
- **RPL principles:** We will draw up national principles for recognising and acknowledging learning. The principles will seek to make visible the competence which individuals have gained by various means in working life and in the education system.
- **Flexible learning platform:** We will develop the higher education system with a view to providing a platform for learners and continuous learning. Our aim is that learners with different status – degree students, lifelong learners and those outside higher education – could study flexibly, selecting courses from all Finnish HEIs irrespective of organisational boundaries or geographical location.
- **Continuous learning:** We will implement a parliamentary reform of continuous learning, responding to the people's lifelong need for upskilling and reskilling. This comprehensive reform will apply to each point of the educational pathway at which the educational system interfaces with the provision and funding of education, social security, relocation security, unemployment security, independent and labour market training, and recognition of prior learning.

Source: Government of Finland, 2019 (bolded titles added by the writers of this study)

It can be concluded that while there is a policy framework for FLPs in Finland, several objectives stemming from various Government programmes form a relatively complex system. The interviews also indicated that the concept of FLPs is understood in different ways. Some national-level interviewees emphasised FLPs' role in advancing the system-level effectiveness; some interviewees underlined FLPs as enablers of individual paths and second choices; some respondents highlighted FLPs in advancing skills and competences development. While FLPs may serve various purposes, there is clearly a need to define the concept of FLPs in a more systematic and consistent way.

4.2.2 Accessibility of higher education

Finnish higher education is based on the philosophy of equality, wherein every student is treated the same. This philosophy of equality begins at the most basic education level and thus the assumption is that the educational pipeline into higher education is equal for all students. At the time of this study, there was not yet uniform definition of equity groups in higher education.

As a part of the policy objective, the new Government will draft a *National Accessibility Plan of Higher Education* by the end of 2020. In this connection, equity in social, geographic, language and minority groups and obstacles in accessing higher education will be identified. The plan will aim to ease the access of underrepresented groups to higher education and at the same time to respond to labour market competence needs by upgrading the educational level of the nation. Based on the interview with the Ministry of Education and Culture policy expert, there were signs of initial definition of the equity groups.

The current Government Programme strongly emphasises accessibility which is one aspect of equity. In this connection, five aspects of equity have been listed: geographic, gender, socioeconomic, disabled and ethnic. So, equity is not only about disabilities [and physical accessibility] but thinking it more widely. This [identification and definition of equity groups] will be one of our main tasks in year 2020 (Ministry, policy expert, in-person interview).

While the national definition of equity groups and setting criteria is a necessary step in changing the focus from equality to equity, more measures are required at the national and institutional level to ensure the implementation of equity practices. These will be discussed further in chapters 4.5. and 5.5.

4.2.3 Actors involved in policy development and implementation of FLPs

In Finland, the tri-partite cooperation has been traditionally important. The tri-partite principle means that the higher education institutions (HEIs), students and the labour market are equally represented in policy development. In Finland especially, educational policy follows the Government Programme, and the Government Programme outlines certain projects supported with national working groups.

All the interviewed groups; the Rectors' Councils, student unions and labour market organisations confirmed that they have a possibility to participate in the ministry-led policy development related to FLPs in many ways. Examples mentioned by the interviewees included for instance memberships in working groups drafting the new funding models for universities and UASs, Vision 2030 and revision of the FiNQF.

The participatory policy development is clearly a strength that supports commitment to jointly set goals. Especially the preparation process of *Vision 2030*, according to the interviewees, was a success as it strengthened mutual understanding of future challenges.

Furthermore, the interviews indicated that the two rectors' councils have a very important role in policy design and the implementing national reforms, including those that relate to FLPs. The interviews also showed that, in recent years, development work had strongly focused on implementation of the student admissions reform, while less resources were left for developing other areas of FLPs.

During my term (in the UNIFI position in 2015–2019), the emphasis of our work has clearly been on student selection and admission to higher education in general. Before my term, in 2007–2008, work began on developing RPL processes, flexible pathways during studies and university cooperation and interaction regarding these. My personal guess is that flexibility towards working life will be an area of special attention in the future (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

Likewise, the UAS sector Rectors' Council provides a framework for the activities related to policy implementation, especially with regard to decision-making and communications, insofar where joint decision-making and commitment is required.

Last year [in 2018] we worked on the reform of the UAS Act, and in relation to that we discussed extensively the role of the open UAS in degree education. Then, the current student admissions project has been high in our agenda. Arene's role is to enable collective decision-making (Arene, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

The two student unions influence national level policy for instance through memberships in national working groups. At the same time, they work as umbrella organisations for local student unions influencing their home institutions. The student unions especially lobby for free education and students' possibilities for second choices.

We do more lobbying with decision-makers and through that, for example, promote increased usage of transfer pathways. If we think about student selection, we influence those topics especially through legal work (Student union, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

Recently our focus has especially been on the recognition of competencies and a competency-based approach more broadly, whether it be recognition of prior learning, work-based learning or competencies acquired during exchanges or credit transfer (Student union, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

The labour market organisations have an especially important role in predicting the future skills and needs in *the National Forum for Skills Anticipation*. Based on the interviews, for instance, the employer side emphasises effectiveness in accessing higher education, while the employee side speaks for continuous learning possibilities and provision for those outside higher education.

There's information governance, there is our pressure through dialogue, there is building a general understanding – all of them are needed. Influencing needs to happen from many directions in order to create a flexible offering. (Labour market union, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

While the Ministry of Education and Culture bears the responsibility for steering, funding and legislation of the HEIs, EDUFI has an operational role in supporting the internationalisation of higher education, including the recognition of diplomas and degrees and acting as the coordination-point for the European Qualifications Framework and FiNQF. EDUFI also maintains the *Studyinfo.fi* website with all the information and application systems for study programmes leading to a degree in Finland and related statistics.

Additionally, inter-ministerial cooperation plays an important role in implementing FLPs. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment's role is to support citizens who have difficulties in finding employability, training and upgrading of qualifications and thus continuous learning. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health takes care of further education of social health care staff and medical doctors' specialisation studies.

As a conclusion, although the participatory and cross-sectoral approach in policy design and implementation has many strengths, it may also lead to some tensions. At the time of the interviews in autumn 2019, several interviewees mentioned that the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, labour market organisations and HEIs were still in the process of shaping a common view on continuous learning.

4.3 National instruments supporting flexible learning pathways

The interview with representatives of the Ministry of Education and Culture indicated that FLPs have been on the agenda for approximately ten years.

> *FLP was emphasised in previous negotiations with HEIs – that it is important to offer flexible learning pathways. During the previous Government's term, the Ministry of Education and Culture financed key projects where FLP has been in core. One of our aims is developing the education system so that there are no dead-ends. For instance, during drafting Vision 2030, we identified some obstacles for FLP and that's when we changed legislation as to UAS Master's degree admissions requirements. So, legislation, dialogue, key projects and financing are the Ministry key instruments (Ministry, HE policy expert, in-person interview).*

Thus, the following sections will investigate further legislation, funding models and previous Government key projects as instruments for FLPs. Additionally, national instruments are considered, including the FiNQF, the ECTS system and national quality assurance of higher education.

4.3.1 Legislation

In the Finnish higher education system, there are several general factors that enable FLPs. These include tuition-free education and admissions (except for open studies where there is a fee of 15 Euros per ECTS), a study grant system and student healthcare services targeted for those studying for a Bachelor's or Master's degree at HEIs.

Over the recent years, higher education legislation has been continuously revised and amended in line with higher education policy objectives. Examples of these amendments include adding student transfer procedure into legislation, introduction of a joint online admissions system and adding a notion of co-operation between upper secondary institutions and HEIs into legislation. There was also indication that legislation and the funding models were revised in parallel, which can be recognised as a good practice (for funding model: see more chapter 4.3.2.).

As was noted earlier in this report, the Finnish HEIs have a high level of autonomy in defining the student admission criteria and quota for different pathways. In the institutional degree regulations and internal instructions, HEIs define the procedures for instance for student admissions, RPL and students' personal study plans (PSPs). As it comes to the implementation of the reform of student admissions, it is based on the mutual agreements between the Ministry and Finnish HEIs.

Based on the consultation with the Ministry lawyer, the main features of the Finnish regulatory framework supporting FLPs are summarised in Table 4.2.

TABLE 4.2. A summary of the regulatory framework for FLP in Finland

Aspect of FLP	Corresponding legislation
General enablers for flexible learning pathways: study grant systems	• Financial aid is available in the form of study grant, government loan guarantee and some students can also be granted housing supplement. • All Finnish students enrolled in HE receive a monthly student grant (average/ monthly: EUR 250.28); for full-time students that make satisfactory study progress, and in need of financial assistance. Financial aid is also available for studies abroad and for adult basic education. • Adult education allowances and scholarships for qualified employees are in place to support adults in developing their professional abilities and updating their competences. Adult education allowance can only be granted for full-time study in degree- or non-degree education. Adult education is also supported in the form of job alternation leave and study leave systems.
Co-operation between secondary level and HEIs	• The new Act on General Upper Secondary Education obligates the providers to organise part of the upper secondary studies in co-operation with higher education institutions for instance in the form of introductory and orientation courses.
Student admissions: open pathway, transfers and other alternative pathways	• The HE legislation regulates on the joint admissions system and defines the general eligibility criteria to apply to Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes at universities and UASs. • Since 2015, there has been an obligation for HEIs to admit transfer students. • There is no legislation on the open studies pathway or the quota for this pathway. These decisions are to be taken by the HEIs.
Legislation on higher education degrees and continuous studies	• The names and lengths of the HE degrees are regulated in the Decree of Degrees; however, HEIs can decide whether applicants are admitted into Bachelor's or directly into Master's degrees. • Since the beginning of 2020, the work-experience requirement in UAS Master's degrees was lowered from 3 years to 2 years (152/2018) • In addition to degree education, universities and UASs may offer professional specialisation studies (at minimum of 30 ECTS) that are targeted to professionals already in working life, wishing to deepen their expertise. • Earlier, it was possible for HEIs to provide commissioned education only for citizens outside EU; now the HEIs can offer continuous studies to all.
Recognition of prior learning	• Based on the Universities Act, students have the right to obtain information on how the assessment criteria are applied to their study attainments. • In institutional Degree Regulations, HEIs define more precisely the goals and processes for recognition of prior learning.
Cross-studying and institutional cooperation	• Since 2018, teaching co-operation between higher education institutions as well as the possibility to purchase education from other institutions became possible by regulations (HE 23/2017); earlier co-operation mainly concerned joint provision of language studies.
Guidance, counselling and career guidance	• The HEIs must arrange tuition and study guidance in a way that enables full-time students to complete their degrees within the prescribed normative time (Amendment 315/2011). • As a new aspect, based on the Act on General Upper Secondary Education, higher education applicants are now entitled to one-year post-application guidance provided by the HEI in question.

As legislative changes were so recent, some of the interviewees stated that, at the time of the interviews in autumn 2019, their impact was not yet fully visible in the statistics. One of these changes related to enabling institutional co-operation in teaching and cross-study.

> *Last year [in 2018], University and UAS legislation were changed. Earlier, the HEI in question was responsible for offering the teaching for the degree. Now, a student can take studies up to 50% of the degree volume from another HEI. This is a big change but does not show yet as it's so new. The goal behind is to add the flexibility of studies and to [enable students] utilise the offerings of other HEIs (Ministry, HE expert, in-person interview).*

4.3.2 Funding models

As described in Chapter 3.4, the Ministry of Education and Culture's steering mechanisms of Finnish universities and UASs consist of target negotiations, the core funding models for universities and for UASs and steering by information.

The two separate funding models for universities and UASs were revised in 2018. In this connection, rewarding HEIs for cross-studying and students taking studies from other institutions was strengthened. The negotiations based on the new funding model between the Ministry and HEIs were to be conducted in spring 2020.

> *When we developed the latest funding model for 2021–2024, the percentual share of ECTS credits [taken from other institutions] was raised. This meant several millions of euros. This applies to universities and UASs. This is one way to highlight the importance of FLP (Ministry, HE policy expert, in-person interview).*

> *Funding model still is based on degrees and ECTS credits taken in other HEIs. But the idea is that HEIs make mutual agreements on buying courses from other HEIs. This is a very new idea – HEIs are negotiating the new models how to do this. (Ministry, HE expert, in-person interview).*

Thus, it can be concluded that the revision of legislation and funding models are supporting FLPs in a very fundamental way.

The interviewees noted that the funding models do not currently support student transfers from one HEI to another. The Ministry representative indicated that this will be considered when developing the next funding model.

However, important to note is that as a transfer student's study right is transferred to another HEI and the funding model rewards degrees completed in due time, there actually is an indirect mechanism that rewards the receiving HEI for transfers. The other way around, the HEI that loses a transfer student, also loses the funding from a completed degree. This understandably affects the desirability of external transfers to HEIs.

4.3.3 Previous Government key projects

One of the previous Government's instruments for developing higher education was based on a project-driven approach. As expressed in *the Government Action Plan 2017–2019* (Government of Finland, 2017), the objective was to provide FLPs, facilitate young people's transition to further education and to extend careers. The previous Government's aim was also that FLPs would make it easier to complete qualifications and reconcile work and studies.

In 2016 and in 2017, the Ministry of Education and Culture organised two competitive calls for projects that support the development of higher education.

As a result, the Ministry decided to fund a total of 46 development projects for a sum of EUR 65 million in years 2017–2020. Practically all Finnish universities and UASs participate in some of the project consortia. The majority of the projects aim to create new practices for various aspects of FLPs, including:

- student admission processes in the universities and UASs;
- the existing Open University route and other routes for secondary level students;
- higher education pedagogy and its digitalisation;
- year-round studying and flexible possibilities for specialisation and cross-institutional studies;
- integration of working life periods into education; and
- students' working life skills and graduates' entry into the labour market.

In more detail, Table 4.3 illustrates examples of achievements of the key projects from the FLP perspective. This analysis was drafted in April 2020 by the national team conducting this study on the basis of material made available on the projects' website.

TABLE 4.3. Examples of previous government-funded key projects developing aspects of FLP

Name of the project, years, participants	Project aims	Achievements so far based on the project's website
Alternative path to university project, 2018–2020, altogether 11 participating universities	• aims to revise the existing Open University route and develop routes for secondary level students and guidance and advice services related to these routes.	www.avoin.jyu.fi/en/open-university/projects/alternative-path • identification of good practices in open pathways • articles and presentations • applicant guidelines
Defa project – Digital Education For All, 2019–2021, five participating universities	• opening first-year studies to everyone is being piloted in the field of information science – part of the introductory and basis studies can be taken as MOOC courses.	www.helsinki.fi/fi/projektit/digital-education-for-all • an alternative MOOC pathway created to information science Bachelor's studies (in some universities as a part of the open studies pathway)
eAMK project – A new ecosystem for learning, 2017–2020, all Finnish UASs	• aims to develop the digital offering of UAS studies to enable open year-round studying and flexible possibilities for specialisation and cross-institutional studies	www.eamk.fi/en/project2/ • opening of Campusonline.fi digital course platform by Finnish UASs • a variety of tools for recognition of work-based learning, digital pedagogics, guidance and mentoring
RiKe project – Cross-institutional study development project), 2017–2019, all Finnish HEIs	• through cross-institutional study pilots, aims to develop joint models of cross-institutional study and thus support students in utilising the course provision of other than their home HEIs	https://wiki.eduuni.fi/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=108954742 • university and UAS rectors have signed a framework agreement on teaching co-operation in December 2019 • pilot models and support material
DigiCampus – A shared digital learning environment, pedagogy and services for HEIs, 2018–2020, 17 universities and UASs	• aims to create a digital cloud learning environment to support year-round study opportunities and to develop the physical and digital learning landscapes at campuses.	info.digicampus.fi/?lang=en • an online learning platform made available for registered students • training, seminars, articles
TOTEEMI project – Learning about work and for work, 2017–2019, 18 universities and UASs	• aims to create structures and practices to support higher education students' entry into the labour market	www.amktoteemi.fi/en • conseptualisation of work and study approach and models for student support, career counselling and workplace co-operation • research reports on combining work and studies

In the interviews, especially rectors' councils' representatives brought up several examples how several key projects have been effective in generating models and good practices for different aspects of FLPs. In addition, they clearly have strengthened cooperation between and within the university and the UAS sector. Among others, the following examples were mentioned:

I expect that the Another path to universities project (TRY project) will produce good practices, and it already has. But the project is still ongoing. (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

The cross-study project, RiKe project, which is coordinated by Tampere University, has prepared an agreement template and model agreements [In December 2019, the rectors and presidents of universities and UASs signed a framework agreement on cross-institutional teaching co-operation.] (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

The eAMK project and the CampusOnline portal have been remarkable joint undertakings of all UASs. UASs have started to offer education to students from other UASs on a significant level (Arene, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

At the time of conducting this study, about half of the projects were completed (2017–2019), while others continue for one more year (2018–2020). Thus, their impact on the implementation of FLPs was not yet seen, although a number of tools and good practices were created. At the national level, a meta-analysis of the outputs of the previous government key projects is needed, as well as a national plan for the continuation of development work and making the outputs available at one site. At the level of individual projects, it would be crucially important to establish an exit-plan with the aim to make achievements sustainable after the completion of the project.

4.3.4 Finnish National Qualifications Framework (FiNQF)

Finland has actively and at an early stage implemented what was agreed in the Bologna Process. This applies especially to the three–cycle degree structure, credits' ECTS compatibility, Diploma Supplement and quality assurance matters. (Finnish National Agency for Education & Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018.)

The Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules (FiNQF) is considered to be a tool that provides information and supports developing education as a learning outcomes-based approach, as well as supports increased mobility and improved access into further study.

The FiNQF describes the qualifications, syllabi and other extensive competence modules that belong to the Finnish national education system. The qualifications, syllabi and other extensive competence modules are classified into eight levels based on the required competences. The competences acquired at each level are defined in the Government Decree, and the level descriptors are in line with the level requirements of the European qualifications framework. The Finnish higher education degrees are referenced at levels 6,7 and 8 in the FiNQF. (see *Table 4.4.*).

TABLE 4.4. The Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules. *Source:* **Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020**

Level	Qualifications and other competence modules
2	• Basic education syllabus • Preparatory education for working life and independent living
3	• Preparatory studies for general upper secondary school • Preparatory education for vocational training • An Advanced syllabus for basic education in the arts
4	• General upper secondary school syllabus and the Matriculation Examination • Upper secondary vocational qualifications and further vocational qualifications
5	• Specialist vocational qualifications
6	• Bachelor's degrees at UAS • Bachelor's degrees at universities • Professional specialisation programmes provided by universities and UASs for holders of higher education Bachelor's degree • Specialised training and Pastoral qualification provided by the church
7	• Master's degrees at UASs • Master's degrees at universities • Professional specialisation programmes provided by universities and UASs for holders of higher education Master's degree • Advanced pastoral qualification, Senior staff officer course, Further studies in war economy and technology and Specific qualification on prescribing medicines
8	• Universities' and National Defence University scientific and artistic postgraduate degrees (licentiate and doctor degrees) • The General Staff Officer's Degree, the Specialist Degree in Veterinary Medicine, and Specialist training in medicine and Specialist training in dentistry

Many national-level respondents stated that FiNQF has improved the clarity and made the skills and competences of qualifications more visible. The FiNQF has also improved the comparability of degrees and thus furthered especially international student mobility. Since 2005, it has also given direction for the learning outcomes approach in the course and curricula design. Furthermore, the Rectors' Council for the UASs highlighted FiNQF's role in recognising the UAS Master's degree and its status in the national education system.

Based on the Cedefop country note on Finland from 2018: "It is significant that Finnish HEIs have supported the development of the NQF from the start and have contributed to the framework design. This seems to reflect the existing Finnish education and training system, where interaction between general, vocational and higher education and training institutions seems to operate more smoothly than in many other countries. A qualifications framework for higher education, in line with the Bologna process, was developed from 2005 and is now an integrated part of the new comprehensive FiNQF." (Cedefop, 2019.)

On the other hand, the interviews for this country case study indicated that in Finland, the role of the NQF in supporting FLPs has been less visible than in some other European countries.

Finland is very specific because we have open access from vocational education to higher education. So, the NQF role [in Finland] much smaller than it might be in some other countries (EDUFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

In March 2018, the Ministry of Education and Culture appointed a committee to prepare a proposal for extending the framework in terms of qualifications that fall outside the FiNQF. These include preparatory and training programmes, studies that support study skills, competence modules related to eligibility and qualifications requirements, and competence modules aiming at the development of competence. Now the procedure for extending and updating the FiNQF is in place, and administrative branches and interest groups can propose new competence modules to be included in the FiNQF until 31 March 2021. The Ministry steers the process and evaluates the proposals (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2020). This is an important step in increasing FiNQF's role at the national level and developing it towards a wider framework for learning.

As it comes to monitoring and evaluating the impact of NQF, the interviews indicated this is a European Union level discussion, too. At the moment, there are very few member states that have made any evaluation of the impact of the NQF, covering its role in supporting FLPs. One of these include the Irish stakeholder survey from 2017 (Indecon, 2017). While there was indication that, in the Irish case, the NFQ had improved access to education and training and improved progression between qualifications, the absence of comprehensive objective data on actual progression pathways and their use made it difficult to isolate the impact of the NQF (Indecon, 2017: 35–42). The same conclusion also applies to Finland.

The impact of NQF on flexibility also links to national level solutions on the interlinkage between the NQF and quality assurance (QA). As stated in the Cedefop analysis on NQF development in European countries, (2018) standing alone and isolated, NQFs are too weak as tools to drive reform and change. For frameworks to make a difference, they must interact with and add to other policies. This underlines the importance of interconnection between NQF, QA, curricula, RPL and guidance policies.

As next steps in Finland, the role of the FiNQF in promoting greater awareness and understanding of the qualifications and the level descriptors and increasing the dialogue between the world of qualifications and the world of work could be further discussed and possibly evaluated at a later stage. Other important areas for national discussions include the role of the FiNQF in advancing FLPs and increasing the synergy between the two national actors: the FiNQF contact point operating at EDUFI and the national quality assurance conducted by FINEEC.

As a top priority, the national level interviewees emphasised the communicative role of the FiNQF and deepening the learning outcomes approach at the institutional level. This also relates to the topical discussion about the lifelong learning continuum in Finland: what skills and competences should be provided in Bachelor's and Master's degrees and what belongs to the scope of continuous learning.

We should emphasise learning outcomes approach increasingly. We look easily only at the amount (ECTS credits), but we should also look the learning behind it (Ministry, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

NQF helps in everything which requires understanding of the learning outcomes, but even more than NQF, it is important that the learning outcomes are defined at the faculty and programme level (EDUFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).

4.3.5 ECTS system

Since 2005, all Finnish HEIs have adopted the ECTS in measuring a student's course load in Bachelor and Master programmes. In ECTS, one full-time academic year is equivalent to 60 higher education credits. The ECTS Users' Guide (European Commission, 2015) describes the system and how it is used in greater detail. In addition, when receiving the degree diploma, all Finnish university and UAS graduates automatically receive a Diploma Supplement (DS) in English language providing additional information on the graduate's studies, level of degree and qualifications provided by the degree for further studies and working life.

As described in the ECTS User's Guide, the ECTS is designed to make it easier for students to move within and between countries and to have their academic qualifications and study periods recognised, whether related to national or international mobility or transfers. Furthermore, the ECTS and Diploma Supplement help to describe and compare study programmes, award and recognise higher education qualifications.

From the national perspective, the ECTS is regarded as fully implemented in Finland. In other words, the ECTS supports various types of FLPs of students. Based on the EDUFI report, the adoption of ECTS compatible credits has also strengthened the link between Finnish higher education degrees and the Qualifications Framework in the European Higher Education Area (Finnish National Agency for Education 2018:43).

Based on consultation with a national ECTS expert, "in 2009–2013, several Finnish universities and UASs applied and received an ECTS label and/or DS label from the European Commission".

During the on-going programme term, starting from 2015, the European level follow-up of the ECTS implementation has been linked with the Erasmus+ Mobility Programme. To be eligible to participate in the Erasmus+ Programme a HEI must have an Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE), granted by the European Commission. The Erasmus exchange reports are collected practically from all exchange students. Thus, the European Commission has tools in place to monitor how studies taken abroad are recognised and whether study guides are up-to-date (EDUFI, ECTS expert, online interview).

4.3.6 National quality assurance of higher education

One of the national instruments supporting the HEIs in FLPs is national quality assurance. The planned evaluations and their schedule for a four-year period at a time are defined in the National Plan for Education Evaluations 2020–2023.

FINEEC conducts three types of higher education evaluations dealing with aspects of FLP: quality audits, thematic evaluations and field-specific evaluations.

Currently, the third cycle of quality audits is underway. The purpose of the audit model is to evaluate whether the quality work in the HEI meets the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) and to assess whether the institutional quality system results in effective enhancement activities.

The links between the quality assurance, the FiNQF and ECTS have been strengthened by including these aspects in the FINEEC audit model for 2019–2024. In order to reach the level of 'good' and to pass the audit, there needs to be evidence that the FiNQF is used in the curriculum process when defining learning outcomes, that the students' workload is defined according to the principles of the ECTS system and that the HEI has systematic procedures for approving the plans for degree programmes or other study entities.

> *The FINEEC third round audit model covers aspects of FLP, such as equality aspects, institutional practices for recognition of prior learning, definition of intended learning outcomes [based on the FiNQF], integration of working life periods into studies and systematic planning and monitoring of teaching and learning (FINEEC, expert in HE evaluations, in-person interview).*

There was not yet evidence available of the impact of the third round audit model on FLPs. However, on a general level, it can be stated that FINEEC audits support HEIs in institutional structures enabling FLPs.

In addition to audits, FINEEC's field-specific and thematic evaluations have dealt or are dealing with aspects of FLPs, such as student transitions from one educational level to another and integration of work and study in HE degree education (*see Table 4.5*; see more about the results field-specific evaluations in chapter 4.4.3.).

TABLE 4.5. FINEEC evaluations from the FLP perspective

Evaluation project	FLP perspective
Institutional quality audits • Second round in 2012–2018 • Third round in 2019–2024	• The FINEEC third round audit model will ensure that the FiNQF is used in the curriculum process when defining learning outcomes, that the students' workload is defined according to the principles of the ECTS system and that the HEI has systematic procedures for approving the plans for degree programmes or other study entities.
Thematic evaluation of student transitions and smooth study paths (2017–2021) • Transition from secondary to higher education will be evaluated in 2020–21	• The evaluation will produce data on guidance at transition phases; students' application and admissions processes; and education providers' ability to support student choices related to further studies.
Evaluations of fields of study • Medical education (2018); Social sciences; Humanities; Technology; Economics and business (2019); Law; Social and health care (2020–2021)	• The evaluations are mainly targeted at the working life relevance of degree programmes. However, they also handle topics such as the degree structures, flexible pathways, guidance of students and traineeship opportunities.

A topic of special interest in recent FINEEC evaluations has been the study paths of immigrants to higher education. The main outputs of these evaluations are described in Table 4.6. The results of the FINEEC evaluation on immigrant students' integration into higher education are discussed further in chapter 4.5.

TABLE 4.6. Immigrants' integration into higher education in FINEEC evaluations

Evaluation project	Main outputs from the FLP perspective
Best practices for the integration of immigrants into the educational system (Puukko & al., 2019)	• Best Practices web portal • Comparative data on German, Irish, Norwegian and the UK approaches
Evaluation of preparatory training for immigrants organized by UASs (Lepola, 2017)	• Role of prepatory training in supporting immigrants' in accessing higher education • Progress of higher education studies among immigrants
Students with an immigrant background on the path towards higher education (Airas & al., 2019)	• Statistical and qualitative data on immigrant students' integration and participation in higher education • Several recommendations targeted at the institutional and national level

Overall, it can be concluded that although FINEEC evaluations have covered various aspects of FLPs, prior to this country case study, there was no comprehensive analysis on FLPs in higher education available. As this study shows, there are several topics in FLPs in need of deeper analysis and further research and evaluations. One such example, brought up by an interviewed evaluation expert, related to the analysis of students' various study paths and how this has impacted their study progress and employment.

It would be interesting to examine the whole journey from application through studies to working life. We [at FINEEC] do examine it in our thematic evaluations on topics such as transition from secondary to tertiary education, integration [in higher education] and experience of student involvement. But from the national perspective, we still lack a comprehensive picture of this [FLP], and that would be extremely interesting (FINEEC, expert in HE evaluations, in-person interview).

4.4 Key national practices supporting FLPs

In the next sections, key national practices supporting FLPs are examined according to the three phases of a student's study path:

- Chapter 4.4.1 discusses alternative pathways including the open studies pathway, transfers and other alternative pathways within the context of student admissions reform. It also examines co-operation developments between secondary and tertiary education.
- Chapter 4.4.2 explores flexibility in university and UAS degree structures and cross-institutional study possibilities and recognition of prior learning from the FLP perspective.
- Chapter 4.4.3 investigates combining work and study, guidance and career guidance and graduate work placements.
- Chapter 4.4.4. discusses development of continuous learning as part of the FLP concept.

4.4.1 Flexibility in admissions

Co-operation with secondary level institutions

The new Act on General Upper Secondary Education obligates the providers to organise part of the upper secondary studies in co-operation with HEIs for instance in the form of introductory and orientation courses. Furthermore, the same Act obligates HEIs now to provide guidance for applicants one year after the application.

A recent study (Ahola & al., 2019) indicated that the upper secondary institutions' collaboration with HEIs has become wider and more versatile, including student and teacher visits from HEIs to upper secondary institutions and vice versa and organising introductory, orientation and open university courses that can be integrated as part of upper secondary studies. The main recommendations related to securing sufficient resources for collaboration between the secondary and tertiary levels, supporting especially small general upper secondary institutions in launching new co-operation initiaves, and thus ensuring equal collaboration possibilities in different parts of the country. Furthermore, the benefits of co-operation for HEIs as tools to successful student recruitement should be highlighted, taking into account the increasing competition between HEIs of applicants and the diminishing size of young population cohort. (Ahola & al., 2020.)

Reform of the student admissions system

As described in chapter 3.2., the Finnish student admissions system have been reformed in 2018–2020.

Many interviewees underlined that one of the crucial strengths of the Finnish student admissions system is that there is no dead end. A secondary degree – either from an upper secondary degree (matriculation exam) or a vocational qualification – provide the eligibility to apply to HEIs. Based on the legislation, study programmes may choose students based on other relevant competencies, as well.

Based on statistics from 2018 (see *Figure 4.1.*), the majority of those enrolled in university Bachelor's degree studies had an upper secondary level qualification as their basic education: 79% the matriculation examination (upper secondary level qualification), 2% an upper secondary vocational qualification and 6% had both. A tenth had previously completed a tertiary degree (this also includes post-secondary qualification and vocational tertiary level qualification) (OSF 2018a).

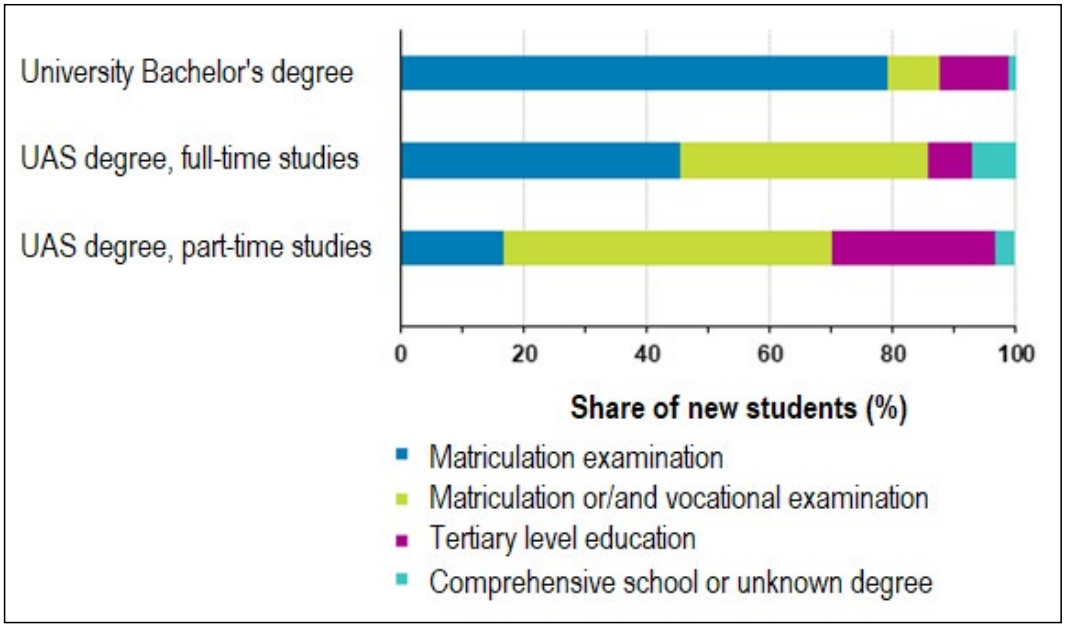

FIGURE 4.1. New students by education and prior degree or qualification in 2018 (%). ***Adapted from:*** **OSF 2018a.**

Of those who started daytime programmes in UAS education, 45% had passed the matriculation examination, 27% had completed a vocational qualification and 13% both the matriculation examination and a vocational qualification. In addition, 7% of students starting UAS studies had already completed a tertiary degree. Vocational basic education was more common among those

having started UAS education arranged as blended/multiform learning (such as contact, distance, group and individual learning). 17% had passed the matriculation examination, 34% had completed a vocational qualification and 19% had completed both. A fourth had a previously completed tertiary degree as their basic education (OSF, 2018a).

The interviews brought up examples of how students can advance via the vocational pathway to a university degree – even to a doctorate.

> *It does happen. There are people with a technician diploma continuing to a UAS and then university. We [at my university] are currently building a pathway from UAS Master's studies to [university] doctoral studies. We have three pilots [of such pathways] in engineering, business and economics and health science. So, UAS Master's graduates in nursing may proceed to doctorate in health science (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).*

The national level interviews, conducted in autumn 2019, indicated that the HEIs had worked intensively to renew the admissions criteria in line with national policy goals: adopting the certificate-based selections and renewing the entrance exams that do not require long-time preparation from students. The policy aim in the spring of 2020 was that in the majority of fields over 50% of admissions were based on certificates – matriculation certificates and vocational diploma.[1)] According to interviews: "In UASs, entrance exams have been unified into one single entrance exam allowing to apply for all UASs and all degree programmes through a single exam from any place" (Ministry, HE expert, in-person interview).

Furthermore, the national level interviews confirmed the long-existing challenges related to the mismatch between supply and demand and the same selection queue for first-time applicants, many-time applicants and those who already have one degree. As two thirds of all applicants (c.a. 100,000 applicants out of about 150,000 applicants) are rejected annually, several interviewees considered it a big waste of time and resources that many applicants receive a study place only after applying three or four times.

Some of the interviewees referred to the limited availability of higher education study places as a so-called zero-sum game. If the share of alternative pathway study places increase, then the number of admissions through the actual application process have to be reduced. Increasing study spots was seen as a way to tackle the problem.[2)]

> *Having the policy goal of 50% rate of higher education, and taking into account that in one age cohort we have about 60,000 people, and that there is a certain number of spots reserved for first-time applicants and a high demand of study places in certain competitive fields, I do believe that increasing the intake will help in this situation. (Ministry, HE expert, in-person interview).*

1) In spring 2020, due to the COVID-19 situation, 50-80% of new students were selected based on certificates, depending on the field of education.
2) As a specific response to the challenges created by COVID-19, in June 2020, the Government decided to allocate the HEIs additional funding covering about 5.000 new study spots.

Open studies pathway

Within the context of the student admissions reform, the open studies pathway routes to higher education are being developed. For this purpose, one of the previous Government key projects – the TRY project (Alternative path to university, 2019) coordinated by the University of Jyväskylä – is aiming to develop, pilot and establish different paths into higher education.

> *Firstly, we aim to revise the existing Open University route so that an increasing number of applicants would be admitted to university degree studies and that the admission criteria for study options could be predicted more accurately. Secondly, we will develop routes for secondary level students and for the needs of working life. In addition, we will develop guidance and advice services related to these routes (TRY project, representative, in-person interview).*

Based on statistics, in 2019, the overall intake through the open studies pathway was currently about 2,000 students, 1,500 in UAS and 500 in universities. Thus, the overall share of the open studies pathway is currently approximately 4% of all higher education admissions and it is strongly concentrated in UASs (see *Figure 4.2.*).

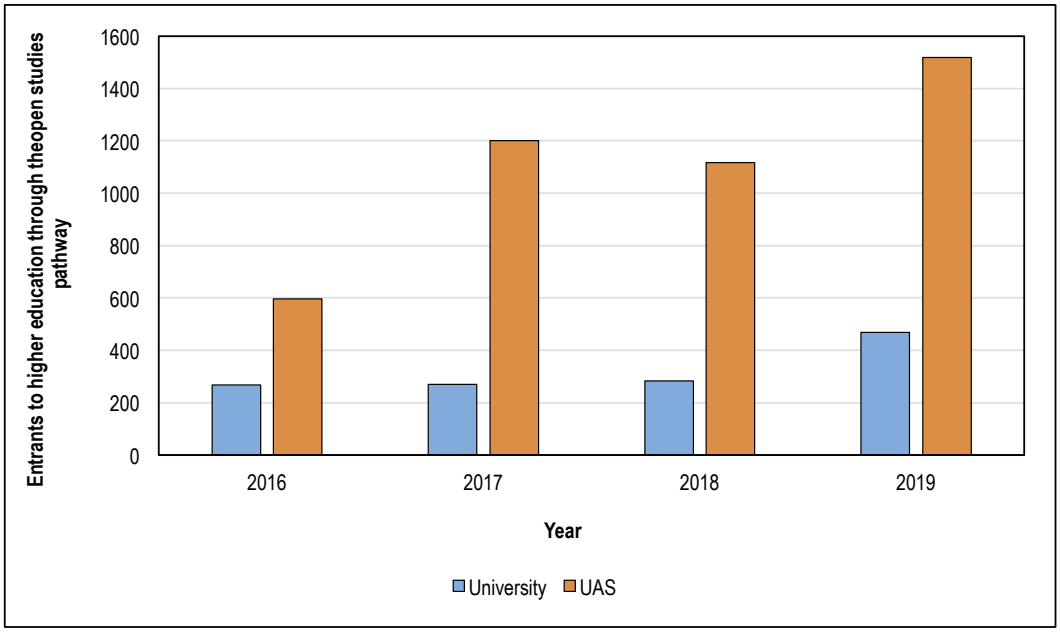

FIGURE 4.2. Entrants to higher education through the open studies pathway (*Source:* Virta database)

It seems that the TRY project, on its part, is contributing to increasing the open pathway in universities. There are 11 universities and 34 subjects participating in piloting the open university pathway. Based on the interview conducted in November 2019, there were more than 200 open studies pathways to Bachelor's and Master's studies. The growth exceeded the original project's projected numbers. However, this was not yet seen in the statistics.

There are some universities which aim to increase the open pathway to account for 10% of all admissions. However, there are no explicit national recommendations on the share of the open studies pathway. One of the obstacles has been the fact that open studies are not cost-free for students.

> *The Ministry has traditionally not commented on percentages. We have to remember that the law states that entrance exams are cost-free, and we [at the Ministry] have interpreted that to also mean that primary selection methods must be cost-free or require a moderate workload (Ministry, HE expert, in-person interview).*

When it comes to the question of how many open studies are required from an applicant applying to a HEI, there is quite a lot of variation between HEIs and degree programmes. In some cases, students have to complete almost an entire Bachelor's degree, but more often it's one year or one term, 60 credits or 30 credits, which is required in order to enter as a degree student.

The open pathway does not exist in all programmes and in all fields. In universities, there seems to be a connection between the attractiveness of fields and the kinds of open pathways that are available. In some universities, the open university provision has a strong focus on education and humanities. In competitive and high-demand degree programmes such as medicine and teacher education, there have not been open pathways available. This study brought up the question whether the Ministry should regulate on widening the provision of open studies in a way that the open pathway covered all fields of study.

In the coming years, the open university pathway may become a more significant pathway. From a steering perspective, the interviews indicated that currently there is limited national data available on the provision of open studies and the impact of this pathway. Therefore, some respondents stressed the urgent need to conduct a long-term follow-up study on lessons learned from the open studies pathway.

At the end of 2019, the Ministry decided to fund a study of the impact of the student admissions reform on reducing gap years. This study will also produce data on students' socioeconomical status and thus equity aspects. Additionally, another study will be conducted in 2020, focusing on the study progress of those admitted through the open pathway.

Transfers

As described in chapter 3.3.4., there are two types of transfers within the Finnish higher education system: the national transfer student procedure and the internal transfer application procedure. The transfer student application procedure is applied in both universities and UASs but not in every education or degree programme. It is up to the faculties and degree programmes to decide on the availability and quota for the transfer pathway.

While developing transfer pathways is one of the policy objectives, the actual volume of transfers via the national transfer student procedure (utilising the *Studyinfo.fi* online application platform) is still quite low, under 1,000 per year. Based on the Ministry expert interview, in 2019 the exact number of transfers via the national transfer application procedure was 268 transfer students in universities and 618 in UASs.

As it comes to internal transfer applications, i.e. students changing their degree programme to fields near their original field of study within the HEI, there is no statistical data available on the volume of this phenomenon. The big difference between the university and UAS transfer numbers may be explained by the fact that universities utilise more internal transfers, while the national transfer procedure is more commonly used in UASs. (On transfers at the institutional level, see chapter 5.4.1).

Based on research conducted in 2018 (Ahola, Asplund & Vanhala), the most typical reason for applying for a transfer was that students did not succeed in accessing the study programmes of their preference in the original selection process. In UASs, the majority of transfers were concentrated in the fields of social and health care and business and administration. In the field of social and health care, several students applied to transfer to degree programmes within the field; such as nursing–paramedic–midwifery. In the field of business and administration, 95% of all transfer applications were sent by applicants to similar programmes in other UASs. As for university transfers, the majority of transfers were from humanities either to other universities in the similar field or other fields, such as economics and social sciences (Ahola, Asplund & Vanhala, 2018).

While transfer routes are available, a more common way to move to a different field or HEI is for students is to apply again for a second study right via normal student selection. According to a blog drafted by the statistics expert at the Ministry of Education and Culture (Haapamäki, 2019), in 2018 there were about 4,500 students admitted to HEIs who had a previous study right in one of the HEIs, approximately 2% of all higher education students. In addition, 1,500 students were admitted to university Master's degree programmes via student selection.

A recent study (Salminen & Murto, 2019) indicated that more guidance and support – both information of studies and life-planning tools – should be provided for applicants, especially for first-time applicants, in order to support life and career choices in the first place. In addition, better utilisation and informing applicants of the transfer student procedure might ease the problem with many-time applicants.

Based on the national level interviews, three obstacles for utilising existing transfer routes and developing new ones could be identified:

- Currently there is not sufficient data available for demand of transfer routes. Consequently, one of the interviewees called for more effective utilisation of existing follow-up data and institutional analytics when developing internal learning pathways: ”It is tricky because not everyone can go to medical school after all. We need professionals in other fields in this country as well. So, the question is how many paths we should create” (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).
- Secondly, internal regulations and traditions restrict increasing internal pathways: ”At least in universities, internal transfers are currently possible only to fields near to the original field of study, such as from dentistry to medical education” (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).
- One of the obstacles related to the wider use of transfer pathways seemed to relate to internal communication and students’ awareness of existing transfer possibilities. This is discussed more from the institutional perspective in chapter 5.4.1.

The interviews with Ministry representatives suggest that further development of transfer routes within the HEIs might be one solution to the national challenge related to many-time applicants. ”If we want to take the pressure off joint admissions, there should be more transferability within a single HEI. So that applicants are not forced to new admissions, but they could use this pathway.” (Ministry, HE expert, in-person interview).

It can be concluded that, if the policy objective of developing transfers is to be achieved, national objectives should be clarified. Additionally, more systematic measures for developing transfer routes – within and/or between HEIs (internal and external transfers) – should be introduced.

Other pathways to higher education

As mentioned earlier in this report, based on law, HEIs may choose students based on other competences besides the grades and exams. One of the pathways being piloted is the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) pathway.

In one of the Prime Minister Sipilä’s Government key projects, Digital Education for All (DEFA), opening first-year studies to everyone is being piloted in the field of information science. The introductory and basis studies can be taken as MOOC courses. After completing a certain number of modules, defined by each participating university, a student may apply to the degree programme.

Based on the interview, the University Rectors’ Council (UNIFI) representative saw ”the MOOC pathway as an interesting initiative and believes that other fields will follow”.

4.4.2 Flexibility during studies

This section examines flexibilisation related to study structures and contents and study modes:

- specialisation choices embedded in the university Bachelor's and Master's and UAS Bachelor's degree structures.
- cross-studying, i.e. taking studies from other degree programmes within one's own or other institutions.

Specialisations within the university and UAS degree structures

As a result of the university degree reform in 2014, the first cycle (Bachelor's) degrees at universities have become broader in scope and their number have been reduced. The idea is that new broad-based Bachelor's programme enable students to first take general studies and then to choose among the Master's programmes provided by the faculty and thus specialise and create their own learning pathways.

Based on the interviews, there is field- and university-specific variation in specialisation possibilities. In some fields, for example in humanities and technical fields, there are Bachelor's programmes which share the same entrance exam and students may choose their specification at a later stage.

The interviewed student union representative warmly welcomed further development of specialisations in the form of wide offerings of selective Master's programmes.

> *Our wish is that [besides the transfer possibility], there would be [even] more focus on making it possible to continue to several Master's programmes with the same Bachelor's degree. You could introduce some kind of bridge studies, but this is rarely even the case. So, recognising the benefits of and the similarities between different degree programmes in a more efficient way. (Student union, HE policy expert, in-person interview).*

While the availability of specialisation possibilities within the university Bachelor–Master structure would offer an important option for FLPs, the interview with the University Rectors' Council (UNIFI) representative indicated that the recent focus of development had rather been on reform of student selection and renewing teaching methods than the development of internal study paths. However, further development of such study pathways will probably return to the agenda in coming years.

> *Although we created the broad-based Bachelor's programmes in 2015–16, recently there hasn't perhaps been much attention on structures [i.e. developing specialisation possibilities through a choice of Master's programmes]. I think we will develop that further at some point (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).*

As it comes to the UAS degree structures, there are specialisation possibilities within Bachelor's degree programmes. There was also indication that the on-going curriculum reform included an effort to increase specialisations embedded in the UAS Bachelor's degrees. These developments are discussed more from the case UAS perspective in chapter 5.4.2.

Cross-institutional studies and e-learning

Traditionally, Finnish HEIs have had mutual agreements that have enabled cross-studying – taking courses and minors from other institutions. One example of this is the previous JOO Flexible Study Rights Agreement Students, which since 2004 has provided graduate and post-graduate students of Finnish universities the opportunity to include courses free of charge from other universities into their degrees. (JOO Flexible Study Rights, 2018.)

This case study indicated that in recent years, institutional cooperation as regards to cross-studying has widened and attained new forms. This development has been initiated and supported by changes in the funding model and legislation and implementation of a corresponding key project. Furthermore, the new funding model now rewards ECTS and the recently changed legislation now enables HEIs to purchase courses from each other.

Overall, the cross-study possibilities comprise for instance the CampusOnline e-learning provision in the UAS sector, field-specific cross-study possibilities and starting from 2020, opening new cross-study possibilities between universities and UASs. The last one refers to the fact that the previous JOO network will be replaced by even wider cross-study possibilities to be opened for universities and UAS students enabled by one of the previous Government key projects – called the RiKe project. (See *Box 9.*)

BOX 9. Three examples of sector-wide and field-specific cross-study possibilities

1. **E-learning across the UAS sector.** Since 2018, CampusOnline.fi has offered students online courses from over twenty Finnish UASs free of charge and to be included in one's degree. Since the beginning, this portal was well-received by UAS students. Almost 60,000 ECTS credits were taken during the summer 2018.
2. **Field-specific cross-study agreements such as the Finnish Institute of Technology FiTech.** The Finnish Institute of Technology (FITech) is a network founded in 2017 by seven Finnish universities of technology and labour market actors. The founding mission of FITech is to contribute to the development of Finnish innovation capacity and to respond to competence demands arising in the field of engineering. FITech offers university courses and minors free of charge for degree students and adult learners.
3. **Cross-study agreement between universities and universities of applied sciences.** Most recently, as a result of the RiKe key project, in December 2019, the rectors and presidents of universities and universities of applied sciences signed a framework agreement on teaching co-operation. In the future, the agreement will allow students to take studies at another university in a more flexible way based on their primary study right at the home university. In addition, the agreement encourages universities to engage in pedagogical development that is based on research and job market needs as well as use collective methods to produce learning materials. A joint national cross-institutional study information service has also been developed in order to automate the transfer of information between universities. The cross-institutional study tools include the EXAM software, which gives students the flexibility to choose their own exam time and place.

The statistics (see *Figure 4.3.*) confirm that credits taken within cross-study agreements between HEIs, especially in the UAS sector, have increased significantly in recent years. This indicator also includes language studies taken in other institutions.

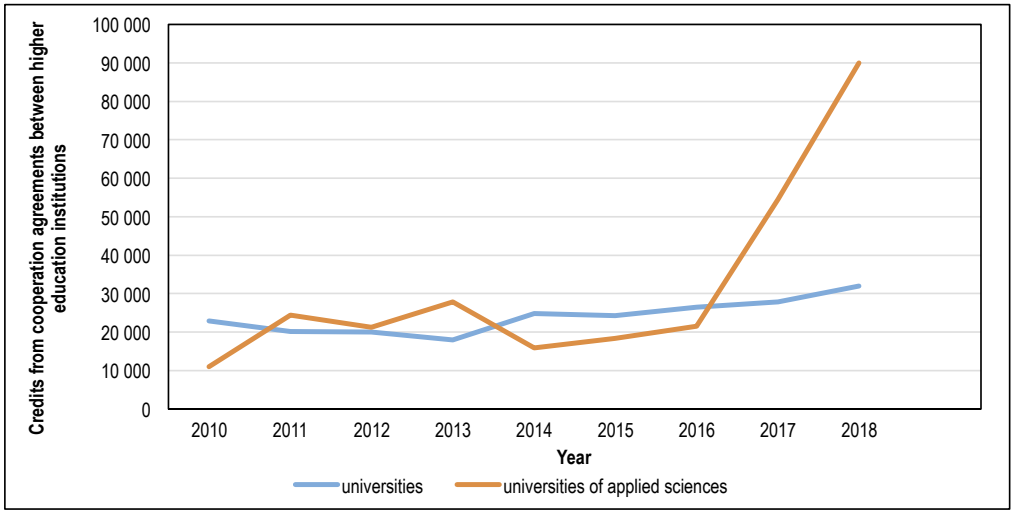

FIGURE 4.3. Credits from cooperation agreements between HEIs (non-degree students). ***Source:*** **Vipunen database.**

While the cross-study collaboration agreements between the Finnish university and UAS sector and the collaboration begun between the secondary and tertiary education has meant a historical crossing of educational borders and more flexibility for students, there is not yet systematic follow-up data available on the provision, completion and added value of the cross-study phenomenon. At the next stage, it would be important to assess whether the cross-institutional studies have met the national, regional and field-specific objectives as regards to enabling FLPs, diversification of competences and contributing to the national innovation capacity.

Recognition of prior learning

Development of national RPL guidelines for recognising prior learning has long traditions in Finland and can be considered a national strength supporting FLPs. Already in 2009, the two Rectors' councils (UNIFI and Arene) published a joint report on principles and recommendations for RPL in higher education. In order to support HEIs, RPL practices have been developed in several joint projects, for instance in the Recognise skills and competences (in Finnish: Tunnista osaaminen) project implemented in 2009–2013.

In EUROSTUDENT VI survey conducted in 2016, almost a third (31%) of Finnish higher education students had applied for recognition of their prior learning or learning acquired elsewhere. Just over half (57%) of applicants were credited for all or almost all of the attainments submitted, while a total of 83% were credited for at least half of their attainments. (Potila & al., 2017).

In 2019, the Ministry of Education and Culture published a comparative survey (Mikkola & Haltia, 2019) on principles and practices of RPL in HEIs. The survey indicated that guidelines and process description for RPL varied from very general to detailed. The concept and terminology related to RPL also varied. The recommendations for improvement included the clarification of the purpose of RPL, the availability of RPL instructions for students, multiple and cost-effective ways of demonstrating competences and the monitoring of the RPL process at the institutional level (Mikkola & Haltia, 2019).

At the time of the data collection for this study, the Network for Universities Study Affairs updated the national recommendations for RPL for universities (UNIFI, 2020). Topics in need of national recommendations were recognised based on a survey on existing RPL practices and in a joint discussion between the universities. This joint process can be considered a good practice. The new RPL principles for universities, aiming to support teachers in RPL decisions, are based on the learning outcome- and competence-based recognition of modules. For example, while prior studies taken in UASs were often only substituted in universities, there is now a national recommendation on their inclusion in the university degree – as they belong to the same level in the NQF. (UNIFI, 2020).

The new national RPL recommendations for universities were published and endorsed by the university Rectors' Council UNIFI in spring 2020. By this decision, all universities are encouraged to implement the national RPL recommendations and update institutional level RPL guidelines accordingly.

While procedures for the recognition of formal learning are relatively well-developed, recognition of informal learning, such as on-the-job-learning and learning acquired for instance in leisure time, is an area for specific interest in Finland. A recent survey, commissioned by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, and informing the Government policy development especially in terms of continuous learning, proposed that digitalisation and artificial intelligence will be utilised in the recognition of student's prior learning and competences (Owal Group, 2020).

4.4.3 Flexibility towards graduation and employment

Combining work and study in degree education

Since 2017, Finnish HEIs have been developing a new way to combine study and work. For instance, new models have been developed to integrate training and working life periods into university curricula as well as guidelines for internships. Additionally, the concept '*studification of work*' (in Finnish: työn opinnollistaminen) was introduced, meaning that a student gains ECTS credits towards his/her degree in working life or in a workplace-oriented learning environment.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education and Culture has strongly supported the development of work and study approaches by allocating funding to specific national projects. Based on the documentation published at each project's website, there are a number of tools and practices that the HEIs can benefit from (*see Table* 4.7.). However, as stated earlier in this report, the implementation of the practices created in the projects is still on its way and needs to be supported by national and institutional measures.

TABLE 4.7. National projects developing work and study approaches

Name of the project, years, participants	Project aims	Achievements so far based on the project's website
Tyyli project – bridging the gap between university studies and working, 2015–2018, six universities	• aimed to develop internships practices, to increase teachers' working life contacts, and to support the curricula renewal	https://tyylihanke.wordpress.com/brief-in-english/ • models of integrating training and working life periods into university curricula • guidelines for internships
TOTEEMI project – Learning about work and for work, 2017–2019, 18 universities and UASs	• aims to create structures and practices to support higher education students' entry into the labour market	www.amktoteemi.fi/en • conseptualisation of work and study approach and models for student support, career counselling and workplace co-operation • research reports on combining work and studies
WORKPEDA – Work-integrated Pedagogy in Higher Education project, 2018–2020, 16 universities and UASs	• aims to develop research-based modules in support of practical work-integrated pedagogy	https://www.tyopeda.fi/tyopaketit • seminars, webinars, videos • research reports, articles

The recent FINEEC field-specific evaluations (Pyykkö & al., 2020), focusing especially on the competence-base and the working life relevance of the degrees in the four fields of study, also contributed to the topic of combining work and study within the degree structures.. The recommendations, to be implemented by the HEIs, included for instance following:

- **In humanities**, the working life relevance of degree programmes should be considered more extensively in the planning of education and the guidance and counselling of students. Traineeship opportunities should be increased in the Bachelor's and Master's stages. The rate of graduates finding employment is approximately 10% lower among graduates in humanities than among graduates in technology and business, for instance. Consequently, employment opportunities should be planned already during the studies.
- **In business**, there should be more systematic cooperation between the university and the UAS sector at the national level. Through more intensive national cooperation between the higher education sectors, the division of labour between the HEIs, the profiles of Master's degrees, and the provision of continuous learning could be further clarified.
- **Higher education in technology** offered by universities and UASs must be developed as a whole, and the overall structure of higher education in the field must be examined boldly and open-mindedly at the national level. There is not enough cooperation spanning the two sectors of education. Instead of maintaining separate systems, common technology and service infrastructures should be built and utilised.
- The labour market relevance of degrees **in social sciences** seems to be high due to their generic nature, but at the same time students find the lack of practical orientation in the studies problematic. As regards the degree programmes, it is necessary to clarify the competences provided by the degree programme and the desired skills and clearly describe them in the learning outcomes of the degree programme. The students' ability to identify their competences should be better supported.

The interview with the University Rector's Council representative indicated that, for instance, internships are increasingly becoming part of all degree programmes.

> *It's perhaps not so common [in universities] as in UASs. But already during the previous curriculum reform in my university, we introduced a work project or an internship into all degree programmes. This way, we have tried to make the transition from graduation to working life as smooth as possible and support student contacts for employment. (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).*

Study and career guidance

There are no national-level guidelines for study and career guidance provided for Bachelor's, Master's and doctoral degree students. Instead, the HE legislation states that the HEIs must arrange tuition and study guidance in a way that enables full-time students to complete their degrees within the prescribed normative time. Guidance belongs to the responsibility of HEIs and is discussed further from the institutional perspective in chapter 5.4.2.

However, since 2011, the National Lifelong Guidance Coordination and Cooperation Group has defined strategic objectives for developing lifelong and life wide guidance in Finland, such as ”services will be equally accessible for all and they meet individual needs; a quality assurance system for guidance will be developed; and the guidance system will function as a coherent and holistic entity”. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2011.) These objectives will be revised during the current Government term.

Furthermore, FINEEC evaluation on student transitions and smooth study paths (to be conducted in 2020–2021) will provide data on transitions from secondary to tertiary education, including related guidance.

Graduate employment and FLPs

During this country case study, it was not possible to access data on how the organisation of FLPs had impacted graduate employment. However, it seems that the existing data (in Koski database) would allow such analysis.

According to Statistics Finland education statistics (see Figure 4.4.), the overall employment of recent graduates further improved. University graduates were most successful in gaining employment, close to 90% of them were working at the end of 2018. Altogether 69% of attainers of basic vocational education qualifications, 84% of attainers of vocational qualifications and 95% of attainers of specialist vocational qualifications were employed (OSF 2018b).

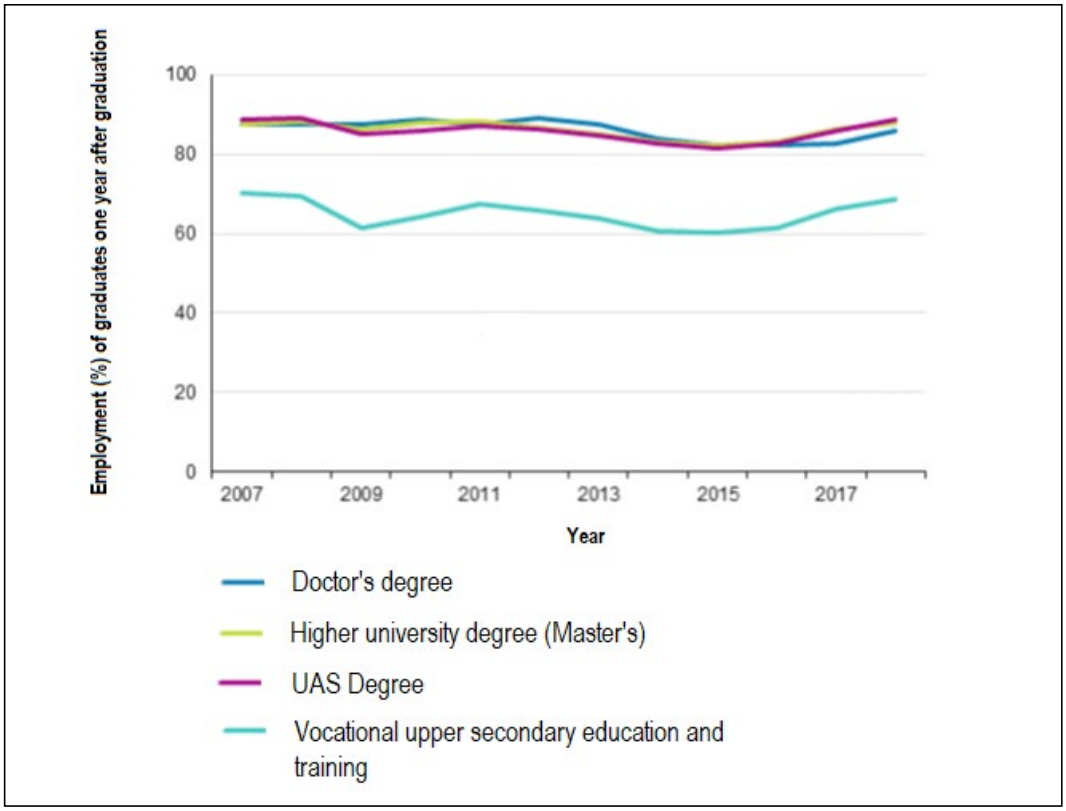

FIGURE 4.4. Employment of graduates one year after graduation 2007–2018 (%). ***Adapted from:*** **OSF 2018b.**

Employment among recent graduates is measured one year after their graduation. One year after graduation, 72% of the graduates were employed, of whom 57% were working full-time and 14% were working besides studies. The share of those working full-time had increased by two percentage points from the previous year. The proportion of the unemployed was eight per cent (OSF 2018b).

The university Rector's Council interview indicated that in order to monitor graduate placement and career paths, there is an increasing need to combine quantitative data with qualitative data produced by the national Bachelor's Graduate Survey (in Finnish: kandipalaute), the Aarresaari network at the university sector and the national AVOP feedback questionnaire at the UAS sector.

> *We're trying to integrate Aarresaari career feedback more closely with Bachelor feedback, so that we could discuss the national situation together among vice-rectors for education. With the change in the funding model and the pressures related to producing skilled labour, these reports are increasingly interesting (UNIFI, HE policy expert, in-person interview).*

4.4.4 Continuous learning

There is an OECD estimate that 30% of all professions will change or disappear in the next ten years. This requires retraining and upskilling of the labour force. As described in Chapter 4.2, the previous Government launched a national reform for continuous learning with the emphasis of lifelong learning, upskilling and reskilling pathways, and this reform is continued by the current Government (Publications of the Finnish Government, 2019).

The current forms of continuous learning consist of open studies, contract-based training offered for external clients and professional specialisation programmes (at minimum 30 ECTS), targeted for those who have completed a degree and have already entered working life (*see Figure 4.5.*).

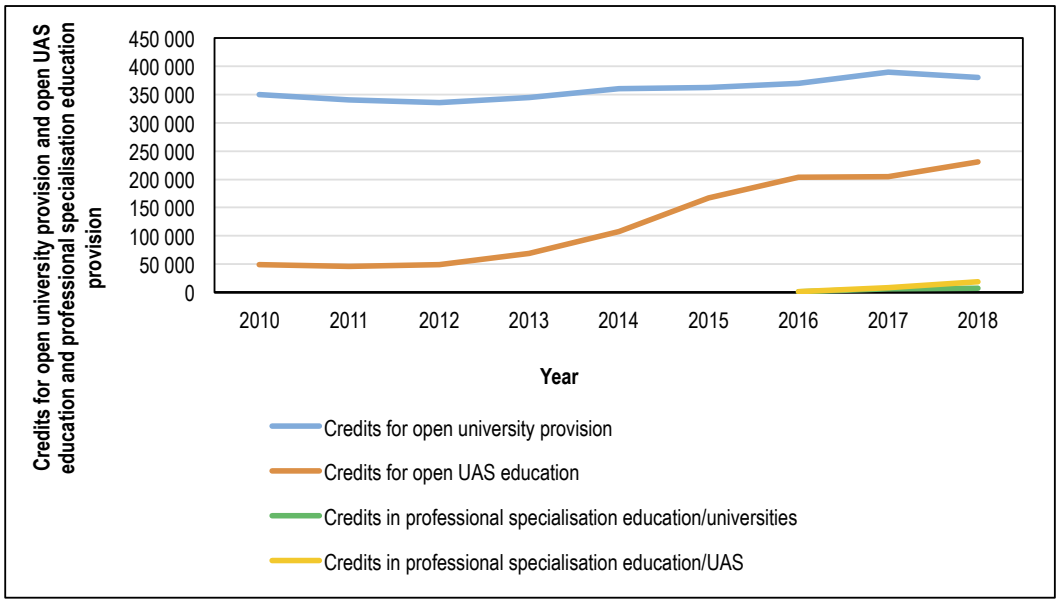

FIGURE 4.5. Credits for open university, open UAS and professional specialisation education (provision in 2010–2019; non-degree students). ***Source:*** **Vipunen database.**

One interviewee noted that the UAS Master's degree – requiring applicants 24 months (two years) of prior work experience to be eligible – can be considered as a form of continuous learning.

> *UAS Master's programmes are a very good examples of continuous learning. The working life aspect is very strong there. So, the [UAS Master's] studies are often completed alongside work, including often a large extent work-based learning or [its recognition in the form of] studification of work (Student union, HE policy expert, in-person interview).*

At the moment, universities and UASs are challenged to increase and further develop the provision of open studies and commissioned training.

A recent OECD review (OECD, 2020) recommended Finland to develop an overarching vision for the continuous learning system and a strategy about how different types of provisions contribute to the whole – the same finding that was also indicated as a lack in this study. The OECD review also encouraged Finland to consider a programme of short courses tailored to adults with low basic skills that aim to improve motivation towards learning. The current financial incentive system leads to inefficiencies by encouraging participation in formal education, such as Bachelor's degrees, rather than non-formal or informal learning. (OECD, 2020.) Thus, the question for Finland is how to fit together different kinds of provisions and whether the current provisions meet various educational and reskilling needs.

4.5 Monitoring the implementation of FLPs in general and for equity groups in particular

The national statistical data plays an important part in monitoring the implementation of FLPs. Vipunen is a public database open to everyone, and the Koski and Virta databases function as data sources. The official education statistics regularly published by Statistics Finland complement the national picture. (See *Table 4.9.*). Based on the Ministry expert view, the reliability of the data is on a high level.

TABLE 4.8. Finnish databases on education

Data sources	Main content from the FLP perspective	Accessibility
Vipunen database (vipunen.fi/en-gb/) • Maintained by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education	• Data e.g. on applicants, students and degrees, study progress and graduate placement, open studies and continuous learning	• Public database open to everyone
Koski database • Maintained by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Agency for Education	• Data e.g. on degrees taken in secondary education and thus students' entry data to higher education	• Limited for the use of various officials and government organisations
Virta database • National data warehouse for higher education is a service which the owner, the Ministry of Education and Culture, has acquired from CSC – IT Center for Science	• Register database of 38 Finnish HEIs of graduations, study attainments, grades, rights to study in HE as well as information on study place acceptation and enrolment to study a degree	• Limited for the use of HE study administration and national HE statistics
Statistics Finland statistics (stat.fi/til/kou_en.html)	• Statistics on the entire education system from pre-primary to adult education	• Public statistics open to everyone

The interviews indicated that the data is utilised at the national level by the Ministry in higher education steering, by stakeholders and by HEIs. In addition to national databases, the Ministry also uses international comparative data, such as OECD reports, in policy work and steering. The Ministry also funds commissioned surveys and impact analyses on educational reforms and legislative changes.

Based on the interviews, the Ministry officials monitor policy-related trends and indicators concerning for instance the open pathway, cross-study and transition into working life. Out of these policy level objectives, employment of graduates was considered best achieved, according to the Ministry expert.

However, the interviews indicated that due to limited resources in the Ministry staffing, much of existing data remains underutilised. The Ministry representatives identified three topical development needs in monitoring as regards to FLPs.

1. **Follow-up of entry ways and alternative study paths and progress of equity groups: "**We currently discuss with Statistics Finland how these groups could be integrated in study progress surveys. There is a clear need. One factor [we have to solve] is also the personal data protection."
2. **Data on transfers: "**There hasn't been much information about this so far, but we'll try to do this more in the future."
3. **Data on continuous learning: "**Currently, we have data on separate study rights and open studies ECTS. We are developing this with HEIs. There is a lot to be developed: who is the student, how is continuous learning provided and divided, and so on."

Equity perspective to FLPs

One of the research questions for this study was whether equity groups benefit from the flexibilisation of Finnish higher education as much or even more than other students.

At the time of data collection for this study in autumn 2019 and spring 2020, there was not yet a comprehensive analysis in place on the impact of FLP policies on equity groups' access, study progress, and work placements. Thus, this is clearly an area for development. However, as part of the Government policy goal to draft *the National Accessibility Plan of Higher Education* in 2020, there were several national processes ongoing to improve the situation.

In 2020, the Ministry of Education and Culture commissioned a report (Tanhua, 2020) on the promotion of gender equality and non-discrimination in higher education institutions, based on the equality and non-discrimination plans drawn up by the Finnish HEIs. The report presents good practices of how equality and equity measures are included in institutional plans, such as accessible organisation of student admission exams; avoiding field-specific gender segregation; recognising differences in students backgrounds and learning abilities; aligning teaching and assessment methods for learners with various backgrounds; and providing personalised guidance

and support. The report concludes that while the general principles are often well-described, more concrete actions are needed from HEIs to enhance equality and equity. The report also proposes the creation of national and international equity indicators and a FINEEC thematic evaluation to direct future development work. (Tanhua, 2020.)

The Ministry had a plan to utilise Tanhua's report and continue this work by conducting a wider survey in autumn 2020 on the obstacles and possibilities related to equality and equity, including interviews with HE representatives from various organisational levels (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020b).

In addition, the GATE project funded by the Finnish Government will analyse the policies and means of promoting equal opportunities in education as regards to social, regional, linguistic and gender equality and the effectiveness of measures to improve the equality of immigrants and persons with disabilities. This analysis will cover Finland and three reference countries (Gate project, 2020).

As it comes to existing research and evaluation data on equity groups, it focuses especially on access to higher education. Here are some examples what research shows as regards to FLPs in accessing HE in regard to various equity groups.

Age: In main admissions, the older the applicant is, the more difficult it is to be accepted. The significance of age has increased during the last ten years and today a 30-year-old applicant's chance to be accepted is approximately 70% lower than that of a 20-year-old. (Nevala & Nori, 2017.) Alternative entry routes are common among older applicants, and there their chances of being admitted is higher.

Socio-economic background: On the whole, new university students are today more equally selected from different socio-economic groups than ever before (Nevala & Nori, 2017). However, there is an increasing variety of quotas and admission routes between different institutions, disciplines and training programs (Isopahkala-Bouret et al., 2018). For example, students from privileged background typically choose and are admitted to highly selective disciplines such as medicine, dentistry and law, while students with lower social backgrounds enroll in less selective and vocationally orientated programs (Nori, 2018; Kivinen & Hedman, 2016).

Regional background: Although the university network has spread widely around Finland, the majority of university students come from south and south-west Finland, where high-prestige institutions and disciplines are concentrated. The network of UASs is more widely distributed than the university network, as each province has at least one branch of the UAS network. Urban people both apply and are accepted to universities more often than people from rural areas (Nevala & Nori, 2017). One reason for this may be the fact that the most successful upper secondary schools with the highest achieving students are located in Finland's biggest cities.

Ethnic background: The FINEEC evaluation (Airas & al., 2019) produced the national overview of inclusion and participation of immigrants and students with an immigrant background in higher education. For the statistical analysis, a specific concept *'immigrant background'* was created in co-operation with Statistics Finland, covering both immigrants and immigrants' children born in Finland.

Based on the evaluation, students with an immigrant background have clearly benefited from study guidance provided by tutor teachers, guidance counsellors, and peer students in their individual study choices. Preparatory training for higher education studies, organised since 2010, is a highly functional practice at the national level, supporting immigrants' access to higher education (Airas & al., 2019).

Figure 4.6. shows the growth of credits taken in immigrant, preparatory training.

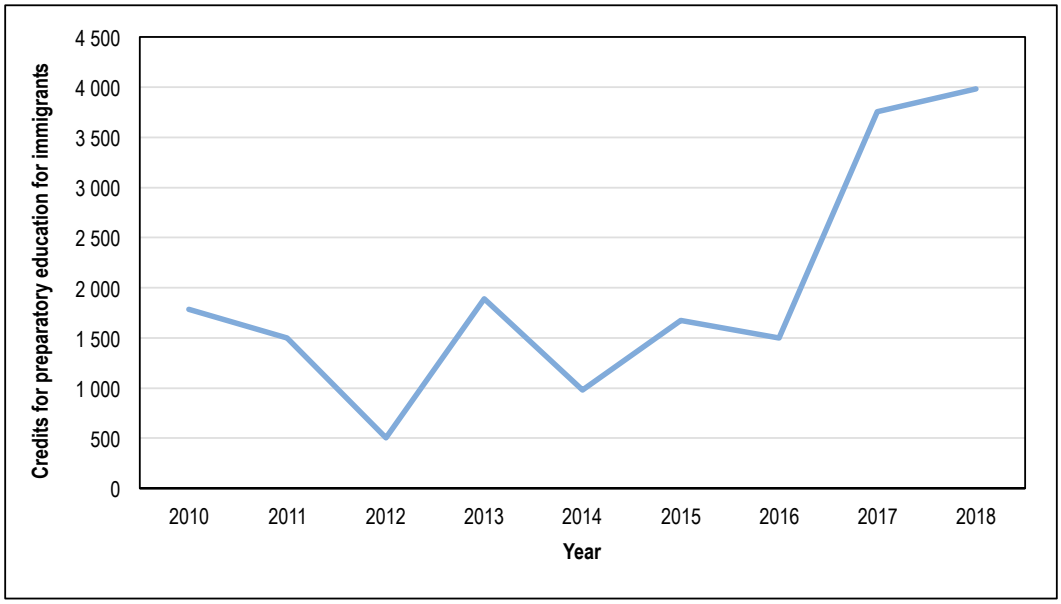

FIGURE 4.6. Credits for preparatory education for immigrants 2010–2018 (UASs, non-degree students), *Source:* Vipunen database

The evaluation report listed over 60 national and local projects that supported the development of immigrants' Finnish language skills, transition from the secondary to tertiary level, their integration into higher education, RPL, progress of studies and employment. As a continuation for the Supporting Immigrants in Higher Education in Finland (SIMHE) project and as a part of the Ministry of Education and Culture strategic-based funding scheme, six universities and UASs had received a national coordination role in immigrant training. This was highly appreciated by the evaluation team (Airas & al., 2019).

The evaluation showed that, while students with an immigrant background was a growing group, it was still an underrepresented group in higher education. The student number had increased four times by 2017 compared to 2012 but was still low: almost 1,400 students with *an immigrant background* is only 0,5% of all higher education students. Out of all these students, 56% studied for a Bachelor's degree in UASs. As it comes to the *immigrants* with study rights in Finnish higher education, their total number in 2017 was 13,900. The evaluation team concluded that the Finnish education system, despite many efforts, is still not sufficiently able to support immigrants in their access into higher education (Airas & al., 2019).

Although a fourth of immigrant applicants had a previous degree, many of them experienced difficulties in having their prior learning fully recognised. Thus, there is a need to develop RPL principles to better fit immigrants' needs and backgrounds. (Airas & al., 2019).

As it comes to progress of immigrants' studies, according to the statistics, five years after starting university studies, 41% of immigrant students have dropped out. Nearly one third of immigrants leave Finland five years after completing their studies, while more than half of them find a job in Finland. The employee expectations related to Finnish language command often complicated work placements for immigrants. (Airas & al., 2019).

Overall, the evaluation team encouraged HEIs to actively consider various forms of affirmative action to provide support in the application process and during the studies, promote a sense of inclusion and assist in finding internship places and contacting employers and thus support immigrants' transfer into working life. The HEIs are recommended to identify the needs for special support or actions for this group *(equity perspective)*, rather than offering the same kinds of services and support for all students *(equality perspective)* (Airas & al., 2019).

Students with disabilities: The interview with the Ministry of Education and Culture representative indicated that the Ministry currently has insufficient data available of disabled students. "The data of disabled students is included in student health surveys, but it is not handled in national data collections." (Ministry, HE expert, in-person interview). Thus, this is also an area that needs to be addressed. Support offered to disabled students belongs to the responsibility of HEIs, steered by the Act of Services and Assistance for the Disabled.

4.6 Enablers and factors lacking in the implementation of FLPs

Enablers

Based on the national level interviewees, the enablers of FLPs can be categorised into six aspects:

1. **Shared vision.** The importance of having a shared goal for FLPs, and especially on continuous learning, was underlined both by the Ministry of Education and Culture and labour market organisation representatives. – "This cannot be done only by the Ministry of Education and Culture alone, but we need other stakeholders, ministries, labour markets unions, HEIs. We need national big thinking – national and other small measures that move to same direction."
2. **Enabling, not too restrictive legislation.** Enabling legislation, regulations and sufficient resources that promote flexibility were mentioned by several interviewees. One interviewee also emphasised that the character of Finnish higher education legislation, not being too detailed and restrictive, can be seen an important enabler. – "HEIs have a lot of freedom in Finland, and if willing, they can develop many things as long as they adhere to the basic legal requirements. Thus, in my opinion the light regulation is one the biggest enablers for FLPs." (Ministry, HE expert, in-person interview).
3. **Free education system, financing and subsidies.** Finland's free education system was mentioned as a major enabler for people from various socio-economic background to access studies and to even get another degree, for example, if their first choice is not the right fit or their interests evolve. Also, opportunities for study leave and adult education subsidies were valued. Available study grant systems were considered as fundamental enablers.
4. **New funding models rewarding cross-studies.** The revision of the funding models for universities and UASs for 2021–2024 and increasing the percentual share of ECTS in the model meant that cross-studying was strongly encouraged. This was seen as an important enabler for FLPs that is already visible in student behaviour and statistics.
5. **Trust and cooperation between HEIs**. Having trust between HEIs, learning from each other and various forms of cooperation were highlighted as important enablers for FLP. Many interviewees stated that joint national projects funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture had advanced the development of FLPs. Furthermore, some interviewees stressed that participatory policy development within the Ministry working groups had promoted commitment to policy objectives. Correspondingly, cooperation within the rectors' councils' networks had contributed to the implementation of these objectives.
6. **Existing practices related to FLPs.** Digitalisation, engaging teachers, guidance and various offerings of alternative pathways and modes of study were also mentioned.

Obstacles and factors lacking

Frequently, the national level interviewees stated that enablers and obstacles for FLPs were the same – depending from the standpoint. The main obstacles and factors lacking mentioned by the interviewees were as follows:

1. **Development of continuous learning in silos.** Both the Ministry and labour market representatives brought up that the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, labour market organisations and HEIs were still lacking a common view on continuous learning.
2. **Expenses of individualised student selection methods.** One of the interviewees argued that individualised student selection methods are work-intensive and thus expensive. "As the volumes are big – every year there are 150,000 applicants and 50,000 are admitted – one can ask how many working hours and euros can be spent per one applicant."
3. **Continuous reforms and the amount of policy goals.** Both of the two rectors' councils verbalised the pressure created by continuous and simultaneous reforms. Especially implementing the national student admissions reform and renewal of teaching methods in higher education have taken a lot of resources. – "You have to choose what to work on at any given time. Students would be confused, the teachers would be confused, the students' parents already are confused. So, we should be patient and work on this in a more systemic and strategic way."
4. **Information systems.** One of the Student Union representatives stated that obstacles are related to transfer pathways between universities and fields or flexible study rights. It is not only a question of funding but also information; how information is transmitted to students and how information systems can be developed.

4.7 Priorities for the future

At the end of each interview, the national level interviewees were asked to identify priorities for the future as regards to FLPs. Six main clusters could be distinguisded.

1. **Completing the student admissions reform.** As a short-term priority, many of the interviewees mentioned the successful implementation of the student admissions reform in universities and UASs. The reform and its impacts need to be monitored systematically, based on lessons learned, and measures should be taken both at the national and institutional level.
2. **Drafting the accessibility plan.** The new Government's objective of drafting a national plan for equal access to higher education puts special focus on minority groups and their access to higher education. The interviewees put forward other aspects related to equality; such as applicants' choices made at the secondary-level and those young and adult people outside of higher education. It was seen that the flipside of flexibility is individual responsibility and not all people have the same kind of abilities for such decisions – and that this should be supported.

3. **Monitoring the benefits of cross-institutional studies**. The national-level interviewees saw that it is important that once cross-institutional studies have started working, these be monitored, as well. The co-operation agreements signed at the end of 2019 between universities and UASs as a result of the RiKe project were seen as important enablers towards opening cross-study possibilities over the university and UAS sectors.
4. **Development of study paths within the university Bachelor-Master degree structure.** While universities established broad-based Bachelor's programmes in 2015–16, there is still room to develop and increase internal study paths, i.e. specialisation possibilities for students through a choice of Master's programmes.
5. **Developing the competency-based approach.** The competency-based approach was seen a future priority. It should increasingly steer the curriculum planning, RPL, recognition of work-based learning ("studification of work") and provision of competence modules for employees. Individualisation of studies, which is already in use in Finnish vocational education, could become a leading star. The recent extension of the FiNQF for non-formal, informal and other provision should be utilised to support this development. Also, new ways for recognising competencies could be developed.
6. **Digitalisation and e-learning possibilities**. Some respondents noted that digitalisation will be a big thing over the next decade which will change higher education structures radically. The already existing e-learning platform for UASs – CampusOnline.fi – was mentioned as a good starting point. The data for this case shows that similar e-learning developments are currently taking place in the university sector as well.

Results: flexible learning pathways in practice – an in-depth study of Finnish higher education institutions

5

This chapter reflects the local implementation of system-level approaches based on two case study institutions. As a background, the selection of the case institutions and data sources for this chapter are presented (chapter 5.1). Then follows the actual analysis, presented in three parts: analysis of how the national policies (chapter 5.2), national level instruments (chapter 5.2) and practices (chapter 5.3) support the institutional level implementation of flexible learning pathways (FLPs).

5.1 The institutional case studies and data collection

Selection of the case institutions

Based on the IIEP-UNESCO research setting, each country was invited to select a sample with a minimum of two institutions representative of the diversity in the higher education sector.

The Finnish team used the following criteria when selecting the case institutions:

- The two case higher education institutions (HEIs) represent the two higher education sectors in Finland, encompassing one university and one university of applied sciences (UAS) from different regions in Finland.
- Following the IIEP-UNESCO guidelines, both are multi-disciplinary HEIs that offer education in Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences (university); and degree programmes such as Engineering, Business and Administration and Social and Health Care (UAS).
- Both case HEIs are recognised for having good FLP practices.
- Both case HEIs have had coordinative roles in national key projects.

The profiles of the two Finnish case institutions are presented in Table 5.1.

TABLE 5.1. The case HEIs in the Finnish country case study

The case HEIs	Acacemic profile	Profile related to FLPs
The case university	• Is a multi-disciplinary university with 10.000–17.000 students. • Provides Bachelor's, Master's, Licentiate's and Doctor's degrees in humanities, social sciences, sciences, business, and information technology.	• Has well-articulated practices for open pathways, transfers, recognition of prior learning, student guidance and counselling and quality management. • Actively involved in the national development projects related to FLP such as the open university pathway to higher education and cross-studying. • Is a member of the networks for Finnish universities.
The case UAS	• Is a multi-disciplinary UAS with 9.000–17.000 students. • Provides UAS Bachelor's and UAS Master's degrees in fields of in the fields of business, culture, health care and social services, and technology.	• Has well-articulated practices for open pathways, transfers, recognition of prior learning, student guidance and counselling and quality management. • Actively involved in the national development projects related to FLP such as UAS admissions reform, cross-studying and studification of work. • Is a member of the Finnish UAS networks.

The Finnish national team agreed on the participation of the two case HEIs in the IIEP-UNESCO project with the rectorate at both institutions in August 2019.

Interviews and focus groups conducted at the case institutions

At the case university, a total of ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in September, October and November 2019. Interview respondents included university leaders and unit heads, faculty deans and students and alumni who worked and studied in different disciplines. Specific respondents were identified using the research guidelines designed by IIEP-UNESCO. (See *Table 5.2.*)

TABLE 5.2. Interview summary at the case university level

Structure/Unit	Date	No.	Role of interviewee	Type of interview
University management	September 2019	1	University leader responsible for teaching and learning	In-person interview
University management	October 2019	1	University expert responsible for academic affairs	In-person interview
Faculties of Math and Science, Business, and Humanities and Social Sciences	October 2019	3	Faculty leader	In-person interview
University management	October 2019	1	Expert from the statistics unit	Phone interview
University management	October 2019	1	Expert on quality assurance	In-person interview
Open University	November 2019	1	Expert on university open studies	In-person interview
University student union	October 2019	1	Student representative	Phone interview
Faculty of Sciences	November 2019	1	Alumni of the open studies pathway	Focus group
Open University	November 2019	1	Student in the open studies pathway	Focus group

At the case UAS, nine staff members were interviewed in October and November 2019. The interviewees included the UAS leaders, representatives of School of Business, School of Health Care and School of Technology, a statistics expert and a representative of the student union. In addition, altogether 13 students and alumni were interviewed in three separate focus groups. (see *Table 5.3.*)

TABLE 5.3. Interview summary at the case UAS level

Structure/Unit	Date	No.	Role of interviewee	Type of interview
UAS management	October 2019	1	UAS leader responsible for teaching and learning	In-person interview
UAS management	October 2019	1	UAS expert responsible for study affairs	In-person interview
UAS management	October 2019		Expert on research, development, and innovation (RDI) activities	In-person interview
UAS management	October 2019		Expert of continuous learning	In-person interview
UAS services	October 2019	1	Expert from institutional statistics unit	In-person interview
School of Business, School of Health Care, School of Technology	October & November 2019	3	Members of School management	In-person interview
UAS student association	October 2019	1	Student representative	In-person interview
School of Business, School of Health Care, School of Technology	October 2019	6	Students who followed different alternative entry routes	Focus group
	October 2019	6	Students who have transferred between programmes within the same HEI or from another HEI	Focus group
	October 2019	3	Alumni who completed studies through FLPs	Focus group

The interview structure and questions followed the IIEP-UNESCO guidelines, but at the same time, the questions were adjusted based on lessons learned in previous interviews. In all interviews, topical themes from the Finnish policy perspective were taken into account whenever possible.

All university interviews were conducted in English, while in the case UAS interviews, respondents were given a possibility to choose an interview language of their preference, which was mostly Finnish. The student and alumni focus groups were conducted bi-lingually in English and in Finnish, based on the participants' wishes. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and those conducted in Finnish were translated into English. The interviews were then coded and analysed by the two researchers following the predefined division of work (see more on chapter 2.2).

5.2 Role of national policies in supporting institutions in FLPs

This sub-section highlights the role of national policies, specifically how national policy objectives for FLPs are embedded within institutional strategies and how the national policy objective for equity and accessibility is implemented at the institutional level.

FLPs as a part of institutional strategies

At the time of the interviews in autumn 2019, the Finnish HEIs were in the process of drafting new strategies. Aspects of FLPs are reflected in the strategies of both case institutions – in line with the national policy objectives. (see *Box 10.*).

BOX 10. FLPs in the case HEIs' strategies

The university case published a new strategy document in 2019; one aim was focused on education development. In the education development strategy (2019–2030), a few specific objectives focus on FLPs:

- **FLPs:** There is a focus on the educational structure allowing for flexible and multi-disciplinary learning paths at different stages of life.
- **Flexible admissions**: Flexible admissions are highlighted as one objective wherein entrance to the university included not only entrance exams but also sectoral cooperation, such as open pathway studies and other universities (transfers).
- **Study guidance**: According to the strategy document all students receive quality guidance at different stages of their studies and throughout their study path.
- **Lifelong/continuous learning**: The university's commitment to the national lifelong learning model is acknowledged by offering curricula to those currently working in the labour market to renew working life skills. Specifically, at the time of interviews, thematic modules were being created for degree students as well as lifelong learners.

In the case UAS one-page strategy for 2020, four areas are emphasised: life-long learning, impactful research, development, and innovation (RDI), digitalisation and operation culture.

In the case UAS interviews, especially the strategic emphasis on continuous learning was highlighted.

> *We have had the traditional degree education, further education and adult education for years. In our new strategy, we are moving even more towards continuous learning, on one hand, and collaborating with secondary education, on the other. We see that our mission is to produce competence to the [Finnish] society in different ways (UAS, director, in-person interview).*

The interviews showed that the case UAS had no special strategy on flexibility. Instead, flexibility is considered to be a cross-cutting topic that was taken into account for instance when revising the curricula and enabling students' possibilities to customise their own pathways depending on their background and interests.

As a good practice, the case UAS had drafted a conceptualisation and visualisation for FLPs. In this conceptualisation, educational, RDI and service provisions were presented based on needs analysis – not only from a student's, but also from an external client's perspective – embedding the whole lifespan from infants to the elderly.

Equity and accessibility perspective

The interviews indicated that following the Finnish overarching principle of 'equality', the focus was on offering FLPs to all students and treating all students the same. At the time of the study, there were not yet significant efforts to offer different pathways for students with different backgrounds, although there was awareness that this may need to be a future focus, especially with the changing demographics. For example, in the university case strategy documents there was an objective to identify and establish practices and functional models for supporting the learning, well-being, and overall study path of students with diverse cultural backgrounds.

All of the Finnish HEIs have drafted institutional plan for equity and accessibility and have participated in national projects aimed at supporting the integration of immigrants into higher education (see more chapter 4.5.). However, at the time of the study, there were not any outspoken objectives for the special treatment of underrepresented groups in higher education at the national or institutional level.

As the objectives and definition of equity groups have been lacking at the national level, setting objectives and monitoring equity and accessibility aspects was not systematic at the institutional level in autumn 2019. As mentioned in chapter 4.1, this situation may develop as the Ministry of Education and Culture aims to define equity criteria and draft *a National Plan for Accessibility of Higher Education in 2020*.

5.3 National instruments supporting institutions in FLPs

This sub-section focuses in on how national instruments support the case institution's development of FLPs. National instruments include legislation, the funding model, government key projects, national qualifications framework, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and the national quality assurance.

5.3.1 Legislation

Based on the case university and UAS interviews, it can be stated that recent changes in higher education legislation, together with changes in the funding models, have impacted institutional development concerning different aspects of FLPs.

One of those mentioned by respondents related to national student admission criteria and the adoption of the joint application system – these have clearly steered development work at the case university and the UAS. Another legislative change that was reflected in the respondents' comments, was the case UAS's increasing co-operation with secondary-level institutions. Furthermore, as mentioned above, after developing continuous learning became a task for HEIs, this had initiated wide-scale development work at both the university and the UAS.

Some of the case university and UAS interviewees are/were members in national Ministry-led or rectors' councils' working groups. Institutional involvement in national working groups supported institutional implementation of legislative changes, as well.

5.3.2 Funding model

The new funding models for universities and UASs will become effective in 2021. In the previous funding model, HEIs were rewarded based on speedy study progress and students completing 55 ECTS per year. In the new funding model, for instance, on-time student graduation is emphasised. Additionally, the share of continuous learning modules has risen to 9% in the new financing model, including more funding based on ECTS taken in immigrant preparatory training, open studies and specialisation studies.

The interviews indicated that both case institutions had anticipated these changes and were in the process of preparing modules, further training and commissioned courses that could be offered and customised as continuous learning services. Thus, it can be concluded that changes made in higher education funding models strongly steer development work related to FLPs at the institutional level.

At the same time, it was stated that the Finnish higher education sector, and especially UASs, have been constrained with significant budget cuts during the last several years. This has led to a need to actively seek external partnerships and funding and to be aware of different funding channels.

5.3.3 Previous Government key projects

The interviews conducted for this country case study suggest that national key projects funded by the Prime Minister Sipilä's Government in years 2017–2019 and in 2018–2020 have played a major role in developing practices and models for various aspects of FLPs (see more chapter 4.3.3).

The interviews brought up numerous examples of achievements in key projects. For instance, the case UAS interviewees mentioned the *Toteemi project* which researched and developed practical models to combine work and higher education studies. The *Eamk* project supported the development of e-learning and the establishment of the UAS's joint *CampusOnline* website and service. Other examples are described throughout this report.

At the time of the interviews for this IIEP-UNESCO project, some key projects were still on-going. At the university sector, the *Another path to universities project (TRY) project* was expected to develop models for open university pathways. When interviewed in November 2019, a representative with the TRY project explained:

> *This project has been very successful. When we started, we had 11 universities and 34 subjects. About a month ago we made an evaluation and we now have more than 200 pathways to Bachelors and Master's studies (degree programmes). The number of pathways has increased more than we projected. It's a big thing for universities and open universities (Uni, Open University expert, in-person interview).*

As recommended in chapter 4.3.3. from the national perspective, a meta-analysis of the outputs of the projects is needed. From the institutional perspective, distribution, awareness and utilisation of good practices is needed; therefore the results of the projects should be made available under a single portal.

5.3.4 Finnish National Qualifications Framework (FiNQF)

Based on the case UAS interviews, the qualifications frameworks are utilised in curriculum drafting and in the description of the UAS's common competences: knowledge, skills and autonomy-responsibility. The criteria for each degree was drafted in accordance with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Finnish National Qualifications Framework (FiNQF).

> *As it comes to the degree contents, there is a curriculum reform ongoing at our UAS. As a part of this process, we're following the FiNQF and EQF levels and standards. Clear selections are made on what degrees and contents belong to which level [in qualifications frameworks] (UAS, director, in-person interview).*

As a good practice, there was also support available from the UAS level for those drafting learning outcomes and competence descriptions of the curricula at the degree programme level.

> *In the central administration we have curriculum experts supporting the staff with the curriculum reform and the alignment of intended learning outcomes with EQF and FiNQF. And ultimately, this is ensured when the curricula are approved by our steering board and then ratified by the management group (UAS, director, in-person interview).*

Thus, concluded especially from the UAS management interviews, the European and Finnish qualifications frameworks support the learning outcome-based approach and comparison of degrees and study contents in RPL processes and in the context of international and national mobility.

On the other hand, the interviews also indicated that not all respondents were able to identify the role of FiNQF in supporting FLPs.

5.3.5 ECTS system

The case university and UAS interviews confirmed that the ECTS system – expressing the volume of learning based on the defined learning outcomes and their associated workload – is considered a precondition and a starting point for curriculum planning.

The UAS management representatives believed strongly that all teachers know the qualitative and quantitative planning criteria and plan the pedagogical solutions accordingly. At the same time, as a part of department-level human resources planning, the School directors make sure that the workload for individual teachers does not become unreasonable. Based on the interviews, the ECTS workload is regularly monitored for instance through students' course feedback questionnaires, while the achievement of intended learning outcomes is monitored through various forms of student assessment. The case UAS interviews indicated that changes are made in the courses based on feedback.

The case UAS degree regulations demonstrate how the RPL process ties together recognising the level, content and workload of prior learning with the aim to promote individual study paths (see *Box 11.*). In other words, this example shows how the FiNQF, learning outcomes and ECTS system are utilised in the institutional RPL process, and ultimately, how they support students' individual study pathways.

BOX 11. Regulations of RPL at the case UAS. ***Source:*** **The case UAS website.**

- "Recognition of prior learning (RPL) refers, as a whole, to the practices that enable competence acquired by students in various circumstances to be recognised and accredited as part of their studies and degrees.
- The goal of recognition of prior learning is to promote the progress of studies and to enable students to take an individual study path. Students have the opportunity to apply for the recognition of prior learning if they possess the kind of competence that meets the aims of their curriculum.
- Students' prior learning is recognised regardless of how, where and when they have acquired it. The aim is that students can evaluate their competence in relation to the competence goals of their courses. Students are responsible for demonstrating, proving and providing adequate information on their competence."

As it comes to international mobility, the interviews indicated that the European qualifications framework and the ECTS system together provide a good framework for study comparability with those countries and HEIs that have a similar approach and agreements. Based on the interviews, students with certificates from other continents than Europe require a case-by-case approach.

It can be concluded that the qualifications frameworks, the ECTS system and processes for recognition of prior learning are interconnected tools that together support FLPs and national and international mobility and transfers. However, the wider awareness of the purpose and benefits of these tools, including especially the FiNQF, could be strengthened among HE staff members.

5.3.6 National quality assurance of higher education

In the case of UAS interviews, out of different types of external evaluations conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Council (FINEEC), the institutional quality audit was mentioned the most often. Based on the interviews, the audit recommendations have led to measures for instance unifying of practices within the institution and between different schools and units.

There were also signals of on-going and active development of the internal quality systems. For instance, the case UAS had a plan to conduct a benchmarking project with a chosen European partner institution in order to compare and develop its information management and services processes.

As discussed in chapter 4.3.6., FINEEC evaluations serve different purposes: institutional quality audits support overall quality management, thematic evaluations support developing a chosen theme of policy level relevance and field-specific evaluations focus especially on the working-life relevance of degrees. Many these evaluations include aspects of FLPs, such as the integration of immigrants in higher education or the role of study and career guidance supporting student's choices and career planning.

However, only few case institution representatives identified FINEEC evaluations as tools that could support them specifically in developing FLPs. This shows that supporting the HEIs in developing FLPs and communicating the evaluation results to the key persons is an area for further development for the FINEEC. Instead, the interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Education and Culture indicated that thematic evaluations inform Ministry level policy development and monitoring.

5.4 Key institutional practices supporting FLPs

This sub-section focuses on key institutional practices that support FLPs. First, flexibility in admissions is considered, including cooperation with secondary level institutions, open studies pathway, and transfers. Second, institutional practices offering flexibility during studies are highlighted, including degree structures and modes of study, cross-institutional studies and RPL. The third area of practices that are explored are those offering flexibility towards graduation and employment such as combining work and study and study and career guidance.

5.4.1 Flexibility in admissions

Co-operation with secondary-level institutions

The case institutions' interviews indicated that co-operation or at least its preparation with secondary-level institutions has recently increased significantly. Co-operation agreements and experiments, such as organising introductory and orientation courses, especially for general upper secondary school students, were being planned or tested. This shows that recent legislative changes promoted co-operation between secondary and higher education.

However, the case UAS interviewees indicated that introductory courses were mainly directed at students in general upper secondary schools. According to some respondents, "there is a limited number of vocational students who have sufficient mathematical and linguistic abilities and academic focus to cope with higher education".

At the same time, there were also encouraging examples of reciprocal co-operation between the UAS and vocational education.

> *Our dental hygienist [UAS] education is conducted in collaboration with the equipment manager [vocational] education. For example, an equipment manager student comes to our dental hygiene clinic, and there are teachers from both schools [UAS and vocational]. Then a dental nurse and a dental hygienist – a future work pair – practice treating the patient together (UAS, Representative of School of Health Care, in-person interview).*

The representative of the case UAS School of Technology told that there was a plan to offer courses – not introductory but basic courses – for vocational students that could be included in their vocational degrees, and possibly later also in a UAS Bachelor's degree, which might inspire them to apply to the UAS.

However, based on the interviews, there were no incentives to support this type of cross-sectoral co-operation between vocational and higher education – UAS teachers teaching in vocational institutions or vocational students studying in UASs. One respondent spoke about a financial incentive, "If there was a funding mechanism that would make it profitable, maybe we could

extend this. Personally, I would rather take vocational students here at the UAS rather than asking [our UAS] teachers to go teach there" (UAS, Representative of the UAS School of Technology, in-person interview).

Thus, both the interviews and a recent study (Ahola & al., 2020.) suggest that the Ministry of Education and Culture needs to ensure sufficient resources for collaboration between the secondary and tertiary levels in order to enhance smooth transitions from secondary to higher education in various regions of the country (see also chapter 4.4.1).

Open studies pathway

In the context of the recent higher education admissions reform at the national level, there has been increased focus on developing the open studies pathway both at universities and UASs. Thus, the national objective on the open studies pathway has clearly had an impact at the institutional level (see *Box 12.*).

BOX 12. Open university provision at the case university.

- The case university has an independent *Open University* which is open for anyone to pursue studies without an entrance exam.
- The open university does not offer degrees, but rather offers flexible coursework with the possibility for university admissions and continuous learning opportunities for people in working life or the unemployed to upgrade their qualifications and competences.
- The open university works closely with university faculties to develop courses.
- Most courses are offered online, accessible in a web-based environment, with teacher support.
- The fee for open university courses is 15 EUR for 1 ECTS credit, which some respondents commented was restrictive especially for students who do not have the capacity to pay this fee.
- Guidance and counselling were also included in open university coursework.

One university respondent discussed how guidance is an important aspect of the Open University, "It [open university] is open to everyone and that's charming but also a challenging issue, because the levels of readiness vary quite a lot. That is why one of our specialty is really good guidance" (Uni, Open University expert, in-person interview).

BOX 13. Open pathway at the case university

- Overall, the criteria for open study admission pathways (ECTS requirements, previous study success and quotas) varied a great deal between institutions and fields of study. At the case university, each faculty had worked closely with the open university to create pathways into some of their degree programmes.
- Not every degree programme offers an open university pathway, especially those programmes that are highly competitive (e.g. teacher training, biology, etc.)
- The minimum level of open university studies needed to apply for university degrees varies from 15 ECTS to a maximum of 60 ECTS and students must maintain high academic marks during their open university studies.
- On average, it took about one year to complete the open university studies (basic studies) before applying to the university degree programme.

Faculties made admission decisions and created quotas for the number of students who entered their programmes this way. Since this admissions pathway was in the development during the study, the number of students entering university in this way was rather small. "There are not many students entering university via open university, the quotas are never met. They are still small numbers who come through these [alternative] routes. So, the majority of students come in the traditional admissions way" (Uni, faculty dean, in-person interview).

Although small, this pathway gives students however an alternative to the traditional and competitive route to university. In addition, the modality of educational delivery is mainly online courses allowing for more flexibility.

> *I was taking open university courses because I wanted to go through that pathway into the university. I had tried the entrance exams four times and didn't pass them. In my case, I had really poor high school grades. I was desperately trying to get into the university, and this was my last hope. This [open university studies] was an opportunity for me to show my motivation. It took me 9 years trying to get into university and I think I was crying when I was admitted, because I was so happy. It [open university] was a really good pathway. I had to do at least 50 credits, the study and courses were in the evening and weekends. It was a bit hard because part of the studies were in another campus and I had to travel there (Uni, Open University alumna, focus group).*

An alumna of the open university pathway described how it offered her one last hope to enter university. Students and alumni also described the open studies pathway as 'empowering' and 'life changing'.

> *Because of my low grades in upper secondary school, I was thinking that I was not good enough to study in the university. But, when I started the open university courses, I was working hard, and I can do it. And, now I'm a PhD student, it's opened a whole new world. It's changed my world (Uni, Open University alumna, focus group).*

BOX 14. Open pathway at the case UAS

- At the case UAS, the general requirement for open studies pathway was 60 ECTS credits.
- In recent years, the case UAS's open pathway admissions procedure was conducted as separate admissions twice a year and the open admission places were announced at the Studyinfo.fi online service.
- After the applicants applied for a study place, the degree programmes assessed their open study performance and interviewed the applicants.

According to some interviewees, this 60 ECTS threshold was a demanding requirement and there was institutional discussion about this. On the other hand, as these students had paid 900 euros for the first year, this was seen a strong signal of their motivation. Considering also the fact that the funding model rewards on degrees completed in due time, admitting students with already 60 ECTS completed is financially beneficial for HEIs. As for the student view, the case UAS student union representative saw the open UAS pathway as being better and more egalitarian for students from different socioeconomic backgrounds than purchasing preparatory training for admission exams from the private market.

At the case UAS, the number of individual open places and the number of pathway students was defined by the heads of degree programmes. In practice, the open spots had to be balanced with the group sizes.

> *If we want to grow the number of students coming in through the other pathways, should we radically decrease the number of students coming in through the joint application process, since there's just not enough room in the classrooms? Then, of course, that's a physical limit. But also, the more heterogeneous the student groups are, it's not necessarily a good solution learning-wise to make the group sizes bigger (UAS, Representative of the School of Business, in-person interview).*

The interviewed UAS students, representing those that have been admitted, were generally very happy with the open studies path and recognition of their prior learning.

> *It is easy to apply through "Studyinfo.fi" and the RPL process has been easy and painless. The timetable [of studies] has adapted to all my wishes. There are no empty slots [in my studies]. The studies are progressing faster than I expected (UAS, student, focus group).*

> *My tutor teacher e-mailed me and invited me to an appointment, where we went through my previous sea captain studies and agreed on their recognition. In addition to this, I had to make a recognition of prior learning application with the text 'based on previous discussions' and attach the certificates [on previous studies] (UAS, student, focus group).*

A case UAS staff member also confirmed that recognition of prior open studies and integrating an open path student in a study group worked well.

If they have completed all first-year courses, for example, they start from the second year, or if they have completed more courses, we can find them the right place to start (UAS, Representative of the School of Technology, in-person interview).

While the open studies pathway was currently under development during the study, the future potential of open studies to offer students an alternative pathway into higher education is high. Institutional experiences on this pathway as well as the follow-up studies to be conducted at the national level (see chapter 4.3.1) will most likely dictate to what extent the open studies pathways and their share of the overall intake will widen in Finnish HEIs.

Transfers

In the case university, transfers from university to university and programme to programme were possible, although they were described as rare by respondents. A university leader commented on how internal flexibility could be increased: ”We have increased flexibility from institution to institution, but we realised we needed even more internal flexibility” (Uni, management, in-person interview).

BOX 15. Transfer processes at the case university

- The process to transfer into a programme was based on faculty policies and processes, so there was no centralised university process.
- The faculty council designed the guidelines and processes for students seeking to transfer from a degree programme (or specialisation) to another within the same faculty or to another Finnish HEI.
- Based on these guidelines, the dean of each faculty granted students' the right to move.
- Transfer students accept the new study place and their earlier study right expires.

While their study completion time is not extended, the study time used to progress in the original degree programme may be reduced to consider the average study time needed for the new degree. Some highly competitive degree programmes, such as teacher training, do not accept transfers. The rationale for not accepting transfers is that the traditional admissions pathway has a very large and highly qualified applicant pool and they do not want students to enter another degree programme and attempt to transfer into a highly competitive degree programme.

To transfer universities, there is a certain time of year that students need to apply. Each degree programme has a quota that controls the number of students admitted this way. ”I have never heard that there was more demand beyond the quota. The quota is not to discourage transfers, it's just to control internal study spots. The university senate sets the quota” (Uni, faculty dean, in-person interview).

Overall, university respondents explained how the transfer process varies across faculties.

> *Student applies for a transfer and submits all information about previous courses taken. Then the department makes a decision on what courses are accepted. A very small number of students do this. It's a lot of manual work – all courses need to be evaluated to make a decision if they match courses in the study area they want to transfer into (Uni, faculty dean, in-person interview).*

> *The transfer systems vary quite a lot. If a student wants to transfer within one faculty, then it's easier than trying to transfer one faculty to another. In the future, we should have more transparent policies how to transfer from one faculty to another. Transfer systems is something we need to work on (Uni, expert in academic affairs, in-person interview).*

At the case UAS, there were internal transfer applications from another programme within the institution and transfers that followed the national transfer student procedure (see *Box 16.*).

BOX 16. Transfer processes at the case UAS

- There were two types of transfers: internal transfer applications from another programme within the institution, and transfers that followed the national transfer student procedure. The latter refers to cases in which a student was internally switching their field of education or applying from other UAS.
- The number of open transfer study places was highly dependent on vacant study spots.
- There were even few transfer applicants from universities to the case UAS.
- The open transfer study places are announced twice a year at Studyinfo.fi online platform.

At the case study UAS, the transfer pathway was monitored at the UAS level.

> *When it comes to transfer students, in principle, it's possible to transfer one's study rights to any programme. But here in our UAS, particularly in our unit, we monitor annually the extent of available transfer spots in the degree programmes. We can't promise a possibility for transfer for every interested applicant, due to the fact that in some programmes there are few drop-outs or there is very little turnover. Of course, the degree programmes try to keep their groups full, so to speak (UAS, Representative of the study affairs unit, in-person interview).*

At the case UAS, the transfer application process followed a predefined model. If the basic criteria – such as study progress in previous studies – were fulfilled, then the application was sent from the central admissions office to the degree programme, possibly to the person responsible for the degree for further examination. At this point, preliminary RPL was done, taking a look at previous studies, what still needed to be completed, and into which group this applicant could be placed.

In different fields of study, there were different perspectives. In general, the share of transfer students compared to the overall student intake numbers were very low. "We are happy to take people in. And we have received a lot of good students, talking about transfer studies. But the volumes are surprisingly small. We're talking about individual students" (UAS, Representative of the School of Technology). A representative from a different School explained their process:

> *We take in transfer students as far as we have room for them in the groups, and they also have to fulfil the defined criteria. In the business programme, since we have these specialisation studies which start in the second year, if they apply to enter a later stage, we can customise their personal study plans to a large extent. But they have to have a certain amount of studies completed, so that they can keep along with the group (UAS, Representative of the School of Business, in-person interview).*

Based on the case UAS student focus group interview, RPL was a smooth process, especially in internal transfers. In transfers from other HEIs, the student had to compare course descriptions and then had their previous studies recognised or had to take substitute courses in the new degree programme.

> *I applied to the international Bachelor's programme [within the UAS] and it was easy to switch from the Finnish-speaking side to the English-speaking side. In practice it went so that I filled the electronic (online) RPL form. I got all the courses I had taken in Finnish recognised by the study advisor (UAS, internal transfer student, focus group).*

> *It went easily with the help of the study advisor. When I had to do the RPL in the system by myself, all the courses I had taken previously did not match the courses here. I had to go through course descriptions and check which parts of courses matched. That required a little bit of creative writing. I was also able to include some of the courses in the elective studies (UAS, transfer student from another UAS, focus group).*

In the case UAS student focus group, there were also two students who were accepted in so-called conversion studies [in Finnish: muuntokoulutus]. Conversion studies are tailored, Ministry-funded studies for students with a certain basic education and leading to a new degree. Based on the interview, these students were also happy with RPL and the tailoring of their study plan enabling speedy progress.

> *I have a university Master's degree, but my graduation followed by long-term unemployment. My friends have studied in this UAS in similar degrees and recommended it. I wrote a motivation letter at the application stage – didn't take an entrance exam, just had an interview. In the interview there was already discussion about what studies could be recognised. The programme was tailored together with the study advisor. The estimated duration of conversion studies is 1,5 years. The conversion study application process was stress-free. The progression of my studies has been incredible and really fast (UAS, a conversion student, focus group).*

The interviews and data confirmed the availability of transfer pathways, including internal transfer within the institutions and transfer routes from one institution and field to another. Concluded from the case university interviews, three main areas in need of development could be identified from the institutional perspective: transparent criteria, policies and quota for transfers.

The interviews also indicated that in order to utilise transfer possibilities, students need to be active themselves. For many, the first source of information about existing transfer possibilities was fellow students. After the interest and motivation towards transfer was born, many felt that then there was sufficient information available and recognition of prior studies clearly promoted progress of studies. Therefore, it is recommended that transfer opportunities and success stories of transfers are better communicated to students.

5.4.2 Flexibility during studies

Degree structures and modes of study

The university degree structures follow national guidelines for Bachelor's, Master's and doctorate level studies. At the time of the interviews, the university was renewing curricular policies for 2020–2023. One focus in the new policy was flexible 'elective studies' – to allow students more freedom to choose courses that fit into their specific study plan. In the new curricular policy, it was recommended that each bachelor's degree programme offered 60 ECTS in elective studies (out of a total of 180 ECTS).

> *In our curricula, there is a lot of flexibility in how students can put together their studies. In the curricula, there are 60 ECTS that are optional, they choose what courses to take. We encourage our students to take courses from other faculties, based on their personal study plan. We consider it important for the students to build their own pathway to graduation (Uni, faculty dean, in-person interview).*

> *I think it's very important to have flexibility when they [students] get here, that they have flexibility in studies. University wide, there are quite a few elective studies in many fields. There has been pressure to offer even more of these elective studies (Uni, faculty dean, in-person interview).*

Multiple university respondents also discussed the importance of online learning for flexible learning.

> *We have to tailor our courses and we have to be flexible to organize our education for different types of clients (our own students and those individuals in working life). We are very aware that we can no longer have a fixed education with face-to-face courses. Now we have to tailor the education and listen to the different needs of our clients (Uni, management, in-person interview).*

We want to provide as much flexibility as possible for our students, so they can take courses independent of time and place and graduate on time. Of course, there are restrictions to this, because some of the courses require lab or fieldwork (Uni, faculty dean, in-person interview).

Students may take online courses as part of their degree studies through the open university. The case university had a partnership with the open university to provide 9,000 ECTS to university students free-of-charge. Not all degree programmes have eligible studies via the open university, but for those degree programmes that do offer studies the students must apply for free-of-charge studies. The university had a quota system that limited the number of students completing studies via open university.

Based on the case UAS interviews, one way of providing FLPs for students was to build optional study paths within the degree programmes. One example of optional study paths in the case UAS concerned the business Bachelor's programme, which had three specialisations to be chosen during the first year of study: digital marketing, accounting and finance, and HR-focused management work.

At the time of data collection for this report in October 2019, the case UAS was currently working on curriculum reform. It became evident that there was an effort to increase specialisation possibilities in certain UAS Bachelor's degree programmes.

Additionally, especially in the field of social and health care, there was a plan to increase options for study modes, that is the pedagogical solutions, and organise teaching in a way that students could choose from a palette. In the future, studies would be offered during the summer term and some courses would be offered year-around.

In addition to curricular solutions related to content-wise flexibility, there was flexibility related to the modes of study. In many programmes, the basic guideline for the teachers was that there needs to be an optional way of completing the course, independent of time or place. Many of the courses were organised partly or entirely online. Students could demonstrate acquiring corresponding learning outcomes by, for instance, practical work, project work or reports.

While important steps were taken from the institution side to increase flexibility, some interviewed students and alumni brought up risks related to too much flexibility and the fragmentation of the curricula. One respondent stated, "It would be useful to have a complete and premeditated package [in the curricula], instead of the patchwork [of modules] that one has now" (UAS, alumni, focus group). Another respondent explained, "There was too much of everything available. Everything was possible. A sharper focus would have been useful" (UAS, alumni, focus group).

Cross-institutional studies

For years the Ministry of Education has encouraged both universities and UASs to seek new kinds of networking and co-operation structures, alliances and even mergers. The main purpose of the cooperation structures has been to build new study paths, new training units, staff training, and student involvement. The case university was involved in a regional project encouraging cooperation between the university, an upper-secondary school and a vocational school. There are currently over ten such processes going on in Finland, one of which is the EduFutura. (EduFutura, 2020.) (see *Box 17.*).

BOX 17. EduFutura co-operation structure enabling FLPs between the secondary and tertiary level.
Source: **EduFutura, 2020.**

- EduFutura Jyväskylä is a learning, research, and development community based on the collaboration of three leading education providers which aims to search for learning solutions of the future and to create diverse opportunities for students to pursue flexible and individual study paths.
- The members of EduFutura are Jyväskylä Educational Consortium Gradia, which provides general upper secondary education as well as vocational education and training (VET), JAMK University of Applied Sciences and the University of Jyväskylä
- Beginning from autumn 2020, EduFutura will offer a platform of cross-studies that a student can take from any of the participating institutions.
- Recognition of prior learning will be based on learning-outcome based curricula. The participating institutions will agree on the RPL principles of offered courses beforehand, and thus, a student can have the studies automatically recognised as a part of their degree without a separate application.
- Higher education studies need to meet the NQF levels 6 or 7.

In the UAS sector, there are similar alliances. One of them is 3AMK, an alliance between three UASs in the capital area. (see *Box 18.*).

BOX 18. 3AMK alliance enabling FLPs between UASs. ***Source:*** **3AMK, 2020.**

- **3AMK** is a strategic alliance of the three biggest UASs in the Helsinki metropolitan area, Haaga-Helia, Laurea and Metropolia. Cooperation areas include Learning Excellence, Entrepreneurial Excellence, R&D Excellence and EduExcellence – Export of Education.
- As a part of the Learning Excellence collaboration area, registered students can choose courses or learning lanes, worth 15 ECTS from each three school. 3AMK also arranges additional intensive courses. The language course offering is formed in cooperation with Aalto University, meaning that students can choose languages either from 3AMK or Aalto University.
- After completing a study course in a partner UAS, a student sends their completed studies electronically to their home HEI to be recorded to the study register.

At the case UAS, there were three main possibilities for cross-studying: 1. CampusOnline, which is an online web-based offering of all UASs' courses, 2. cross-studying enabled by the HEIs' co-operation agreements and 3. cross-studying within one's own institution.

The UAS Bachelor's degree structures vary between 15–30 credits of optional (elective) studies which enable students' choices based on their own career plans.

> *Campus Online has been available for a short period of time, but it's already increased, and I think it's going to increase even more in the future, since there is quite a wide offering of online courses and great demand among students (UAS, Representative of the School of Business, in-person interview).*

As regards to the HEIs' agreements on cross-study, it seems that educational profiles of each institution and degree programme had an effect on cross-studying. The quantity of cross-studying based on mutual cross-study agreements has been relatively low so far, but it is expected to increase.

> *In my own field, we offer modules of 15 ECTS credits in this UAS cooperation. Usually in our 15-credit module, half of the students are from our UAS and half of them from the partner UASs. But I wouldn't say the [student] volumes are very big. They could be bigger (UAS, Representative of the School of Business, in-person interview).*

At the same, through e-learning, students' possibilities to take courses from other degree programmes within their own institution have increased and they were encouraged.

> *In our programme, a student can include up to 30 credits of optional studies into the Bachelor's degree. I always encourage students to do that, as it brings added value. I think you need two things: you need the substance, but you also need something that complements it. That's what makes you a professional (UAS, Representative of the School of Technology, in-person interview).*

On our UAS's intranet, you can see all the courses that you can take on the UAS network. And what the recent UAS co-operation had brought is that they have increased the offering, especially when it comes to summer studies (UAS, student union representative, in-person interview).

Thus, it can be concluded that the existing cross-study possibilities clearly benefit an individual student in growing and diversifying his or her competences, but even more potential is embedded in cross-study approaches while they continue to widen.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL)

In the case university, a policy for RPL was included in the Degree Regulations (see Box 19.).

BOX 19. RPL policy at the case university

- Students who completed previous studies at another Finnish or foreign HEI, internships or work experience may have those studies/experiences recognised as part of their current degree programme. When the curriculum and/or competences acquired correspond to the learning outcomes of the current degree, these are considered as RPL.
- No more than half of the total requirements of a Bachelor's or Master's degree may be compensated by previous studies or competences.
- However, there are exceptions to this rule if previous studies were completed at a Finnish university and if a significant part of the previous studies were included in the current degree programme (these rules are not applied to joint degree programmes).

In Figure 5.1. is a simplified illustration of the RPL process in a random university. However, the practice and guidelines for students are far more detailed. *Inclusion* refers to the approval of a course or a study module completed in some other educational institution in the degree as such. *Substitution* of studies means that a course or a study module included in the student's curriculum is replaced with a course or a study module of a corresponding content and level, or on the basis of another competence.

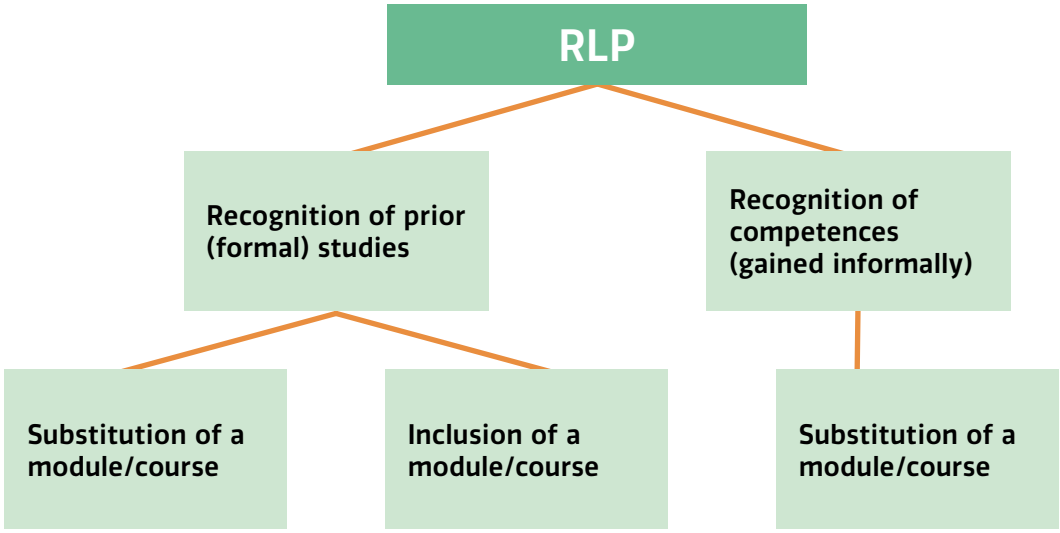

FIGURE 5.1. Example of the RPL process at a university. *Source:* Mikkola & Haltia, 2019

At the case UAS for this study, there were general guidelines and a process description for RPL. The goal of RPL, as defined by the case UAS, was to promote the progress of studies and to enable students to take an individual study path.

The case UAS staff interviews indicated that in addition to general guidelines at the institutional level, some fields of education had their own RPL guidelines. Most commonly, the staff member making the RPL decision was the tutor teacher, but there were some field- or programme-specific variations in this as well.

> *For some degrees, the responsible teacher of each course recognises the prior learning. But, for example, in the field of social and health care, we have nominated tutor teachers who have a central role. RPL decisions are centralised on certain persons [in degree programmes]; thus, the competence grows (UAS, Representative of the School of social and health care, in-person interview).*

Based on the case UAS's RPL guidelines, "students' prior learning is recognised regardless of how, where and when they have acquired it. RPL can take place through credit transfer or be based on evidence. Similar to the case university, credit transfer at the case UAS takes place in two ways: substitution and inclusion. Prior learning can be recognised either in full or partially. Students are responsible for demonstrating, proving and providing adequate information on their competence."

In Figure 5.2. is an illustration from another UAS of the process of RPL and how PSP is connected to the RPL process. In this case, the term used by the UAS is Accreditation and Recognition of Learning.

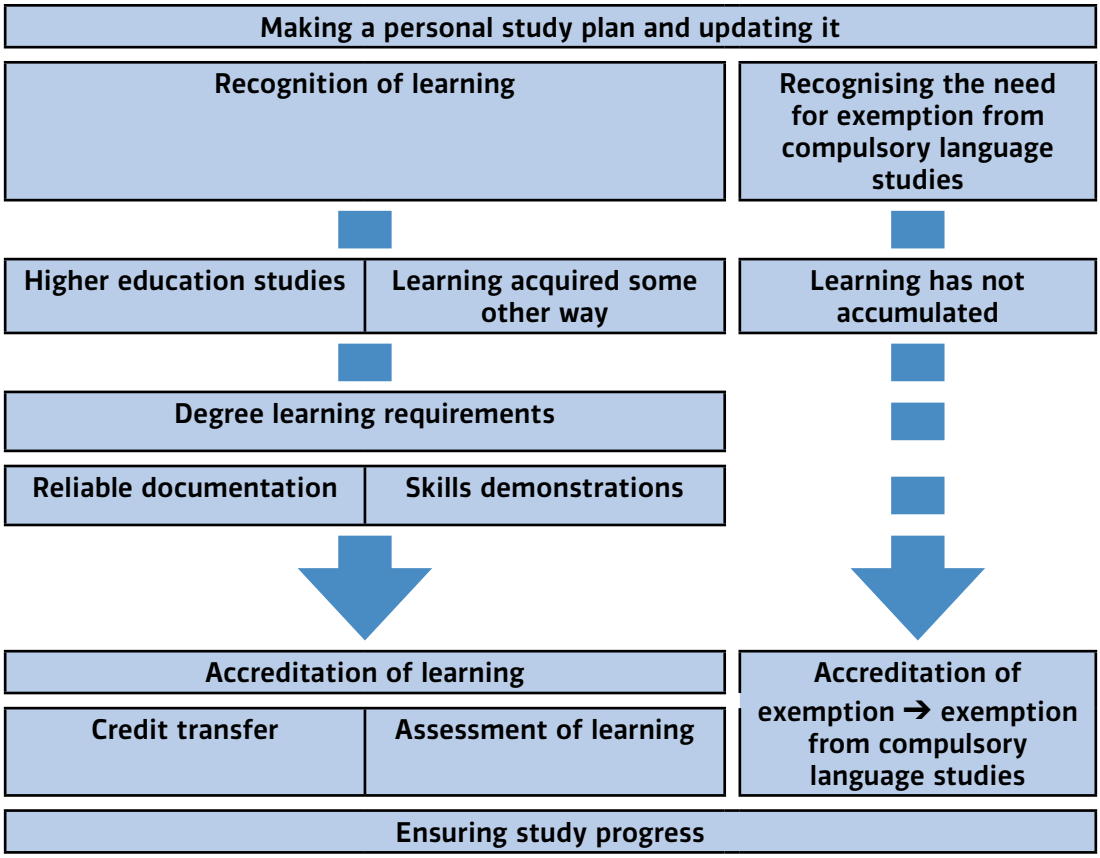

FIGURE 5.2. Personal study plan as a part of recognition and accreditation of learning (at HAMK UAS; *Source:* Mikkola & Haltia, 2019)

The interviewed case UAS student and alumni representatives were mostly happy with the RPL process and the availability of staff support. It also became clear that RPL requires students to be able to articulate their prior learning in relation to the curricula competence requirements.

> *For me, the RPL was successful. I also got recognised some open studies and exchange studies. The student advisor helped me with the RPL. I had to be active regarding the RPL and contact teachers. It was a complicated puzzle since I had so many previous studies (UAS, alumni, focus group).*

As it comes to the question of institutional-level support for RPL decisions, the interviewees mostly saw that the expertise needed in RPL decisions lies within the degree programmes. As an example of good practice, the case UAS interviews indicated that at least in some fields RPL decisions and cases are monitored together.

Our guidance counsellor calls the people doing these things together regularly, and they can discuss together, whether they should agree on something together or whether they should add this to the guidelines, since otherwise the students will feel that it's unfair that someone accepts, while another person rejects (UAS, Representative of the School of Social and health care, in-person interview).

At the case UAS, the student affairs registry maintains data on the accumulation of credits and different forms of RPL, full or partial, and the demonstration of competences.

Overall, it can be concluded that the strengths and challenges related to RPL processes in the case UAS are generally well-identified. Successes include supportive advisors and guidance counsellors who help students navigate the RPL process as well as the learning experience students gain from the exercise of analysing their prior competences with curricula competence requirements. However, while summaries were being made, there was no clear picture of how the process and outcomes of the RPL process were monitored as a whole at the institutional level.

5.4.3 Flexibility towards graduation and employment

Combining work and study in degree education

Based on this study, three trends could be idenfified as regards to combining work and study in degree education:

- increasing emphasis on competence-based curricula
- new ways of recognising work-based learning and
- new tools and practices for integrating work-periods, internships and project-based learning into curricula.

As an example of good practice of competence-based curricula development, the case UAS's curriculum reform in 2019–2020 was strongly based on feedback collected from working-life partners and analysis of working life competences. From the university sector, there was a similar example.

In my university, we carried out a skills' needs mapping exercise in 2–3 fields, to figure out which skills and competences are needed. We got very good suggestions from them [from labour market associations and other partners] for curriculum development, and on the other hand, if there are some immediate skills needs, we can modify our continuous learning offering based on that (Uni, management, in-person interview).

As expressed in chapter 4.4.2, there is an increasing interest in Finland to develop recognition of work-based learning. As a good practice, principles for recognition of work-based and other learning is included in the case UAS's RPL guidelines. (see *Box 20.*).

BOX 20. Recognition of work-based learning at the case UAS.

- Students can also apply for the recognition of competence acquired by other means than study, such as at work or in their own free time.
- In such a case, the student must apply for recognition of their competence by demonstrating it with a certificate of employment, other documents, records or works.
- If necessary, the student may be requested to supplement his/her demonstration with a report, an interview, an essay, a learning diary, a portfolio, a practical skills demonstration or a test.
- A numeric grade will be assessed whenever possible.

One of the previous Government's key projects, Toteemi project, aimed to strengthen the higher education students' engagement in the job market by creating models for student support, career counselling and workplace co-operation.

As a result of the Toteemi project, there have been some very positive experiments of studification of work. However, it seemed that at the time of the interviews in autumn 2019, the implementation of studification of work was still at working progress at the case UAS. The obstacles mentioned by the interviewees included the lack of suitable jobs for students corresponding to the curricular requirements and the hesitant attitudes of some teachers and employers towards students as employees.

> *We've had some initiatives related to home care, where there is the workforce deficiency. Working life has found out that they need these. It's been agreed that a student has to have 140 ECTS credits or 160 credits completed, for getting a temporary job for instance as a nurse. Then they can get it [the work experience] recognised as part of their studies. I believe this is going to increase in the future (UAS, Representative of the School of Social and Health Care, in-person interview).*

Based on the interviews, in order to make studification of work more common, a step-by-step approach is needed within the institutions. At the same time, co-operation and communication with employers needs to be strengthened. The competences in different fields also need to be taken into account. One respondent explained, "It's important to start piloting and bringing in good ways of doing this in order to get people involved. And it's also a question of management and connecting this to the curriculum reform" (UAS, Representative of the School of Social and Health Care).

Study and career guidance, including personal study plans

Guidance and counselling play a key role in informing and guiding students about various options for FLPs. Since there are multiple FLP options available, guidance and counselling are essential in helping students navigate the FLPs that are most advantageous for their personal situation.

According to the case university regulations, students are entitled to guidance and counselling services to enable them to complete their degrees within the prescribed normative time. As for the case UAS degree regulations, degree students are entitled to personal guidance throughout their studies at their UAS. Guidance offered at the case UAS consists of study guidance, guidance for professional growth, career planning and development and general guidance (see *Box 21.*).

BOX 21. Guidance provision and staff at the case UAS

Forms of guidance and counselling

- Study Guidance: The objective of study guidance is to give the student the tools to integrate into the learning environment and work actively in the learning community, plan their studies, realise their studies according to a plan and manage their time.
- Guidance for Professional Growth and Career Planning: The objective is to strengthen the professional identity of the student and to support the student in making sensible plans, choices and decisions regarding their education, studies and career. Personal study planning (PSP) is a professional development process encompassing the entire study path. The PSP process includes the RPL process (Recognition of Prior Learning): RPL gives the student an opportunity to make earlier learning visible and make the student able to apply for recognition of their prior learning no matter where and how this knowledge has been acquired.
- Guidance for Personal Growth and Development: Personal growth is supported by reinforcing students' life management skills, self-knowledge and self-confidence. Well-being services aim at giving students the needed support and tools to increase well-being.
- General Guidance: The aim is to give general guidance to the student in practical study-related matters and thus support the smooth progress of studies.

In addition, based on the case university and the case UAS websites, there is special guidance and support available for disabled students. As a good practice, the case university top management had taken a decision on accessible education, including physical accessibility, transportation and special arrangements in learning environments (classrooms and/or examinations) and personal assistance. There were also accessibility contact persons in each faculty and departments.

In both case HEIs, guidance is provided by various staff members (such as teacher tutors, study advisors, well-being and health care staff members etc.). The interviews indicated that student tutors have an important role in supporting new students' socialisation into the higher education community and acting as mediators between staff and students.

While guidance related to FLPs is embedded in regular guidance structures and cannot be separated from them, the interviews addressed various trends on how FLPs affect the development of guidance services.

During this study, the case university was updating the current principles for guidance and counselling. The case university faculties had a plan for guidance and counselling confirmed along with their curriculum. Teaching units were responsible for guidance and counselling at all stages of study, including advising students on their PSPs. Most faculties used an approach where groups of students were counselled through group guidance.

Guidance and counselling are also needed during the admissions process. One university respondent discussed how flexible admission pathways were changing the type of admission guidance provided.

> *If we talk about the admissions process, we are in the process of implementing more ways to admission. We are making an admissions renewal next year [2020]. So, we are going to have the majority of students taken in by upper secondary certificate [matriculation exam] and [university] entrance exams and we have added a number of admissions based on open university studies. So, that makes the admissions process more flexible. Of course, this needs different kinds of guidance regarding what kind of group you are in – can you get in by your matriculation exam or do you need an alternative pathway? We are developing our admissions services for even better guidance in this process (Uni, expert in academic affairs, in-person interview).*

Furthermore, university guidance and counselling were not seen only for study guidance, but also incorporated career guidance. One respondent explained the evolution of study and career guidance: "It used to be that these two aspects (study guidance and working life) were separated, but now they have been combined to ensure that students get both study and career guidance" (Uni, expert on quality assurance, in-person interview).

Several of the case UAS interviewees underlined the importance to develop multiform guidance services and direct individualised support to students that need it most. One of the case UAS representatives stressed the need to identify various guidance needs: "Guidance should be tailored and renewed in a way that best meets the student or continuous learner (client) needs – be it individualised, group, distance or online support." When it comes to career guidance of degree students, the case UAS relied in students' participation in internships and RDI projects that can crucially support students' familiarisation with working life and consideration of different career paths.

The Finnish HEIs have adopted personal study plans (PSPs) since the early 2000's. PSPs are potentially a good practice that may support higher education students' individual study paths and career choices. The case university defines the concept of PSPs, their purpose and role in supporting FLPs as indicated in Box 22.

BOX 22. Personal study plans supporting FLPs at the case university

- A personal study plan (also referred to as PSP or HOPS in Finnish) is a documented plan of studies to be completed, along with their timing and order of completion as well as their completion methods.
- The PSP guides the study path and builds around the structure and learning outcomes of the degree the student pursues towards. When planning the studies, the student can take his/her [individual] interests, career objectives and employment prospects into account.
- The PSP is, first and foremost, a tool for planning the studies: it helps the student to keep track of which studies are to be completed and which studies have already been completed.
- The PSP is compiled with the support of a study advisor or advisors assigned by the teaching unit. The student and study advisor have at least one PSP discussion at the beginning of the student's studies. Students are entitled to personal study plan guidance a) at the beginning of studies, b) at least once during the bachelor's studies, c) at least once during the master's studies and d) whenever an essential part of the study plan is revised.
- The PSP can be modified when the student's goals change and specify.
- PSP is compiled [electronically] in the study data system.

The case university interviews suggest that every student who had a study right in a degree programme, made a PSP and kept it up to date during their studies. The study plan was a detailed schedule of study modules and units, as well as international exchange or internships, the student planned to complete as part of their degree. One respondent explained the intention behind the PSP, "Throughout a student's studies they should think about what kind of knowledge pathway they want to develop, and they can more purposely and consciously plan their studies" (Uni, management, in-person interview).

At the case UAS, PSPs were drafted at the beginning of studies with the support of teacher tutor and as group guidance. In the case UAS, PSPs were often ready-made. The case UAS focus group indicated that many students were happy with the PSP process "In the first year, the courses were predetermined and in the second year the study advisor said what courses it was recommended to take. So, I did that" (UAS, student, focus group).

The interviewed case UAS students also felt that there was support available for updating PSPs in case of individual study choices. "Yes – I had my PSP updated. I met the tutor teacher several times especially at the beginning. I had to be proactive" (UAS, alumni, focus group).

As a conclusion, this study demonstrated that both case HEIs were in the process of rethinking guidance services: as a good practice, the university connected the renewal of guidance services to curriculum reform, while the case UAS also considered guidance needs of continuous learning clients. Both HEIs saw that a certain amount of guidance needs to be secured for every student; that guidance must cover all phases of study; and that special guidance needs (for instance resulting from individual choices) are identified and met with methods fitting for purpose.

As it comes to PSPs, the research (Ansela & al., 2006) emphasises dialogue between students and guidance personnel and seeing PSPs not only narrowly as technical study plans, but including study and career planning elements in PSP guidance. In doing so, guidance and counselling as well as the PSP are tools to support FLPs.

5.4.4 Continuous learning

At the case university, the increased focus at the national level on continuous learning was met with a new thematic module offering. Faculties were in the process of developing modules (from 5–15 ECTS) aimed at offering practical skills in a certain field. These modules would be offered to continuous learners, but also current degree students, as a way for all citizens to develop their competences in a specific area especially related to advancements in the working world. For many university respondents, the thematic modules were considered to be a key priority for the future.

The case UAS had also invested strongly in the provision of continuous learning and developing individual learning solutions in different life situations; juniors and young people, those in or outside of the job market, and also the seniors. The interviews brought up an example of development of competence modules.

> *We have customised short training courses for upgrading of qualifications. There is a demand for competence modules, especially in the construction and real estate field, since there's a huge construction boom ongoing. When continuous students have completed competence modules worth 60 credits, they can access higher education studies via the open path and then complete their degree flexibly. That's one flexible pathway model (UAS, Management representative, in-person interview).*

As described in chapter 4.3.4., there is now a procedure and criteria in place on how various interest groups can propose new competence modules to be included in the Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules (FiNQF).

While a lot development work was ongoing at the institutional level, respondents stated there is a need for more joint national discussions about the overall framework and pedagogy of continuous learning. Many respondents also underlined that continuous learning needs to cover both formal and informal learning; therefore, continuous learning should not be separated from discussions related to development and flexibility of degree education.

5.5 Monitoring the implementation of FLPs in general and for equity groups in particular

Institutional statistical data

Generally, Finnish HEIs produce three types of statistical data: the official funding indicators for the steering process conducted by the Ministry of Education and Culture; internal reports generated based on these funding indicators for the internal management; and ad hoc reports on requests for internal needs or for instance, for journalists.

The case UAS interviews showed that when it comes to the Ministry funding indicators – such as for instance the number of applicants, graduates, drop-outs, course and graduate feedback, RDI activities, open UAS, commissioned and retraining and HEI collaboration studies – these are closely monitored and reported back to the UAS top management by the heads of schools and respective directors and units.

As for the aspects of FLPs, there was data available at the case UAS on alternative pathways, credits acquired through RPL, studification of work in RDI projects and credits completed as a part of cross-study agreements. However, it seemed that current indicators do not allow to monitor more detailed aspects of FLPs.

For instance, the current definition for RPL did not distinguish various contexts of recognition; whether it is connected to a student's previous degree studies in their home or other institution, or open studies or transfers. Furthermore, statistics on cross-studying show how many students from other institutions have completed studies in the receiving institution, but the institution itself did not have the data on how many of their students have completed studies elsewhere.

At the case university, monitoring of the implementation of FLPs was not yet systematic. However, respondents did expect this to change in the future with the rapid development of and strategic emphasis on FLPs. At the case university, a new study data system was currently being launched during the study. The system supports student's registering for studies, PSPs, guidance and counselling related to the PSPs and at the same time serves as an instrument for teachers supporting numerous aspects of teaching. The new study data system also allows for more statistical data collection to better monitor the current state of institutional FLPs.

Monitoring of equity aspects

The university case did not systematically collect data on FLPs or more specifically equity groups. One respondent in the university case specifically explained how collecting this type of data has legal implications in the Finnish context: "We are not systematically collecting data on equity groups. Actually, in the national Finnish context that type of data collection could be seen as illegal profiling [under data protection]. We do collect data on nationality and gender, which might be relevant" (Uni, expert from institutional statistics unit, phone interview).

The same applied to the case UAS, which had institutional data available on the gender, age, nationality of students and immigrants participating in preparatory courses.

It seemed that, in autumn 2019, the age, socio-economic or regional background of students were not systematically monitored at the institutional level. Based on interviews, nor was there any follow-up at the case UAS on how many of those immigrants who had attended preparatory training were admitted as degree students and how they had progressed in their studies. Instead, as a good practice, the case UAS interviews highlighted examples of utilisation of the data for instance when updating the institutional plan for accessibility and equality.

5.6 Enablers and factors lacking in implementation of FLPs

Enablers

In the university case, three enablers were discussed throughout the interviews.

1. **Increased emphasis on FLPs**. Altogether, respondents discussed the increasing emphasis on FLPs across the university. They pointed out new institutional policies and practices supporting FLPs and how staff are more aware of FLPs.
2. **New curriculum reform.** The new curriculum (2020–2023) supports more flexible study plans and altogether more flexible studies which enables FLPs to further develop.
3. **National focus on continuous learning.** Every respondent who was university staff mentioned the national focus on continuous learning, which has helped facilitate FLP initiatives. For example, thematic modules were developing which will also be available to degree students.

Based on the case UAS interviews, four factors, partly overlapping, could be distinguished as enablers for FLPs at the institutional level:

1. **Shared vision and successful management**. The interviewees emphasised that successful management, curricula renewal, well-established processes and joint discussion of development challenges are key enablers in supporting the community commitment to a common goal. While some challenges were recognised, it was also mentioned that significant steps have been taken place in a short time.
2. **Motivation and positive attitudes.** Many respondents stated that awareness-raising and attitude change are important enablers for FLPs.
3. **Openness and ability for institutional renewal.** Some of the case UAS interviewees brought up that the ability of the organisation to renew itself in the changing situation and develop its service and other processes based on learner and client needs is a crucial enabler. Additionally, the case UASs' large international networks and openness for international co-operation were mentioned as enablers.
4. **Financial incentives.** Some respondents stated that national guidelines and financial incentives are important enablers and motivators.

There is a common theme between the two cases that seems to be enabling FLPs. In the university case, more emphasis on FLPs in policies, practices and curricular reforms serve as important enablers. Likewise, in the UAS case shared vision and successful management support awareness and development of FLPs. In the UAS case, some respondents pointed to how financial incentives enable FLPs, but this was not as prevalent in the university case.

Obstacles and factors lacking

In the university case, the challenges providing barriers or obstacles to FLPs.

1. **Academic traditions.** One interviewee discussed how the traditional way of doing something is always the biggest challenge.
2. **Time and money.** Another respondent discussed how time and money is needed for more flexibility. There is a need for more resources to build and develop FLPs. At the same time, it takes time to develop FLPs.
3. **Digitalisation.** A few respondents mentioned how the digital systems at the university should be behind in terms of actually supporting more flexible study systems.

Based on the case UAS interviews, obstacles and factors lacking were partly the opposite to enablers.

1. **Limited flexibility in some regulated degree programmes**. One interviewee mentioned that in some fields, such as social and health care, the degrees and qualifications are externally regulated which leaves less room for flexibility.
2. **Updating teachers' job descriptions.** Earlier, teachers' tasks traditionally consisted of teaching of degree students while there is now an additional requirement for UAS teachers to participate in research, development and innovation (RDI) work and in the provision of further education and company trainings. It was stated that this new obligation to participate in RDI and the provision of continuous learning may not yet have come up clearly enough in teachers' job descriptions.
3. **Finances for extended group sizes.** It was stated that in the UAS Bachelor's degree programmes, there are certain limits or quota for students entering through alternative pathways; exceeding this produces additional costs which was considered problematic.

While both case institutions presented different challenges, there were a few that were similar. In the university case, respondents mentioned how more time and money was needed to fully develop FLPs, in the UAS case additional costs to develop FLPs was also mentioned as an obstacle. Unique challenges included academic traditions in the university case and specific limited flexibility in some degree programmes in the UAS case.

5.7 Priorities for the future

In the university case interviews, numerous priorities were mentioned:

1. **Continuous learning is a priority.** For citizens in working life, that are unemployed, or current students, there is need to develop specific competences for the future labour market, thus continuous learning is a future priority.
2. **Widen the routes for admissions.** This is a priority area for the university quality assurance efforts, since it is part of the university-wide strategy.
3. **Evaluation and monitoring of FLPs is a priority for the future.** "Currently, FLPs are not evaluated as a specific area. However, in the new university strategy, it concerns accessibility, studies and counselling. So, it should be included in the future quality system" (University head of unit).
4. **Joint data systems:** A new study information platform will allow for more collaboration between universities, open universities and offer opportunities for more data collection on FLPs.
5. **Curricular policy renewal (2020–2023)**: New curricula allowing more open flexible studies: 60 ECTS in Bachelor's studies.
6. Renewal of the **guidance policies** will enhance the support of FLPs and PSPs.
7. **Open university pathway** admissions will increase. Open university has worked with faculties on admissions criteria which has created more opportunities for students. The vision is to increase the market share of students engaging with open university studies.

In the case UAS interviews, five main priorities for the future were highlighted:

1. **Meeting the re-training needs of working life.** Most of the interviewees saw that due to drastic changes in the future labour-market, the HEIs are challenged to offer modules and training that complement or assist to upgrade the existing competence that working people already have. In this connection, as stated by some interviewees, it should be made clearer how a student can have recognised ("studify") their learning acquired in working life and possibly later get a degree certificate.
2. **Increasing flexibility of degree teaching.** While continuous learning will increase, many respondents thought that also the flexibility of degree teaching should be increased. At the institutional level, this implies finding new ways of providing learning and teaching efficiently. At the national level, the respondents saw, "it requires even more systematic recognition of various instances where the learning can take place."
3. **Developing need-based services.** Some of the case UAS interviewees suggested that current student guidance and counselling, including tutoring and career guidance, should be developed to match the new, flexible ways of studying and students with different backgrounds.
4. **Increasing ways of labour market co-operation**. It was also brought up that in the future, innovation clusters will be important – not only concerning teaching but also piloting and developing new products, models and innovations with working life, external stakeholders and businesses.

5. **Supporting teachers in change.** The recent changes towards more FLPs – teaching in new ways, participating in RDI work, and especially offering study modules as continuous learning – challenge staff members in different positions, especially teachers. More support should be provided to the staff level in order to implement the change.

Comparing the future priorities of the university and UAS cases, one area of synergy that stands out is continuous learning. In both cases, there are intentional efforts to further develop modules and opportunities for citizens and current students to increase their competences for future labour-market needs. In addition, both cases have guidance and counselling as a future area of importance, with the university case renewing their guidance policies to further support FLPs and the UAS case further developing guidance and counselling to better meet the needs of current students. Differences between the two cases include evaluation and monitoring of FLPs in the university case and supporting teachers in the midst of so many changes in the UAS case.

Comparative analysis of policies and practices for FLP – conclusions and recommendations

6

This chapter analyses the linkages between chapters 4 and 5; the impact of national level policies, instruments and practices supporting flexible learning pathways (FLPs) on institutional level implementation. In addition, this chapter provides a summary of the key findings, highlights areas in need of improvement, and sets forth key recommendations for policy makers and practitioners based on the findings of this country case study.

When reading this summary, it is good to bear in mind the methodological limitations when making generalisations about all Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) and their practices. The institutional-level data for this country study consisted of only two case institutions, one representing the university-sector and the other the universities of applied sciences (UAS) sector. On the other hand, national-level respondents covered all the key actors. In this sense, the national level picture provided by this case study can be considered relatively comprehensive, while institutional practices are presented as examples of ongoing development.

Another fact worth noting is that this study provides a snapshot of the FLP situation in Finnish higher education at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 when the data for this study was collected. It became evident that there is a considerable amount of development work on-going and that FLPs are a moving target in Finland at both the national and institutional levels.

6.1 Linkages between policies, instruments and practices

The case study indicated that FLPs as a concept have been on the policy agenda for about 10 years. However, the idea of FLPs has deep roots in Finland and is connected to core values such as ensuring equal educational opportunities for every citizen independent of their gender, ethnic, socioeconomic background; an educational system with no dead-ends; and free education and well-developed study grant and adult education support systems.

Depending on each Governments' political agenda, policy level objectives related to FLPs have varied. The current Government (2019) emphasises especially the role of FLPs in continuous learning, employability, equality and accessibility of higher education.

In the Government Programme (2019), one central objective is to make higher education available for everyone. The aim is that at least 50 % of young adults (25 to 34-year olds) will have completed a higher education degree (current GER is 41%). Another central objective is the reform of continuous (lifelong) learning, containing development and renewal of competences throughout one's life and at different career stages. More detailed policy objectives related to FLPs include: 1. implementation of student admissions reform in universities and UASs, 2. development of learning environments, 3. co-operation with secondary level institutions, 4. updating the principles for RPLs, 5. development of transfer procedures, 6. definition of equity groups and drafting a national plan for access to higher education and 7. development of study and career guidance.

Based on this study, the main drivers for FLPs in higher education consist of demographic changes, economical and labour market changes, geographical factors, equity factors and international comparisons.

While there is a policy pipeline for FLPs in Finland, policy measures stemming from various Government programmes build on each other, in various stages of completion, forming a complex system and sometimes even contradicting each other. There is clearly a need for a more systematic and cohesive approach to FLPs.

The effectiveness of instruments for FLPs

The national-level instruments examined in this study included six instruments: 1. the funding models for universities and UASs, 2. relevant legislation, 3. previous Government's key projects, 4. the Finnish National Qualifications framework (FiNQF), 5. the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and 6. national quality assurance of higher education.

Below is an analysis of the effectiveness of these national-level instruments supporting FLPs in Finland.

Funding model: The funding model proved to be the central instrument in steering the development work that takes place in HEIs. The case study showed that the Ministry has revised the funding models in a way that rewards the institutions for admissions through the open pathway and students taking studies from other institutions. The statistics showed increases in ECTS taken in open studies and in cross-study. The new funding model also promoted forms of continuous learning, such as developing thematic and competence modules – available both for degree students and external clients (continuous learners) – and immigrant preparatory training.

Legislation: In parallel with changes in higher education funding, the Ministry had also revised the corresponding legislation. The changes included, for instance, enabling cross-studies within and between universities and UASs. In addition, co-operation between upper secondary institutions and

HEIs as regards to applicant guidance was added into legislation on upper secondary institutions. Due to the fact that many legislative changes were made only recently, their full impact was not yet visible. Regardless, these two, funding and legislation are the most effective national level instruments steering development work at the institutional level.

Government funded key projects: One of the previous Government's (Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's Government) instruments for developing higher education and FLPs was based on a project-driven approach. The case study brought up several examples of how key projects and related competitive funding have strengthened cooperation between and within the university and the UAS sectors. There was also a lot of evidence of the accomplishments of the key projects in generating models and good practices for different aspects of FLPs. These included, for instance, widening e-learning and cross-study possibilities at the UASs in the form of the CampusOnline portal, signing university and UAS agreements for cross-studying, developing the open studies pathway to higher education and producing tools for integrating working life periods into education. It can be concluded that without key projects, most of the recent years' progress related to FLPs would not have realised. Thus, the project-based approach supported the implementation of the policy objectives. The key challenge is to ensure the continuation of the development work after the projects have been completed by the end of 2020 and the project funding ends.

Finnish National Framework for Qualifications and Other Competence Modules (FiNQF): The Finnish higher education degrees (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctor's) are referenced at levels 6,7 and 8 in the FiNQF. The country study indicated that, on the general level, the FiNQF had improved the clarity and comparability of degrees and supported national and international student mobility. There was also evidence that the FiNQF was utilised in curriculum drafting; in the description of the common competences and intended learning outcomes as well as RPL processes. Areas for further national discussions include the role of the FiNQF in advancing FLPs and increasing the synergy between the two national actors: the FiNQF contact point operating at EDUFI and the national quality assurance conducted by the FINEEC.

ECTS: Since 2005, all Finnish HEIs have adopted ECTS in measuring a student's course load in Bachelor and Master programmes. From the national perspective, ECTS was regarded to be fully implemented in Finland. From the institutional viewpoint, the FiNQF and ECTS system were held as preconditions and starting points for curriculum planning. Furthermore, both of these tools were in active use when recognising the level and content of prior learning, both in the national context (recognition of formal and non-formal learning; transfers and alternative pathways) as well as in the context of international mobility. It can be concluded that the FiNQF and ECTS are embedded in the Finnish higher education system and as such, they are important enablers for FLPs, but the visibility especially of the FiNQF could be still advanced. Additionally, this study suggests that deepening the learning-outcome and competency-based approach, encompassing all educational levels, is at the core of developing FLPs.

The national quality assurance: As part of the national quality assurance system, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) conducts audits of institutional quality systems, education field-specific and thematic evaluations (on themes of policy relevance). The study showed that audits and other evaluations have dealt or are dealing with various perspectives of FLPs. These

include, for instance, evaluating transitions from secondary to higher education and integration of students with an immigrant background in higher education and ensuring for instance that HEIs use the FiNQF and ECTS in the definition of learning outcomes and the students' workload as part of their quality systems. There was some evidence that FINEEC evaluations had supported policymakers and HEIs in developing aspects of FLPs, however, prior to this study there was not a comprehensive policy-driven analysis available on FLPs in higher education. This study highlighted the fact that there is a lack of evaluation and follow-up data on several areas in FLPs. In future, the FINEEC role in evaluating FLPs and equity aspects could be strengthened further.

The effectiveness of practices for FLPs

The effectiveness of key national practices supporting key topics in FLPs and the focus areas chosen for this country case study (see Chapter 2.2) are presented below.

Co-operation between secondary and tertiary level institutions: The country study showed that recent legislative change has led to new openings of co-operation between the secondary and tertiary level, for instance, organising preparatory and introductory courses for secondary level students. While there was still no statistical evidence if this has actually contributed to smoother transition to higher education, experiences were encouraging and sufficient resources for collaboration were called for.

Flexibilibity in admissions: There was evidence that the policy objectives related to the development of the open studies pathway was underway, however, transfer pathways need further attention.

The development of the open studies pathway was supported by a national key project. There was evidence that as a result of the key project, the number of open pathways had increased in the university sector, but this pathway was not available in all fields of education. Also, some universities had set a goal to increase the share of this pathway up to 10% of all admissions (the current share is 4% on average). From the interviewed students' perspective, the open pathway was seen an important alternative to the traditional and competitive route. Several interviewees stressed the need to conduct follow-up research on the open pathways, and at the end of 2019, the Ministry of Education and Culture decided to commission two such research projects. This study also brought up the question whether the Ministry should regulate on the provision of open studies so that this pathway could be widened to all fields of study.

Enabled by the legislation since 2016, there were transfer pathways available in several fields, but their number was still low. The policy goal that transfer pathways would enable students to switch institution, faculty or study field without having to apply for a second study right was not yet accomplished. Thus, the potential of transfer pathways as one solution to the Finnish applicant backlog problem (150,000 HE applicants annually of which 50,000 are admitted, many of them having already one study right) is not yet exploited. The case study indicated that the main reasons for this were the limited availability of transfer spots and the lacking data on demand of transfer routes from one field to another, which complicated their design. At the national level, there was limited amount of statistical data and research available on transfer pathways. From

individuals' perspective, there was insufficient awareness among students and even staff members of existing transfer possibilities. The study also suggests that, as the funding model rewards degrees completed in due time, and the transfer student's degree will be completed in the receiving HEI, there will be winners and losers as regards to funding. Perhaps for this reason, the case university identified internal transfer pathways and procedures, such as transfers between faculties, as an area for development, while the case UAS, as a receiving institution also paid attention of having full student groups. – Overall, the development of transfer pathways would require more specific national guidelines and support for institutional work.

Flexibility during studies: The study indicated that there were numerous possibilities for students for flexibility during studies. These possibilities related to study structures, study contents and modes of study. As regards to study structures, while universities and UASs had created specialisation choices within the university Bachelor's and Master's degree structures and UAS Bachelor's structures, there were still plans to focus on how specialisation choices could be increased in connection with the curricula renewal. Generally, it can be stated that flexibility embedded in degree structures has contributed to the diversification of UAS Bachelor's and university Master's degrees.

Cross-studying, i.e. the possibility to take studies from other degree programmes within one's own or other institutions, was enabled by legislation and was also recently added in the funding model. Cross-study approaches included several good practices. One of the previous Government's key projects – the eAMK project – had resulted in the creation of the CampusOnline.fi e-learning platform, as a result the number of e-learning credits increased significantly. A recent agreement was also signed on cross-studying between universities and UASs which is expected to widen students' possibilities for cross-sectoral studies in the future. There were also promising alliances between secondary and tertiary level institutions, enabling students' cross-sectoral study and related agreements between the providers on how these studies can be automatically recognised as part of students' degrees. In the near future, the added value of cross-study models and approaches in creating new competencies and innovativeness should be examined more closely.

The national guidelines for RPL at universities were published by a network consisting of key actors from universities' study affairs units, which can be considered a good practice. From the interviewed students' perspective, RPL processes seemed to work well both in the open studies pathway and in student transfers and enabled speeding up the study progress. As a part of the RPL process, students were compelled to verbalise their prior learning from the learning outcomes perspective, which is an important skill also towards working life.

The study and career guidance related to FLPs was under development in both case institutions. Both emphasised the need to identify individual guidance needs and accommodate provision of services accordingly. As a good practice, the case university connected the renewal of guidance services with the curriculum reform, while the case UAS focused especially on identifying the needs of continuous learners. The interviews indicated that students benefit from personal study plans (PSPs) when planning their individual choices with the support of a study advisor, however, students' own initiative was often required in updating PSPs.

Flexibility towards employment: There was a lot of evidence of co-operation between HEIs (especially UASs) and working life. Internships, RDI projects in the UAS sector and studification of work (RPL of work-based learning) were highlighted as tools for students to gain and have recognised work experience from their own field. There were promising initiatives and projects developing the integration of study and work. At best, these tools may support individual career planning and graduate employment.

Continuous learning: In line with the policy objectives and steered by legislative and funding model changes, the case HEIs were in the process of developing modules of continuous learning to be offered as open studies to adult learners already in the labour market. While a certain amount of open studies (normally 60 ECTS) provides a possibility for re-entry to higher education studies, the recent OECD study (OECD, 2020) concluded that not all staff reskilling needs are covered by existing provision, and thus the development of complementary forms of customised provision is needed.

Equity groups and FLPs: This case study indicated, that in line with the current Government policy, the Ministry of Education and Culture had initially defined five aspects of equity (at the end of 2019). These included equity aspects as regards to geographic, gender and socio-economic backgrounds, immigrants and students with disabilities. A national plan of equity and accessibility of higher education was to be drafted by the end 2020. A research project (Gate project, 2020) was commissioned to inform this work.

As the objectives and definition of equity groups had previously been lacking at the national level, setting objectives and monitoring of equity and accessibility indicators was not yet systematic at the institutional level. Following the Finnish overarching principle of 'equality', the focus was still on offering FLPs to all students and treating all students the same.

Out of the five above mentioned equity aspects, there was a recent FINEEC evaluation (Airas & al., 2019) available on immigrants' integration into Finnish higher education which covered aspects of the flexible access, progress and employment of this group. Despite several national projects and the availability of preparatory training, immigrants' share of all higher education students in Finland was still low. Overall, In overall, it can be concluded there should be more specific support available for disadvantaged students so that they can reach their full potential.

Key enablers for FLPs

Based on the results, the most important enablers for FLPs in Finland include free education and study grant systems, trust and cooperation between HEIs, increased emphasis and attention on FLPs and continuous learning and curricula reform and enabling, not too restrictive legislation.

Policies and the realities in HEIs

To sum up some trends related to policies and institutional realities, the following observations were made based on this country case study:

- **Policy overload.** While the HEIs had put into action a lot of FLP-related development work in the recent years, supported for instance by the rector's councils and various working groups, the interviewees stated that it is not possible to develop everything at the same time.
- **Economic limits at the institutional level**. As a part of the institutional autonomy in student selections, the HEIs define the availability and number of quotas for open study and transfer student pathways in various fields of study. This is partly based on the predictability of group sizes; pathways could be opened if there was room in the group. On the other hand, it became clear that alternative pathways did not exist in the most popular fields. It was also stated that while FLPs may serve individual students' needs, they may also lead to heterogeneity of the groups, need of differentiation in teaching methods and thus additional workload for teachers – this all needs to be balanced at the degree programme level.
- **The limits of flexibility.** Some interviewees underlined that there should not be flexibility at any cost. Some interviewees also questioned how many pathways there should be. Some students felt that while FLPs provide many possibilities for the individualisation of study paths, there is also a risk of too much complexity and too many choices.
- **The importance of teacher support.** Teachers, in particular at UASs, have received new tasks. In some cases, there was some resistance to new requirements created by renewal of teaching methods, increasingly heterogenous student groups, and new tasks related to RDI and continuous learning. Teachers need to be more supported, particularly in the implementation of the FLP practices.
- **Communication of FLP opportunities.** One of the critical topics relates to students' awareness of existing pathways. There is clearly a need for better communication both at the institutional and national level.

6.2 Good practices in FLPs

National level

1. **Key projects in developing FLPs**. The previous Government's key projects clearly advanced networking and national discussion within and between the university and the UASs sector. The projects produced numerous models, tools, online material and publications that at best support the implementation of aspects of FLPs.
2. **E-learning possibilities at the UAS sector**. The eAMK key project resulted in the creation of the CampusOnline.fi portal; proving the selection of online courses by more than twenty Finnish UASs to be included in UAS student's Bachelor's degree. This portal was well-received by UAS students and almost 60,000 credits have been taken during the summer 2018.

3. **Cross-study agreements crossing boundaries of secondary and tertiary education.** As a result of a previous Government's RiKe key project, the rectors and presidents of universities and UASs signed a framework agreement on teaching co-operation. In the future, the agreement will allow students to take studies at another university in a more flexible way based on their primary study right at the home university. Additionally, the case university was involved in a regional project encouraging cooperation between the university, an upper-secondary school and a vocational school, aiming to build new study paths for students.
4. **FINEEC thematic and field-specific evaluations.** Evaluations conducted by the FINEEC – relating to topics such as the transition from secondary to tertiary education; immigrants' integration into Finnish higher education and field-specific evaluations – form an instrument that can significantly support the Ministry policy work and institutional work in learning from best practices.

Institutional level

1. **The open studies pathway** as an alternative to traditional university admissions continues to grow and develop. At the university case, there was an increasing focus on developing pathways to specific degree programmes as the open university and university academic staff worked closely together to design pathways (curriculum, ECTS, and guidance). These efforts are more widely supported by the Government-funded development project (Alternative path to university, 2020) and the open studies network consisting of all open universities in Finland.
2. **Optional studies (electives) in the curriculum.** The university and UAS case showcased how degree programmes included a specific amount of flexible studies that students could choose which courses to take depending on their PSPs and career ambitions. For instance, the university case curriculum included 60 credits that students could select on their own. In the case UAS, the electives varied between 15 and 30 credits.
3. **RPL guidelines and processes.** All Finnish HEIs have practices and processes in place for RPL. In most cases, students felt that there is sufficient guidance available for RPL and that RPL supported the identification of competences and progress of studies. Furthermore, in some units, assessment and standardisation of RPL decisions is conducted by key staff members at regular intervals. In many cases, institutional RPL processes benefit from national RPL guidelines and surveys.
4. **Personal study plans.** PSPs to be drafted by all Finnish higher education students is a good practice that can support a student in their individual study paths, verbalising and identifying their competences and future career choices. All HEIs are recommended to ensure that PSP guidance includes study and career planning aspects, genuine dialogue between students and guidance personnel and identifying those students in need of specific support.

6.3 Policy implications and recommendations for improvement

Recommendations for the national level to be used in policy-development and decision-making:

1. **A more comprehensive policy approach to FLPs, including a national definition for FLPs.** Finland has various, partly fragmented elements of FLPs embedded in the policy agenda. In the future, a national cohesive definition of FLPs could support the development and articulation of efforts in this area, especially at the operational level in HEIs.
2. **National monitoring and evaluation of FLPs.** The Ministry of Education and Culture is encouraged to utilise research and statistical data on FLPs in analysing the impact of FLP policies on study progress, graduate employment and competence renewal. More staff resources might be needed for the Ministry level analysis and refinement of the existing data on FLPs, as well as developing new indicators. The areas for development include follow-up of entry ways and alternative study paths, data on transfers and definition of indicators for continuous learning.
3. **Intersect of equity and FLP policies.** As a part of the Ministry-led preparation of the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* in 2020, the Ministry is encouraged to define equity groups and set national objectives. Monitoring of objectives should be embedded in national and institutional level monitoring systems. Once equity groups are defined at the national level, intentional efforts are needed to target FLP policies to equity groups.
4. **National meta-analysis of the previous Government's key projects.** While the key projects have led to numerous models and tools supporting FLPs, there is still need for a meta-analysis of the achievements of the key projects and a plan for continuation so that these tools could be fully utilised at the institutional level by educational management and staff members.

Recommendations for the institutional level to be used by the institutional management and practitioners:

1. **Continue to develop the open studies pathways.** In the coming years, the open university pathway may become a more significant admissions pathway. It is recommended that universities utilise the good practices created by the key project *Alternative path to university project* (TRY). In addition, research on the open pathway should be used to inform the development work.
2. **Further development of internal pathways.** While there were already possibilities for internal pathways – that is specialisation possibilities for students within the university Bachelor's, Master's degree structure and UASs Bachelor's structure and internal transfers – still more support should be targeted to institutional development, for instance in the form of national projects. Internal pathways might enable students to make choices as part of their current study paths, instead of applying for a second study right.
3. **Guidance and counselling services based on learner's needs**. There needs to be more intentional efforts to inform students of available pathways. Overall, guidance and counselling services should be structured, and if need be, even remodeled based on learner's and client's needs.

4. **Management of change towards FLPs**. At the institutional level, more attention should be paid to facilitate the change towards FLPs. This could include creating a definition of the institutional strategy on FLPs and its integration into the quality system. Special support should be targeted to teachers in order to support them during this change.

Finally, it can be concluded that while Finland has taken major steps in developing FLPs in higher education, including flexibility in degree structures and modes of study; enabling cross-disciplinary studies; and most recently, launching new possibilities for cross-sectoral studies between the secondary and tertiary education and between the university and UAS sectors, still more potential is embedded in the FLP concept.

In future, a more strategic and competency-based approach to FLPs may pose solutions to several challenges Finland is facing. These include the demographic changes and the diminishing age classes; the need for the workforce skills upgrading and renewal; and the policy aim related to equal opportunities. If the national aim continues to offer equal opportunities for all students to access and pursue higher education, intersection of the FLP policies and equity measures may help to ensure that no student is left behind.

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In March 2019, Finland accepted an invitation to join the IIEP-UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal 4 project: *Planning for Flexible Learning Pathways in Higher Education*. The IIEP-UNESCO research project, 2018–2021, includes eight country case studies from different regions around the world. This report presents findings from the Finnish national case study.

This study provides a holistic picture of flexible learning pathways (FLPs) in Finnish higher education, encompassing flexibility in access, progression, transfer, completion and transition to the labour market. The report offers an analysis of the strengths and good practices regarding the Finnish FLP policies, regulatory frameworks, instruments and practices, as well as national and institutional recommendations to further develop FLPs.

The study was conducted in 2019–-2020 by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) and Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER) at the University of Jyväskylä.

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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Finnish Education Evaluation Centre P.O. Box 28
(Mannerheiminaukio 1 A)
FI-00101 HELSINKI
Telephone: +358 29 533 5500
Fax: +358 29 533 5501
karvi.fi