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Territorial progress of Quality Apprenticeships in QUEENS Regions

SOUTHWEST FINLAND REGION



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Introduction

This report examines the current state of apprenticeship training and other forms of work-based learning in Southwest Finland within the framework of the QUEEN project. The analysis covers both vocational apprenticeship training and practical training in universities of applied sciences, recognising that high-quality work-based learning can support lifelong learning, strengthen employability and improve the availability of skilled labour in a rapidly changing labour market.

The analysis is linked to the Southwest Finland Regional Strategy 2040+ and the Regional Programme that implements it, which serve as the regional policy instrument in the QUEEN project. While these policy documents do not directly regulate apprenticeship systems or educational practices, they provide a strategic framework for strengthening regional competitiveness, employment, skills development and collaboration between education providers and working life. In this context, improving the quality, accessibility and attractiveness of work-based learning is seen as an important contribution to the region's long-term development objectives.

The report combines desk research, policy analysis and extensive stakeholder consultations conducted with vocational education providers, higher education representatives, social partners and employers. The objective is not only to assess the current situation against European quality principles, but also to identify opportunities for policy improvement and stronger regional cooperation. Particular attention is given to the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA) and to exploring how its principles can support the further development of apprenticeship and apprenticeship-type models across different levels of education.

By bringing together perspectives from vocational education, higher education and working life, the analysis provides a comprehensive picture of the strengths, challenges and future development opportunities of work-based learning in Southwest Finland. The findings are intended to support evidence-based policy learning and contribute to the implementation of the region's strategic goals related to skills, employment, talent attraction and lifelong learning.

Special features of Southwest Finland

Southwest Finland is a coastal region of 27 municipalities with just under 500,000 inhabitants. It is known for strong sectors such as maritime industry, food production, medical and health technology, automotive industry, tourism, and solutions related to climate change and the circular economy. Although the region continues to grow, labour availability remains a long-term challenge: youth unemployment has increased, while shortages of skilled labour persist, particularly in construction, technology, health and social services, and green transition-related fields. Southwest Finland is highly international, with one of the highest shares of foreign speakers in Finland, making international students and professionals a key untapped resource for regional labour supply. Following exceptionally strong labour demand during the COVID-19 period, job vacancies began to decline in early 2024 and continued to fall in 2025, especially in care, construction, trade and services. This downturn has also reduced opportunities for apprenticeships and internships, as these sectors traditionally play a central role in providing work-based learning placements.

Definition of social partners from a regional perspective

In the QUEEN project, the key stakeholder network in Southwest Finland is built around the **Regional Ecosystem for Continuous Learning**, an EU-funded initiative aligned with the objectives of the Southwest Finland Regional Strategy. The ecosystem responds to a shared regional need for better coordination of education and guidance provision for the working-age population, recognising continuous learning as essential for regional competitiveness and labour market adaptability. It brings together education providers from higher, vocational and liberal adult education, employment areas and apprenticeship offices, as well as labour market organisations and the Chamber of Commerce.

The stakeholder network plays a dual role: it provides up-to-date, practice-based information on apprenticeships and work-based learning, while also serving as a platform for jointly interpreting project findings and shaping common regional policy goals. The network is complemented by broader social partner involvement, notably through the **Regional Education Division**, which promotes and monitors the implementation of the regional programme related to skills and education. The Division includes representatives from regional authorities, education providers, labour market organisations and companies, ensuring that both policy and labour market perspectives are reflected.

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Regulatory framework

Apprenticeships in Finland are regulated by the Vocational Education and Training Act (531/2017) and the Act on the Financing of Educational and Cultural Provision. The VET Act governs the organisation, content, and quality assurance of vocational education and training, aiming to support working life skills, further studies, and lifelong learning.

Apprenticeship training is regulated in Chapter 8 of the Act. Paragraph 70 defines apprenticeship training, while paragraph 71 regulates training based on a training agreement. Apprenticeship training may cover a full qualification, parts of a qualification, or smaller units and is based on an employment contract with remuneration. Training based on a training agreement applies only to parts of a qualification or smaller units, is not an employment relationship, and does not include remuneration.

This analysis also covers work-based learning and internships at universities of applied sciences, which are compulsory components of degrees and are regulated by the Government Decree on Universities of Applied Sciences (1129/2014). Degrees consist of basic and professional studies, elective studies, work placements, and a thesis. Work placements must comprise at least 30 ECTS and support professional competence, with no further regulatory requirements specified.

Regional context and policy instrument

The Southwest Finland Regional Strategy 2040+, implemented through the **Regional Programme 2026–2029**, positions the region as a connector of people, skills, businesses and innovations, aiming to strengthen sustainable vitality, attractiveness and well-being. Within this framework, the QUEEN project supports an **entrepreneur- and talent-friendly region** by improving cooperation between companies and educational institutions, strengthening recruitment pipelines, and aligning apprenticeships and work-based learning with regional skills needs. It advances **competent and skilled citizenship** by developing lifelong learning pathways, practical training models, and the employability of both local and international students, while also contributing to **well-being and a good quality of life** through meaningful work opportunities, inclusive learning environments, and smoother transitions into the labour market. Through interregional learning, QUEEN assists in translating strategic goals into concrete practices, aligned with the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships.

Regional Systems or tools to identify or anticipate skills shortages, especially in emerging sectors

In Southwest Finland, skills shortages and emerging competence needs are identified and anticipated through regional foresight tools, most notably the **Southwest Finland Foresight Academy**, whose aim is to bring together existing forecasting resources related to regional skills and education needs. The Foresight Academy develops a systematic, network-based approach to anticipating future workforce competence requirements, enabling education providers to respond flexibly to signals from working life; its activities are grounded in a formal partnership and cooperation agreement between regional actors. Regional forecasting draws on **multiple data sources**, including Statistics Finland's Labour Force Survey and population structure data, as well as education statistics from the Vipunen reporting portal,

which compiles information from Statistics Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Finnish National Agency for Education.

Key sectors in Southwest Finland include health and social services, technology, medicine, and health technology. These sectors are also expected to face significant workforce retirements between 2025 and 2029, particularly in social and health care, construction and infrastructure, technology, and business. Together, they employ a large share of the regional workforce and experienced the strongest growth between 2015 and 2019. As a result, they were a key focus of consultations, which aim to further assess the skills needs of businesses and working life across the region's priority industries.

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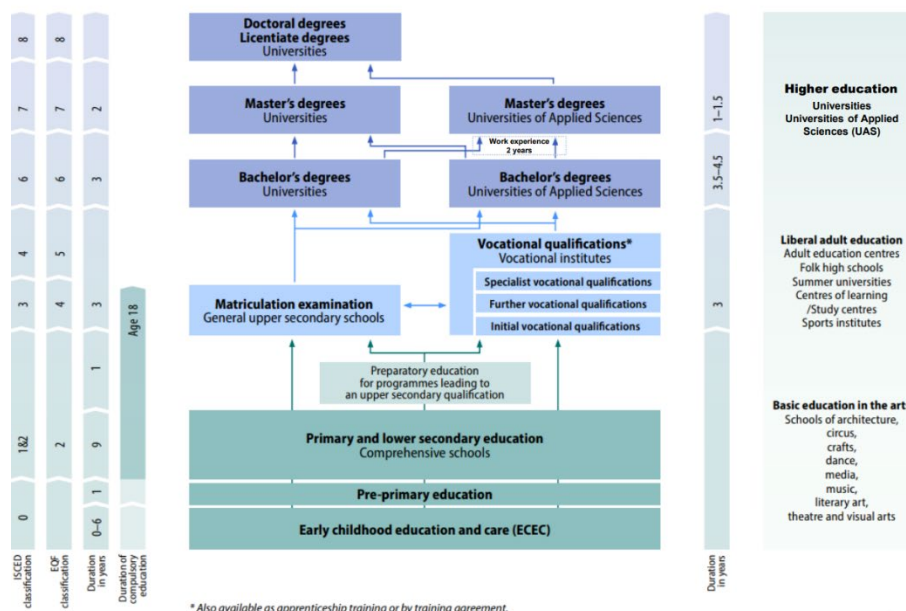
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Finnish education system in a nutshell

The Finnish education system (picture 1) is characterized by flexibility and permeability, with no dead ends between educational pathways. Learners can progress vertically and horizontally across levels, whether they initially choose a general or vocational track after primary and lower secondary education. In vocational education and training (VET), apprenticeship training is available within initial, further, and specialist vocational qualifications. Additionally, internships are an established part of higher education, particularly in bachelor's degrees at universities of applied sciences (UAS).

Noticeably, by the side of degree education, working-life related micro-credentials or parts of degrees are offered to adult learners by VET and HE institutions, following the idea of continuous learning. Furthermore, liberal adult education provides diverse opportunities for informal and non-formal learning, which in the European discourse is covered by the term lifelong learning. Hence, the term “continuous learning” in the Finnish context is more narrow than lifelong learning, as it considers learning relevant to employment and working life.

EDUCATION SYSTEM IN FINLAND



Picture 1. The Education System in Finland

Apprenticeship system in Finland and Southwest Finland region

The VET qualification structure in Finland consists of three levels: vocational upper secondary qualifications, further vocational qualifications, and specialist vocational qualifications, covering approximately 160 qualification titles. Vocational qualifications are available to both young people and adults and can be completed either in education institutions or through apprenticeship training. Vocational institutes remain the main providers of initial vocational education.

Work-based learning (WBL) plays a central role in Finnish VET and is primarily carried out in real work environments. A major reform in 2018 increased the flexibility of WBL by allowing all learners to participate in either training agreements or apprenticeship training, depending on their individual

circumstances. WBL can span the entire duration of studies or cover smaller units or modules, as defined in each learner's personal competence development plan. While legislation does not mandate a minimum or maximum share of WBL, providers are strongly encouraged to organize learning at workplaces whenever possible.

Unlike traditional dual apprenticeship systems, the Finnish model does not prescribe a fixed alternation between school and work. In practice, however, learning combines workplace-based training and institution-based studies. In apprenticeship training, approximately 70–80% of learning typically takes place at the workplace under an employment contract, with remuneration paid to the learner.

WBL arrangements are flexible, and learners may transition from a training agreement to an apprenticeship if the necessary conditions are met. Work-based learning is goal-oriented and guided, enabling learners to acquire practical vocational skills relevant to their qualification.

In Southwest Finland, data collected by VET institutions indicates a declining trend in apprenticeship offering, particularly among vocational qualification students. This decline has been linked to the general economic situation and rising unemployment both nationally and regionally.

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Practical training in higher education in Finland and Southwest Finland region

The Finnish higher education system comprises 14 universities and 24 universities of applied sciences. Universities focus on scientific research and research-based education, while universities of applied sciences emphasize practice-oriented education tailored to labour market needs. Both types of institutions enjoy extensive autonomy in education, research, and internal administration.

Work placements are a compulsory component of UAS bachelor's degrees, though practices vary by field and institution. Placements may be completed in Finland or abroad, in one or several periods, and may be paid or unpaid. When placements are unpaid and not based on an employment contract, a formal agreement between the institution and the host organization ensures insurance coverage. Unlike VET, higher education institutions do not define workplace supervisory responsibilities in detail, nor do companies receive financial compensation for hosting students.

Beyond traditional placements, many universities of applied sciences provide opportunities to complete study modules through work-based learning. These models can be student-oriented (learning at one's own workplace), university-oriented (project-based or practice-integrated studies), or company-oriented (upskilling employees in collaboration with higher education institutions). In higher

education, work-based learning is primarily a pedagogical approach rather than a formal employment-based model.

More than half of Finnish higher education students work alongside their studies, either part-time or full-time. The proportion is slightly higher in Southwest Finland than the national average, reflecting the region's strong labour market connections.

Although there have been policy discussions about expanding apprenticeship training to higher education and continuing professional education—highlighted by proposals in 2007—such initiatives remained limited pilots. Despite recognized potential benefits for labour mobility, employment rates, and workforce availability, apprenticeship training has not become an established model within Finnish higher education.

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Territorial analysis - regional key findings

Research methods

The analysis draws on multiple datasets collected during consultation rounds in fall 2025 and spring 2026 (see Picture 2). These include semi-structured interviews with apprenticeship providers, social partners, and higher education training developers, with minor adaptations for each group. All interviews were recorded and AI-transcribed. Additional data were gathered from meetings with working life representatives using participatory qualitative methods, in the form of Padlet contributions in workshops and online sessions.

In sum, qualitative data was collected as follows:

- Apprenticeship providers: 14 interviewees from 7 organizations
- Social partners related to apprenticeships: 3 interviewees from 3 organisations
- Higher education practical training developers: 9 interviewees from TUAS
- Working life representatives: 45 participants during discussion events 5.3. and 27.4.2026



Picture 2. Desk analysis process in Southwest Finland region

Key results of the interviews with apprenticeship professionals

Highlights /summary

- The apprenticeship system in Southwest Finland is strong in quality but fragmented, with many providers and no shared coordination framework.
- Demand varies sharply by sector: health and social care placements have declined, while construction and industry show growing interest.
- Employers' awareness of apprenticeships remains uneven, limiting placement availability despite generally positive attitudes.
- Pedagogical support is a key development area due to inconsistent workplace guidance and the end of national instructor training.
- EFQEA criteria are broadly met, but improvements are needed in pedagogical support, remuneration clarity, stakeholder collaboration, and international mobility.

The current apprenticeship landscape in Southwest Finland is characterised by a high number of training providers, which creates a fragmented operating environment lacking coherent coordination and shared practices. Although collaboration is possible and individual relationships function well, the absence of jointly agreed processes (e.g. standardised training compensation models, documentation, and employer engagement procedures) results in unnecessary administrative variation and internal competition among providers. At the same time, employers' familiarity with apprenticeships varies significantly, with a considerable portion lacking up-to-date information or experience of the model. This inconsistency affects the availability of apprenticeship placements, particularly in sectors under labour market pressure.

Demand for apprenticeships has shifted across fields: health and social care placements have declined due to staffing regulations and financial constraints, while construction and certain industrial sectors have seen increased uptake, including short-term seasonal apprenticeships. The proportion of learners with migrant backgrounds is growing, and while the apprenticeship model supports their labour market integration, it also increases the need for stronger guidance and employer support. The funding model continues to steer provision strongly, favouring young learners and those without a prior qualification. As a consequence, opportunities for adult career changers are becoming more limited despite regional workforce needs.

Across interviews, stakeholders consistently highlighted challenges related to pedagogical support. The discontinuation of national training for workplace instructors has led to uneven guidance practices and varying levels of pedagogical competence. While some organisations have developed strong local solutions, most actors expressed a need for a more structured and coordinated support system, including potentially mandatory workplace instructor training. Furthermore, although the European EFQEA quality criteria are largely embedded in Finnish legislation and thus well implemented in practice, certain criteria, especially those linked to pedagogical support, remuneration clarity, involvement of social partners and stakeholders, and transparency in international mobility, were identified as areas requiring further development.

Overall, the apprenticeship system in Southwest Finland operates on a strong legislative foundation and enjoys generally positive employer attitudes. However, its effectiveness is constrained by fragmented coordination, variable guidance practices, and structural barriers within the funding system. Addressing these issues would significantly enhance regional responsiveness, improve equity of access, and strengthen the system's capacity to meet evolving labour market needs.

Key results of the interviews with higher education practical training developers

Highlights/summary

- Internships are a core and legally required component of universities of applied sciences, playing a crucial role in students' transition to working life, professional identity development, networking, and first employment
- Internship practices and guidance vary widely by field, with highly regulated and structured models in health care and more fragmented, student-driven approaches in other fields

- Recent developments include fewer available placements, a rise in unpaid internships, growing use of remote and hybrid formats, and increased financial pressure on students, all of which affect internship quality and accessibility
- Key development needs include stronger pedagogical support, systematic quality assurance, equal opportunities for international students, and closer, long-term cooperation between higher education and working life

Internships are regarded across all fields as a core and legally required component of Universities of applied sciences and as the most important pathway to initial employment. They enable students to transition into real working life, develop professional competence and identity, build networks, and identify potential thesis topics. However, internship practices and guidance models vary significantly between fields. In health care, internships are highly regulated, structured, and systematically guided, whereas in other fields the processes are more fragmented, often student-driven, and lighter in terms of supervision. Overall, internships frequently appear unclear, and their role as a structured career pathway is not always sufficiently reflected in processes and guidance.

In recent years, internships have been strongly affected by a weakened labour market, the growing prevalence of unpaid internships, and the increase in remote and hybrid formats. Students' financial pressure has led to combining internships with paid work that does not necessarily correspond to their field of study, which may reduce the educational value of internships. The position of international students has deteriorated in particular due to language requirements and unpaid placements.

Employers' attitudes towards UAS internships are generally positive, but there is an increasing tendency to favour unpaid arrangements. Large and established organisations often view internships as part of their recruitment pipeline, whereas small and medium-sized enterprises typically act on a situational basis with limited capacity for long-term planning and supervision. Technological developments, including remote work practices and the use of artificial intelligence, are also reshaping the content and forms of internships.

In addition to internships, work-based learning at higher education institutions is also implemented in the following ways: recognition of prior learning, project-based studies, RDI projects, simulation environments and different kinds of company collaborations. Internship quality is mainly assessed through student reflection and teacher tutors' assessments, and most fields lack a unified, proactive quality assurance framework. The EFQEA criteria are considered broadly applicable to higher education internships at a principled level, but key development needs are identified in pedagogical support at the workplace, remuneration, systematic quality monitoring, and equal treatment of international students.

In summary, it can be stated that the key areas for development in work-based learning at Universities of applied sciences are considered to be strengthening pedagogical guidance both at the educational institution and in the workplace, clearer communication to employers regarding the roles of different educational levels, and the development of common quality standards for practical trainings, at least within the HEI(s). At the regional and national levels, there is a need for closer and more long-term dialogue between HEIs and the working world, better support for SMEs hosting trainees, the

development of models similar to apprenticeship training in higher education, and clearer structures for career guidance and employer collaboration. Cooperation with vocational education is also considered important but underutilized.

Key results from meetings with working life representatives and other social partners

Highlights/summary

- Increased uncertainty in working life, economic conditions, and rapidly changing skill demands require more proactive and closer collaboration between education and employers.
- Current work-based learning practices and communication are fragmented, creating a need for more unified approaches, clearer messaging, and stronger emphasis on concrete business benefits
- Collaboration should shift from individual pilots to strategic, long-term partnerships, supported by improved regional coordination.
- Expanding work-based learning requires more flexible models, stronger guidance support, and reforms to apprenticeship systems and funding to make them more attractive to employers.
- The gap between education and working life should be narrowed by strengthening practical relevance, anticipating skills needs, and building a coordinated cooperation model that delivers clear added value for companies.

Meetings with working life representatives and other social partners collected perspectives mainly from two workshop-based sessions. In these sessions, the participants had an opportunity to reflect on preliminary findings from the interviews and thus gave them an opportunity to expand the perspectives of the QUEEN project's regional analysis.

In both meetings, it was emphasized that uncertainty in working life has increased, which is reflected in employers' caution, for example when making new recruitment decisions. According to the latest survey by the Finland Chamber of Commerce (Economic Review 01/2026), sectors such as construction, trade, and services view the current situation most pessimistically, while industrial outlooks have improved. The prevailing geopolitical uncertainty also poses challenges for companies. At the same time, skill needs are changing rapidly, which requires more proactive and closer collaboration between education and working life. The integration of international professionals into the Finnish working life is also currently recognized as a common challenge.

The discussions clearly highlighted that current practices, terminology, and operating models related to work-based learning and apprenticeships are perceived by companies as confusing and inconsistent, making participation more difficult. Companies call for clearer, more concise, and up-to-date communication that concretely demonstrates benefits and directly addresses their needs. The importance of continuous dialogue was also emphasized in order to better align the expectations of education and working life.

A need was also identified to move from isolated pilot initiatives towards long-term, strategic partnerships where goals and responsibilities are jointly agreed upon. Regional cooperation was seen to require better coordination to reduce overlaps and to make activities clearer for companies. In

addition, there is a need to develop shared platforms and operating models that support collaboration between different actors and facilitate company participation.

The discussions identified that there is a shortage of work placements, particularly for young people, and that companies' willingness to offer placements has declined due to economic uncertainty. Company participation could be increased by providing clearer and more flexible models as well as stronger support, for example in guidance. There is also a need to develop the apprenticeship model and its funding to better respond to the diverse needs of working life.

Similar concerns have been repeatedly expressed by business interest and service organisations such as the Federation of Finnish Enterprises (Suomen Yrittäjät ry) and regional Chambers of Commerce (Kauppakamari). According to them, the current apprenticeship system is not sufficiently attractive to employers due to the obligation to pay full wages during the studies. A new model could, for example, allow unemployed and/or low-qualified young people to undertake apprenticeship training with support equivalent to unemployment benefits. Another repeatedly proposed solution is the gradual scaling of wage costs, where part of the salary would be covered through wage subsidies. The impacts of the recruitment subsidy for young people (under 30), introduced at the beginning of 2026, on work-based learning development are not yet sufficiently known. The employment voucher aims to facilitate young people's employment by temporarily lowering recruitment costs for companies.

The discussions also highlighted that there is, in some areas, a gap between educational content and the practical needs of working life, which should be addressed by strengthening practical relevance and links to working life. At the same time, the importance of developing education pathways and anticipating skills needs through collaboration among stakeholders was emphasized. The role of educational institutions in anticipating skills needs was considered crucial, but this role requires clarification and more consistent communication.

Based on the discussions, one key solution is the development of a shared, proactive operating model in which educational institutions, companies, and other network actors work in a coordinated manner and share responsibilities. This should be supported by the development of unified practices, clearer communication, and concrete support measures that make it easier for companies to participate in work-based learning. There is also a need to strengthen long-term partnerships and to make use of new solutions such as digital platforms, talent profiles, and renewed apprenticeship models.

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Region's progress towards EFQEA criteria

Table 1 provides a consolidated overview of Southwest Finland's progress against the 14 criteria of the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA). The table brings together observations from both vocational apprenticeship training and work-based learning practices in universities of applied sciences, enabling a broader assessment of quality apprenticeship-type models across different education levels.

Drawing on stakeholder consultations conducted in Fall 2025– Spring 2026 and comparing current regional observations with the European Commission's 2020 assessment of the Finnish apprenticeship system, the findings indicate that most EFQEA criteria are well reflected in both Finnish legislation and regional practice. At the same time, the consultations identified several areas where further development would strengthen the system, particularly in pedagogical support, employer engagement, remuneration practices, international mobility, and the coordination of work-based learning opportunities across education levels.

	Regional progress in Finland and Southwest Finland region since 2020			
EFQEA criteria	State of play in Finland 2020	Observations in vocational in Southwest Finland 2025-2026	Observations in UAS's in Southwest Finland 2026	Other comments
1. Written contract: An apprenticeship should be based on a written contract between the employer, the apprentice and the vocational training institution.	Fully in place	Shortcomings in unified operating methods, e.g. regarding training allowances and forms		
2. Learning outcomes: Comprehensive learning outcomes should be defined by the employers and vocational training institutions, ensuring both job-related skills and personal development.	Fully in place	Offering local degree components would be an option, but it is not a familiar operating model for companies, so achieving them is challenging		
3. Pedagogical support: In-company trainers should be designated and cooperate closely with VET providers and teachers. Teachers and trainers should be supported to update their skills.	To a large extent in place <i>Additional comment: Initial state of system/scheme change</i>	The cancellation of the specialist training program in competence-based qualifications has had a visible effect in the region: teachers lack basic knowledge about identifying work-based learning On the other hand: Investments made in the training of workplace instructors in Salo area.	Supervision varies across different fields; in general, workplace supervisors have no obligations toward the educational institution.	
4. Workplace component: At least half of the apprenticeship duration should be carried out in a workplace, and there should be	Fully in place		In UAS there are minimum of 30 (total 210/240) credits of practical training in each bachelor degree.	

opportunities to undertake part of such placements abroad.				
5. Pay and/or compensation: Apprentices should receive pay and/or compensation, taking into account cost sharing arrangements between employers, apprentices and public authorities.	Fully in place	It should be considered whether a clearer, tiered model for remuneration is needed in line with the development of competence	The number of unpaid internships is on the rise amid economic uncertainty. There are also variations across different sectors.	
6. Social protection: Apprentices should be entitled to social protection, including necessary insurance.	Fully in place			
7. Work, health and safety conditions: The host workplace should comply with relevant rules and regulations on working conditions, in particular health and safety legislation.	Fully in place			
Framework conditions:				
8. Regulatory framework: A clear and consistent regulatory framework should be in place, based on partnership and a transparent dialogue among all relevant stakeholders.	To a large extent in place <i>Additional comment: Some discussion have started but not lead to any new measures (yet)</i>			
9. Involvement of social partners: Social partners, including at sectoral level, should be involved in the design, governance and implementation of apprenticeship schemes.	To a large extent in place			

10. Support for companies: Financial and/or non-financial support should be provided, particularly for small, medium-sized and micro-companies.	To a large extent in place	The amount of training compensation for the employer varies.		
11. Flexible pathways and mobility: There should be flexible entry requirements, as well as opportunities for further education and training. Apprenticeships should lead to a nationally recognised qualification. Transnational mobility should be a component of apprenticeships.	To a large extent in place			The number of international internships is quite low at both levels of education.
12. Career guidance and awareness raising: Career guidance, mentoring and learner support should be provided to ensure successful outcomes and reduce drop-outs.	Somewhat in place <i>Additional comment: Some discussion have started but not lead to any new measures (yet)</i>	In the region, apprenticeships are a familiar and established activity for some companies, and they have positive experiences with apprenticeships. For some, it is foreign or associated with misunderstandings and a lack of knowledge. More attention should be paid to ensure that versatile learners have access to apprenticeship training		
13. Transparency: The transparency of, and access to, apprenticeship offers within and between Member States should be ensured.	Fully in place			
14. Quality assurance and graduate tracking: There should be quality assurance of apprenticeships and	To a large extent in place			

tracking of employment and career progression of apprentices.	<i>Additional comment: Some discussion have started but not lead to any new measures (yet)</i>			
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Table 1. An overview of Southwest Finland’s progress against the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships (EFQEA).

ILO recommendation 208 - Consultation-Based Gap Analysis

Stakeholder consultations with apprenticeship providers and higher education institutions in Southwest Finland reveal a strong shared understanding of the importance of work-based learning for employability, labour market integration and regional attractiveness. At the same time, the findings identify several gaps and partial overlaps in relation to the quality principles outlined in ILO Recommendation No. 208, particularly when considering the full spectrum of work-based learning beyond formal apprenticeships.

The most prominent gap concerns **the fragmentation of governance and coordination**. While vocational apprenticeship training is grounded in a strong legislative framework, its regional implementation is dispersed across multiple providers without shared coordination structures. In higher education, work placements are essential but organised through highly diverse and partly ad hoc models across disciplines. This fragmentation contrasts with R208's emphasis on coherent frameworks, clarity of roles and coordinated quality governance.

A second key gap relates to **pedagogical support and workplace supervision**. Consultations consistently highlight uneven guidance practices, both in apprenticeships and higher education placements. The lack of systematic workplace instructor training, combined with reactive rather than proactive support, limits the consistent achievement of learning outcomes. This only partially aligns with R208, which places strong emphasis on structured learning arrangements and trained supervisors.

Remuneration and learner protection emerge as a third critical gap. While remuneration is formally present in apprenticeships, wage structures and employer costs remain unclear. In higher education, unpaid internships have become increasingly common, even where placements resemble productive work. This situation diverges significantly from R208's principle that quality apprenticeships and work-based learning should involve fair remuneration or compensation and safeguard against exploitation.

The consultations also reveal **limited alignment regarding adult learners, career changers and flexible pathways**. Current funding and structural arrangements prioritise young learners, while adult reskilling and mid-career transitions are insufficiently supported despite growing labour market needs. Although R208 explicitly promotes apprenticeships across age groups, this principle is not yet fully realised in regional practice.

Finally, **quality assurance, monitoring and inclusiveness**, particularly for international learners, remain underdeveloped. Quality monitoring is fragmented and largely reactive, with limited use of shared indicators or outcome tracking. International students face specific barriers related to language requirements, unpaid placements and restricted access to employer networks, highlighting a gap between R208's equality and inclusion objectives and day-to-day regional implementation.

Overall, the consultations suggest that the main non-overlaps with ILO Recommendation No. 208 lie not in conflicting goals but in operationalisation and coverage. These gaps point to clear areas where the QUEEN project can add value by translating international quality principles into coherent regional practices, extending quality standards to diverse forms of work-based learning, strengthening

pedagogical support, improving fairness and inclusion, and enhancing coordination and quality assurance across education levels.

References:

Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation, 2023 (No. 208): guide for policymakers:

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Alignment of Regional Consultation Findings with Cross-Cutting Themes

The regional strategies of Southwest Finland strongly emphasize cross-cutting priorities such as inclusiveness, skills development, and the digital and green transition, which are reflected in multiple initiatives and policy frameworks. The consultation findings broadly confirm the relevance of these priorities but also highlight gaps between strategic objectives and practical implementation in apprenticeship-based models and higher education work placements.

With regard to **inclusiveness**, consultations indicate that while inclusive models and support mechanisms exist, access to high-quality work-based learning remains uneven. International students, adult learners and career changers face barriers related to funding structures, language requirements and the prevalence of unpaid placements. This suggests that inclusiveness is strategically well embedded but operationally inconsistent across sectors and education levels.

In the context of the **digital and green transition**, the region demonstrates strong strategic commitment, particularly through smart specialisation priorities. However, consultation findings show that digital, green and sustainability-related competencies are not yet systematically integrated into apprenticeship content or work placements. Instead, their inclusion largely depends on sector, employer capacity and individual initiatives, limiting the coherence of skills development aligned with future labour market needs.

Regarding the **focus on skills**, stakeholders consistently recognise apprenticeships and work placements as key pathways to employment and skills acquisition. Nevertheless, consultations reveal variability in pedagogical support, learning outcomes and quality assurance, suggesting that skills development objectives are achieved unevenly. Opportunities for adult reskilling and flexible pathways remain underutilised despite clear regional demand.

Finally, although **artificial intelligence** is identified as a strategic priority at regional and national level, its role in apprenticeships and work placements is still emerging. Consultation findings indicate limited and fragmented integration of AI-related competencies, reflecting an early stage of translation from strategic ambition to operational practice.

Overall, the consultations suggest that the main gaps are not related to policy direction but to implementation, coordination and quality assurance. These gaps point to a need for more systematic integration of cross-cutting themes into apprenticeship-based and work-based learning models, as well as stronger mechanisms to ensure inclusiveness, pedagogical quality and alignment with future-oriented skills across the region.

Conclusion

The findings of this regional analysis demonstrate that Southwest Finland has a strong foundation for high-quality work-based learning. Both apprenticeship training in vocational education and practical training in universities of applied sciences are supported by stable legislative frameworks, well-established institutional structures and generally positive attitudes among employers and education providers. The comparison with the EFQEA criteria further confirms that most of the key quality elements are already embedded in Finnish legislation and regional practice. In many respects, the challenge is therefore not the absence of structures but ensuring their consistent implementation and further development.

At the same time, the consultations revealed several common development needs across educational levels. These include strengthening pedagogical support in workplaces, improving the visibility and attractiveness of apprenticeship and internship models for employers, supporting international learners more effectively, and creating more coherent regional cooperation structures. Stakeholders also highlighted the need for more flexible pathways for adult learners, career changers and groups requiring additional support, as well as stronger links between skills anticipation and work-based learning opportunities.

A recurring theme throughout the consultations was the fragmented nature of employer engagement. From a company perspective, the wide variety of apprenticeship, internship and work-based learning models can be difficult to understand, particularly when cooperation opportunities are offered by multiple educational institutions. Stakeholders therefore identified a need for more coordinated communication, joint operating models and long-term partnerships that would simplify collaboration and create greater value for employers.

Despite current labour market challenges and the decline in available placements, the consultations also highlighted many examples of successful cooperation between educational institutions and employers. Participants emphasised that these positive experiences should be communicated more actively, as successful examples can increase awareness, strengthen employer confidence and encourage wider participation in work-based learning schemes.

The findings also provide concrete directions for implementing the objectives of the Southwest Finland Regional Strategy 2040+ and the Regional Programme 2026–2029. Rather than requiring new legislative measures, many of the identified development needs can be addressed through stronger regional coordination, stakeholder collaboration and strategic cooperation between education providers, employers and public authorities. The Regional Ecosystem for Continuous Learning, together with existing regional governance structures, offers a practical platform for promoting shared operating models, improving employer engagement, strengthening guidance and support practices, and enhancing the visibility of work-based learning opportunities. The regional policy instrument can therefore serve as a catalyst for translating the identified quality improvements into coordinated regional action, while supporting the region's strategic goals related to skills development, employment, business competitiveness and the availability of talent.

Quality Assurance in Finnish education system is based on trust of the quality management systems of the educational institutions themselves, with frequent monitoring from the national Finnish Education

Evaluation Centre (FINEEC). In addition to internal institutional monitoring, quality assurance in apprenticeships and work placements would benefit from more cross-cutting evaluations regarding continuous improvement, stakeholder feedback, monitoring of outcomes, consistency of implementation, inclusiveness, and evidence-based decision-making, which are all central elements of the EFQEA framework.

Overall, the findings suggest that the future priority for Southwest Finland is not the creation of entirely new systems, but the strengthening of coordination, inclusiveness and quality within existing structures. In this context, the QUEEN project provides an important opportunity to translate European quality principles into practical regional cooperation models, strengthen collaboration between vocational education, higher education and working life, and support the implementation of the region's long-term strategic objectives through evidence-based policy learning and stakeholder cooperation.