FINNISH NATIONAL AGENCY FOR EDUCATION

Ulkoministeriö Utrikesministeriet Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

HEP PROGRAMME 2024-2026

Synthesis of the HEP annual reporting 2024

1. THE AIMS OF THE HEP PROGRAMME 2023-2026

The Higher Education Partnership Programme (HEP) supports partnerships between Finnish higher education institutions (HEIs) and HEIs in the global South for collaboration related to **methodological, educational and administrative dimensions of higher education.**

The HEP programme **develops the quality of higher education** through international cooperation and specifically aims to boost graduate **employability, digitalization** and both **social and technological innovations**. Attention is given to promoting equal access to higher education for a diverse group of students. HEP also supports student and staff exchange to pursue mutual exchanges and learning.

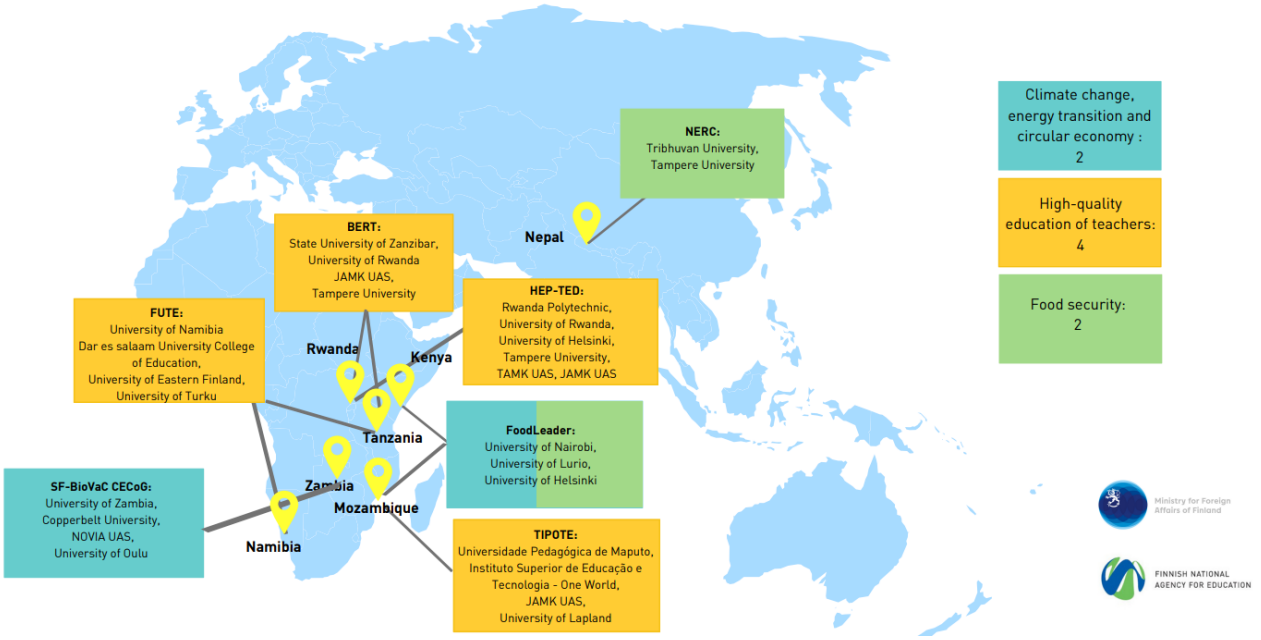
The thematic priorities of the HEP programme are:

- teacher education (primary, secondary, vocational)
- climate change, energy transition and the circular economy, and
- food security

Currently, there are **7 HEP projects**, involving **7 partner countries**: Kenya, Namibia, Nepal, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania and Zambia. The 7 partnerships involve **totally 20 HEIs**: 9 Finnish and 11 from the partner countries.

Finland's Ministry for Foreign Affairs provides funding for the programme through its development cooperation funds and the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) manages the programme.

HEP projects 2024-2026 on a map



2. ACHIEVEMENT OF RESULTS DURING THE REPORTING PERIOD

The HEP partnerships have all made good overall progress in the year 2024, with activities mainly proceeding according to workplans. Delays have occurred, mainly due to late procurements, software incompatibilities and partner country staff workloads. Challenges related to virus outbreaks and political instability also influenced project activities, but appropriate mitigation was found, through digital alternatives. Some minor changes to activities and approaches were made based on EDUFI monitoring recommendations, to enhance the project effectiveness and impact.

HEP Programme level Results Framework

The HEP programme long-term objective (IMPACT) is that HEIs contribute to sustainable development through quality, inclusive, working-life relevant higher education. The programme has two expected outcomes. The first focuses on institutional-level development while the second relates to staff capacities.

The OUTCOME-level aims relate to four more specific, short-term objectives:

- Educational offer (new study programmes and courses)
- Professional development (training of admin and academic staff)
- New pedagogical methods, incl. digitalized and blended education
- Access to higher education for students with vulnerable backgrounds

IMPACT
HEIs in the partner countries contribute to sustainable development by providing high-quality, inclusive and working-life relevant higher education.
OUTCOME 1
Strengthened educational and institutional capacities of partner HEIs in providing working-life relevant higher education
Output 1: Strengthened educational capacity, including/in particular renewed degree programmes and individual courses
Output 2: Strengthened capacity of teachers and experts involved in projects in teaching and administration (professional development)
OUTCOME 2
Improved quality of the partner HEIs' education, including digitalized and blended education
Output 3: Improved pedagogical methods and new innovative solutions created for teaching and learning.
Output 4: Improved access to higher education for students with vulnerable backgrounds

Educational offer (study programmes, courses)

Concerning development of new educational offer, the initial HEP project period was characterized by preparatory work to ensure relevance of the new educational components planned, which is a crucial step in the curriculum development process. Courses to be revised have been identified and the partnerships have been working on **specific needs assessments, mappings and landscape analysis**.

Bench-marking visits to Finland have been arranged but even more importantly, also to neighboring regions and countries. Some partnerships have already established new courses, pedagogical or quality assurance tools, ready for institutional approval or external accreditation.

*The HEP-TED partnership has strengthened **quality assurance methods**, by a new self-assessment framework for teachers, as well as student feedback tools. They are currently under review for approval at University of Rwanda and Rwanda Polytechnic.*

***A first master-level Postgraduate Programme in Technical Teacher Education** at Rwanda Polytechnic has been developed.*

Professional development

As evidenced by the progress indicator below, 1047 staff has participated in professional development during 2024. Most partnerships have offered these trainings both in physical, hybrid and digital forms. Internet connectivity has proven to be a challenge but was appropriately mitigated through the use of pre-recorded videos and learning materials. Blended learning has also been used in the staff training, where assignments were done as preparations for a specific training course, and also continued afterwards in smaller teams.

Access to higher education for students with vulnerable backgrounds

Several HEP partnerships demonstrate sincere efforts towards more inclusive access to higher education, and support during the studies. In the **BERT project in Rwanda and Tanzania, students with disabilities are directly involved in project activities**, with actions focusing on awareness-raising about student rights, landscape mapping regarding obstacles for students with disabilities, and developing assistive technologies.

Other partnerships have worked on identifying gaps in institutional inclusion policies and strengthening disability-inclusive pedagogies, as well as providing teacher trainees with improved competencies in inclusive education.

The project activities have also focused on enhancing gender balance in higher education, e.g through events related to women in STEM (BioVac and HEP-TED) or strengthening the WASH facilities for female students to prevent absences (NERC).

Progress according to HEP Programme level indicators

Based on data provided in the 2024 annual reports, the programme progress is presented in the table below, based on HEP programme-level indicators. It is worth mentioning that the first indicator measuring impact based on the leadership survey is not such a relevant indicator at this stage, as most respondents indicated that it is too early to assess the long-term impact after only one year.

PROGRAMME LEVEL IMPACT AND OUTCOME: INDICATORS			
Level	Indicator	Source of verification	2024
IMPACT HEIs in the partner countries contribute to sustainable development by providing high-quality, inclusive and working-life relevant higher education	**Indicator 1** Satisfaction of the leadership of the partner HEIs on the impacts of the projects.	Annual standard leadership feedback survey[1] (scale 1-6).	**4,7**
OUTCOME 1 Strengthened educational and institutional capacities of partner HEIs in providing working-life relevant higher education (*renewed degree programmes and individual courses, professional development*)	**Indicator 2** Number of staff engaged in capacity development, including exchange programmes.	Project annual reports, lists of participants	**1047** **(50% female)**
	Indicator 3 Number of educational institutions, incl. higher education, reached through measures aimed to increase their capacity	Project annual reports, lists of participants	**62**
OUTCOME 2 Improved quality of the partner HEIs' education, including digitalized and blended education (*innovative pedagogical methods, inclusive access to higher education*)	**Indicator 4** Student satisfaction on new and/or revised courses	Annual standard student feedback survey	**Available in 2025**

[1] Scoring (∑a+b)/2n. Arithmetic average. Each score provided by the leaders for questions a and b above are counted together. This sum is divided by the number of answering leaders times two.

Risk encountered during implementation

The 2024 reports and risk matrixes of HEP-funded projects highlight common challenges in the early implementation phase. Operational risks such as procurement delays, staff turnover, and digital limitations are widespread and affect timelines and remote collaboration. Projects have responded with internal adjustments and technical solutions.

Strategic and contextual risks—like political shifts and institutional restructuring—are harder to control but have been clearly acknowledged, supporting adaptation and contingency planning. Economic risks, including rising costs and funding delays, have led many projects to revise financial plans and improve budgeting flexibility.

Importantly, several projects have reported reduced risk levels due to stronger partnerships, better coordination, and timely resource use—demonstrating a learning-based approach to risk management. Continued attention to risk assessment and regular updates will be key as projects move into more intensive implementation stages.

3. CONSISTENCY WITH THE FINNISH DEVELOPMENT POLICY

The Human Rights Based Approach, Gender Equality and Non-discrimination

The HEP projects follow a human rights-based approach by supporting non-discrimination, inclusion, participation, accountability, and transparency. A wide variety of stakeholders are involved from the beginning, and their roles and responsibilities are identified.

Gender Equality

All seven projects actively integrate gender equality into their operations. BERT uses an intersectional lens, empowering **women with disabilities** and placing women in leadership. FUTE and HEP-TED ensure **gender balance** in the collaborative thematic partnership teams and promote **female leadership.** FoodLeader's human resource survey reflects positive feedback on gender equality implementation. NERC and SF-BioVac plan gender-sensitive content in teaching and materials and TIPOTE tackles **gender-based discrimination**. Across projects, gender-balanced participation in activities, disaggregated data, workshop facilitation by women, and open access to mobility opportunities reflect a strong commitment to gender equity.

Non-discrimination & Disability Inclusion

The projects are committed to non-discrimination and aim to include people with disabilities and other marginalized groups. They support equal access to learning, teaching, and cooperation by using inclusive methods and removing barriers. Special attention is given to both visible and invisible challenges that may affect participation. Projects encourage open discussion, raise awareness, and strengthen policies to support inclusion. All activities are planned to make sure no one is left out.

Non-discrimination & Disability Inclusion

All projects affirm non-discrimination and inclusive engagement in planning and activities and tries to ensure **digital accessibility** and open participation for all educators, using inclusive platforms. BERT and TIPOTE focused notably on **disability inclusion.** BERT empowers **students with disabilities** through peer support, leadership, and policy change. TIPOTE focuses on both **visible and invisible disabilities** and broader exclusion factors, while FoodLeader has tracked perceptions of accessibility and discrimination through surveys. HEP-TED works with institutions like Rwanda's Institute for Special Neds Education SNIE to strengthen inclusive pedagogy. NERC recognizes structural access limitations and promotes ongoing dialogue. The SF-BioVac project design includes awareness of inclusion needs.

Climate resilience and protection of the environment

The projects reviewed have taken various steps to support environmental sustainability and climate resilience. A key focus area is the integration of environmental themes into education and training. Projects have incorporated topics such as climate change, sustainable food systems, and disaster preparedness into curricula and capacity-building activities. This approach strengthens awareness and skills related to environmental issues among both staff and students.

Digital tools and online collaboration are widely used to reduce the need for travel. Online teaching and virtual meetings have become routine, and when travel is necessary, it is typically planned to combine multiple activities within a single trip, improving efficiency and minimizing environmental impact. In daily operations, projects have also made choices that reflect environmental awareness. These include a preference for digital over printed materials, the provision of vegetarian meal options, and the promotion of public transportation.

Although environmental sustainability is not the primary focus in most of the projects, there is a growing recognition of its relevance. The inclusion of climate-related content in both educational and project-level activities suggests a foundation for more systematic work on environmental responsibility in the future.

4. PARTNERSHIPS AND COOPERATION

Partnerships between institutions in HEP projects have generally worked well, with mutual respect, shared goals, and a strong commitment to the collaboration. Many of the partnerships are based on earlier cooperation, while others were built during the project through open dialogue and joint learning. Differences between institutions—such as their size, focus, or experience—often brought useful perspectives, though they also required careful coordination and understanding of different contexts.

Good communication has been important for planning and carrying out project activities. Project teams have set up regular meetings and used different online tools to share information and stay in touch. These efforts helped with joint planning, progress monitoring, and making joint decisions. Still, some challenges remained—for example, different academic calendars, working cultures, or competing responsibilities, which sometimes caused delays or required flexible solutions.

Written agreements and clear coordination structures supported shared understanding and made it easier to follow up. However, differences in administrative systems sometimes made cooperation more complex and required extra time and effort. Open and inclusive ways of working helped partners stay engaged and feel responsible for the outcomes.

Trust played an important role in successful cooperation. Being open to different ideas, listening actively, and working towards shared goals helped build trust among partners. In-person meetings, shared tasks, and regular communication further supported good relationships. The Project Boards supported the work by giving guidance, reviewing progress, and supporting broader goals.

Involving external stakeholders and associate partners was often valuable and helped make the projects more relevant, built stronger local support, and increased the chances for longer-term impact. Stakeholders contributed through events, feedback, or advisory roles and helped link the project to wider development goals.

Good practices in implementation:

- Early relationship-building and joint planning
- Clear roles, jointly agreed aims, co-creation in joint collaborative teams, regular communication with attention to linguistic
- Co-developed curricula to foster relevance, blended learning to increase accessibility, institutional support to anchor inclusive pedagogies
- Stakeholder engagement beyond academia to boosts visibility and broader impact
- South-South collaboration to sustain results
- Anticipate delays—in procurement, reporting, auditing

5. PROJECT VISIBILITY

During the year, HEP projects actively shared information, results, and updates with different audiences. Communication efforts were planned based on each project's stage and context, using a mix of tools and channels. Communication efforts often included contributions from all partner institutions, which supported a sense of ownership and collaboration. News articles and updates were written and shared through various channels, often in rotation among partners.

Many projects began the year by establishing communication teams and structured dissemination plans. These were implemented through institutional websites, newsletters, social media platforms, and internal university communication channels. Projects created dedicated webpages and blog sites, which were regularly updated with news, stories, and project outcomes.

Stakeholder engagement was a central focus across projects. Partnerships were strengthened through meetings and presentations with ministries, embassies, universities, NGOs, and international organizations. Participation in events such as university research weeks, conferences, and public seminars helped extend the projects' visibility beyond academia.

Some initiatives gained national media coverage through radio and television broadcasts, significantly increasing their outreach. In one case, a workshop on inclusive education was aired on national television, with participation from embassy officials and government representatives.

Digital media played a key role, with social media channels such as LinkedIn and Instagram used to share real-time updates, build professional networks, and highlight achievements. In several cases, audiovisual materials were developed, and content was shared on YouTube and public websites to ensure broader accessibility.

Projects also presented their work in high-profile academic and policy forums, including international conferences and embassy briefings. Participation in global platforms enabled the projects to contribute to discussions on topics like teacher education, nutrition, sustainable development, and energy access, enhancing their relevance and visibility.

Overall, communication and dissemination activities were characterized by a combination of strategic planning, multi-channel delivery, and inclusive stakeholder engagement. These efforts strengthened partnerships and laid the groundwork for future collaboration and sustainability.

Project	Publications and Articles
BERT	Forthcoming: Landscape Analysis on disability inclusion in East African HEIs Forthcoming: Global Mapping Desk Review on best practices in inclusive learning
Foodleader	No publications in the first year of the project
FUTE	Iipinge et al. (2024): Future teacher education for sustainable development (conference paper at EduCon, Namibia, Sept 2024)
HEP-TED	Several articles and web content from different partners
NERC	No publications yet, draft manuscript underway on food composition database
SF-BioVac	No official publications yet, dissemination via LinkedIn
TIPOTE	Irmeli Maunonen-Eskelinen: Living Lab approach to inclusive pedagogy (Arena, in Finnish) Pigga Keskitalo: Professorin työpäivä (KIDE Journal, 2/2024, in Finnish)

6. QUALITY ASSURANCE

Internal quality assurance methods

Across all projects, internal quality assurance primarily revolves around regular monitoring and evaluation through meetings, reporting, and tracking activities. Most projects hold bi-weekly or monthly meetings among project coordinators and relevant personnel to ensure progress and address any challenges. Specific tools like risk management tables, timesheet submissions, and project management handbooks are being used to manage budgets, activities, and resources. Many projects also conduct surveys (pre- and post-activity) to assess the quality of workshops and events, with feedback used for continuous improvement. Internal communication is maintained through digital platforms like Teams, Zoom, and email.

External quality assurance methods

Externally, quality assurance is ensured through regular meetings with the broader project team and external stakeholders. These include general project meetings, project board sessions, and specialized expert reviews. Transparency is maintained with all documents being accessible to project partners, and meeting minutes are shared. Several projects incorporate feedback surveys to evaluate workshops and other activities, while external audits are conducted for financial transparency and accountability. These external mechanisms help ensure compliance with project goals, financial guidelines, and best practices.

Some examples of concrete monitoring mechanisms:

- Timesheets submitted monthly by partners to ensure budget follow-up and accountability
- A financial guidelines handbook to ensure joint understanding of processes
- Regular "traffic light" meetings to assess risks and progress based on the result framework
- Online self-evaluation workshop for team members
- A designated monitoring and evaluation expert to oversee quality assurance

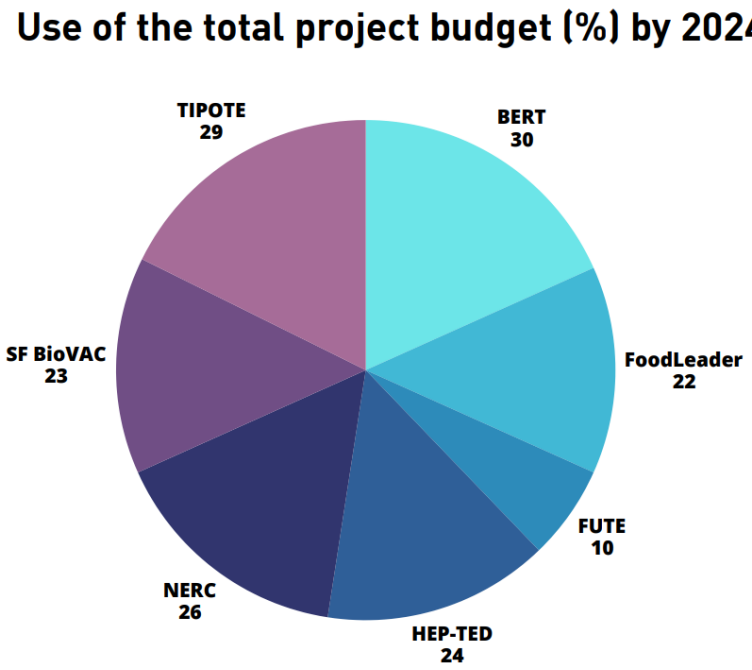
7. MOBILITY SCHEME

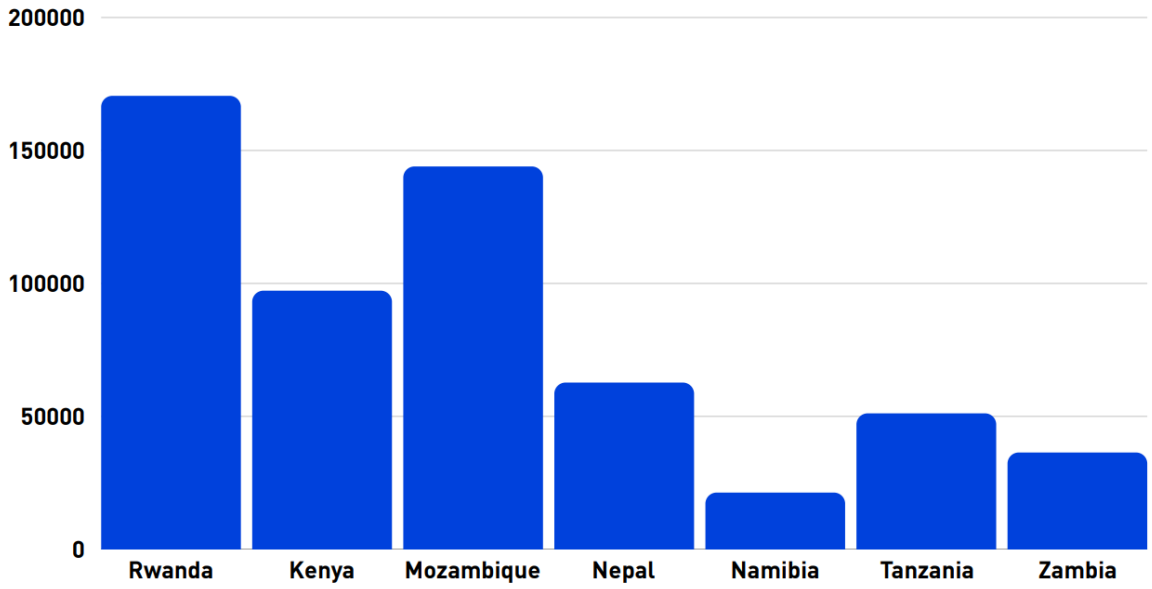
In the reporting year, the projects had not yet started student exchanges, but plans were in place for 2025. The cooperation has started with staff mobility.

8. FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

The total budget for the HEP projects for 2024–2026 is approximately 6.9 million euros. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs covers 90 % of this amount, while the remaining 10 % is self-financed. The first payment for the projects was 30 % of the granted aid.

The projects have started off well. The table below shows that most projects have currently used around 20–30 % of their total budgets. The second table presents the distribution of payments by southern partner countries. Rwanda and Mozambique each host two projects, which explains why these countries receive the largest share of the funding.

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