

# Increasingly diverse universities




Overview of learning support needs  
and proposed measures to support  
the student spectrum

SYL

# 1. Introduction

In 2017, Finland set a target of 50% of the age group 25–34 completing higher education by 2030. Since then, the goal has moved to 2035, and achieving the target still seems challenging. Efforts have been made to increase the number of persons attending education without increasing permanent funding for higher education institutions. In its Sustainable Growth Program of 2019 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022), the Ministry of Education and Culture estimated that achieving the education level target would require additional investments of up to €190 million annually for several years.

In addition to the lack of funding, the National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL) is concerned about the coping of new students in their studies. It is clear that if admissions are increased, the group of students will also be increasingly diverse, especially given the changes that have taken place in recent years in compulsory education, in curricula that emphasize support for previous levels of education, and in legislation (Sointu et al., 2024). From the perspective of equality, support for students is weak and may even be completely lacking at the higher education level. Even now, the completion of studies is seen as a challenge, and many students drop out. A responsible increase in the level of education requires that the needs of the entire increasingly diverse group of students are taken into account so that everyone has a genuine opportunity to complete their studies. At worst, changes affecting university studies and coping with them, as well as inadequate learning support measures, may increase the risk of exclusion from education and society



(Pesonen et al., 2023). The level of education will not increase if the students do not graduate.

In this action plan, SYL presents three themes that affect the different learning support and guidance needs of students as the student population expands and becomes more diverse: 1) diverse learners and individual arrangements 2) students' generic skills, and 3) students with an immigration background. This plan includes an overview of these issues and proposals for actions to support graduation.

## 2. Review of the current situation

### 2.1 Diverse learners and challenges in individual arrangements

According to the Eurostudent VII survey, 37.7% of women and 32.2% of men studying at a university experienced disabilities including health problems or learning difficulties (Korkeamäki & Vuorento, 2021). Of these students, 4.8% of women and 3.8% of men reported learning difficulties. However, according to Sointu and colleagues (2024), perceived learning difficulties vary between 5.8% and 11.5%. In a study carried out in 2023 by SYL and the National Union of Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (SAMOK), 10.1% of students reported being on the neurodivergent spectrum (Naalisvaara et al. 2023). According to Kiljunen et al. (2024), 14.1% of university students have a history of learning support from previous school levels. A previous study showed that students in need of support are exerting themselves more than other students to pursue their studies, spend more time studying and feel that the challenges related to studying undermine their quality of life (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011; Lambert & Dryer, 2018). In particular, challenges with reading and writing (LUKI) are the most common needs for support in higher education institutions (Korkeamäki & Vuorento, 2021). Neurodiverse students with LUKI challenges are one of the largest groups in need of support (McDowall & Kiseleva, 2024). Students with diverse support needs are also at risk of dropping completely out of education (Pesonen et al., 2023). In fact, the lack of support and care has been found to be linked to dropping out of

studies (Korkeamäki & Vuorento, 2021).

In universities, support is provided by many different actors, such as teaching staff and administration education specialists, as well as experts in psychology, counselling, and special pedagogy. However, the situation is not coherent, as traditional learning and teaching culture and a strong culture of individual study arrangements based on the medical model influence the organization and systematic nature of support. In the current situation, the responsibilities and operating models for providing systematic support are often unclear. Support should be developed in a research-based fashion by clarifying the distribution of work, the roles and the practices for providing support between different operators (Sointu, Vuojärvi, Korkeamäki, Pesonen & Äikäs, 2025). Extensive knowledge and understanding of the support available for learning and the needs for this support also helps the teaching staff to take the requirements of the diversifying student population into account in their pedagogical arrangements (Sointu et al., 2025).

## 2.2 Students' generic skills

Generic skills – meaning work skills taught alongside subject-specific content and skills – have a significant impact on the progress of higher education students' studies.. Managing these skills is one of the objectives of higher education as a prerequisite for building expertise in your own field, and they form the basis for building expertise in one's own field alongside to learning field-specific knowledge and skills. Generic skills central for progressing in higher education include critical thinking, argumentation, problem-solving, interaction skills and evaluation of information sources (Halpern,

2014). However, goal-oriented support for learning these skills requires combining them with courses. This means skills should be made visible in learning objectives for courses, utilised in teaching and steer assessment methods towards learning them (Tuononen et al., 2020).

The Kappas 1 (Ursin et al., 2021) -project published by the Ministry of Education and Culture assessed the generic skills of higher education students, including analytical reasoning and evaluation, problem-solving, argumentative writing, and writing mechanics. According to the findings, the majority of higher education students had either satisfactory or poor levels of these skills, but the proportion of excellent results increased among university students who were at the final stages of their studies. Statistically significant differences between fields of study were not observable in the assessment results, whereas the student's previous educational background and socio-economic background had a clear impact. Among other factors, success in the mother tongue test of the matriculation examination was linked to a high level of generic skills. Furthermore, those who had completed the matriculation examination had a statistically significant higher level of skills compared to others. Socio-economic background was linked to the possession of generic skills, especially the manifestation of a culture of reading and learning in childhood. (Kappas 1, 2021). Differences in research results draw attention to influence from upper secondary and comprehensive school education, as well as differences in the contexts of learning outside of school.

Previous research has identified the need to deepen the understanding of the background factors affecting

generic skills. There is unevenness among students in skills development during higher education (Hyytinen et al., 2015) and how useful different skills are perceived as (Tuononen et al., 2019). Interaction with peers and feedback from teachers and peers are identified as meaningful resources in identifying development needs (Halpern, 2014; Toom et al., 2017). Increasing general awareness of which skills in the age group require special attention can support the planning of courses in an equal and pedagogically sound, predictable manner.

### 2.3 Students with an immigration background

In this context, we use the term immigration background, following the example of the Finnish National Agency for Education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022), which covers individuals' diverse backgrounds better than the categorisation 'immigrant', for example, in a situation where an individual was born to immigrant parents in Finland. An immigration background and speaking a first language other than Finnish or Swedish are separated here, as the language proficiency of an individual cannot be assessed based solely on their background (Iikkanen et al., 2023). This excludes foreign students in higher education institutions in Finland, who have primarily moved to Finland to pursue their studies.

The general representativeness of people with an immigration background in Finnish higher education is clearly lower than their proportion of the population. Furthermore, their position in education is not always recognised, or there is no willingness to recognise it, even if there is a need for special support (Airas et al., 2019). For example, taking cultural differences into account in how students are expected to self-direct in


their studies could enable the provision of individualised support in the early stages of the studies.

An immigration background is linked to lower success in studies and to the fact that young people with an immigration background must look for their educational paths more than youth with a Finnish background. This has nothing to do with their level of knowledge or skills, but rather with their limited educational opportunities. When examining the link to academic success, it is important to consider the impact of socioeconomic background, as its significance may be greater than that of immigration background itself. Of course, an immigration background is often also linked to a weaker socio-economic position, which may highlight the lack of participation in education. (Castaneda, A., & Eid, M., 2025).

## 2.4 How can we support a diversifying student body?

Raising the level of higher education accessibly requires more than just increasing enrollment. Supporting the completion of studies and the graduation of a diverse student body requires work on several levels and a rethinking of the entire support system. This requires a systematic investment in the development of students' generic skills, the strengthening of individual support measures, and the identification of educational paths for diverse learners and students from different backgrounds.

In SYL's view, as a society, we cannot afford to ignore the increasingly diverse student population. Raising the level of education in a responsible manner is only possible if every student is guaranteed genuine



opportunities to succeed in their studies and obtain a degree. In the previous sections, we have identified factors that affect the success of a diversifying student population. In the following section, we present measures that offer concrete solutions for developing a more equitable and accessible higher education system.

### 3. Proposed measures

Measure 1: Setting up a working group to prepare an evidence-based national support model for higher education.

In the current situation, support in universities is provided by several parties, such as teaching staff, administrative experts, and social and health service providers. The division of responsibilities and the operating models are not always clear. Determining the need for support and deciding on individual arrangements is often centralised to accessibility contact persons, but the responsibility for organising the support and the operating models varies.

Furthermore, varying and sometimes extremely strict interpretations of data protection legislation make it harder to plan and implement learning support and hinder the flow of information between support services. A model for learning support based on research in a university context would clarify the distribution of work, the roles and the practices of providing support between teaching, administration, and health and social service providers.

A working group should be set up to prepare the model and investigate the options and requirements for providing support. One option for resolving the situation would be to move away from the diagnosis-centric medical model and replace it with a pedagogical model. The pedagogical support model would shift the focus to the support needed in teaching for all students (including those with multiple needs) and reduce the need to regulate learning support needs as sensitive personal data. Another option is to clarify the

interpretation of the law so that the teaching and support services staff could receive the information they need about the support provided to students.

Measure 2: A pilot project of one year of preparatory education for a higher education degree for those who have completed upper secondary education.

At present, preparatory education for a qualification, called TUVVA, is offered after comprehensive school education to persons of compulsory school age who need additional support before transitioning to upper secondary education. TUVVA-education allows students to improve their grades, learn the language of their future qualification, and practise study skills and life management skills. In order for as many upper secondary graduates as possible to move to higher education and succeed in their studies, a similar system is also needed between upper secondary education and higher education. This would improve students' skills in areas such as language proficiency, generic skills, and life management, which in turn would support better study initiation, completion, and graduation rates.

Preparatory education would particularly support students who do not have a direct pathway to higher education or who need additional skills to transition to higher education studies. Preparatory education for higher education could also involve practising reading, writing and independent information acquisition skills in case learners are lacking in them after upper secondary education. Attending the education would not be full-time, but could be done voluntarily alongside work, for example. At the same time, this would increase the understanding of education opportunities

and eligibility for higher education among upper secondary graduates. This would reduce any 'dead ends' in education paths.

**Measure 3: Launching a pilot project on enhanced guidance based on the number of academic credits accumulated at the end of the second year in university.**

The slow progress of studies may indicate challenges in the studies or attachment to them, a lack of motivation towards the studies, due to being in the wrong field for example, or challenges related to mental health or coping. Higher education institutions monitor the progress of students' studies and the completion rate to a very varying degree. Aalto University has examined student data for factors affecting graduation within the target completion time (Suomala et al., 2024). According to the analysis, none of the individual variables correlated strongly with graduation within the target time, but the connection to the credit accumulation after the second year of study was clearer than others.

We propose piloting intensive guidance based on credit accumulation at higher education institutions at the end of the second year. Intensive guidance would be offered to students who have completed fewer than 45 credits by the end of their second year of studies. In this case, the student would be invited to a guidance discussion to talk about problems related to the progress of their studies, the necessary forms of support, or, potentially, a transfer application to a more suitable field. Students would also have the opportunity to refuse this guidance if the slow progress of their studies is planned and intentional.

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SUOMEN YLIOPPILASKUNTIEN LIITTO

FINLANDS STUDENTKÅRERS FÖRBUND

NATIONAL UNION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN FINLAND

National Union of University Students in Finland is a student organisation which represents approximately 150,000 students in Finland. All student unions in Finnish universities are members of SYL. A student union is a public corporation which is governed by the Universities Act.

**Nikolas Bursiewicz**

Education Policy Adviser

**Heidi Rättyä**

Education Policy Adviser

**Samuli Leppämäki**

Board Member

**Heli Ylikoski**

Board Member

[syl.fi](http://syl.fi)

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