

Belief in the future demands actions today!

During the past years students have faced an endless list of cuts and reforms, last of which have been the talks about cutting into the pensions generated from studies.

Higher education, students, and their importance in Finnish society are widely recognized. From one government program to the next, students and the education sector and their needs are strongly emphasized. However, we believe it is time to ask whether we have been able to focus on the essentials and identify the most effective measures.

Following are a few key figures regarding the situation of our students and higher education system:

- 29% of students experience significant psychological stress (KOTT, 2024)
- 24% of students have feared running out of food and 18% have cut back on medication due to lack of money (KOTT, 2024)
- Between 2021 and 2025, total investment in higher education in Finland fell by 3%, while in OECD countries it grew by 14.2% (Education at Glance, 2025).

At SAMOK, we are particularly concerned about students' opportunities to gain work experience and enter the labor market. In economics, there is a concept known as the scarring effect, whereby challenges encountered early in one's career leave a lasting mark on one's entire career and lifetime earnings. This is not only a heavy burden on a human level, but also a factor that slows down our national economy.

Students represent hope for the future; when young people and students are doing well, it creates faith in the future. At its best, the period of study creates networks and a framework for students' future that will carry them far.

Studies enable networking with working life and stronger integration into society. Various affordable leisure activities and involvement in organizations also create a good foundation and general skills for the future for students. To make this possible, students should be able to focus on their studies above all else.

We must therefore find solutions that strengthen vocational education and training and, at the same time, students' belief in the future. Finland's growth and development do not happen in a vacuum; they require investment. At this particular time, bold investments in people are needed. Investments in education are not wasted, but generate long-term growth and well-being for all sectors of society. Investments in education also send a clear signal to young people that education is worthwhile.

In drawing up this program, we have recognized the pressure that the economic situation is putting on our own sector. This encourages us to be creative. We want to offer new perspectives, development directions to be explored through experimentation, and cost-effective solutions to everyday challenges.

Sustainable increase in education level

Finland needs more highly educated professionals. Regionally comprehensive and work-oriented applied sciences education plays a crucial role in this. Finland's competitiveness requires strengthening the basic funding and RDI activities of UAS:s in order to guarantee the quality of education.

SAMOKs goals:

- **Increase basic funding and fully finance start-up places.**
- **Identify and utilize the full RDI potential of the higher education system.**
- **Develop continuous learning to enable longer working careers.**

The basic funding for universities of applied sciences must be permanently increased to correspond to the increased number of student places. Raising the level of competence cannot be achieved with one-off increases alone, but requires systematic funding that extends beyond electoral terms. Each new place must be fully funded to ensure the quality of teaching and the guidance and support of an increasingly diverse student body. The funding model must be updated to emphasize skill levels rather than output. Funding should support the completion of studies, flexible study paths, and encourage smooth transitions from vocational education to higher education.

The RDI activities of universities of applied sciences and their links to teaching must be better recognized in funding so that the full potential of expertise can be utilized. The terms and conditions of RDI funding must allow for flexible use in the development of expertise and learning. The funding conditions must be clear to all parties in order to avoid internal competition for funding and staff segregation. Funding for RDI activities at universities of applied sciences must be increased without cutting resources for degree programs. Involving students in RDI projects deepens working life connections, meets the needs of companies, and promotes the emergence of new applied research.

We need to focus on continuous learning and break down barriers to changing careers. The transformation of working life requires agile updating of skills, but current structures create unnecessary obstacles to this. Restrictions on changing fields and a rigid quota for first-time students threaten to limit individuals' opportunities to respond to changing skill needs. The quota for first-time students must be changed so that those who have completed fewer than 60 credits retain their status as first-time students. This will reduce the risk of wrong choices and lower the threshold for updating skills. Smaller learning modules than degrees must be resourced and the modularity of studies developed to respond to changes in sector-specific skills needs.

A sufficient income is a guarantee for future skills

The Finnish social security system must focus on enabling lifelong learning and ensuring stable learning paths.

SAMOKs goals:

- **Simplify the social security structure by implementing a pilot program including students to new general social security benefit.**
- **Student debt must be brought under control.**
- **Continuous learning needs its own support.**

In recent years, student financial aid for higher education students has been subject to several legislative changes. The transfer of students to the housing supplement of student financial aid, the increase in the state guarantee for student loans, and the index freezing of benefits have had a significant impact on students' livelihoods. The lower level of housing supplements and the insufficient supply of affordable housing make it difficult to cover everyday expenses. At the same time, difficulties in repaying student loans have increased and the median loan amounts of students are on the rise. A comprehensive reform of student financial aid is underway, but the proposed solutions alone are not enough to improve the situation. **The level of student financial aid must be raised and the maximum acceptable housing costs for municipal groups receiving housing allowances must be increased.** Housing allowances must be tied to an appropriate index. The security of student loans must be improved by raising the income limits for interest subsidies and making interest subsidies available for more interest periods. Student loan compensation must be developed so that it takes into account the total amount of loans taken out during the entire period of study.

The aim of the social security reform is to create a smoother and simpler system. During the current government term, one step towards reform has been the regulation and introduction of general social security benefit. When combining social security benefits, students must also be included in a smoother and simpler social security system. This can be done by implementing a general social security benefit trial for students. **General social security benefit trial would enable the collection of data on the suitability of it as a source of income during studies.**

A continuous learning support model will be introduced to encourage people to retrain and continue their education without financial risk or excessive debt. Updating skills and changing direction must be made possible in all life situations, including during unemployment, so that we can respond to the needs of working life. Degree studies and the completion of small skill modules should be allowed without losing unemployment benefits or income support.

Learning ability is tomorrow's work ability

Finland thrives on its skilled workforce, but in addition to training, their well-being must also be taken care of. A health survey of university students (KOTT) conducted in 2024 showed that up to 35 percent of university students struggle with study exhaustion and 29 percent with significant mental stress. Action is needed to ensure that students can cope!

SAMOKs goals:

- **Include all university students and people under the age of 29 in the therapy guarantee.**
- **Include in the Pupil and Student Welfare Act the obligation of universities to provide the services of a study psychologist and counselor, as well as staffing levels.**
- **Expand the range of services provided by the Finnish Student Health Service (FSHS), for example, in the areas of sexual health and free contraception, as well as selected specialist medical care services.**

From SAMOK's point of view, the therapy guarantee was welcome, but its implementation remained unclear. There is no medical justification or legal basis for the current age limit of 23 (cf. the definition of a young person in the Youth Act). In addition, the limit is challenging from a service production perspective, as the same customer group is currently treated according to different criteria. It should also be noted that the challenges faced by higher education students are largely related to their stage of life, not their age. SAMOK calls for the extension of the therapy guarantee to all higher education students and for the age limit to be raised to under 29 years of age in accordance with the Youth Act. In addition to a more comprehensive therapy guarantee, we need to invest in preventive work. The organization and resourcing of preventive well-being services in higher education institutions support students' graduation and subsequent employment.

The challenges to learning ability are addressed by harmonizing the criteria for support services and creating staffing levels. At present, there is too much variation in services and their availability. This phenomenon can be partly explained by a shortage of skilled personnel, but a common target level for services is also needed to even out the differences between higher education institutions. Minimum staffing levels must be defined for student welfare services to ensure comprehensive support services for students at universities of applied sciences. **A similar example from lower levels of education can be found in the Student Welfare Act, which does not currently cover higher education institutions.** The ability to study lays the foundation for future work ability and resilience, which are required for a long career. In any case, a continuous increase in the need for services is to be expected. This is a result of the increase in the number of places available, which will significantly increase the potential group of service users.

Let's reduce bureaucracy and make student healthcare more accessible! For example, in the case of gynecological services and dermatology, which are in high demand among students, the student's care pathway begins at the FSHS but continues with a referral to the welfare services. The current model slows down access to care and increases the administrative burden on both service providers.

A humane and attractive Finland

Finland competes globally for skilled workers. International students are an invaluable resource for our country, and we must retain them through a humane and encouraging immigration policy. With an aging population, we cannot afford to lose a single skilled worker.

SAMOKs goals:

- **Grant permanent residence permits automatically to all those who have completed a higher education degree.**
- **Create binding common rules for supervised and responsible student recruitment.**
- **Launch a nationwide employment voucher trial and develop language teaching.**

The Aliens Act must be amended so that permanent residence permits are automatically granted to all those who have completed a higher education degree in Finland, without separate consideration or income limits. The number of international student applications is declining, and according to the report "At What Cost?" (2025), plans to remain in Finland fade as studies progress. The current guidelines place higher education sectors in an unequal position with regard to residence permits and unnecessarily limit Finland's knowledge capital. In order for students to build a permanent future in Finland, the requirements for residence permits for family members must also be eased and the processes speeded up.

Higher education institutions must be required to use only audited contractual partners for student recruitment. Financial pressures have increased the use of education agents and, in some cases, misleading marketing, which, combined with high tuition fees and strict income requirements, exposes students to financial hardship. Marketing must provide a realistic picture of the cost of living and the labor market. **Every university of applied sciences that engages in international recruitment must hire an international coordinator who is responsible for the overall integration and community building of students and acts as a bridge to social services.** The regulation of education agents must also be promoted internationally.

SAMOK proposes a nationwide trial of employment vouchers, whereby employers hiring skilled workers would receive a financial incentive. The vouchers would lower the recruitment threshold and compensate for the need for training due to language skills development. Language skills are key to employment, but studying them should not delay graduation. High-quality, sector-specific teaching of domestic languages must be resourced and increased as an integrated part of degrees and work placements. Free language teaching must also be offered after graduation. The proposed measures are a small concession to society, but a decisive reason for students to build their future in Finland.

Work and participation for tomorrow's experts

Ensuring progress in studies and employment are important, as they are essential from the perspective of students, higher education institutions, and society. At the same time, students' social inclusion must be improved so that they can feel part of Finnish society.

SAMOKs goals:

- **Ensure that compulsory training periods are implemented as part of studies.**
- **Change the title of the higher UAS degree to Master (UAS).**
- **Ensure sufficient public funding for the statutory tasks of student unions.**

Finding internships has become significantly more difficult as the labor market has weakened. Many students are already in a situation where their studies are being delayed due to a lack of internships. This also weakens their livelihood, as student financial aid is linked to the progress of their studies. The delay also causes problems for universities of applied sciences, as their funding depends on the number of students graduating. Internships are a significant part of a university of applied sciences degree, ranging from 30 to 120 credits, or 20 to 80 working weeks, depending on the degree. **A national internship voucher should be created to support employers in offering internships to university of applied sciences students and to remove the internship support obligation as a condition for internships, as it places students in an unequal position.**

The title of the higher UAS degree should be changed to Master (UAS). The title of Master would strengthen the recognition, working life value, and international comparability of the degree. The level and qualifications of the current degree title are not sufficiently recognized in working life, even though it is equivalent to a higher degree completed at a university (EQF 7) and provides the same eligibility for public sector positions. Approximately 25,000 students are enrolled in higher degrees at universities of applied sciences, and more than 6,000 graduate each year.

Universities of applied sciences have statutory student unions, but they do not have secure funding to carry out their tasks. **We propose that student unions be guaranteed sufficient basic funding from the state budget to enable them to carry out their statutory tasks to a high standard.** Long-term funding must be secured so that student unions can rely on it from year to year. Student unions do important work to promote the social participation of university of applied sciences students. Their tasks include acting as a link between their members and promoting their social, societal, and intellectual aspirations, as well as those related to their studies and their position in society. The student union's task is to prepare students for active, informed, and critical citizenship.