



Professional  
Doctorate

# Professional doctorate programme

Proposal by 12 universities of applied sciences



# Abstract

Finland needs new solutions to enhance its competitiveness, competence level and innovation capability. Twelve universities of applied sciences propose the establishment of a Professional Doctorate programme in Finland to meet development needs in the workplace and strengthen regional vitality. According to the proposal, the programme would be launched with a national pilot during the next government term.

A Professional Doctorate is a workplace-oriented, multidisciplinary and solution-based degree that complements the Finnish higher education system. It provides an opportunity to develop organisations and competence at the. The degree is equivalent to the corresponding degree from universities but differs in terms of its aims and implementation: the focus is on applied research, cooperation with employers and impact.

Universities of applied sciences are already important actors in RDI activities and regional development. They have developed their research and development activities, built career pathways for researchers and RDI experts and networked with international higher education institutions. A Professional Doctorate programme would be a natural continuum for this development and would enable a professional higher education pathway from Bachelor's and Master's degree to Doctorate.

The proposal is based on the joint preparation work of 12 universities of applied sciences and their readiness to take action. The pilot phase provides an opportunity to test and develop the model in a controlled manner, in collaboration with workplaces and international partners. Now we need the political will and legislative support that would allow Finland to take the next step towards a fully-fledged and effective dual model.

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# 1. Why does Finland need a professional doctorate programme?

Slow economic growth and a decline in international competitiveness are widely recognised challenges to Finland's economy. Although education, research and development are very important to Finland, the country has in many respects failed to achieve the objectives set for higher education and innovation activities. The potential of universities of applied sciences (UAS) as experts in applied research and workplace cooperation has not been fully utilised in solving these problems. The need for a more versatile doctorate programme system has also been overlooked.

Finland's competitiveness is on a poor level. The country clearly lags behind in terms of investments, and innovation capabilities have deteriorated. OECD reports show that since 1991 the number of people with a higher education degree has decreased in comparison to other OECD countries, with approximately 39% of the population aged 25-34 years currently holding a higher education degree. The challenges faced by wellbeing services counties have been recognised, and there is a clear need for practical and high-quality applied research, development and innovation activities in different organisations. The level of competence in companies has to increase in order to improve their competitiveness and opportunities for increasing added value. This applies to SMEs in particular.

At this time, Finland's innovation policy is strongly dependent on leading companies. Although leading company ecosystems offer SMEs new opportunities to participate in networks and innovation activities, their own development needs and possibilities to independently invest in product and service development may take a back seat if sufficient attention is not focused on competence and a higher education community that is suitable

for them. This has been identified in the From Innovation to Growth – A Study on the Innovation Potential of SMEs in Finland report (2025) and in Business Finland's Mid-term evaluation of the leading company initiative (LCI) partnerships final report (2025), both of which emphasise the need to strengthen innovation capabilities and scaling opportunities in SMEs.

A Professional Doctorate programme that strengthens competence in close cooperation with companies would provide new tools to promote Finland's competitiveness and business growth.

The advantage of a doctorate programme with a professional orientation is the fact that it meets a specific need and positions the entire development process in the work environment, thus creating a financial and functional link between education and companies and other work organisations. At best, the research results would change operating methods in the workplace throughout the development process and immediately produce beneficial information. A Professional Doctorate programme would therefore accelerate the discovery of solutions to enhance productivity and competitiveness in the Finnish economy.

## Universities of applied sciences as workplace developers

Universities of applied sciences have been operating in Finland for more than 30 years, as the Experimental Legislation on Universities of Applied Sciences was passed in 1991 and the first universities of applied sciences launched their activities in autumn 1992. In 2005, universities of applied sciences also gained the right to award Master's degrees. Master's degrees awarded by universities of applied sciences are equivalent to Master's degrees awarded by universities. They renew work-related competence and offer an outstanding pathway for employees to develop their competence level to meet the needs of workplaces and increasingly demanding job descriptions. Today, one in four Master's degrees are completed at a UAS.

Cooperation with employers – especially SMEs – is at the core of UAS activities in terms of both education and RDI activities. The Universities of Applied Sciences Act states that the mission of universities of applied sciences is “to provide higher education for professional expert jobs based on the requirements of working life and its development and on the premises of academic research and academic and artistic education and to support the professional growth of students”. Universities of applied sciences “shall also carry out applied research, development and innovation activities and artistic activities that serve education in universities of applied sciences, promote industry, business and regional development and regenerate the industrial structure of the region”.

This close cooperation with employers in all activities and a strong regional development task is what gives universities of applied sciences their special role in Finnish society.

Through their activities, universities of applied sciences have accumulated significant understanding and expertise concerning the situation and needs of companies as well as the ability to cooperate closely with companies in education and research. These strengths also form the basis for the distinctive profile of a Professional Doctorate programme.

Anyone who has completed a Master's degree at a university of applied sciences has the formal qualifications required to apply for doctoral studies offered by universities. However, this opportunity does not meet work-related needs. A Professional Doctorate would supplement the education offered by universities of applied sciences, utilise the full potential of higher education institutions and create an education pathway from Bachelor's and Master's degrees to the doctoral level that serves the competence needs of individuals and workplaces and corresponds to international benchmarks.



## A doctorate programme is a prerequisite for vitality and competitiveness

The Ministry of Education and Culture is leading the work on a vision for higher education and research. This vision work will define the guidelines for higher education until 2040. As a result, this is an excellent time to seek and find solutions for the higher education field that would respond to the challenges facing Finnish society and enable better operating conditions for higher education institutions. The launch of a Professional Doctorate programme in Finland could be one step towards achieving the objectives of raising competence levels and making broader use of applied research.

In this proposal, the starting point for developing a Professional Doctorate is to increase appreciation for professional competence, which was the foundation for creating the entire UAS system. At the same time, it involves applying a new type of development-based thinking to the highest level of education. The societal performance target is to expand the impact of research and development activities to areas that have previously been somewhat isolated in a professional, regional or competence sense.

A Professional Doctorate is linked to concrete workplace development in the same way as Master's theses completed at universities of applied sciences, thus having a direct impact on the development of work-related productivity and competence. This would also create a more versatile model and opportunities to develop the competence level and innovation activities of individuals and organisations while simultaneously accelerating the process of commercialising and utilising innovations.

Greater involvement of universities of applied sciences in regional and business development

requires that doctoral students participate in implementing applied research alongside teaching and research staff. A doctorate programme is a key tool for diversifying competence at higher education institutions and ensuring that competence is disseminated to the region through graduating doctors.

The world of work needs high-level experts who have the ability to apply research in practice and possess a good knowledge of workplaces. The workplace-oriented education and research activities at universities of applied sciences provide a good starting point for strengthening this type of competence. Graduates who complete the Professional Doctorate presented in this proposal will have a development-oriented researcher education. At workplaces, they can serve as researchers as well as innovators, change agents and professional experts. A doctorate based on a dual model produces versatile competence that is suitable for business and industry.

The strong internationalisation trend in universities of applied sciences emphasises the need for a Professional Doctorate programme. An increasing number of universities of applied sciences have networked with international higher education institutions in the areas of education, research and development. For example, doctoral education is one of the development areas in the European University alliances in which universities of applied sciences also participate extensively. Several universities of applied sciences have already agreed on international cooperation to ensure doctoral education for their personnel. Projects and separate agreements have made universities of applied sciences a welcome partner in terms of developing and providing European doctoral education, but the limitations of the national system mean that degrees are awarded through an international partner. In other



words, the Finnish higher education system should – like its international partners – recognise the unique nature of UAS competence.

## Placement of doctors in the labour market

Developing Finland’s vitality and competitiveness requires a high level of competence and quality RDI activities in both the public and private sectors. However, the majority of doctors still find employment in the university sector in Finland. With regard to the R&D goals of the Parliamentary Working Group and the related development of productivity, it is very important to increase the number of doctoral candidates while also ensuring that they are more evenly distributed across different R&D tasks in the public sector and companies.

According to Sivista’s statistical report, the greatest increase in the number of doctors is at universities, but the largest relative increase can be seen in the private sector and among entrepreneurs. Self-employment is more common in the health and well-being sector, which can probably be attributed to physicians who work as entrepreneurs. A report published by

the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2025) mentions the need for doctors in companies but also touches on their difficulties in recruiting R&D experts. Sivista’s Tohtorit työelämässä report (only available in Finnish) highlights the high rate of emigration among expert doctoral graduates.

A close link between the education and workplaces would support the employment of doctors in the business world, which is the starting point for the Professional Doctorate programme presented in this proposal. Level 8 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) states that it allows for this type of work related to a Professional Doctorate that is linked to innovation and practical professional skills.

When a Professional Doctorate programme is closely linked to cooperation with companies, it will contribute to developing the competence level and competitiveness of Finnish business and industry. A professional doctorate pathway is also an opportunity to increase Finland’s retention power with regard to international experts.

## 2. Towards a fully-fledged higher education institution

The Finnish dual model has evolved throughout its existence. When universities of applied sciences were established in the early 1990s, the dual model was very different from what we know today. The development has taken place in the missions, ownership structure and funding model.

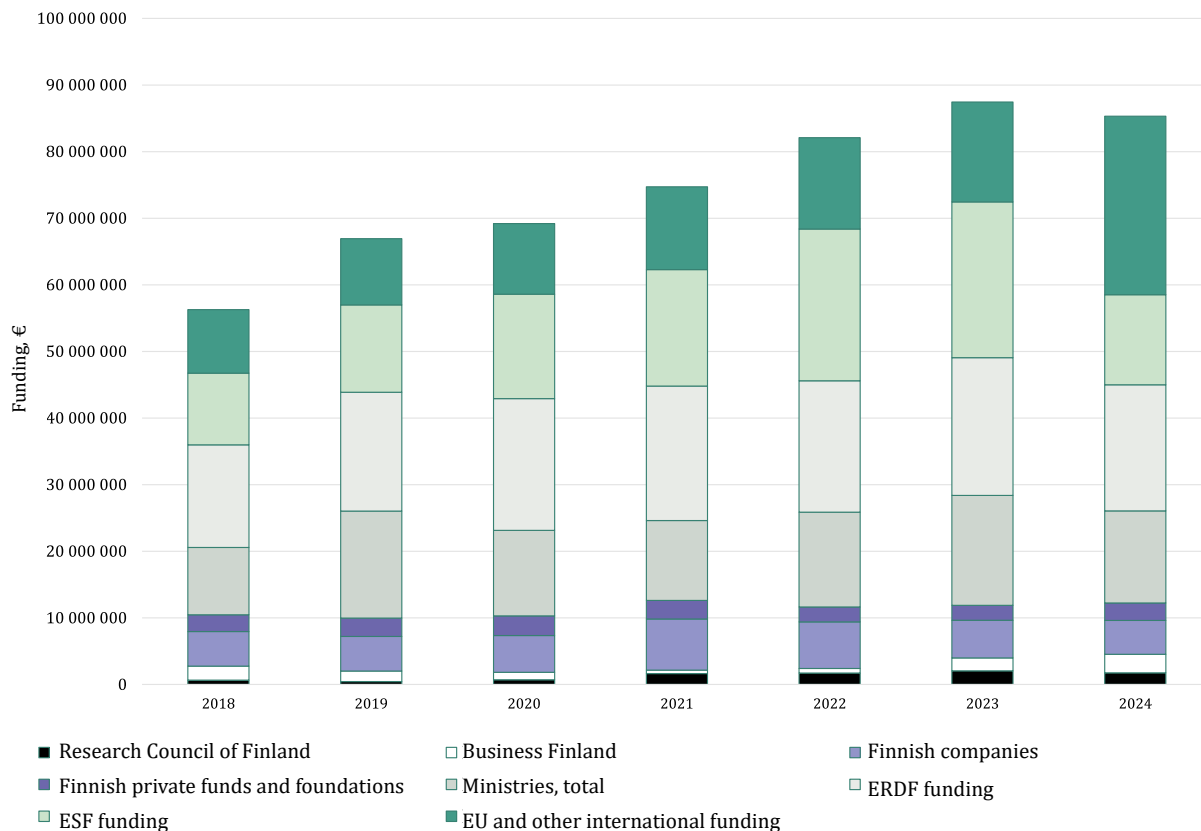
Since the very beginning, universities of applied sciences have responded to changes in the labour market, and they continue to do so. At the time universities of applied sciences were established, their main mission was to provide first-cycle higher education as well as service and (research) development activities to support education. Since then, the educational mission has expanded to include second-cycle Master's degrees awarded by universities of applied sciences, which are equivalent to Master's degrees awarded by universities. The education offering provided by universities of applied sciences has increased and demonstrated its usefulness: in 2024, the number of graduates from universities of applied sciences was 65% higher than 10 years earlier (Vipunen, Attained degrees in UAS education). The From Innovation to Growth – A Study on the Innovation Potential of SMEs in Finland report particularly highlights the need that companies have for professional Master's degree education.

Universities of applied sciences have also significantly developed their RDI activities. Funding for research and development activities acquired through external competition more than doubled between 2015 and 2023 (Vipunen, Research funding for universities of applied sciences). At the same time, improvement in the quality of RDI activities is reflected as an increase in the shares that Business Finland, Horizon Europe and the Research Council of Finland (RCF) hold in the UAS project portfolio. For example, the first RCF-funded

projects led by universities of applied sciences were awarded in the 2020s. Today, RDI activities account for a significant proportion of the volume of UAS activities when measured by number of personnel and turnover. This also makes universities of applied sciences significant applicants for competitive RDI funding and international drivers of applied research and innovation that is based on high-quality science in cooperation with other actors in the education sector, workplaces and regional developers.

In order to develop competence, universities of applied sciences have launched career pathways for researchers and RDI experts and are active members of several European University alliances. International models for developing a Professional Doctorate programme (e.g. in the Netherlands, Portugal, Germany) offer excellent examples in which such programmes contribute to the regional impact and international competitiveness of higher education institutions.

The 12 universities of applied sciences involved in preparing this proposal are located in different parts of Finland and are recognised regional developers in their regions. In terms of external RDI funding, they account for 60% of the total funding at universities of applied sciences. The overall quality and internationality of research has increased over the past decade, and the same applies to the amount of funding. Figure 1 presents the total external



**Figure 1. Total external RDI funding of the 12 universities of applied sciences and the most important sources of funding. (Source of data: Vipunen)**

RDI funding of the 12 universities of applied sciences that prepared this proposal as well as the most important sources of funding. RDI projects funded by the Research Council of Finland, Business Finland and especially international funding sources have emerged alongside traditional and significant regional development funding (ERDF and ESF). The moderate amount of corporate funding is largely explained by the operating environment, where business partners are often SMEs whose limited solvency tends to restrict their participation in a study to steering group work and trials.

In other words, the RDI activities at universities of applied sciences have shown strong growth and development. The question arises as to whether this changing operating environment has been sufficiently taken into account so that Finland and our business sector can

properly benefit from growth in UAS education and RDI activities.

Universities of applied sciences do not yet have access to all the tools needed to develop competence at a higher education institution. The right to award doctorates would allow universities of applied sciences to train high-level experts in applied research, who are needed in companies and other organisations and also in the RDI activities at universities of applied sciences. A doctorate programme with a close link to workplaces would also complement the educational pathways offered by universities of applied sciences from the individual’s perspective so that, after completing a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree at a UAS, students could further increase their competence to serve the needs of industry and commerce through doctoral education.

### 3. International development

In Europe, two main lines are visible in development of the higher education field and doctoral education: structural reform and expansion of the UAS mission.

In terms of structural reform, universities of applied sciences have become professional universities or universities, which has also given them similar rights to train doctors and award other degree titles that were previously reserved only for universities. For example, this type of development took place in England in 1992, when all 33 polytech organisations were given the chance to become universities and they all decided to take that opportunity. Similar structural changes were implemented later in, for example, Ireland, Norway and Portugal. The structural changes were based on the principle of making university education more accessible, improving research skills and enhancing the attractiveness of the higher education institution for both personnel and students. A less frequently mentioned but likely significant factor is the perspective of education exports, i.e. the fact that higher education institutions with university status have more appeal in international markets.

The second development line has been expanding the mission of universities of applied sciences. This involved retaining the structural dual model while expanding the UAS mission – especially in RDI activities. Launching a Professional Doctorate programme has been a key element in this development. Similar development models exist in, for example, Germany and the Netherlands, where Professional Doctorate programmes are being piloted in 2023–2029.

On a global scale, a Professional Doctorate is also more extensively used as part of a versatile education system. Professional Doctorate programmes have been implemented in different forms internationally. Some international examples include Professional Doctorate (prof. doc), Doctor in Education (EdD), Doctor in Business Administration (DBA), Doctor in Nursing (DNP) and Doctor in Social Work (DSW) (Hawkes & Yerrebati 2018). In this proposal, we use a single concept (Professional Doctorate) to refer to doctorates in different fields.

A key objective in developing a Professional Doctorate has been to strengthen the impact of the degree on workplaces and organisational development in different countries. A Professional Doctorate programme expands and deepens the doctorate framework from scientific discussion in the discipline to practical and theoretical problems in the profession. A Professional Doctorate thus creates a bridge between the professional community and scientific discussion. The degree programme strengthens the students' professional skills, in which case the impact is based not only on the implemented development project but also on developing the readiness of the student placed in the work community (Boud et al. 2020).



## 4. For whom is the professional doctorate intended?

A Professional Doctorate is suitable for experts and managers who work in various product development, innovation and development tasks or otherwise have an interest in solving challenging problem situations, conflicts or development needs at the workplace. As a rule, a Professional Doctorate is completed in close cooperation with the world of work – primarily at the doctoral student’s own workplace. In this case, the doctoral student already has a strong understanding of their research topic and its context.

A Professional Doctorate is suitable for workplaces that want to take their activities to a new level. A special feature of the Professional Doctorate is the fact that it is designed to be completed in connection with work – at the workplace. This also means that the company must be willing and able to commit to practical implementation of the doctorate.

Research problems and designs are formulated in close collaboration with companies and other stakeholders to ensure that the new solutions that are found and developed also improve the organisation’s own productivity, competence, market position, competitiveness, etc. The workplace serves as a laboratory for doctoral research, and the benefits and relevance of the study are tested in real situations – already during the studies.

The development needs of companies and organisations are increasingly complex and wide-ranging, which requires that graduates of the Professional Doctorate programme have multi-disciplinary competence and understanding. This is why, in accordance with international examples, a Professional Doctorate is always constructed as a multi-disciplinary degree – not just linked to a single scientific discipline. The Professional Doctorate supports this process through multi-disciplinary guidance and studies that bring together doctoral students from different professional and educational backgrounds. This approach produces directly applicable competence and solutions that benefit the individual as well as the entire organisation.

## 5. What would a professional doctorate be like?

A programme adapted from Professional Doctorate degrees that already exist around the world would be equivalent to an academic PhD degree and on level 8 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). In terms of its profile, the Professional Doctorate degree will focus on finding new practical solutions by means of high-quality and inter-professional research, development and innovation activities, and demanding research methods. The degree would expand the Finnish concept of doctoral education in an international direction.

The basic education requirement would be a Master's degree, 300 credits.

A Professional Doctorate will include at least 40 credits of elements that support the degree. During their studies, the student will gain an understanding of which methods are most suitable for finding solutions to the proposed research problem and how to utilise previous studies and theories in solving research problems. This work will be supported by experts at the higher education institution, international networks and high-quality guidance. Workplace representatives will also be involved in the guidance of each doctoral student.

The structure of the Professional Doctorate programme is intended to support doctoral education that is strongly linked to the world of work in order to strengthen the RDI capabilities of individuals and organisations. The aim is to progress systematically towards options for solving the selected problem. Universities of applied sciences will build a systemic model for a Professional Doctorate that is based on dividing the research into phases. This would enable group guidance and promote peer learning. Studies that are jointly planned and implemented by universities of applied sciences will support research progress and the on-time graduation of students. Employer support and motivation are an essential part of

a process in which the student's learning path benefits competence growth throughout the organisation.

This section describes the roles and criteria of different parties and an indicative three-year programme for a Professional Doctorate programme.

### Parties to the professional doctorate

One of the Professional Doctorate supervisors is always from the workplace. The minimum requirement for this supervisor is a Master's degree and experience in RDI tasks. The supervisor representing the workplace may also be the main supervisor if that person meets the criteria set for main supervisors. In this case, the steering group or evaluation group of the Professional Doctorate programme appoints another supervisor from a higher education institution.

A joint national programme will support supervisors in their guidance task, such as the special features of a Professional Doctorate, guidance on co-operation with workplaces, and reconciling the student's work tasks and research work. Guidance competence will also be developed with regard to the actual research process and especially pedagogical guidance competence.

### **Expectations of the student**

- The student has completed a Master's degree and has in-depth work experience in the field of research.
- The student has encountered challenges, problems or conflicts in their work that require in-depth analysis and research tools in order to find a solution.
- The student wants and is able to combine studies and work. As a general rule, the research is done for the workplace or as a project otherwise linked to work and funded in different ways. This ensures that the student has a strong connection to the workplace and support provided by the employer.
- The student can also actively seek funding for their research work.

### **Expectations of the main supervisor**

- A doctorate degree and experience in doctoral research guidance
- Following completion of their doctoral degree, experience of leading research projects (especially in business cooperation).
- Merits equivalent to those of a docent position (a university docent position is not required).

### **Expectations of the employer/ workplace**

- The employer commits to and takes a positive attitude towards the research project as part of the organisation's development.
- The employer commits to support the research work and to serve as one of the supervisors or mentors of the work. The workplace can serve as a genuine learning and research environment.

### **Expectations of the higher education institution**

- The higher education institution is involved in the national professional doctoral school and the work is guided by a researcher in that school who meets the relevant criteria. The criteria for supervisors are presented in section d (expectations related to the main supervisor)
- The higher education institutions offer cross-disciplinary research groups and guidance to support the students. One of the supervisors may be from another Finnish or international higher education institution, and in all cases the higher education institutions also ensures that there is an adequate connection to work.
- The higher education institutions enable the integration of different theories through education to support practical research (EQF 8).
- The higher education institutions provide the researcher with an appropriate research infrastructure that complements the research environment at the workplace as necessary.
- The higher education institution supports the further development of methods and challenges the researcher to test them as part of the research. Possible immersive learning environments produced by the higher education institution and ethical utilisation of artificial intelligence support the student's research.

### **Common supervisor pool:**

- Student guidance takes place through the joint supervisor pool of higher education institutions. The supervisors are approved by the national steering group.
- The supervisor may be from a Finnish or international university of applied sciences, a higher education institution with similar activities, or from the world of work.

## Structure of the professional doctorate programme

The target time for completing a Professional Doctorate is three years, but this can be extended to four years. The total workload is 180 credits (ECTS), of which 30-40 credits consist of modules in accordance with the joint curriculum. The remaining 150-160 credits consist of dissertation work.

### Applying for studies and acceptance

Students apply for the studies based on

- a research plan (standard),
- a motivation letter and
- a letter of recommendation/commitment from the employer.

Students will be selected by a group appointed by the national professional doctoral school.

### Year 1

- Personal study plan. The plan is prepared with the supervisors. In addition to increasing research and substance competence, the studies include innovation competence, the starting points for putting research results into practice, and professional growth.
- Specifying and dividing the research plan into phases
- Description of the challenge/problem/development target using scientific methods.
- Mapping theories and previous research aimed at finding a solution
- Research methodology studies and selection of the student's research method.
- A review article to map the current state of the student's research topic.

### Year 2

- Advancing the research and testing theories to solve the practical challenge.
- Implementation of the personal study plan to support the research process.
- Interim seminar.
- Reporting the results to the workplace partner as agreed.

### Years 3-4

- Advancing the research and testing theories to solve the practical challenge.
- Implementation of the personal study plan to support the research process.
- Completion of the results (year 3) and publication as well as presentation and public dissertation (optional year 4).



Publication of the research results may consist of various outputs, such as scientific peer-reviewed articles and conference presentations, professional publications, patents and inventions, the company's development plans and strategies, all of which are compiled into an appropriate innovation portfolio. A publication plan is drawn up in connection with the research plan.

The innovation portfolio and its outputs are assessed by suitable external preliminary examiners (2–3), who are selected from experts and professionals who have the competence needed to assess the impact of the work. After the preliminary examination, the evaluation group makes a decision on the dissertation

submitted for approval, i.e. grants the permission for public defence. The group members are professor-level researchers from the participating higher education institutions, representatives from other Finnish or international higher education institutions (those granting Professional Doctorates in the EU) and workplace representatives.

The impact of research produced in the Professional Doctorate programme is regularly evaluated by the steering group and workplace representatives in different fields using relevant impact indicators and by monitoring the accumulation of competence in the programme. This is particularly important during the pilot phase.

## 6. Development of a joint doctoral programme

In order to organise the Professional Doctorate programme, universities of applied sciences would establish a joint national Professional Doctorate programme that includes the higher education institutions offering the degree. The activities will begin by piloting the overall concept with a development-oriented approach that welcomes input from all stakeholders.

The focus during the pilot phase will be on developing the overall concept and testing the necessary structures. Persons from higher education institutions who have sufficient research merits and an understanding of the higher education system will be appointed to a joint pool of experts whose task is to guide and develop the professional doctoral programme in cooperation with workplace mentors. This diverse professional doctoral school steering group will continue to guide activities in the

future. Participants in the steering group will include pedagogical and research experts from higher education institutions, representatives from the world of work and international specialists. The aim of thematic, multi-disciplinary steering groups is to promote and further develop the professional doctoral programme and its research activities. In addition, the steering group may establish fixed-term working groups to develop the activities.





## 7. Research funding

Several types of regional, national and international funding that fund current RDI activities can be utilised to finance the research. However, the aim is to conduct research that has a direct business impact on workplace actors, in which case companies and other actors would participate in the costs of research performed in the Professional Doctorate programme, for example, by covering the salary costs of doctoral students.

Especially in the pilot phase, other external funding will also be needed to implement a successful Professional Doctorate pilot. We propose that funding and incentives for participating in the Professional Doctorate pilot could be allocated from the multiannual plan for the use of central government research and development funding.



## 8. Conclusion

Launching a Professional Doctorate programme at universities of applied sciences directly responds to the challenges that are currently facing Finland's business sector, regional development and competence needs. The model presented above is based on strong links to workplaces, a multidisciplinary approach and the impact of applied research – which are the strengths for which universities of applied sciences are known.

International examples demonstrate that a Professional Doctorate programme is already an established part of higher education in many countries. Finland is not a pioneer in this development, but we now have the opportunity to take a step towards a functional and fully-fledged dual model in which universities of applied sciences also have access to all higher education tools and a professional, work-oriented higher education pathway that includes a Professional Doctorate to complement Bachelor's and Master's degrees completed at a university of applied sciences.

The proposal is based on the vision of 12 universities of applied sciences and their readiness to take action. The pilot phase provides an opportunity to test and develop the model in a controlled manner, in collaboration with workplaces and international partners.

Now we need political will and legislative support. It is time to give universities of applied sciences the right to train doctors who will develop Finnish workplaces, contribute to strengthening the competitiveness of companies and Finland as a whole, and produce solutions that meet the development needs of organisations.

# Composition of the programme group

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Professional  
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Developing professional doctoral education:

