

**Sustainability Programme
for Universities of Applied
Sciences 2026–2030**

Arene

Sustainability Programme for Universities of Applied Sciences 2026–2030

The task of universities of applied sciences is to build a globally sustainable and fair future in cooperation with industry and business. The aim is to secure the basis for human development, well-being and adaptability in a changing world.

Producing expertise and experts is the most significant way for universities of applied sciences to support the sustainable and responsible development of society, industry, and business. Universities of applied sciences promote sustainable development through education as well as research, development and innovation (RDI) activities, which are the statutory tasks of universities of applied sciences. RDIE is when learning and competence development are integrated into RDI activities.

Together with their partners, universities of applied sciences and their graduates are an important part of the solution in the struggle to combat climate change, promote nature positivity and achieve sustainability in industry, culture, and business. Ecological sustainability requires the sustainable use of natural resources, safeguarding the functioning of ecosystems, and restoring natural environments. What is meant by nature positivity is the global objective of halting the loss of biodiversity by 2030 and to reach full recovery of nature by 2050. Universities of applied sciences strive to mitigate climate change and work towards nature positivity by, foremost, reducing the climate and nature impacts of their own activities. Effective education and RDI activities can also achieve change.

Universities of applied sciences play a key role in creating sustainable growth and accelerating the green transition through work-oriented competence and RDI activities. What is required to guarantee effectiveness are resources that strengthen the operating conditions of the universities of applied sciences. It is therefore necessary to reinforce the role of the universities of applied sciences as institutions that solve sustainability challenges in society.

The sustainability and responsibility work of universities of applied sciences is guided by the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Figure 1), and the sustainable development guidelines by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. The 2030 Agenda recognises the importance of education and RDI for achieving necessary changes. Sustainable development refers to ecologically, socially, culturally and economically sustainable development.



Figure 1: un.org

To promote sustainability work, universities of applied sciences have worked together to prepare joint sustainability commitments and related measures. The Sustainability Programme for Universities of Applied Sciences 2026–2030 provides a common framework and supports the work of all 24 universities of applied sciences in Finland in their efforts towards a more sustainable and responsible future.

This programme is a continuation of the previous programme for the sustainable development and responsibility at the universities of applied sciences, the achievements of which were assessed with a self-assessment survey in early 2026. Based on its results, sustainable development and responsibility work at universities of applied sciences has progressed at a steady and consistent pace: sustainability has been established at the strategic level, but there is still work to be done in the practical implementation. Creating a system for sustainability work and knowledge-based management thereof, bolstering the personnel’s sustainability competence, and improving the quality of nature work were highlighted as development targets.

Impact through high-quality research and competence development

Universities of applied sciences and research universities are the foundation of competence and innovation that support Finland's transition to a sustainable and resilient future. Research and education create researched information as well as solutions and competence to mitigate climate change, to promote nature positivity, to respond to the challenges of technological revolutions, and to manage risks that threaten well-being and safety. Universities of applied sciences are platforms for multidisciplinary cooperation and development between different actors. Our expertise supports and challenges industry and business, higher education institutions, municipalities, personnel and students to build a more sustainable future. The environment, people, and the economy are considered equally in our decision-making and everyday activities.

The common goal of the communities of universities of applied sciences is to increase our handprint, or impact in the development of society, and to reduce the footprint of our actions. Our handprint grows through the work of our expert personnel in education as well as RDI. Universities of applied sciences promote an equal and accessible knowledge-based society in which sustainability competence is a universal basic skill. Graduates of universities of applied sciences and the results of our research, development and innovation help to grow the handprint of society while reducing its carbon footprint (Figure 2).

The programme for the sustainable development and responsibility at the universities of applied sciences promotes sustainability through five themes: education, RDI, management and personnel competence development, climate and nature work, and sustainability reporting. It is these five themes that combine into a whole that helps the universities of applied sciences both grow their handprints and reduce their footprint.

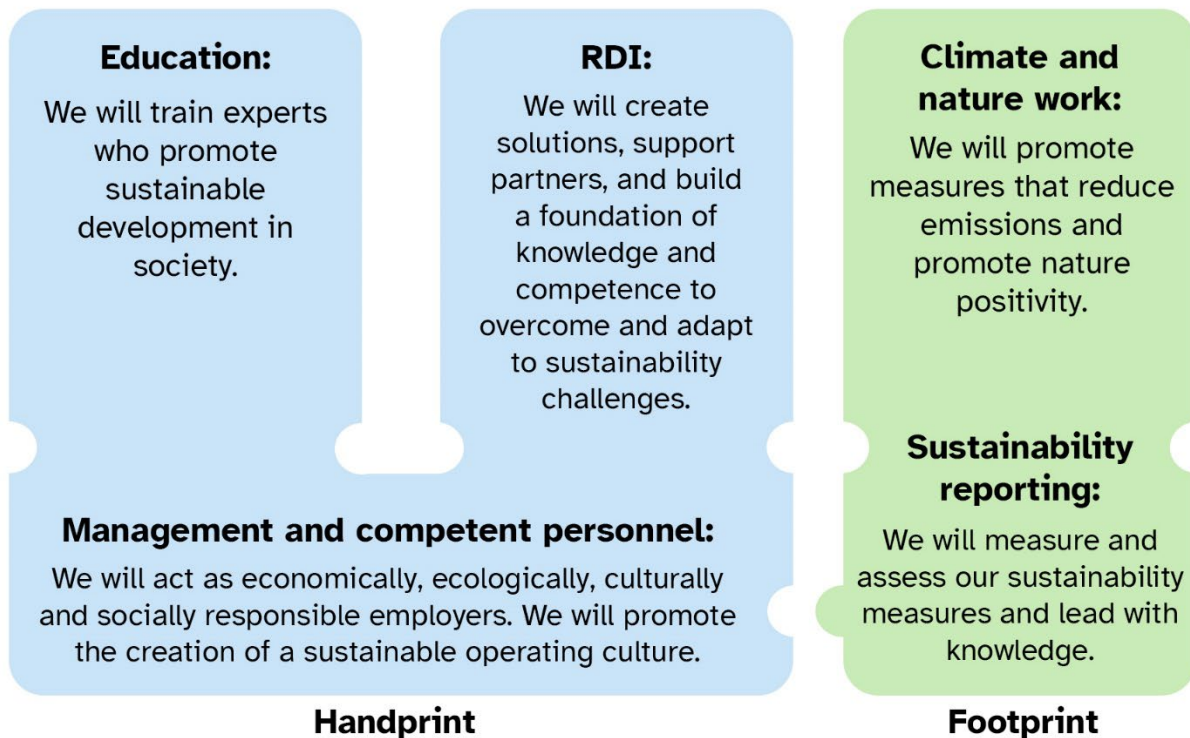


Figure 2: Aspects of increasing the handprint and reducing the footprint of universities of applied sciences

Sustainability cooperation between universities of applied sciences is built upon a network of sustainability officers and the thematic working groups within it. The network of sustainability officers brings together experts appointed by the universities of applied sciences and serves as a national peer network that supports joint development, exchange of information and communication.

The thematic working groups operate under the network of sustainability officers and regularly cooperate with Arene committees, working groups and other networks. Their themes are education, RDI activities, management and personnel competence development, climate and nature work, and sustainability reporting. Their objective is to ensure that sustainability and responsibility become closely tied with the key tasks, management, and joint development of the universities of applied sciences. This is to ensure that the continuity of the work, consistency, and shared learning.

Sustainability commitments of the universities of applied sciences

EDUCATION – Universities of applied sciences build competence for a sustainable future

Universities of applied sciences play an important role in educating new experts and strengthening professional competence through Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes and continuous learning. Active cooperation with business and industry at universities of applied sciences, strong pedagogical competence and RDIE activities allow us to anticipate and train for future competence needs.

Universities of applied sciences offer flexible opportunities for studies and competence development, allowing higher education for a wide range of students. This is part of the social responsibility of universities of applied sciences and ensures that as many as possible find their place in building a sustainable society.

The common competences of the universities of applied sciences create a strong foundation to develop skills for a sustainable future. We have also improved our data collection on the available training. Our major challenges are related to the assessment of the students' sustainability competence and using this information to anticipate ways to develop our education.

Our commitment

1. We will support the sustainability transition in all areas and levels of society by training experts with the skills and drive to promote a sustainable future in their careers and in society.
2. We will develop curricula and assess the development of our students' sustainability skills in cooperation with business and industry to ensure that sustainable development and responsibility remain universal features of all our programmes and serve to accelerate the sustainability transition.

Our measures

- We will lay the foundation of educational development on joint sustainable development learning outcomes.
- We will anticipate changes in work and actively develop our degree programmes to respond to them, which will accelerate the sustainability transition in business and industry.
- We will reinforce the role of sustainable development and responsibility in all our education efforts.
- We will encourage our students to work towards sustainable development.
- We will focus on sustainable development and responsibility in the lifelong learning we provide.
- We will promote and enable the development of up-to-date expertise in sustainable development by integrating RDI in learning and teaching.
- We will monitor the achievement and impact of the learning outcomes of sustainable development and responsibility through various surveys and assessments.
- We will work openly in extensive cooperation with higher education institutions, other educational institutions, business and industry, and other stakeholders.

RDI – solutions to the challenges of sustainability

Research, development and innovation are statutory tasks of the universities of applied sciences, which create solutions to the sustainability challenges in society and in nature, both in the future and today. Applied research, partnerships and wide networks allow us to develop new technologies, operating models and innovations.

It is the objective of universities of applied sciences to consider sustainable development in all our RDI activities and promote these objectives in cooperation with both the higher education community and through wider partner networks. Universities of applied sciences build their RDI activities with business and industry, the public sector, and the third sector and through international networks. They can also promote a regenerative economy, which, instead of maintaining the system of using natural resources, strives for a nature-positive and sustainable approach to society and business. Our updated commitments and measures are built upon our previous work, while taking nature positivity and local solutions into account.

Our commitment

1. We will develop solutions through RDI that are a sustainable response to the development needs of society, culture and the economy, which promote nature positivity and support the prevention of climate change and environmental crises, and adaptation thereto.
2. Our RDI will build competence, develop structures and cooperation, and produce sustainable solutions that help to improve our education. We acknowledge that the skills used in education includes both global issues and local sustainability acts.
3. We will develop our operations so that one of the reasons we are a sought-after and responsible partner and employer is our ecologically, socially, culturally, and economically sustainable RDI.

Our measures

- We will continue to use and develop the jointly criteria for developing the sustainability and responsibility of RDI.
- We will produce sustainability solutions with the higher education community, business and industry, the public sector and the third sector.
- We will produce the necessary information to support increasing the impact of our RDI activities at the local, regional, national and international level and publish the knowledge gained from RDI for society to use, particularly through promoting the social discourse and openness of information.
- We will use the results of our RDI projects to build the foundation of competence used in our education and create opportunities to learn sustainability and responsibility in our RDI projects.

MANAGEMENT AND COMPETENT PERSONNEL – sustainable management and development of competence

It is the objective of universities of applied sciences to manage their operation in accordance with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and to make long-term decisions that reinforce ecological, social and economic sustainability. Responsibility and sustainability are integrated into our strategy, performance indicators, and management structures.

Universities of applied sciences are managed equally and fairly. We encourage our personnel and supervisors to make responsible and ethically sustainable decisions. The operating culture at universities of applied sciences is based on values, transparency and honesty.

Universities of applied sciences develop their management and competence in a way that reflects on their operating methods and policies. However, there are difficulties in the systematic nature of competence development and using knowledge in decision-making. One challenge for the personnel's sustainability competence is its general nature.

Our commitment

1. We will manage our operation through knowledge and justify and explain our decisions.
2. Sustainable human resource management promotes well-being at work, sustainable management of personnel resources and continuous development of competence. We will use suitable tools and methods to achieve this.
3. We will assess our personnel's competence and performance in a diverse, evidence-based manner.
4. Our personnel will have sustainability and responsibility competence that supports the sustainable and responsible operation of the university of applied sciences, reinforces its continuous improvement, and produces impact for our stakeholders.
5. Our operating culture is diverse, equal and open to all.

Our measures

- We will ensure that the sustainability and responsibility competence of our personnel develops throughout their employment cycle by integrating these themes into management and HR processes.
- We will include the sustainable development and responsibility competence in management and task-specific core competences based on roles and responsibilities.
- We will assess the implementation of sustainability and responsibility training and develop it based on feedback.
- We will systematically monitor and assess the organisation's sustainability and responsibility competence as part of our quality management system.
- We will develop diversity in both management and practical work and ensure that social accessibility is systematically improved.
- We will work with responsible partners while reinforcing regional equality, well-being and vitality and while promoting societal change towards more sustainable and responsible solutions.

CLIMATE AND NATURE WORK – reducing emissions and minimising damage to nature

The objective of climate and nature work at universities of applied sciences is to improve our carbon handprint and nature positivity as well as to reduce our climate and nature impacts. The university of applied sciences sector has engaged in carbon footprint calculation since 2020, and it is carried out using a joint calculation model that is constantly being updated. The use of results in management remains uncommon, and the entire sector does not yet have a joint low-carbon roadmap.

Our commitment

1. We will examine our climate and nature impacts together. Our objectives are based on a transparent calculation model that follows the provisions for green claims.
2. Universities of applied sciences will commit to continuously reduce their carbon footprints. For Scope 1 and 2, we will aim to be as close to net-zero as possible by 2030 without an increase in our negative nature impacts. For Scope 3, we will set institution-specific reduction targets that are based on category-specific relevance and verifiable measures.
3. Universities of applied sciences will reinforce the climate and nature competences of their personnel and students and work towards a carbon and nature handprint that is positive for society through RDI, education and regional development.

Our measures

- We will create a joint policy for the UAS sector on emission reductions and nature positivity.
- We will gradually expand the calculations to nature impacts (nature footprint) and identify the key impact categories.
- We will reduce the energy consumption of our properties, which reduces the climate and nature impacts of our operations.
- We will adjust the implementation of our travel and procurement guidelines towards emission reductions and to minimise negative nature impact. We will pay particular attention to air travel and necessity-based procurement.
- We will use the results of the calculation in management decision-making and link them with financial, facility and procurement processes.
- We will prepare an annual report that includes the climate and nature impacts as well as the societal handprint of the measures.
- Universities of applied sciences will work through their networks to develop joint calculation methods, indicators, and comparability. We will continue and reinforce the cooperation between Arene and Unifi, especially through the Finn-ARMA network, to maintain the national harmonisation of the methods and objectives.

SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING – towards systematic monitoring and knowledge-based management

The aim of sustainability reporting is to expose the sustainability work of universities of applied sciences and to support their systematic and consistent management. Sustainability reporting can compile information about the footprint and handprint of a university of applied sciences.

Monitoring of information related to sustainability work supports strategic management, decision-making and operational development as well as reinforces stakeholder confidence. It is the aim to integrate sustainability work in the regular knowledge-based management and continuous improvement of the university of applied sciences.

Despite there not being a legal obligation for sustainability reporting, universities of applied sciences have been determined to develop their monitoring of information related to sustainability work. The joint national reporting model has laid the foundation for a uniform language, learning from others, and continuous improvement. What has been the key difficulty of sustainability work is compiling the knowledge in a form that supports external reporting, internal management, impact assessment and proactive development at once.

Our commitment

1. We will jointly commit to developing the monitoring of sustainability work as a systematic, transparent and appropriate activity.
2. We will build the monitoring of sustainability work upon joint definitions and principles. We will jointly develop the indicators that support reporting.
3. We will monitor the progress of sustainability targets, identify development needs, and transparently communicate both successes and difficulties.

Our measures

- We will gradually include the monitoring of sustainability work as part of the university of applied sciences' regular data collection, assessment and reporting processes.
- We will refine the indicators and measurements to better support the strategic goals and link them directly with operational steering and decision-making.
- We will reinforce the link of sustainability work with the quality management system, risk management, and strategic planning.
- We will use the monitoring of sustainability work as a tool to develop competence and to increase our understanding of sustainability impacts.
- We will use sustainability reporting to support proactive management, transparent communications, and the role of universities of applied sciences as a pioneer in sustainable development.

Jointly prepared programme

This programme is a continuation of the previous programme for the sustainable development and responsibility at the universities of applied sciences. We had identified a clear need to update the programme, as sustainability work has developed in strides in recent years. Organisational competence, awareness and capabilities have become stronger, while the sustainability issues as a whole have become more complex with growing requirements for the operating environment.

All 24 universities of applied sciences in Finland have undertaken the commitments in this programme. This updated programme was jointly prepared by personnel of the universities of applied sciences from all Arene working groups on sustainable development as well as the network of sustainability officers and its working group on sustainability reporting.

Work to update the programme was coordinated by the chairs of the network of sustainability officers and the working subgroups: Vappu Kunnaala-Hyrkki, Xamk (network of sustainability officers); Eveliina Asikainen, TAMK (working group on education); Timo Parkkola, Humak (working group on RDI); Tiina Huhtalo, Lapland UAS (working group on management and competent personnel); Asseri Laitinen, VAMK (working group on climate and nature work); and Mirva Juntti, Lapland UAS (working group on sustainability reporting).

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