

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY FROM THE NORTH

University students are the hope for the future of Finland's welfare society. The current economic uncertainty, both nationally and in students' lives, is causing a lack of clarity about the future. Fostering faith in the future and investing in young people and students is a long-term investment towards a prosperous and sustainable society.

When building an economically sustainable future, we must recognise the importance of higher education institutions for regional development. They create opportunities, innovation and a skilled workforce for the region, as well as developing the region's cultural life and diversifying its services. To counter the decline in educational attainment and increase the number of people with higher education, we must ensure that the higher education network remains comprehensive throughout Finland, including in Lapland.

For the sake of a sustainable future for society, it is important that students are well-supported and that their ability to focus on their studies is safeguarded. This includes, among other things, securing students' livelihoods, affordable housing, welfare services and the opportunity to pursue education at any stage of life.

The "Building a sustainable society from the North" programme is the parliamentary election programme for 2027 of the University of Lapland Student Union and the Lapland University of Applied Sciences Student Union (ROTKO). Taking the current economic situation into account, we have put forward various alternative solutions to create opportunities for a sustainable future throughout Finland.

This document is our comprehensive programme, which provides a framework for our advocacy work in relation to the parliamentary elections. A separate parliamentary election campaign will be drawn up based on this program.

Access to high-quality education must be guaranteed throughout Finland

A key part of the future is the expertise brought by students throughout Finland. In addition to building this society, students need confidence in their ability to cope and support themselves, regardless of their age. Investing in adequate student income ensures lifelong learning and a sustainable supply of skilled workers for the labour market.

At present, students are living on a tight budget, and student financial aid has been subject to numerous legislative changes. Furthermore, students' ability to improve their own livelihood has been weakened by the poor employment situation, which is particularly evident among international students. According to research, a precarious financial situation affects mental wellbeing and coping, which is reflected in the completion of studies and timely graduation, particularly among students in a more vulnerable position.

Students' student loan balances have risen sharply, first due to low interest rates and then due to reduced benefits. This is already evident in the increasing difficulties recent graduates face in repaying their student loans, as shown by the rise in KELA's interest subsidy payments. However, a loan is a personal risk, and challenges may arise in its repayment, especially if studies are interrupted, for example due to illness.

In Lapland, in addition to reduced income, an uncertain housing situation places an even greater burden on students. The limited availability of housing and high rents are forcing students into even tighter living conditions locally. Students' attachment to their study locations can be strengthened by improving the conditions for affordable housing construction. This also supports international talent staying in Finland.

The housing allowance received by students does not reflect the actual cost of housing locally. The housing allowance must consider the availability of affordable housing. Due to the housing shortage, an increasing number of students are forced to pay higher rents, which the housing allowance does not currently cover. At present, students do not receive any form of housing support during the summer unless they are studying. With the employment situation being poor, many students are living on an empty budget, and keeping a flat in their university town is not necessarily possible.

The long-term goal must be a form of social security that is unconditional, individual-centred, and universal. This would alleviate the complex situation students face when transitioning from one benefit to another. A clear system would reduce the burden on both students and society. Financial security must be accessible to everyone.

Enabling affordable housing

- Investment must be made in affordable housing construction in areas where it is particularly needed. Student housing in these areas is supported by interest-subsidised

loans and investment grants for specific groups, with sufficient authorisation levels for their allocation.

- In addition to local measures, legislation is now needed in the region to allow for more detailed regulation of illegal accommodation than is currently the case.

The housing allowance must be linked to a suitable index that considers regional differences in housing costs.

- The maximum acceptable housing costs for housing allowance municipal groups must be increased. The housing allowance must be linked to a suitable index.
- The housing allowance received by students living in Rovaniemi should be raised to the highest municipal group, and the maximum amount of the housing allowance should be increased.
- Students should be able to apply for general housing benefit during their studies if they are not using their student finance months. This will ensure that students are not left without support during the summer.

Student financial aid

- Cash benefits under student financial aid must be linked to the national pension index.
- The maximum number of support months per degree must be increased to at least 55 support months. The additional support months will ease the financial challenges students face during the summer.
- The government must set an interest rate cap on student loans to help alleviate students' debt burden.
- The repayment period for student loans should be the target period plus one year.

Facilitating employment

- Make it easier for immigrants who have graduated from a Finnish higher education institution to obtain a permanent residence permit and citizenship.
- A nationwide trial of an employment voucher for employers should be launched to support the hiring of international students and the learning of the local languages alongside work.

Higher education institutions drive regional growth and raise skill levels in the North

Raising the national level of education requires skilled professionals with higher education qualifications. Education must be accessible to all who wish to pursue it, regardless of age, and it must continue to be distributed across Finland. High-quality higher education is the foundation for growth and ensuring social sustainability. For higher education institutions to be able to produce science, art and skilled professionals, investment must be made in their funding.

It is important to us that higher education institutions remain in Lapland, and that northern expertise can be developed increasingly as a whole. The presence of higher education institutions in Lapland is essential to ensure that the region continues to have highly educated experts in the future. Higher education institutions play a significant role in the region's sustainable development. In addition to development, the region is shaped by the security policy situation and new trends in Finland's foreign policy. Higher education delivered through local expertise supports the security of the whole of Finland.

International students are part of the future of Finnish higher education. As the age structure changes and the workforce ages, international experts are a resource for the welfare society of the future. Higher education institutions can support the retention of international experts in the local region.

Higher education institutions must facilitate lifelong learning. Investing in lifelong learning is crucial in the face of changes to the structure of working life. Retraining and further education must be possible without financial risks. In this way, we ensure that the educational level of citizens meets societal needs. It is important that the skills of Finnish graduates continue to be developed in the workplace after they have completed their degrees.

Adequacy of core funding

- The funding of higher education institutions must be based on adequate and forward-looking core funding.
- The funding model for higher education institutions must be developed in such a way that it encourages quality of education rather than the number of degrees awarded.
- The funding model must be made less performance-based than before, whilst ensuring that core funding remains at a sufficient level.
- The level of core funding for universities will be raised to the Nordic level.

Enabling lifelong learning

- The Open University must be developed as a means of lifelong learning and a pathway to higher education, where individuals can obtain a degree. It is not possible to complete full degrees at the Open University.
- People must have the opportunity to pursue education at any stage of life.
- Developing lifelong learning is critically important to ensure that Finnish professionals can respond to changes in the world of work.

Multi-year funding planning

- In addition to the adequacy of core funding, the funding of higher education institutions must take account of the continuity and multi-year nature of funding. A predictable and forward-looking funding model strengthens higher education institutions' ability to produce the world's best experts in Finland and raise the level of education among 60% of young adults by 2040.
- The funding model for higher education institutions must be reformed so that it is based, above all, on enabling academic freedom.

Free teaching of domestic languages

- High-quality, subject-specific teaching of the national languages must be resourced and expanded as an integrated part of degree programmes and work placements. Free language teaching must also be provided after graduation.

A strong society of tomorrow is built on thriving students

Student wellbeing is not merely a matter for the individual but is directly linked to the future of society as a whole and the sustainability of the workforce. That is why concrete and structural solutions are emphasised in the development of student wellbeing: extending the therapy guarantee, staffing levels for student welfare services, and strengthening the services of the FSHS. The aim is to ensure that every student receives the support they need in a timely and seamless manner, without bureaucratic obstacles or regional disparities. In particular, the effectiveness of care pathways between the FSHS and the well-being regions, as well as the accessibility of services regardless of the student's place of study, are key issues that require solutions at the local level as well.

Therapy Guarantee

- The challenges faced by higher education students are largely linked to their stage of life rather than their age; therefore, extending the therapy guarantee to all higher education students and raising the age limit to under 29 would be sensible and in line with the Youth Act.
- In addition to a more comprehensive therapy guarantee, we need to invest in preventive work. Organising and resourcing preventive well-being services in higher education institutions supports students' graduation and subsequent employment.

Staffing levels for student welfare services

- Challenges to academic ability are addressed by harmonising the criteria for support services and establishing staffing levels.
- Minimum staffing levels must be defined for student wellbeing services to ensure comprehensive support services for students at universities of applied sciences. Academic ability lays the foundation for future work ability and the resilience required to achieve a long career.

Equal access to FSHS services

- The range of FSHS services will be expanded to include specialist healthcare and free contraception.

Cooperation between the FSHS and the welfare regions to promote and maintain student health must be strengthened, and a smooth transition between service providers must be facilitated.

Expanding FSHS services to all outgoing and incoming exchange students.

Students must be able to access equal care from the FSHS regardless of their city of study. There are significant differences in FSHS services between regions, which creates inequality among higher education students and cities. The problems are particularly acute in the Sea Lapland region, where students have to travel several dozen kilometres to access the various FSHS services.