

From Carbon Neutral to Nature Positive Higher Education Institutions

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We examine HEIs can move from carbon neutrality towards contributing to the global Nature Positive goal. While carbon footprinting has become widespread, carbon neutrality claims often lack consistency and do not fully follow international standards. Biodiversity footprinting is an emerging field, and many HEIs are still developing approaches to measuring and addressing their impacts on nature. Because climate change is a key driver of biodiversity loss, biodiversity footprints inherently include carbon impacts, yet go beyond them by capturing broader environmental pressures.

The study is based on two expert workshops held in Finland with sustainability practitioners from universities and universities of applied sciences. The workshops focused on clarifying the carbon neutrality claims (particularly the inclusion of Scope 3 emissions) and on defining shared climate and biodiversity goals for Finnish HEIs.

To contribute meaningfully to Nature Positive outcomes, HEIs must demonstrate a measurable net positive impact on biodiversity and expand their assessments from carbon-only to integrated carbon and biodiversity footprints. Comprehensive inclusion of Scope 1 and 2 emissions and most Scope 3 categories is essential. The paper provides recommendations for target-setting, reporting, and a refined definition of a Nature Positive University, encouraging HEIs to lead systemic change towards planetary well-being.

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