

POLICY BRIEF

**Supporting
transformation
towards sustainable
lifestyles within
adult education
in the Nordic
countries**



Nordic Network for
Adult Learning

INTRODUCTION

The sustainability challenges require a vast transformation of education in the Nordic countries in the coming years.

Adult education (AE) has a pivotal role in supporting change at the societal and the individual level as well as throughout the adult workforce, but it requires a renewed vision of sustainability education within both formal, non-formal, and informal adult learning. If we are to create relevant models for sustainability education (SE) and support normalisation of sustainable lifestyles we need to change the structures and promote the right conditions for institutions, teachers and students.

The aim of this policy paper is to inform decision makers on how SE can be strengthened within adult education to reach the Vision 2030 of the Nordic Council of Ministers applying principles of diversity, professional freedom and a strengthened focus on Bildung.

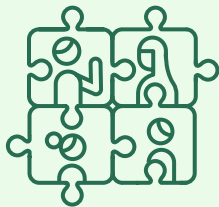
Concrete examples of actions for the 2025–2030 program period

- **Promote Nordic** multidisciplinary, cross-sectoral collaboration and development projects on SE
- **Promote the use of GreenComp**, ecoliteracy and nature-connection in future development projects
- **Promote development** of future competencies in both educators and learners with the focus of social imagination of everyday practices in everyday settings including work life.
- **Ensure coherence** between funding for sustainable development and funding for education and culture.
- **Create a joint course** of professional development on transformative SE for teachers and organisational leaders in the Nordic countries with possibility of ECTS merit and with an emphasis on co-learning and Bildung.
- **Continue the support** for physical meetings within the programs of the Nordics, which is essential for community building and deep reflection, but promote a rethinking of ways to reach the latter in a more sustainable way.



RECOMMENDATIONS

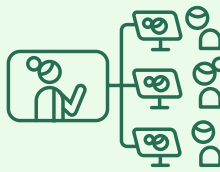
Three overarching recommendations have been developed to promote sustainable lifestyles in adult education in the Nordic region. These recommendations are based on the results of a Nordic pilot learning circle that involved participants from various backgrounds, countries, organizational cultures, and professional roles.



1. Promote Diversity and Inclusion

Strive to promote diversity and inclusion in Nordic adult education by using cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary methods. This helps reduce polarization and develops stronger collaborative competencies, ensuring long-term sustainability for various educational initiatives.

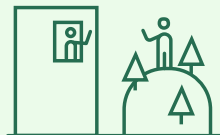
- Involve individuals from diverse back-grounds in decision-making, planning, and the implementation of a diverse adult education.
- Support projects and structures that promote knowledge that is diverse, localized, anchored, co-created, and systematic.
- Create common platforms where Nordic adult educators can collaborate and develop new approaches.



2. Increase Autonomy and Pedagogical Freedom

To facilitate a shift from instrumental education to a more exploratory and creative learning process, teachers, students, and institutions need greater autonomy and less focus on quantitative assessment.

- Reduce administrative pressure on institutions and teachers, giving them greater freedom to explore innovative teaching methods.
- Facilitate organizational changes that reduce control and provide space for pedagogical innovations, as well as continuous professional development, both practice-based and research-based.
- Encourage a continued shift in the role of the educator, from the traditionally all-knowing figure to a co-learning facilitator in a rapidly evolving world, thereby creating more dynamic and collaborative learning environments.



3. Integrate a Bildung perspective

Support and integrate a Bildung approach on sustainability education (SE), and encourage institutions to make sustainability an integrated part of all areas within the organization.

- Provide time and resources for inter-disciplinary and practical teaching methods, such as nature-based learning, artistic expressions, and life-oriented projects, helping individuals develop a deeper connection to their surroundings.
- Encourage holistic and systematic approaches, such as the Whole Institution Approach, and promote regenerative leadership.
- Evaluate educational programs and certification standards based on their ability to support transformative learning and create long-term changes in students and staff.

KEY BARRIERS AND DRIVERS

The above recommendations for policy and the program period for 2025–2030 build on the experience of professionals from diverse backgrounds within the Nordic countries. The following barriers and drivers were identified to hinder or support transformation towards sustainability within adult education.



What are THE KEY DRIVERS that promote transformation towards sustainability within AE?

→ Supporting surroundings that normalise sustainable lifestyles

The learnings from the project underscore that sustainable education emerges from being immersed in a culture of sustainable transformation, rather than from mere study. Our surroundings are what shape our behaviour the most, prompting institutions globally to adopt e.g. the Whole Institution Approach to foster an educational environment that normalises sustainable transition.

→ A Bildung perspective on education

The project highlights the need to shift from traditional academic structures to holistic, interdisciplinary, and experience-based approaches. These approaches should support general sustainability competencies such as [general sustainability competencies described by UNESCO](#) and fosters life orientation and Bildung in adult education.

→ Spaces for need-based professional development

Sustainability requires continuous professional development for teachers. When this occurs in bottom-up, peer-to-peer reflective spaces, it fosters need-based learning and responsive approaches for transformative education. This collective process not only envisions better teaching and work environments but also shifts the teacher's role from all-knowing to co-reflective, exploring new possibilities and approaches.

→ Connectedness with other humans and the environment

To shift the long-standing mechanic-reductionist worldview, a focus on connectedness and ecoliteracy is essential. This can be fostered through nature-based, place based and aesthetical approaches in class, the organisation and the physical surroundings.

→ Time, space and open-ended processes that foster deep learning

When institutions prioritise time for dialogue and the involvement of diverse perspectives and needs, transformative change flourishes. By allowing leaders, teachers, and students the necessary time for discussion, reflection, dreams, and visions, we cultivate the optimal conditions for meaningful learning for sustainability.

→ Diversity, when enacted as a resource

When embraced, diversity becomes a resource for development, democratic and collaborative competencies and strong systemic competencies and interdisciplinary culture. This will ensure sustainable solutions that counteract exclusion and polarisation.

→ Certification processes that are used as a lever for motivation, cooperation and dialogue

Certification processes can foster collective exploration of values and culture, creating ownership of the sustainability transformation among staff. This dialogue encourages reflection on how sustainability aligns with the organisation's vision and how individuals can contribute. Sharing this journey with the network amplifies the transformation.

What are THE KEY BARRIERS that hinder transformation towards sustainability within AE?



- Lack of time and space for professional development for teachers and for transformative development for learners.
- Exclusiveness of the sustainability agenda and hence rejection, inequality and polarizations.
- Persistent silos in terms of professions, subjects and educational disciplines.
- Sustainability is often understood as purely technical solutions neglecting deeper, cultural dimensions of sustainable transition.
- An educational system and labour market which promotes a competitive culture and mindset more than collaboration and trust and hinders the deep, slow processes required for transformational learning.
- Political volatility and increasing competition for funding between and within institutions
- Lack of ecological literacy within organisations and a weak connectedness to nature.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The recommendations in this policy paper address the three interrelated dimensions of the vision for sustainability in the Nordic countries. It is founded on relational worldviews that recognize humanity's absolute dependence on the biosphere, mindful management of resources which enhance the **GREEN** aspect.

It underscores the importance of diversity and inclusiveness and the value of multiple perspectives, listening to each other in an atmosphere of timefulness which promotes the **SOCIAL** aspect of the vision.

It emphasises collaborative and co-constructive communities of practice that promote innovation and support

the wellbeing economy thereby adding a needed focus on wellbeing economy and collaboration to the **COMPETITIVE** aspect.

Thereby it responds to the global challenges of sustainability and enables adult education in the Nordic countries to take a lead in the transformation towards a more sustainable world.

The pilot project "Development of Educational Models for Sustainable Lifestyles" (2023–2024) has been carried out within the Nordic Council of Ministers programme for sustainable lifestyles.

The project was conducted as a learning circle representing adult learning organisations in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Faroe Islands, Finland, and Sweden).