



Turku Urban Research Programme 2026–2029





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Contents

Summary	4
1 Introduction.....	5
2 Objectives.....	7
3 From the City of Turku's Mayor's Programme to Research Themes	10
3.1 Sustainable Economy.....	11
3.2 Wellbeing and Equality	13
3.3 Regional Equality and Reducing Segregation	15
3.4 Education, Competence and Employment	17
3.5 Housing, Land Use and Sustainable Mobility	18
3.6 Climate and Nature City	19
3.7 Attractiveness and Internationalisation	20
4 Programme Implementation.....	22
4.1 Funding Instruments.....	22
4.2 Model for Cooperation	24
5 Concluding Remarks.....	28
Literature	30
References	32

Summary

The Turku Urban Research Programme is a joint research programme of the City of Turku, the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University, within which research is conducted on cities and their development. The period 2026–2029 will be the programme's fifth period.

The Turku Urban Research Programme focuses on societal and spatial changes in cities and on the city's capacity to influence these changes independently or together with other actors. Building on the City of Turku's Mayor's Programme 2025–2029 and the City Strategy of Turku, the Turku Urban Research Programme 2026–2029 presents the thematic areas of research carried out within the programme while leaving researchers and research groups free to define their own research questions and delimit the content of their research in greater detail based on their academic starting points.

The programme's main objectives are to 1) strengthen the knowledge base and expertise supporting regional vitality and wellbeing; 2) generate new research knowledge for the city to support decision-making in accordance with the themes of the strategy and the Mayor's Programme; and 3) increase the impact of academic urban research by emphasising dialogue on the application of research findings and the use of knowledge in urban policy.

The Turku Urban Research Programme organises an annual call for research projects. The programme may also provide supplementary funding for externally funded projects or support projects in working with the city organisation. In addition, small focused studies are carried out within the programme based on the city organisation's current information needs. The programme may also include other funding and operational instruments separately defined by the programme steering group. The Turku Urban Research Programme seeks to promote research that is both scientifically excellent and beneficial from the city's perspective.

1 Introduction

The Turku Urban Research Programme is a joint research programme of the City of Turku, the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University, within which research is conducted on cities and their development. In 2026, the programme's fifth period will begin and continue until 2029. The programme's most significant form of activity is the funding of research projects through an annual call.

Within the Turku Urban Research Programme, urban research is understood as multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research focusing on the city, urban residents, or phenomena occurring in urban environments. The city may also serve as an actor in the research. Suitable research topics for the Urban Research Programme are those that generate knowledge useful for the development of the City of Turku or enhance understanding that supports urban development. However, research carried out within the programme is not required to produce immediately applicable results.

The Turku Urban Research Programme focuses on societal and spatial changes in cities and on the city's capacity to influence these changes independently or together with other actors. Within this overarching thematic framework, the Turku Urban Research Programme 2026–2029 presents the thematic areas for the fifth programme period, derived from the City of Turku's Mayor's Programme and the City Strategy of Turku. These thematic areas are broad, leaving researchers free to refine their research themes and formulate more precise research questions and research boundaries.

During the 2026–2029 period, the Urban Research Programme challenges researchers in particular to reflect on the drivers of sustainable urban growth and the conditions that support the wellbeing of urban residents. In addition, the programme encourages research into historical developments of particular interest to Turku, as well as the city's future and identity, in the spirit of the Turku 800 anniversary celebrations culminating in 2029.

The operating environments of Finnish cities are currently in a state of continuous change due, among other factors, to uncertainty in economic development and the global geopolitical situation. Turku seeks to monitor and anticipate change in order to make informed choices about its future.¹ The objective of the Turku Urban Research Programme is to strengthen the knowledge base of the City of Turku and its stakeholders to support urban development and other urban policy decisions. Public-sector decision-making is increasingly expected to be evidence-based, while at the same time established methods and outcomes of producing knowledge are increasingly being challenged in society by alternative viewpoints.² To maintain trust in academic knowledge production, the Urban Research Programme not only generates research knowledge but also communicates research processes and findings to city residents and decision-makers as broadly, openly and interactively as possible.

Although the importance of urban policy was until recently supported by an almost global consensus, the past decade has seen various system-challenging political movements question urbanisation and globalisation, drawing particularly on the experiences of residents in areas left behind by development and their perceptions of the unequal distribution of the benefits of urbanisation in both the Global North and the Global South.³ International research has shown that this “geography of discontent” also affects many cities and urban regions internally, contributing to political polarisation and the success of populist movements.⁴ This has manifested itself in short-termism and discontinuity in urban development – for example, through cities withdrawing from projects and measures related to environmental conditions or social diversity, and more broadly through difficulties in making decisions on matters of shared concern.⁵

Within the European Union, however, it has thus far been possible to systematically build an urban policy that is founded on the benefits of urbanisation and oriented towards the future as part of the EU’s broader regional policy promoting cohesion and sustainable growth. The EU Urban Agenda 2025 emphasises not only the innovative and prosperity-generating nature of cities but also their sustainability, accessibility, inclusion, safety, fairness and health.⁶

In Finland, national urban policy is guided above all by the National Urban Strategy 2020–2030, which represents a shared vision developed jointly by the Government and cities concerning the future direction of Finnish cities. The strategy emphasises urban vitality, social sustainability and climate-smart urban development.⁷ Finnish urban policy has nevertheless been criticised for the unclear division of responsibilities between cities and the state and for insufficient

recognition of the distinct characteristics of large cities.⁸ Academic urban research is therefore needed not only to deepen large cities’ understanding of their own distinctive characteristics but also to strengthen recognition of their particular needs at the national level and increase awareness of the importance of large cities for Finland’s overall wellbeing and sustainable growth.

As the Turku Urban Research Programme enters its fifth programme period, responsibility for basic health and social services has shifted from municipalities to wellbeing services counties. This has created new interfaces for research and development and, above all, fundamentally changed the role of cities. Cities can now focus more strongly than before on strengthening their economic foundations, innovation capacity and vitality. This shift also places municipalities’ educational responsibilities and the development of the urban environment in an even more central position. In supporting the wellbeing of city residents, preventive measures – such as promoting inclusion, preventing and reducing segregation, supporting participation in physical activity and developing cultural services – have also gained greater prominence. In addition, in 2025 public employment services (TE services) were transferred from the state to municipalities, enabling municipalities to integrate labour-market issues more seamlessly into their economic vitality policies. During the 2026–2029 period of the Turku Urban Research Programme, it will be important to study and evaluate, among other things, the success and impacts of the health and social services reform and the TE services reform in the Turku region.

2 Objectives

The Turku Urban Research Programme encourages both researchers and practitioners to reflect, through multidisciplinary approaches, on the objectives and means of developing a good city. Ecologically, socially, culturally and economically sustainable urban development requires research-based knowledge and the application of knowledge in practice. However, generating knowledge that supports urban development also requires academic freedom and an operating culture that encourages new scientific initiatives and bold experimentation.

The research themes presented in the Turku Urban Research Programme 2026–2029 are based on the City of Turku's Mayor's Programme and City Strategy. This ensures that research supports decision-making processes. Strengthening the knowledge base helps improve the effectiveness of urban development measures and prevent unintended negative consequences. Research supporting decision-making may concern, for example, the urban environment, city residents or the operating practices of the city organisation.

The key objectives of the Turku Urban Research Programme 2026–2029 are to:

- 1) Strengthen the knowledge base and expertise supporting regional vitality and wellbeing;
- 2) Generate new research knowledge for the city to support decision-making in accordance with the themes of the city strategy and the Mayor's Programme; and
- 3) Increase the impact of academic urban research, with particular emphasis on dialogue concerning the application of research findings and the utilisation of knowledge in urban policy.

Although projects funded under the thematic framework of the Urban Research Programme are expected to deliver societal impact, they are fundamentally academic in nature. Urban development grounded in academic research offers a deeper basis for action than the data-driven management and development approaches that have proliferated rapidly alongside digitalisation.⁹ Development based on academic knowledge involves reflection on the distinctive characteristics of different forms of knowledge, including, for example, their explanatory power and the uncertainties associated with them.¹⁰

Academic expertise can, for example, illuminate the temporal dimension of urban change. Future-oriented research can support foresight, the identification of development trends, preparedness for alternative development pathways and the development of future scenarios. Academic research can generate not only knowledge but also research-informed perspectives on the values and norms that shape our actions and influence our future.

Research can also contribute to understanding the spatial dimension of urban development, not only in relation to changes within the city itself but also through comparative research by relating these developments to those taking place in other cities and urban regions. In research projects funded by the Turku Urban Research Programme, empirical research has traditionally focused on Turku and the Turku region. However, research projects may also address a broader phenomenon and its impact on the development of cities or urban regions, provided that the knowledge generated can be demonstrated to be useful for the development of Turku. The Urban Research Programme encourages comparative research in which knowledge and findings generated elsewhere in the world are applied, where appropriate, to Turku's

operating environment. At the same time, the programme encourages researchers to relate research conducted in the Turku context to the international operating environment and to use research carried out within the Urban Research Programme, for example, as a springboard for international project applications.

The Urban Research Programme encourages both researchers and practitioners to adopt a phenomenon-based approach in which phenomena related to cities and urbanisation are examined from the perspectives of multiple disciplines and administrative sectors.¹¹ This enables the development of holistic solutions to the various challenges and opportunities associated with urban phenomena. The need for a phenomenon-based approach is also linked to the “wicked problems” commonly associated with the governance and development of cities and regions – problems that constantly evolve and whose resolution from the perspective of a single discipline or administrative sector can easily create new problems from the perspective of another.¹² The City of Turku's Mayor's Programme introduces cross-administrative leadership groups to facilitate the management of such challenges by bringing together expertise from multiple administrative sectors.¹³ Cross-sector collaboration is also promoted through the Urban Research Programme, which encourages researchers to form multidisciplinary research groups to examine urban phenomena from different perspectives. Multidisciplinarity broadens the field of urban research by incorporating disciplines that have not traditionally been associated with urban research.

The Urban Research Programme encourages researchers to design projects in which the city organisation participates as an active actor. In such projects, research groups may, for example, work together with the city to develop experiments in which different hypotheses or theoretically grounded operating models are tested and monitored in practical operating environments.

Knowledge is generated not only for city leadership, other staff, city councillors and urban development experts, but also for city residents. When communicating research and its results, consideration is given to the fact that the knowledge and understanding generated through research are typically useful across multiple administrative sectors and stakeholder groups. The objective is to promote the broad utilisation of research findings in both practice and research. Researchers are expected to publish not only peer-reviewed scientific articles or monographs but also more accessible publications on their research topics aimed at experts or the wider public. Researchers are also encouraged to communicate their research through other channels. The Urban Research Programme supports communication related to research projects by organising, among other things, various seminars and discussion events where researchers can present their research and its findings to different stakeholder groups. In addition, all projects funded by the Urban Research Programme publish a concise and accessible research review, including recommendations for action, in the programme's own publication series.



PHOTO: VILL MEDIA OY

3 From the City of Turku's Mayor's Programme to Research Themes

The City of Turku has two guiding strategic documents. The Mayor's Programme, Turku for a New Century – 800 Years of History and Future, Sustainable Growth and Human Stories, is an agreement concluded by the City Council that took office in 2025 and defines the priorities for action during the 2025–2029 council term. The City Strategy, The Growth Story of Turku Towards the 2040s, translates these priorities into broader entities and extends the time horizon into the 2040s. The City Strategy also briefly describes Turku's current situation in relation to its strategic objectives and presents an initial framework of indicators for measuring progress towards those objectives. Researchers are encouraged to familiarise themselves with these two documents when planning research projects.

The thematic structure of the Turku Urban Research Programme 2026–2029 is based on the Mayor's Programme, but researchers are expected to interpret the themes from the perspective of research and through the research questions of their own disciplines. This research-based approach supports the city's long-term development.

Research carried out within the Urban Research Programme focuses on societal and spatial change in cities and on the opportunities available to cities – especially the City of Turku – to influence this change independently or together with other actors. Researchers and research groups may define the scope of their research more precisely based both on their own research interests and on themes derived from the Mayor's Programme.

This chapter briefly presents the themes of the City of Turku's Mayor's Programme, relates them to the City Strategy and provides examples of how they may be developed into research themes. The programme does not propose possible research questions so as to leave researchers free to formulate research questions from the perspectives of their own disciplines and expertise and to design scientifically innovative initiatives.

The Mayor's Programme is structured around seven overarching themes. These themes are: 1) sustainable economy, 2) wellbeing and equality, 3) promoting regional equality and reducing segregation, 4) education, competence and employment, 5) housing, land use and mobility, 6) climate and nature city and 7) attractiveness and internationalisation. These themes are largely mutually supportive and complementary. In addition, the programme includes cross-cutting themes such as growth orientation, sustainability, vitality, collaborative leadership, open communication, and the utilisation of digitalisation, data analytics and artificial intelligence in urban governance and development. During the 2025–2029 period, the Mayor's Programme places particular emphasis on the city's sustainable growth: socially and regionally cohesive urban development, the conditions for economic sustainability, and reconciling growth with planetary boundaries.

3.1 Sustainable Economy

Turku's financial management is based on an active growth and employment policy aimed at maintaining and strengthening the city's tax base. The city's principal sources of revenue consist of municipal tax, property tax and corporate income tax, all of which the city can influence through its growth policy. Securing the revenue base, in turn, enables long-term investment in the future. Enabling growth requires both hard and soft investments. Hard investments relate to urban development, land use, transport and mobility; soft investments, in turn, support the smooth everyday lives of Turku residents and the services that underpin them, including education, early childhood education, sports facilities, employment, culture, libraries and events.¹⁴

Turku's municipal finances are preparing for a reform of the central government transfer system, and the City of Turku seeks to influence this reform so that the needs of growing cities are adequately taken into account and their investment capacity safeguarded. Finland's municipal landscape is currently undergoing significant differentiation, while at the same time the role of municipalities in service provision is also being reconsidered at the national level. To support this objective, a parliamentary working group has been established, whose work is expected to lay the groundwork for changes to, among other things, municipal responsibilities, the central government transfer system and possibly also the municipal structure.¹⁵

Both the Finnish economy and the global economy are currently subject to considerable uncertainty, arising in part from geopolitical factors, which means that the strategic direction of Turku's municipal finances must be monitored regularly. Where necessary, there must also be capacity to adapt to exceptional circumstances.

The key to sustainable financial management lies in continuously monitoring change and managing operations on an evidence-based basis. This promotes administrative efficiency and the purposeful allocation of resources.

Within the Urban Research Programme, themes related to sustainable economy may include, among others:

- the development of municipal finances and possible structural reforms affecting municipal responsibilities and financing
- the city's investment capacity and new financing models that strengthen it
- public-private partnerships, partnership agreements and alliances
- ownership steering
- strengthening employment and labour availability
- the evolution and development of service networks
- the significance of digitalisation in improving the efficiency of administration and service provision
- historical turning points in urban economies
- the local impacts of global economic challenges



PHOTO: HEIKKI RÄISÄNEN

3.2 Wellbeing and Equality

The wellbeing of residents consists of physical, mental and social wellbeing. For this reason, the promotion of wellbeing is approached in the Mayor's Programme as a multifaceted whole encompassing, for example, services related to upbringing and education, culture, leisure and other aspects of residents' everyday lives.

Following the transfer of responsibility for basic health and social services from municipalities to wellbeing services counties, municipalities' wellbeing-related services have been able to shift their focus from addressing problems to supporting wellbeing through preventive measures. However, the interfaces between the city and the wellbeing services county still require active engagement by the city in order to avoid overlaps and ensure that residents can easily access the services they need.

The Mayor's Programme highlights a sense of community in everyday life as a key component of wellbeing. This can be supported not only through various wellbeing and cultural services but also through urban spaces that encourage encounters and through spaces for everyday mobility that support community, such as the areas surrounding public transport hubs.

Children, young people and families with children are identified in the Mayor's Programme as priority target groups in efforts to promote wellbeing. The role of schools in promoting wellbeing is important, for example, for the integration of families with immigrant backgrounds. Supporting children's and young people's participation in sports and physical activity is also emphasised in the Mayor's Programme. Supporting these groups contributes in the long term to increasing physical activity among all residents of Turku.

In the spirit of the Turku 800 anniversary celebrations, the Mayor's Programme gives culture a prominent role as a contributor to wellbeing. In promoting culture, emphasis is placed on resident participation, and cultural provision is directed not only to central Turku but also to suburban areas.

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Following the transfer of responsibility for basic health and social services from municipalities to wellbeing services counties, municipalities' wellbeing-related services have been able to shift their focus from addressing problems to supporting wellbeing through preventive measures.



Within the Urban Research Programme, themes related to wellbeing and equality may include, among others:

- the evolution of the municipality's role in supporting wellbeing from historical periods to the present day
- the formation and functioning of interfaces between cities and wellbeing services counties
- service guidance, service allocation, accessibility and timeliness
- future needs in education
- the integration of multilingual children, young people and families and those from different cultural backgrounds
- the significance of culture and the creative sectors for wellbeing
- the significance of public spaces and services in residential areas for community and a sense of inclusion
- the causes of physical inactivity and measures to address them
- manifestations of racism and opportunities to address them

3.3 Regional Equality and Reducing Segregation

Turku is the most spatially segregated city in Finland. For this reason, the city is required to take effective measures to promote regional equality and reduce segregation. Segregation is a prime example of a complex phenomenon and a “wicked problem”, the management of which requires multidisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration. Research carried out within the Urban Research Programme has significantly advanced understanding of segregation and influenced policy measures aimed at promoting regional equality and reducing segregation, in which Turku seeks to act as a national frontrunner. To combat segregation, a cross-administrative national segregation programme based on cooperation between the state and cities is currently being prepared.¹⁶ Research conducted in Turku can both build on work carried out within the framework of the national segregation programme and generate knowledge in support of the programme.

In the City of Turku’s Mayor’s Programme, regional equality and reducing segregation are promoted by encouraging residents towards greater community through both new operating cultures and spatial solutions. Among other things, the city develops cooperation with various organisations to support opportunities for participation among residents of different ages. The city is also committed to improving the comfort and functionality of public and shared spaces across different parts of the city.

Residential differentiation is addressed through housing policy, land use and a transport system that encourages sustainable urban mobility. Service networks are developed based on the specific characteristics and needs of residential areas. Where necessary, investment is directed towards the quality of local schools through measures of positive special treatment in order to ensure high-quality schools across all residential areas.

Residents’ sense of inclusion is promoted both by emphasising respectful encounters with residents in the city’s services and administration and by encouraging residents to encounter one another in ways that strengthen community. Homelessness is reduced systematically and partly in cooperation with the Wellbeing Services County of Southwest Finland.

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Research carried out within the Urban Research Programme has significantly advanced understanding of segregation and influenced policy measures aimed at promoting regional equality and reducing segregation, in which Turku seeks to act as a national frontrunner.

Within the Urban Research Programme, themes related to promoting equality and reducing segregation may include, among others:

- the dynamics of differentiation between residential areas and opportunities to reduce segregation and its impacts
- evidence-informed decision-making in preventing and reducing segregation
- evaluation of the effectiveness of policies aimed at preventing and reducing segregation
- indicators of school segregation and reducing school segregation
- the division of responsibilities between the city and the wellbeing services county in promoting wellbeing
- new opportunities for suburban development
- inclusion and democracy in the city
- children's and young people's participation in hobbies and organised activities
- monitoring and evaluation of participatory budgeting experiments
- experiments relating to the activation of urban spaces and their monitoring
- promoting active urban mobility and its impacts



PHOTO: HEIKKI RÄISÄNEN

3.4 Education, Competence and Employment

One of the city's core responsibilities is to promote the city's vitality and the wellbeing of its residents. For this reason, the city seeks to ensure that all residents have opportunities to develop their skills and become skilled individuals with opportunities to engage in meaningful work and thrive. This is also essential from the perspective of residents' sense of inclusion.

In developing education for children and young people, both people and the spatial conditions for learning are key factors. Sufficiently small group sizes help ensure that teachers have time to engage with pupils and monitor their learning. Ensuring literacy and other basic skills is identified in the Mayor's Programme as a particular priority in the development of comprehensive education. Adequate amounts of in-person teaching are also guaranteed in vocational education and upper secondary education in order to ensure the quality of learning. The Mayor's Programme emphasises fostering Turku's bilingualism as a resource for education and competence development from early childhood education through to university studies. The City Strategy highlights Turku particularly as a university city with a long tradition and emphasises the importance of all higher education institutions in Turku for RDI activities that support vitality in the long term.

The Mayor's Programme seeks to promote employment and monitor the outcomes of employment measures based on selected indicators. Employment services are closely integrated into the city's vitality work and take into account the individual needs of both jobseekers and employers. In addition, the objective of the Mayor's Programme is to make establishing a business in Turku as smooth as possible.

The Mayor's Programme emphasises the importance of services aimed at integration and language learning, as these support the rapid employment of immigrants. The city sets an example for companies and other organisations in the region in employing multilingual staff.

Within the Urban Research Programme, themes related to education, competence and employment may include, among others:

- developing early childhood education, for example from the perspective of language learning
- development needs in comprehensive education
- development needs relating to learning environments
- the development of cooperation models between cities, higher education institutions and businesses
- the city and its networks as promoters of RDI activities and business activity
- the effectiveness of employment services and their further development
- responding to businesses' premises and land plot needs
- business clusters in the city and the region
- the integration and employment of immigrants

3.5 Housing, Land Use and Sustainable Mobility

Sustainable urban development supports the City of Turku's ambitious climate objectives, high-quality housing, the attractiveness of the living environment and the quality of life of Turku residents. In the Mayor's Programme, the principal geographical focus area for urban development is the development corridor between the Port of Turku and Varissuo, which is being developed as a high-quality public transport corridor and whose development aims in particular to improve social balance across areas. Another objective is to ensure the functionality of the emerging education and business cluster in Kupittaa and Itäharju. Urban development combines objectives related to housing, workplaces and the development of service networks. In addition, the needs of tourism are taken into account.

Particular emphasis is placed on opportunities for sustainable and smooth everyday mobility, which also contributes to reducing emissions. The urban mobility system plays a key role in influencing the attractiveness of urban spaces, community and the conditions for the success of commercial services. An action programme for the development of the city centre will be prepared, including a transport plan for the city centre.

A sustainable urban structure reconciles compactness with sufficient greenery, enabling urban functionality, attractiveness, minimisation of the carbon footprint, adaptation to the impacts of climate change and the preservation of biodiversity. At the same time, the city also aims to enable a growing supply of plots for detached housing. Turku also seeks to safeguard values associated with maritime character, cultural environments and built heritage.

Within the Urban Research Programme, themes related to housing, land use and sustainable mobility may include, among others:

- the dynamics and impacts of urbanisation
- the characteristics of sustainable urban structure and promoting sustainability through planning
- reconciling compactness with diverse urban nature
- promoting functional and sustainable everyday mobility and developing the transport system
- developing the service offering and perceived quality of public transport hubs
- regional and national transport connections and logistics
- developments in modal split and influencing it
- links between land use and transport planning
- accessibility of services
- structural change in commerce and city centres
- intelligent transport systems
- safe and attractive public spaces
- the characteristics of attractive residential environments
- housing policy
- housing cultures and housing choices
- cultural values of the environment
- the history of the built environment

3.6 Climate and Nature City

Turku seeks to become a leading climate and nature city. Turku's objective is to achieve carbon neutrality by 2029, which requires emissions reductions across all sectors. The Mayor's Programme commits to monitoring the achievement of emissions targets through a reliable set of indicators. Turku aims to become a nature-positive city by 2035. In addition, Turku promotes the green transition both through its own investments and by providing an attractive investment environment for other green transition actors.

Turku is committed to protecting the unique natural values of the Archipelago Sea. The city reduces environmental loading on the Archipelago Sea together with other municipalities in the region, the Regional Council of Southwest Finland and the state. The city also promotes sustainable tourism in the Archipelago Sea region.

Within the Urban Research Programme, themes related to climate and nature may include, among others:

- mitigating climate change through urban development choices
- applying ecological compensation in urban planning
- urban ecosystems and their protection
- ecosystem services
- environmental health
- energy-efficient urban development
- civil society, everyday practices and agency in the climate and nature city
- approaches to adapting to climate change in cities
- sustainable tourism
- protection of the Archipelago Sea and inland waters
- circular economy in urban development
- the green transition and energy production from the perspective of cities
- the role of institutions of governance in promoting sustainability
- cooperation between the city and businesses in promoting sustainability

3.7 Attractiveness and Internationalisation

In the Mayor's Programme, Turku commits to promoting sustainable growth and the wellbeing of residents by acting as a customer-oriented and effective partner to the business sector. Turku promotes innovation and attracts investment through business services, employment services and support for RDI activities. Cooperation with both businesses and higher education institutions plays a key role in this. Such cooperation also improves opportunities to secure international RDI funding.

Turku is an internationally recognised university city with a long tradition. All higher education institutions in Turku operate internationally and attract international talent to the city. Turku seeks to strengthen its attractiveness and retention of international talent through a comprehensive English-language service offering. In promoting Nordic relations and Nordic cooperation, Turku actively leverages its geographical position as a gateway to the west, its bilingualism and its Swedish-speaking cultural heritage.

Domestic partnerships are also important to Turku. Key regional partners include the Regional Council of Southwest Finland, the Turku City Region Joint Municipal Authority and the Wellbeing Services County of Southwest Finland. All of these actors share common knowledge needs and also benefit from the production of knowledge that serves all parties. At the national level, key partners include Finland's other major cities, which likewise generate knowledge that supports comparison and mutual learning.

Turku's vitality policy is reflected, among other things, in climate action and the pursuit of nature-positive development. The green transition brings new jobs to the city and strengthens Turku's reputation as a responsible and attractive city.

During the current Mayor's Programme period, Turku's attractiveness is further strengthened by the city's 800th anniversary celebrations, culminating in 2029. The anniversary year highlights Turku's position as a frontrunner in culture, education and sustainable development. The anniversary year and its events increase Turku's visibility and attractiveness both nationally and internationally. They strengthen Turku's expertise and reputation as a versatile event city. The anniversary year also provides a framework for research on topics such as Turku's history, cultural heritage and identities. Researchers will also be needed to assess the social, cultural and economic impacts of the anniversary year and the events organised within its framework.

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In the Mayor's Programme, Turku commits to promoting sustainable growth and the wellbeing of residents by acting as a customer-oriented and effective partner to the business sector. Turku promotes innovation and attracts investment through business services, employment services and support for RDI activities. Cooperation with both businesses and higher education institutions plays a key role in this.

Within the Urban Research Programme, themes related to attractiveness and internationalisation may include, among others:

- factors influencing the international attractiveness of cities
- accessibility as a factor of attractiveness
- the relationship between competence, research and regional competitiveness
- the use of external funding in urban development and collaborative development
- regional impacts of the creative sectors
- urban culture, cultural policy and the city's cultural institutions
- multiculturalism in urban development
- global trends in urban development
- global, European and national networks of cities
- cooperation within city regions
- city marketing
- urban events and event cities
- the city's history and identity
- the history and present day relating to the Swedish language and Swedish-speaking Finland



4 Programme Implementation

The Urban Research Programme is implemented primarily through research projects funded within the framework of the programme. Research projects are expected to be both scientifically high-quality and useful from the perspective of city administration and urban development. The city organisation and the universities cooperate both in the administration of the Urban Research Programme and throughout the different phases of research projects carried out within its framework.

4.1 Funding Instruments

Research cooperation under the Urban Research Programme is financed through various funding instruments. The programme's principal form of activity is the funding of university-led research projects through an annual competitive call. In addition, city-initiated targeted studies are carried out within the framework of the programme. The city may also participate, within the framework of the programme, in large-scale and multi-partner research projects implemented through external funding. The programme may also award other grants and thesis awards if so decided by the programme steering group.

The programme's own research calls refer to research funding competitions organised by the City of Turku and its partners. In addition to the City of Turku, the principal funders are the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University, although other funders may also participate.

Funding Instrument	Implementation	Schedule
Programme research calls	Co-funding	Once per year (autumn)
Funding of targeted studies	100% city-funded, co-funded, or externally funded through city-administered funding	Continuous, city-initiated
Participation in large projects	The city may act as a co-funder or participate in other ways in research implemented primarily through external funding	Continuous, university-led
Other funding	Primarily city funding	As decided by the steering group

Table 1: Funding Instruments

Calls may cover either all themes of the Urban Research Programme or specific themes separately defined in the call notice. As part of the call process, researchers are invited to submit research project proposals describing, among other things, the precise topic, perspectives and approaches, and the scope of the project. The call notices published on the City of Turku's website define the scientific and practical relevance and impact criteria on the basis of which proposals are selected for funding under the Urban Research Programme. The evaluation committee includes representatives from the universities, the City of Turku organisation and any other organisations that may fund research carried out within the framework of the programme.

Under the Urban Research Programme's research calls, funding may be applied for by research groups whose leader and research team are affiliated with the University of Turku or Åbo Akademi. Research consortia may also include researchers from other Finnish or international universities, higher education institutions or research institutes. However, at least 50% of each project's funding must be allocated in the project budget to the University of Turku or Åbo Akademi University.

Projects are required to adopt a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary research approach. The call process is conducted in two stages. Applicants invited to the second stage may be asked to clarify or supplement their applications before the evaluation committee makes its final decisions.

Research calls have traditionally been organised in the autumn, but the Turku Urban Research Programme reserves the right to change the application period if necessary.

Targeted studies refer to studies separately tailored to the city's needs and are typically smaller in scale and shorter in duration than projects funded through research calls. In these cases, the city agrees with the researcher on the research topics and methods. Targeted studies are often linked to the city's current development issues and can help clarify the background to these issues and provide new knowledge to support development decisions. Preparation of targeted studies is typically initiated by the city with support from the research director, although researchers may also take the initiative. The same concept may also be used to develop tailored courses in which students, for example, design solutions to problems or development targets defined by the city. There are no application periods for this type of cooperation, and cooperation may be discussed with the city on an ongoing basis.

Large research projects refer to extensive projects, typically lasting several years, which are implemented through funding provided by funders independent of the city organisation. This funding may consist of research funding or regional development funding where research elements are included. Directing research funding towards research that promotes interaction with practical actors and places greater emphasis on communication has been a long-term trend.¹⁷

Providers of research funding include, for example, the Academy of Finland, the Strategic Research Council (SRC), Business Finland, European Union framework programmes (especially Horizon) and various foundations. Such funding is generally applied for by researchers. Researchers may discuss project cooperation with the city on an ongoing basis without a separate deadline. The city may co-fund or otherwise participate in projects that support its own development activities, for example by providing a development platform for research projects.

Urban development activities are externally funded through EU framework programmes and structural funds as well as various national programmes. In these cases, applicants are generally cities, regions or third-sector actors, although universities may also apply.

The Urban Research Programme encourages researchers to monitor funding calls issued by the EU, the SRC and other similar funders and to explore opportunities for fruitful cooperation between researchers and the city organisation within these calls. The programme's own funding may be regarded as seed funding that supports the development of ideas into broader joint research and development projects between the city and researchers.

All research funded and carried out within the framework of the Urban Research Programme is subject to the following conditions: The work of the professor (or equivalent) leading the project or sub-project is considered part of the executing organisation's (universities or equivalent) own funding contribution and is not reimbursed; however, no working time records are required. Costs relating to researchers employed for the project are reimbursed in full, calculated on the basis

of actual employer costs (30%, rather than according to overhead model coefficients). A fixed overhead allowance of 18% is accepted for the funded portion of the project. The funder approves the use of funding for salaries, grants, and research data and travel costs. As a rule, the project type is public research funding (VAT 0%). The City of Turku appoints a steering group for each funded project.

More detailed questions concerning research funding should be addressed to the research director well in advance of the deadlines.

4.2 Model for Cooperation

The principles of management by knowledge and evidence-informed decision-making emphasise the need to utilise research-based knowledge within city organisations.¹⁸ The societal impact of research is not ensured solely through communication of results but also through interaction at different stages of the research process and, for example, by opening up methodological choices to target audiences.¹⁹ This becomes increasingly important the more polarised the operating environment becomes and the more research knowledge is challenged, for example in social media through alternative viewpoints.

Over recent decades, operating models have been developed between universities and other organisations in which partners bring their expertise to shared arenas and address challenges interactively and participatorily, while critically evaluating research evidence and other forms of evidence and framing new research questions.²⁰ This forms the basis of approaches such as co-creation and knowledge brokerage.²¹

In such partnerships, universities can act as analytical drivers of urban development, as critical counterparts and as actors that broaden and deepen public debate. Applying research knowledge also requires familiarisation and reflection on the part of the city organisation. Co-creation is based on interaction throughout the different phases of the process.

The programme-level cooperation model is based on an agreement between the City of Turku, the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University, which defines, among other things, the role and composition principles of the programme steering group and the responsibilities of the research director, who serves as a shared resource of the universities and the city. The content of the Urban Research Programme is decided by the steering group. The research director for urban research, jointly appointed by the University of Turku and the City of Turku, acts as rapporteur to the steering group and as the operational lead of the programme. The research director serves as the programme's knowledge broker and is responsible for preparing and designing the overall programme, participating in the planning of research projects and programme activities, and ensuring alignment and interaction between the knowledge needs and other interests of the city and the universities. The research director also supports the identification of new partners both within the city organisation and within the universities.

The Urban Research Programme seeks to increase interaction between the city and the universities beyond the research projects it funds. This includes, for example, background discussions on the research needs of the city's central administration and service areas and on research provision across different disciplines, including theses.

The City of Turku appoints a steering group to all research projects it funds (programme research calls and targeted studies) or appoints a project member to large research projects and requires projects to adopt an interactive approach. The objectives of steering group work at different stages are described in the information box on page 26.



PHOTO: TARA JAAKKOLA

1. BEGINNING

The first meeting is held soon after the launch of the project. The meeting reviews the project's research plan, research data and schedule. Discussion also covers expectations relating to the research, the role of the steering group and the research group's expectations regarding support from city personnel. Although the proposed plan has already been approved for implementation during project selection, the steering group process may further refine the plan and provide those using the results with additional information about the expected nature of the results and their potential benefits. The initial meeting should also include agreement on when the first interim meeting will be held and who will be responsible for organising it.

2. INTERIM

The interim meeting or meetings should be scheduled so that they include reporting on interim results and possible discussions concerning choices or refinements related to the research design when moving to the next phase of the research process. Interim results may include, for example, reporting on the literature review (how the phenomenon has been approached in previous research) or a preliminary examination of the empirical component. Discussion on choices and refinements may concern, for example, the refinement of research questions or the allocation of resources. At the interim meeting, it is advisable to agree on the timing of the next interim meeting or the final meeting.

4. FOLLOW-UP

At the conclusion of the project, steering group members representing the city should reflect on what the results mean for the development of Turku (e.g. strategic objectives, operational management, budgeting and activities). The chair of the steering group summarises the project's outcomes, and the steering group links the project results to monitoring measures under the Mayor's Programme. Steering group members are encouraged to present the results to an appropriate management group or other forum in a manner they consider suitable.

3. FINAL STAGE

At the final meeting, the research findings and the researchers' recommendations are presented regarding which development choices the results enable, support or require. In addition, discussion is held on the significance of the results for practical urban development. In this context, representatives of the city organisation should also consider the significance and usability of more abstract research findings in relation to, for example, major changes in the operating environment or major strategic choices that may challenge existing structures.

The research director participates in steering group meetings and supports dialogue between researchers and city representatives. The role of members of research project steering groups is to support research from the perspective of the city's knowledge needs and to ensure dissemination of results within the city organisation. Steering group members may also help researchers establish connections with the city organisation and arrange contacts that support the research.

A key feature of steering group work is the shared exchange of knowledge – first between researchers and city representatives and then among city representatives themselves – concerning the significance of the results and their desired impacts and channels of influence in urban development and administration (see the diagram Stages of Steering Group Work on page 26). The programme also organises broader events and seminars, primarily intended for expert audiences, to present research and discuss ongoing projects, their results and the significance of those results for the development of Turku. In addition, the Urban Research Programme communicates research directly to residents where the topics of research projects are of interest to a broader audience.

Researchers are expected to publish results in academic, peer-reviewed forums, but also in more accessible formats, for example blogs or professional publications. The research programme supports the implementation of the principles of responsible and open science. Each project receiving funding from the programme is required to publish a review in the programme's own Research Reviews series. Results may alternatively be published as a broader and more in-depth report in the programme's Research Reports series. Both are freely downloadable online publications (turku.fi/kaupunkitutkimus), edited by the research director. Research findings are also disseminated through other channels.



PHOTO: HANNA OKSANEN

5 Concluding Remarks

By the beginning of its fifth programme period, the Turku Urban Research Programme had reached fifteen years of operation. This makes the programme unique both nationally and internationally. The programme's long-term and systematic development is reflected in accumulated experience, established practices, recognition and shared understanding among stakeholders. The Urban Research Programme is not based solely on aligning the strategic interests of participating actors but also on shared values and objectives. For both the city and the universities, it is important to bring together capable and motivated people in order to accelerate cultural creativity and innovation and improve people's quality of life both in the city and more broadly in society.

Two external evaluations of the programme's impact have been conducted, the first in 2018 and the second in 2024. Both evaluations concluded that the Turku Urban Research Programme had succeeded in its role as a bridge-builder between the city and the universities. Among the factors identified as enabling this bridging role were continuous dialogue at programme and project level, defined cooperation processes for research projects and long-term development.²² According to the evaluations, the Urban Research Programme has supported the creation of an environment conducive to knowledge creation and utilisation and has thereby strengthened evidence-informed decision-making in the City of Turku.²³ The programme has been assessed as strengthening strategic decision-making in Turku and enhancing cooperation and interaction between the city and the universities.²⁴

The programme encourages phenomenon-based thinking. It promotes multidisciplinary and cross-sector approaches that create positive development cycles while also helping the city respond to the “wicked problems” of our time related, for example, to environmental crises, growing social inequality and Finland's economic challenges. The thematic link between research and the city's strategies ensures practical relevance.²⁵ For the future of the programme, it is essential that the content of the research produced responds to the knowledge needs of different service areas and that the multidisciplinary nature of projects supports the city's collaborative leadership.

External evaluations of the Urban Research Programme identified programme communication as a particular area for development. During the 2026–2029 period, the programme will communicate more effectively with audiences outside the city organisation, targeting political decision-makers and residents. The more residents' lived realities diverge and the more polarised the political environment becomes, the more important broad communication becomes. Polarisation has so far remained limited in Finnish cities, but even in the Nordic context it must be anticipated in the future.²⁶

From the perspective of universities, the Turku Urban Research Programme seeks to provide established processes and mechanisms for delivering research-based societal impact – the university's third mission. The programme implements the strategic objective shared by both the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi of achieving practical impact through regional partnerships.²⁷

Research carried out within the framework of the Urban Research Programme provides a broad range of perspectives on societal and spatial change. As a result of long-term cooperation, the city organisation has learned to encourage researchers to produce research knowledge that supports decision-making. However, this does not only mean applicability of results; there is also an expectation that research will position Turku's development within broader national and global trajectories and increase understanding of cities and urban development among actors within the city organisation. Continuous anticipation of the future is essential for the city, and wise responses require not only foresight but also carefully considered perspectives and an understanding of the background to societal developments. The Urban Research Programme encourages and inspires university researchers to conduct socially impactful research and provides the city with knowledge and academically grounded perspectives for managing change.

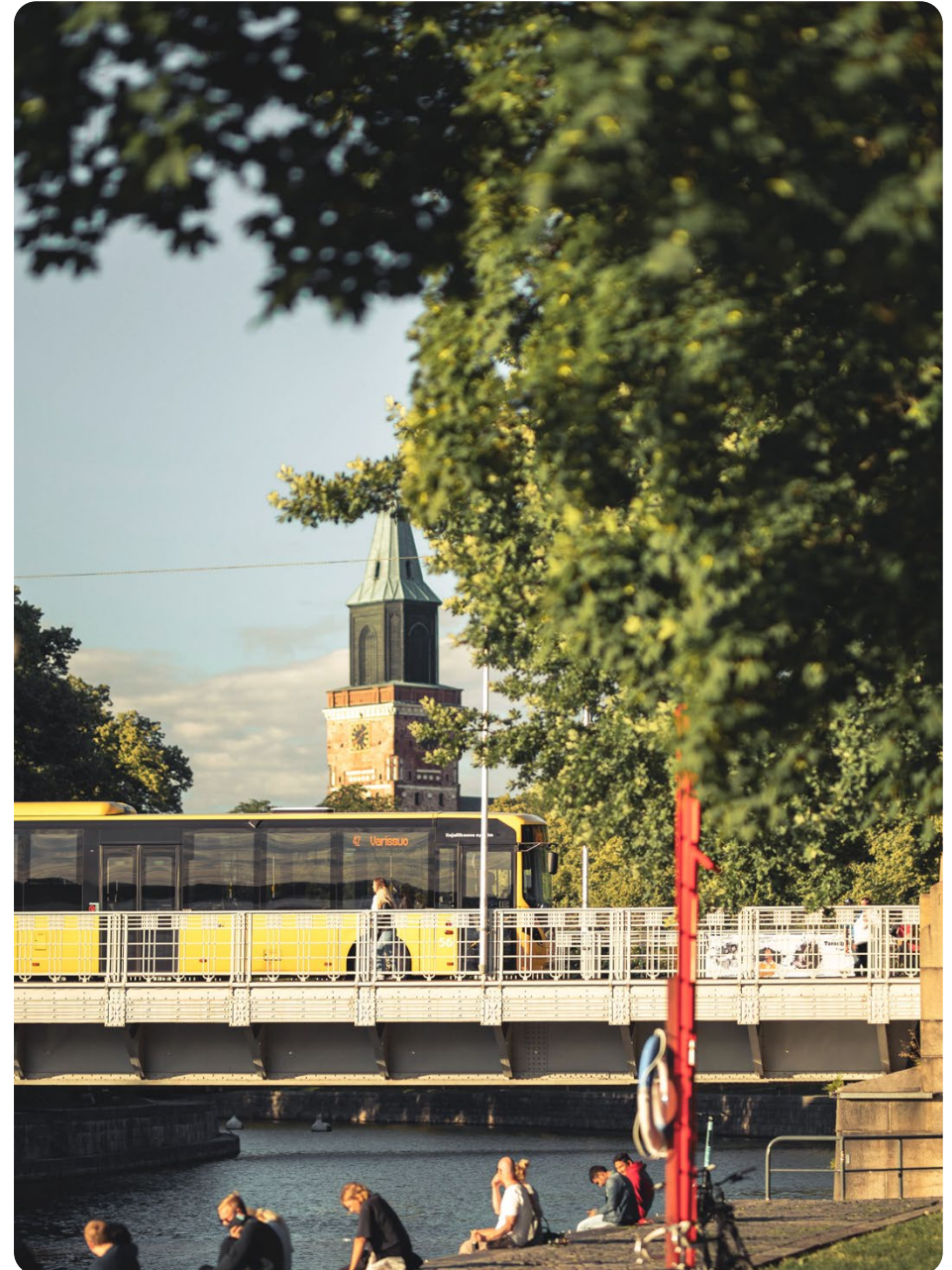


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