VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON
TE HERENGA WAKA

ZERO CARBON BY 2030*

2025 SUSTAINABILITY REPORT

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The designs used in this report, designed by David Hakaraia, draw inspiration from Māui-tikitiki-a-Taranga, embodying the spirit of innovation, resilience, and determination. Additionally, the manawa aho (heart line) is woven into the design, representing the pulse of knowledge, connection, and the intergenerational transmission of wisdom. These elements collectively speak to the remarkable feats of courage, learning, and perseverance that define the pursuit of education and personal growth.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

I orea te tuatara ka puta ki waho—a problem is solved by continuing to find solutions.

The University had a solid year in 2025. Our student numbers were up, the campus was vibrant with more students participating in sustainability activities alongside their studies, and things felt like they were getting back to pre-COVID times. But our relative success feels a bit hollow when there is such geo-political instability across the world and a struggling economy in Aotearoa New Zealand, with far fewer jobs for our graduates. The current coalition Government has made it clear that sustainability is not a priority for them. While we at Te Herenga Waka remain committed to a sustainable future, it has become a bit more of an uphill battle, with each new policy and funding decision making it harder to make positive progress. The nay-sayers are emboldened, and the supporters are more hesitant to speak up.

I've been leading the sustainability mahi of the University for nearly 20 years and I've seen several changes in government direction and the ebbs and flows of private-sector support for sustainability. While we are in a low period now, that will change. Our environmental crises will not magically solve themselves.

Through all the ups and downs, we are still able to make progress. Compiling this report is always a good opportunity to remind myself how far we have come and how we are contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. We did a lot of measuring in 2025 as part of gaining our first STARS rating (Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System)—a gold one! It's a framework that measures our sustainability performance across academics, engagement, innovation and leadership, operations, and planning and administration, designed specifically for universities, with more than 1,200 institutions across 52 countries participating. Unlike a lot of the university rankings, this framework is more of a true indicator of sustainability performance. We're chuffed with a gold rating and are working on getting platinum when we next submit in three years' time.

One of the areas that helped us achieve our gold STARS rating was our integration of mātauranga Māori to our sustainability work. The most prominent example of that is through Ngā Mokopuna, the redevelopment of our marae precinct, built on a brownfield site previously occupied by five old colonial villas. The building has been designed to meet the Living Building Challenge—a framework that resonates with Māori values and is also, by far, the toughest sustainable building certification in the world. We spent our first year of occupying Ngā Mokopuna in 2025 and have now gone 12 months processing our own wastewater on site, relying entirely on the rain for water supply, and generating 33 percent more power than we used. We are on track to deliver the performance and complete all the necessary documentation to gain our certification later in 2026. Beyond the building itself, the kaupapa of integrating sustainability and mātauranga Māori has been strengthened by relocating the sustainability team into the deputy vice-chancellor (Māori) portfolio and renaming it deputy vice-chancellor (Māori and kaitiakitanga). This organisational structure will help us embed the ethos of Ngā Mokopuna across the University.

I hope you enjoy reading this report—it's a nice summary of the highlights from 2025 and a transparent snapshot of our performance so far.

Noho ora mai

Andrew Wilks (he/him)
Manutaki, Toitūroa—Director, Sustainability

AT A GLANCE

He whakarāpopototanga

At a glance

[1] QS World University Rankings 2026
[2] Times Higher Education rankings 2025
[3] Shanghai Global Ranking of Academic Subjects

Ranked 240th
out of the world's top 1,500 universities in 2025[1]

1 of 23 ★★★★★+
of the world's 'Five Stars Plus' rated universities, setting the gold standard for higher education[1]

Ranked 194th
for social and environmental sustainability[1]
globally among the world's top 2,000 universities, and we're the 1st university in NZ to receive a gold STARS rating from AASHE.

In the world's top 1% for 22 subjects[1]
Accounting & Finance, Anthropology, Classics & Ancient History, Communication & Media Studies, Development Studies, Earth & Marine Sciences, Education, English Language and Literature, Geography, Geology, Geophysics, History, Hospitality & Leisure Management, Law, Library and Information Management, Linguistics, Performing Arts, Philosophy, Politics & International Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Theology/Divinity and Religious Studies

Ranked 1st in NZ
for Library and Information Management[1], Politics and International Studies[1], and Law[2]

Ranked top 50 in the world and 1st in NZ
for Artificial Intelligence (AI)[3]

4,894
Qualifications awarded

$27m
invested in scholarships by the University in 2025

Total revenue **$582m**

Total expenditure **$573m**

$106.2m
external research income

1,939
Māori domestic equivalent full-time students (EFTS)

1,060
Pasifika domestic EFTS

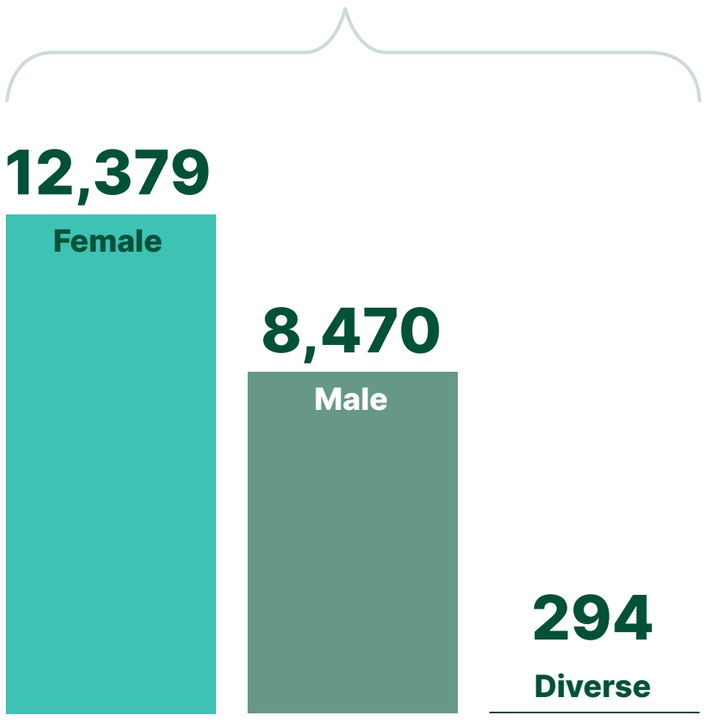
14,653[4]
government-funded EFTS

1,679
full-fee EFTS

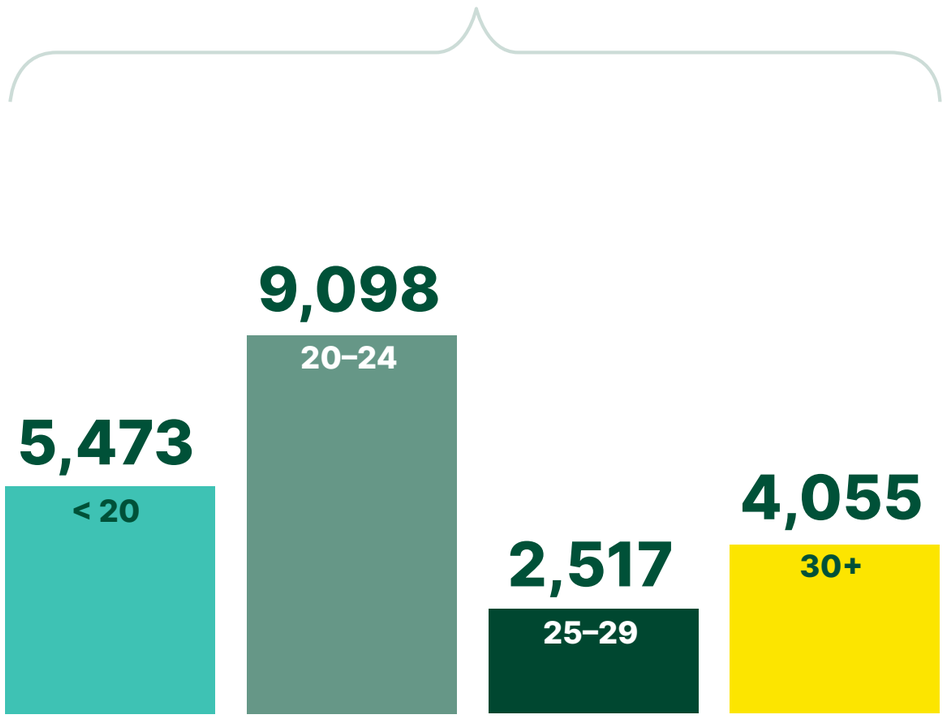
[4] 14,650 SAC funded and 3 STAR funded

Student distribution

Gender



Age



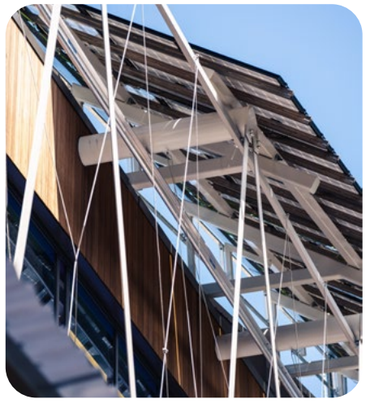
Staff

2,237
staff (full-time equivalent)

1,022
teaching and research staff

2025 BY THE NUMBERS

53
SCHOLARSHIPS OFFERED IN SUSTAINABILITY TOPICS
(worth $314,000, down from $336,500 in 2024)



13,759
STUDENT VOLUNTEER HOURS
(up from 13,072 in 2024)

488
RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS IN SUSTAINABILITY
(down from 612 in 2024)

48
SUSTAINABILITY-FOCUSED MEDIA RELEASES
(resulting in 46 media stories, down from 81 in 2024)

13.2%
MĀORI STUDENTS
(up from 12.6% in 2024)

7.2%
PASIFIKA STUDENTS
(up from 7.1% in 2024)

17,147
TONNES OF GROSS CARBON EMISSIONS
(down 11% from 2017 baseline)

426
TONNES OF WASTE TO LANDFILL
(up from 386 in 2024)

8,678
ENROLMENTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY COURSES
(down from 8,679 in 2024)

170
COURSES OFFERED IN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY
(up from 157 in 2024)

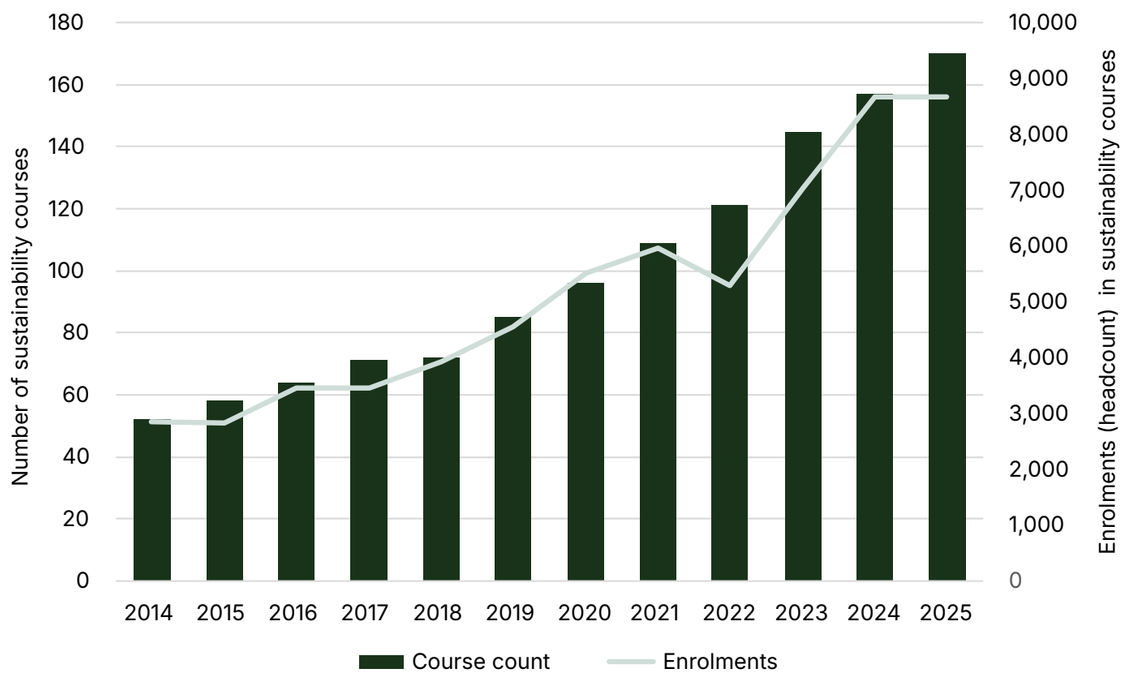
88%
WOMEN ON SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM
(up from 78% in 2024)

5,300
TREES PLANTED
(up from 3,400 in 2024)

LEARNING AND TEACHING

Measuring our performance

Performance indicators	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Environmental sustainability-focused course offerings	96	109	121	145	157	170
Enrolments in environmental sustainability-focused courses	5,509	5,965	5,290	7,041	8,679	8,678
Environmental sustainability-focused scholarships (Cumulative value)	12 ($96,000)	10 ($59,500)	13 ($164,654)	40 ($315,000)	35 ($336,500)	53 ($314,000)



As a reflection of Te Herenga Waka's prioritisation of kaitiakitanga (guardianship of the environment and people) as part of its strategic goals, it is wonderful to be able to report that the number of courses on offer that are incorporating environmental sustainability material is continuing to rise steadily. In 2025, 95 percent of all our undergraduate qualifications awarded (2,497 students) included sustainability-focused learning requirements, up from 89 percent in 2024. The breadth of sustainability teaching is important as we can't rely solely on sustainability specialists to solve our global challenges—we need graduates with sustainability skills in a wide variety of different career paths.

Where we can improve

We need to be careful that the growth of sustainability course offerings (either through new courses or incorporating new sustainability content into existing courses) is matched by student interest. In most previous years, adding more course offerings has led to more enrolments, but that was not the case in 2025. While it's too early to draw the conclusion that student demand for sustainability course content has peaked, we do need to ensure that we avoid oversupply of course options and that the sustainability content is high quality.

The Sustainability Office and the Academic Office began working together on a project to evaluate the breadth and depth of sustainability and mātauranga Māori content in Te Herenga Waka's curriculum. Using the University's new curriculum management system, Mata, courses with components directly relating to sustainability and mātauranga Māori can be tracked. The aim of mapping the curriculum and gaining a baseline evaluation of the number of courses—and the number of students engaging in them—is to help inform what is considered good practice in the development of sustainability and mātauranga Māori course learning objectives and share them across the University through a community of practice.

Photo: *Isabelle Charlett*

The human side of sustainability

The inextricable link between people, culture, and the environment is the focus of a new major in Environmental Humanities. Te Herenga Waka is the first university in Aotearoa to offer an Environmental Humanities major, which is available to students as part of the Bachelor of Arts and the new Bachelor of Environment and Society qualification. The new major was introduced following an increase in sustainability-focused humanities courses on offer, in response to student demand. Su Ballard, professor in Art History, says there is a clear need for creative practices such as art, film, literature, media, and theatre to help communicate crucial scientific messages. “We need people who can write critically and describe and engage with the environment. We need many ways to approach problems that affect us all, and so, if the problem is climate change, then we need everyone’s tools, including critical observation and imaginative interpretation.”

The value of the connections that can be forged between art, science, and community engagement to tackle environmental issues was underscored by Master of Science

Nikki Wright

graduate Nikki Wright, whose thesis explored the complex social and environmental dynamics around the interconnections of art, science, and insect pollinators. Her research explored the human–pollinator relationships within her own Wellington neighbourhood. She created a multimedia blog and planted an eco-art berm with native shrubs to provide pollen, nectar, and host leaves for native bees, moths, and butterflies. Her work connected the stories of these insects with the history and ecology of the landscape and the experiences of human neighbours, beekeepers, entomologists, artists, and the local council.

Scholarships support student success

To help support our students who share our commitment to a sustainable future, there are also now more environmental-sustainability-focused scholarships available to students, and it has become easier for students to find them—anyone searching Te Herenga Waka's website for funding opportunities can now filter their search for sustainability scholarships. The funding for our scholarships comes from both the University itself and generous donors from our community. In a cost-of-living crisis, scholarships make a massive difference for our students so they can focus on their studies and ultimately become the change-makers we need them to be.

A new scholarship that aims to encourage Pasifika students into environmental stewardship was launched in 2025. The Protect Our Islands Pasifika Scholarship was established by Te Herenga Waka alumna Dr Monica Gruber, who has transformed her Ecology and Biodiversity PhD research into Pacific Biosecurity Limited. The company supports Pacific nations to manage the impact of invasive species, and company profits are used to fund the new scholarship. "We want to support students who have a desire to build resilience in the Pacific through nature, whether that's in invasive-species management, conservation in protected areas, or marine resource management. I just want the applicants to be passionate about being caretakers of the Pacific," says Monica. "I hope this scholarship gets talented students over the line and into a career that has benefits for the peoples and environments of our Pacific region."

In 2023, we established a pool of sustainability scholarships for school leavers who demonstrate community-minded environmental practices to help attract students who share our commitment to a sustainable future. In 2025, we added another scholarship offering to recognise the amazing sustainability mahi of our existing students. The Pakohe Sustainability Scholarship recognises enrolled students engaging in inspiring conservation and environmental work, with a focus on extracurricular and voluntary contributions on campus and in the wider community. In its inaugural iteration, 11 students were awarded $4,000 each. Funding for the Pakohe scholarship comes from Te Parahia contestable fund, an internal sustainability fund that uses money raised from a levy on air travel.

Extracurricular opportunities for students

In 2025, the University's Wellington International Leadership Programme and Wellington Plus, which had previously been two separate but complementary extracurricular leadership programmes, merged to become a new entity. The Kitea Impact Programme is a comprehensive offering that enables students to make a positive difference in their local and global communities, while gaining new leadership skills and connections. A lot of work went on behind the scenes to design the new programme, including extensively consulting students to respond to their interests and priorities. As a result, Sustainability—Toitū ta Taiao was identified as one of Kitea's five core themes. Hundreds of students take part in Kitea's sustainability-focused activities, which include the Green Impact scheme and community work such as tree planting, food rescue, and beach clean-ups.

RESEARCH

Measuring our performance

Performance indicators	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Research publications contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (as per SciVal at the end of the calendar year)	505	586	506	573	612	488
Externally funded grants for environmental sustainability research (Cumulative value)	47 ($31.5 million)	59 ($62.6 million)	55 ($32.6 million)	54 ($7.6 million)	32 ($21.0 million)	38 ($11.7 million)

In the same way that the breadth of our sustainability teaching across our different programmes is important, so too is the breadth of our sustainability research so we can address our sustainability challenges from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Over the past three years, 38 of our 40 research-active departments produced scholarly outputs that contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (31 percent of all our research publications). We received full marks for the research component of our Gold STARS rating.

Where we can improve

While the number of external research grants our academics received in 2025 was slightly up on the previous year, their total value ($11 million) was about $10 million less than in 2024. The majority of our research funding comes from government, and their decision to significantly change the available funding has prompted us to increase our efforts to diversify so we are less reliant on them.

We also need to remain mindful of ensuring our research gets used. That is very difficult to measure, and the outcomes from our research may not materialise until many years later. Sustainability research tends to be quite outcome oriented and addresses real-world environmental and social issues; however, at the start of each research project, we still need to be deliberate about who would be best to use the research findings.

Continued research success in climate change

Te Herenga Waka's Tim Naish, professor of Earth Sciences at the University's Te Puna Pātiotio—Antarctic Research Centre, has been elected to a key international climate research role as the new chair of the Joint Scientific Committee of the World Climate Research Programme (WCRP). The WCRP coordinates international research on the pressing scientific questions about our changing climate facing society and decision-makers, and the Joint Scientific Committee brings together research that underpins decisions made under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, such as the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. It also oversees the delivery of climate-model projections for Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessment reports. Professor Naish says the appointment is a great honour. "New Zealand has played a vital role in advancing global understanding about the scale and impacts of climate change, and we now have an exciting opportunity to lead the international climate science community through the next IPCC assessment report cycle."

A team of Te Herenga Waka researchers has spent the summer in Antarctica as part of a large international research effort to uncover clues about how the West Antarctic Ice Sheet will fare in a warming climate. The SWAIS2C (Sensitivity of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet to 2°C) project is a collaboration between 10 countries and involves more than 120 scientists. Earth Sciences New Zealand, Te Herenga Waka, and Antarctica New Zealand are at the helm, leading project management, drilling operations, and logistics. SWAIS2C co-chief scientist Dr Huw Horgan, from Te Herenga Waka, says it's complex work. "This is Antarctic frontier science, and what we're trying to do is hugely challenging from an engineering and logistical perspective as well as being world-leading science."

The SWAIS2C (Sensitivity of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet to 2°C) project.

Research supporting biodiversity

A conservation tool developed at Te Herenga Waka using artificial intelligence as an alternative to traditional fieldwork to better protect the endangered southern royal albatross has been recognised with an award. Research fellow Mitchell Rogers received a 2025 Satellites for Biodiversity Award from the Connected Conservation Foundation and Airbus Foundation for his research into albatross colony health on Campbell Island, conducted in collaboration with the Department of Conservation. “These birds live in one of the most isolated places on Earth. Traditionally, conservationists have relied on infrequent manual counts, often limited to small, accessible areas, which only capture a fraction of the albatross story,” says Mitchell. The award will enable him to use a high-resolution image of the island, enhanced by artificial intelligence, to better track the colony by detecting nests, estimating population sizes, and assessing breeding success.

Southern royal albatross.

Our researchers have pinpointed priority areas in Wellington where efforts can be focused to save maire tawake, or swamp maire, from the deadly myrtle rust disease. “We’ve identified sites that are likely to have the highest abundance of swamp maire and the lowest risk of myrtle rust. They’re also easy to access, so we think focusing on these sites offers the most cost-effective conservation strategy,” says Dr Sarah Herbert, a researcher in Biological Sciences at Te Herenga Waka. “Myrtle rust has a devastating effect on swamp maire, causing an almost complete loss of flowers, fruit, and new leaves. There’s an urgent need to identify sites where conservation and wetland restoration can take place to help ensure this treasured tree’s survival.”

The way birds’ behaviour and ecology varies across seasons and in response to both natural and human-driven environmental changes was the focus of doctoral research at the University. Ecology and Biodiversity PhD graduate Dr Tirth Vaishnav says human activities—including climate change, the introduction of new species, increased use of air travel, and the growth of cities—are throwing the natural patterns of bird behaviour such as breeding, feeding, and migration out of balance. “We are starting to see these temporal patterns shift as climate change gets worse,” Dr Vaishnav says. “As disturbances like this, along with the effects of urbanisation on habitats, continue to alter the timing of natural events on a large scale, it’s increasingly crucial to understand how that affects the way birds behave and interact with their environments.”

Maire tawake.

Dr Tirth Vaishnav

Public commentary from our researchers

As the critic and conscience of society, it's the job of universities to hold leadership to account. We're proud of Te Herenga Waka's academics for continuing to engage the public on the big issues through opinion pieces that question government policies and offer evidence-based solutions.

Yinka Moses, a senior lecturer in Te Kura Kaute, Ture Tauhokohoko—School of Accounting and Commercial Law, writes that New Zealand's leadership in mandating climate-related financial disclosures for big corporates could be undermined by softening disclosure rules. He says the Government's move to relax the rules, primarily in response to claims of high compliance costs, could see Aotearoa lose its position as a leader in transparent and accountable climate reporting. He also says the changes are simply bad for business. "Any reform that weakens the rules will make it harder for investors and others to assess climate-related risks, potentially leading to reduced investment confidence and higher financial volatility for firms, especially those operating in high-emission industries or with significant exposure to climate-change consequences."

The ad hoc approach of sucessive governments in response to natural disasters is the worst approach to take, according to Te Herenga Waka's Chair in the Economics of Disasters and Climate Change, Professor Ilan Noy, and PhD candidate Belinda Storey. They say the combination of the insurance industry pulling out of some parts of Aotearoa and a rise in extreme weather events will have significant consequences for property prices and local economies. They have developed a framework that outlines the policy trade-offs the government faces in adapting to climate change, and suggest a proactive response is the best solution.

Environmental Studies lecturer Amanda Thomas wrote about the benefits of climate protests. "There is a gap between people wanting action [on climate change] and what is happening on the ground," she says. "Climate protest acts as a bridge between the population and the decision-makers who serve us. Protests communicate the depth of feeling and provide one way of seeking accountability from politicians for community wellbeing." She says there are other benefits to protests too. "Much of the current Government's work promotes individualism—there is little sense of a public that it serves … In contrast, climate action is about being together, in communities, to nurture the things that Aotearoa New Zealanders value: nature and fairness."

Solar power cuts electricity bills and carbon emissions, and New Zealand needs to scale up faster, writes Paul Hume, a senior research fellow in Te Wānanga Matū—School of Chemical and Physical Sciences. He says the benefits are manifold: the adoption of solar combined with battery storage could cut nearly four million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions. "New Zealand is also facing an energy shortage, leading to high electricity prices. But solar could be part of the solution because global reductions in the price of panels mean residential solar is now likely the cheapest option for households."

A government decision to shrink legislated targets for cutting agricultural emissions signals a lack of ambition to meet climate targets, says James Renwick, professor of Physical Geography and former climate change commissioner. "It represents a major step backwards and could threaten New Zealand's trade relationships," he says. "On top of the weaker ambition on methane reductions, the Government recently reopened the country to oil and gas prospecting, removed a subsidy for electric vehicles, and disestablished a fund meant to help decarbonise industry. All moves are counter to New Zealand's free trade agreement with the European Union." He says action needs to be taken immediately. "Meanwhile, the climate is changing rapidly … There is urgency around reducing emissions of all greenhouse gases in every sector and every country. New Zealand's weakened methane target raises the risk of unmanageable consequences from climate change."

ENGAGEMENT

Measuring our performance

Performance indicators	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Student volunteer hours (Wellington Plus)	9,290	9,563	9,124	10,476	13,072	13,579
Sustainability-focused media releases (Number of resulting stories)	45 (148)	30 (38)	48 (42)	43 (64)	38 (81)	48 (46)
Actions completed by staff and students in the Green Impact programme	101	289	339	134	284	505
Students who think they have become more engaged with sustainability issues while at the University (%)	46	44	42	42	42	41
Philanthropic donations to sustainability work	$1.7 million	$250,000	$250,000	$2.6 million	$732,000	$359,000

Conducting top-quality, evidence-based research on climate change and environmental sustainability is one thing, but getting that valuable information out there is another. At Te Herenga Waka, we recognise our role as kaitiakitanga of the environment and of our people, and know the two are intertwined for the good of each other. Ensuring members of the public (including top-level policymakers) and our campus community understand what's happening to our natural world is crucial. Inspiring them to do something about it is just as important. The University's staff and students do a fantastic job of raising awareness of sustainability issues and motivating people to take action. Increasing demands on people's time and brain capacity mean we need to work harder to get the right messages out there, but the numbers are heading in the right direction. On campus, students are returning to attend classes more in person and, by extension, the campus is more lively, with noticeably more engagement in our sustainability-focused clubs and all the extracurricular opportunities for sustainability action. This extends to our wider community, with increasing student volunteer hours supporting numerous local cultural, environmental, and social organisations.

Where we can improve

While enrolments in sustainability courses and participation in extracurricular opportunities have both been increasing, our students' self-percieved engagement with sustainability issues has not increased correspondingly. We know that sustainability is important to our students (86 percent of students said it was in 2025), so it may just be that many of them are already very engaged, but we need to ensure that our curriculum content and student experience is high quality and actually engages our students.

We want to increase our community engagement, and sustainability work provides a great opportunity to do that. Work-integrated learning, research collaborations, internal funding that promotes outreach, student clubs, and event spaces such as Ngā Mokopuna all support that kaupapa, but it takes time to build up.

Influencing policy

The team at Te Herenga Waka's Raumata—Policy Hub is bringing together multidisciplinary research teams and making sure the right information is getting in front of the right people. The Hub exists to connect our academic community with decision-makers to ensure any policy decisions are able to draw on well-founded evidence. A big focus of the Policy Hub's work is climate change—it was asked by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment to research and advise on the implications of climate opportunities and risks for Aotearoa. The final report was based on climate scenarios developed by 12 key sectors and found, among other things, that there is no future where New Zealand will achieve zero gross emissions by 2050. The project was commissioned in recognition of the fact that climate change is going to be one of the biggest challenges faced by this country in coming decades. Engaging our Policy Hub to conduct this important work is an acknowledgement at the highest level of its influence and excellent research quality.

Supporting local innovation

Some remarkable solutions were put forward by the University as its nominations for the Earthshot Prize. The awards recognise ideas that aim to repair and regnerate the planet over the next decade. We nominated Predator Free Wellington for its work to create the world's first predator-free capital city; Kaipara Moana Remediation, which is working to replant thousands of kilometres of waterway margins, wetlands, and eroding hillsides; Hot Lime Labs, which is extracting carbon dioxide from forestry and crop waste to provide heat and boost yield in greenhouses, and reduce fossil-based emissions; and Mint Innovations, which recovers critical metals—such as copper and nickel—from e-waste and old lithium ion batteries. We are very proud to be the only Aotearoa-based official nominator for the Earthshot Prize, which cements our reputation internationally as a thought leader in sustainability.

Gaining public recognition

Two of Te Herenga Waka's landmark buildings, including our new sustainable marae complex, scooped major architecture awards. At the New Zealand Institute of Architects' (NZIA) New Zealand Architecture Awards, Ngā Mokopuna won in the education category and garnered the prestigious Ted McCoy Award for Education, the category's supreme award. It was one of many accolades for Ngā Mokopuna in 2025, but Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Māori and Kaitiakitanga) Professor Rawinia Higgins says the NZIA win was a particular highlight. "So much heart and soul was poured into this project and it's pleasing to see that passion felt by so many. We've won a few awards this year, but this is a special one because it recognises the architectural mastery on a national stage." Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery was also recognised at the awards, winning the Enduring Architecture category.

Student internships

An internship scheme that enables students to apply their skills and knowledge to the workplace is giving some of them the chance to get stuck in to real sustainable infrastructure solutions. In a tight job market, internships offered through Te Herenga Waka's Work Integrated Learning programme are a productive way for students to get a foot in the door of public- or private-sector organisations. Student Maia Clark was matched with the Wellbeing Economy Alliance, which promotes ideas such as investing communal wealth back into communities and a Māori intergenerational way of thinking. The case studies Maia worked on focused on nature-based solutions, community engagement, and infrastructure and were compiled into a local government resource guide. One related to a new bus depot being developed by Greater Wellington Regional Council as part of the expansion of its electric fleet. "These case studies added real-world evidence to the handbook, strengthening its impact as a policy and communications tool for candidates and community leaders," Maia says.

Maia Clark

On-campus participation

A group of crafty staff members turned a volunteer craft day into a new sustainable shopping bag system for the University's halls of residence. The Sustainability Office has been working with halls of residence to see how they might support sustainable initiatives in the halls. One idea was to start a 'boomerang bag' system, so they reached out to Te Herenga Waka's staff craft group, VUW Crafters, for help. Around 30 reusable bags have been created by volunteer sewers, and alongside other bags donated to the Sustainability Office, they are now available for hall residents to borrow and return after use. "The sewing volunteers have really enjoyed getting stuck in to this project and they have produced some stunning bags," says Micky Vale, founding member of VUW Crafters. "It has been awesome to see the bags being put to good use and the students making the most of this great initiative," says Zay Tiuka, deputy head of hall at Cumberland House.

Boomerang bag crafter.

The much-anticipated annual photography contest saw many inspiring entries that showcased how Te Herenga Waka is protecting both the environment and human wellbeing. The theme for 2025's Sustainability Photo Competition was manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga, inspired by the new Ngā Mokopuna building. Open to all staff and students, the competition asked entrants to submit photos that told a story about the importance of environmental action. Associate Professor Paul Wolffram, Film programme director and one of the judges for the competition, says it was fantastic to see so many creative takes on the theme. "The strongest photos for the judges were those depicting people engaged with whaka manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga, and the winners depict people enacting these values. The photographs draw the eye and tell a story."

Photo: *Lucy Moore*

"The strongest photos for the judges were those depicting people engaged with whaka manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga, and the winners depict people enacting these values. The photographs draw the eye and tell a story."

OPERATIONS

Measuring our performance

Performance indicators	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Energy consumption—electricity and natural gas (GWh)	34.5	36.3	39.8	43.2	41.1	40.1
Air travel—University funded (million km)	11.1	3.8	17.1	33.8	42.4	48.1
Sustainable commuting mode						
Students (%)	94.9	94.8	91.8	93.7	93.8	93.9
Staff (%)	75.8	75.8	75.8	75.8	84.0	84.0
Commuting by car—staff and students (million km)	4.4	4.9	4.6	5.2	6.0	5.2
Waste and recycling						
Landfill (tonnes)	395	458	468	389	386	426
Recycling and compost (tonnes)	107	126	147	183	177	220
Paper consumption (reams)	15,500	12,600	21,000	6,209	2,628	11,427
Metered water consumption (m^3)	96,737	98,974	96,213	92,871	99,263	94,736
Trees planted	1,000	2,400	4,150	3,150	3,400	5,300
Gross greenhouse gas emissions (tonnes CO_2e)	10,715	9,282	12,364	14,090	15,159	17,147

As an institution that boasts roughly the same population as a small town, Te Herenga Waka has an obligation to 'walk the talk' in making sustainability a key part of how we do business day to day. This isn't just something a few people are responsible for—reducing our impact on the environment and becoming more sustainable into the future is something all staff and students play a part in achieving. While there is always room for improvement, we are happy to report we are continuing to make good progress.

We are delighted to see a big rise in the number of trees planted by the University. Working with the Wellington City Council and our local community, the Growing Our Futures reforestation project is a key component of our efforts to improve the environment. It's also a great opportunity for applied research and teaching, and has the added benefit of being a fun day out for our student, staff, and alumni volunteers. In 2026, we will complete planting of the Ōhariu Valley site—nearly 30,000 native trees will have been planted and, with ongoing maintenance and pest control, the forest cover will soon establish. Now we are working on plans for 2027 and beyond.

Where we can improve

Since the pandemic, our carbon emisions have been steadily on the rise. The opportunities and challenges for our climate action are described in more detail on the following pages.

Ngā Mokopuna is an exemplar of sustainable practice, but it is less than 1 percent of the built area of the University. We need to apply the approaches used in the design and operation of Ngā Mokopuna to improve the practices of the rest of the University, from cleaning practices to procurement criteria.

A sustainability leader among global universities

We are very excited to become the first university in Aotearoa to get a STARS rating for leadership in tertiary sector sustainability—and it's a Gold rating, at that. The Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS) is run by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), and recognises leadership in areas across research, teaching, operations, and governance.

With more than 1,200 participants in 52 countries, the programme is the most widely recognised framework in the world for publicly reporting information related to a university's sustainability performance.

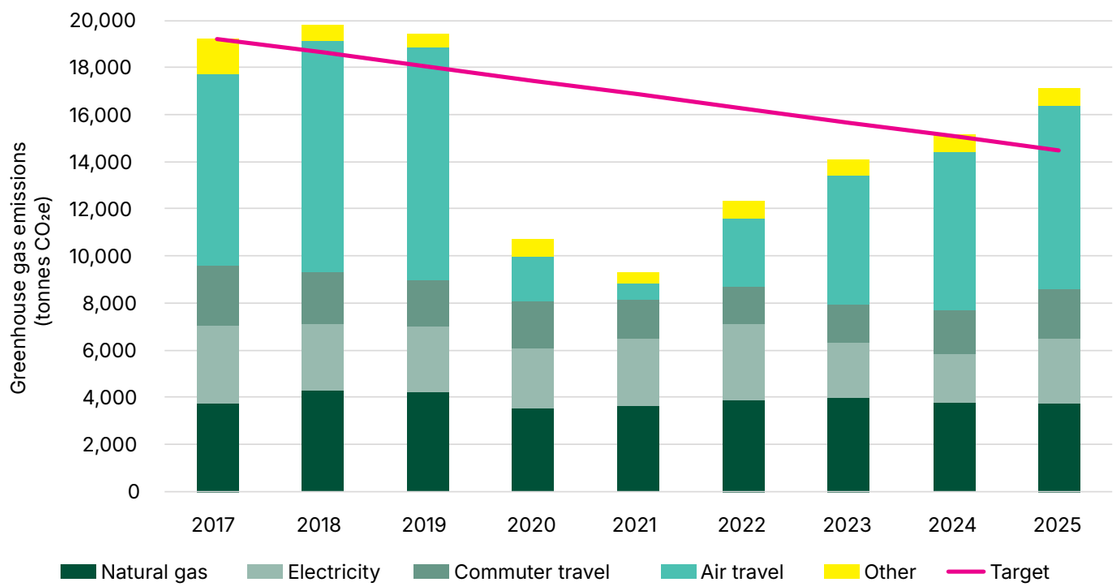
"Sustainability is central to the kaupapa of the University. It's incredibly heartening to see that being recognised," says Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Māori and Kaitiakitanga) Professor Rawinia Higgins. "Everyone should be proud of this achievement—it goes beyond the work of any one person or team. Sustainability has never just been about the environment alone. It's the connection to people that drives these outcomes."

The STARS report sheds light on sustainability initiatives where the University is performing particularly well. Research and learning were strong areas for the University, with 92.9 percent of its academic departments actively engaged in sustainability research and 88.6 percent of undergraduate qualifications awarded including sustainability-focused learning requirements.

"This is a fantastic endorsement of our sustainability mahi right across the University, and shows that we are making great progress," says Andrew Wilks, director, sustainability. "We're really lucky to have incredible students and staff who care about how they can make a difference—in their research, in their teaching, or simply in how they get to campus each day."

Climate action

Our Zero Carbon Plan has a 2030 target of net zero emissions and a 40 percent reduction in gross carbon emissions compared to our 2017 baseline. In 2025, our gross greenhouse gas emissions increased by 13.1 percent compared to 2024 figures. The gross emissions for 2025 were still 11 percent below our 2017 baseline, but well above our target level. Our annual greenhouse gas inventory provides more detail on our emissions and all the measurement processes.



Air travel is the largest source of our emissions, and it has continued to rise, despite the digital tools we mastered during the pandemic to maintain connection, the introduction of an internal carbon levy, and air travel carbon targets. It is a major challenge for us, as travel supports our core academic purpose of generating and sharing new knowledge, but we know the climate impact it generates. With electric aircraft unlikely to be able to get our academics to Europe anytime soon, we are left in a tricky situation with no easy solutions.

Our ongoing work to reduce energy consumption on campus is proving effective. Electricity consumption decreased by 4 percent compared to 2024, while gas consumption dropped 1 percent. Further reductions in gas consumption are anticipated with the recent completion of the work to electrify heating and hot water in Te Puni Village, von Zedlitz building, and parts of Rutherford House. However, the nationwide scarcity of gas is increasing our focus on minimising its consumption.

We are also exploring the use of certified renewable energy certificates for our electricity use to incentivise greater investment in renewable energy. While we are increasing on-campus renewable generation, there is limited suitable roof space to support it.

While it is critical that we continue work to reduce our carbon emissions, we have also begun work to prepare for the impacts of climate change as a significant amount of global warming has already occurred, with more to come.

In 2023, we led the development of sector-wide climate scenarios to explore how climate change will impact tertiary education in Aotearoa over the rest of the century. The mahi to develop the scenarios was a great example of cross-sector collaboration and was recognised with an Australasian Green Gown Award in the Powerful Partnerships category. In 2024, we used these scenarios to facilitate a series of workshops and meetings across the University to determine the risks and opportunities most relevant

to Te Herenga Waka. We then prioritised these based on likelihood and impact. Now we are developing our plan of how best to respond to those risks and opportunities and how to integrate the actions within existing work streams.

The key opportunities include increased demand for climate-related teaching and research, increased population diversity leading to richer cultural exchange, utilisation of mātauranga Māori and Ngā Mokopuna, increased global connections to solve climate challenges, and growing our reputation, which helps to attract students through our climate action.

The key risks include the security of supply for utilities (particularly natural gas), the mental health of staff and students, the financial health of the University as well as financial stress for individual staff and students, the impact of weather events on campus facilities, greater inequities across staff and students as disadvantaged groups experience greater impacts of climate change, reduced internationalisation through less travel, increasing insurance costs, narrowing research funding, and city-wide housing shortages.

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