

Sustainable development by and with universities: Recommendations for action

April 2021, English translation January 2022

Intensive engagement with sustainable development is a central requirement for universities.

The DG HochN defines sustainability as a systemic, holistically approach that aims at a transformation towards the sustainable future of society. Applied to higher education institutions, a whole institution approach is suitable to consistently interlink the core competencies of higher education institutions in teaching, research, and transfer and thus to achieve the greatest possible impact in the development of sustainability solutions. The aim is to embed sustainability centrally, that is to say into the structure and the system of target indicators of the universities. This includes all university members and their engagement for sustainability at higher education institutions.

These recommendations for action were developed by the Policy Hub of the DG HochN in consultation with the Executive Board and reflect the current state of the discussion. They take up the demands of the Federal Government's National Action Plan "Education for Sustainable Development" (ESD), refer to the fields of action of the DG HochN (-Network) and provide an orientation framework for higher education institutions. They are directed towards all German higher education institutions, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), funding institutions as well as political decision-makers in parliaments, state and federal ministries.

Overview of the key areas for sustainability action at universities

Whole institution approach: The Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) with its Roadmap ESD for 2030, the National Action Plan ESD and the HRK recommend that higher education institutions adopt a Whole Institution Approach to align and readjust higher education core processes with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In doing so, higher education institutions can gradually bring their academic activities and operational processes in line with sustainable development.

Governance: The university management and university members formulate goals, establish organisational structures and implement concrete measures in order to develop a sustainability strategy and establish a culture of sustainability.

Research: The university's research activities take sustainability principles into consideration. In doing so, they demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility. Research in the field of sustainable development and specific research on sustainability are supported and expanded, inter- and transdisciplinary paths are strengthened and valued.

Teaching: Sustainability and ESD are broadly anchored and implemented in all degree programmes, ESD expertise of teachers is valued and encouraged. Competence-oriented concepts put students at the centre of their focus and enable them to co-create the teaching-learning processes.

Transfer and third mission as exchange between higher education institutions (HEI) and other societal stakeholder groups increasingly address sustainability issues. The higher education institutions support sustainability transfer, e.g. in the form of university-practitioner cooperations that aim to make concrete contributions to sustainable development in society.

Student engagement: Students are important drivers of sustainability at higher education institutions. They call for sustainable development, consideration of sustainability issues in teaching and sustainable operations. Therefore, they should be actively and structurally involved in the sustainability activities of higher education institutions.

Operations: Universities adopt a sustainability approach in their operations. They link this approach, where it makes sense, with teaching, research, transfer and student engagement and thus achieve a role model effect in their environment.

Participation and transparency are the guiding principles of a sustainable university. The main idea is to give as many university members as possible the opportunity to participate in sustainability processes within the university. Involvement in the development of a sustainability strategy and in concrete sustainability activities must be ensured through appropriate participation formats. Clear and comprehensible communication and internal cross-linking are fostered by sustainability reporting.

In order for the sustainability transformation of the universities to succeed, sufficient funding for these tasks is indispensable. The state ministries provide the required resources as basic funding, and the higher education institutions take this issue into consideration in their budgets. To this end, it makes sense to include or further strengthen sustainability as a goal of higher education institutions in the Framework Act for Higher Education.

Concrete recommendations for action

Whole institution approach

- Universities develop an overall concept or strategy with concrete goals and measures in order to align all their main fields of action with the challenges of sustainable development in an integrated manner. This also includes defining responsibilities for the implementation of the sustainability goals.
- Universities anchor the cross-sectional sustainability endeavour and the coordination of the sustainability strategy or the overall sustainability concept structurally (e.g. as vice-president for sustainability, as sustainability officers and/or working groups of the senate).
- Universities and ministries provide personnel and financial resources in order to safeguard sustainability coordination and sustainability activities in the long term.
- Ministries create incentives for sustainability engagement and honour universities that have a convincing sustainability master plan.

Governance

- Sustainable development is a natural part of the university's mission statement, and sustainability goals are formulated for all key areas. The development of the mission statement and strategy involves all members of the university, especially the students.
- Sustainability is anchored in the target agreements concluded with the ministries, in the development plans of the higher education institutions and gradually in individual faculties and other units.
- Universities set up coordination and steering function units that bundle sustainability concepts (e.g. sustainability-oriented incentive systems, organisational development measures, interface design) and coordinate and promote their implementation. These coordination units work closely with all status groups, especially the students.
- Universities set up a steering group (e.g. senate working group) on sustainable development in which all status groups and major content areas are represented. This working group collects the activities of the universities related to sustainability, discusses them and prepares decisions. In the sense of the Whole Institution Approach, it should be closely linked to sustainability management and the higher education institution's management.

Research

- Sustainability is anchored as a guiding principle in research in all disciplines.
- Universities provide (financial) incentives to integrate the idea of sustainability into new research projects.
- Universities support sustainability-oriented disciplinary, inter- and transdisciplinary research structurally, conceptually and methodologically and promote networking among researchers.
- Research funding organisations call for sustainability concepts in their calls for proposals and take these into account when evaluating the applications.
- Research funding organisations increasingly promote research on sustainable development in the humanities and social sciences as well as educational research in the field of ESD.

- Research funding institutions create their own departments or commissions for sustainability and ESD, which are coordinated with each other.

Teaching

- Sustainability and ESD are anchored as a guiding principle in the mission statement for teaching as well as in the curricula of all degree programmes in discipline-related and/or interdisciplinary courses, so that all students at German higher education institutions have the opportunity to acquire sustainability-related expertise as well as the action competence for sustainable development that is necessary to achieve the sustainability transformation.
- The curricular integration of sustainability/ESD at higher education institutions is anchored in university contracts and target agreements as well as examination regulations of the federal states.
- Within the scope of teaching and learning in higher education/didactics of higher education, further education and training courses for lecturers on topics related to ESD shall be initiated, developed further and consolidated.
- Sustainability and ESD are a component or criterion of the accreditation processes of study programmes.

Transfer

- Transfer for sustainable development is anchored at the universities as a guiding principle. This refers to the reciprocal exchange of knowledge, technologies and ideas between universities and practitioners to promote sustainable development in a societal context. This can take place in the form of projects, technologies, concepts, model solutions, etc.
- Universities establish organisational interfaces for the coordination of sustainability transfer processes in teaching, which facilitate student work with partners in the practical setting (project work, internships, career training, service learning, etc.) and thus qualify students as transfer agents of the university.
- Universities establish (regional) socio-ecological transformation centres that initiate and accompany transformation processes for sustainable development.
- Universities strengthen the innovation potential for sustainable development of companies, municipalities, public agencies and civil society organisations through sustainability transfer in transdisciplinary research and practice integration in teaching.

Student Engagement

- Students are involved in sustainability process at all levels (especially at the governance level) and in all areas of the university in line with the whole institutional approach. This commitment is valued and, if necessary, rewarded with credit points, etc.
- Students are actively involved as co-creators in ESD-oriented teaching. Teaching is linked with research, where appropriate, in the sense of research-based learning through project workshops or project tutorials.
- Universities substantially support the students' sustainability engagement through infrastructural resources, auxiliary contracts and financial resources in the long term.

- The universities set up sustainability offices or green offices in which student initiatives develop sustainability activities jointly with university staff and support the implementation of the university's sustainability concept.

Operations

- Universities establish internal communication between the administrative staff, the respective sustainability officers and the representatives of university management as part of a continuous improvement process and thus increase acceptance within the university.
- Universities integrate sustainability into their social processes, e.g. personnel policy, continuing education, health management.
- Universities implement a sustainability/environmental and/or quality management system such as DNK or EMAS(plus). They are funded through the Länder budgets and supplied with sufficient human and financial resources.
- University operations focus on climate protection and achieve the (emission) reduction targets defined in the Federal Climate Change Act of December 2019 by 2030. The focus is on the areas with the highest emissions, such as mobility (business trips, air travel, travel and commuting), and energy and facilities management. In the sense of the Whole Institution Approach, however, all greenhouse gas emissions generated by the activities of the universities are accounted for and reduced.
- Universities take into account and integrate sustainable development criteria in their operational economic processes, e.g. in procurement and financial investments.

Participation and transparency

- Universities enable all interested university members to participate in sustainability activities. Formats such as round tables or sustainability working groups serve as useful approaches. Bringing together the different perspectives of students, administration, teaching and research can provide important impulses.
- In line with the principle of "having a say, participating, sharing responsibility", higher education institutions establish participation formats and incorporate them into existing decision-making formats.
- Universities establish systematic and regular sustainability reporting, e.g. as a mandatory part of the annual university report or as separate sustainability reporting.
- University managements regularly submit to the evaluation or audit of their sustainability activities in teaching, research, transfer, student engagement and university operations.

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Cf. the understanding of sustainability that was developed in the Hoch-Network:

<https://www.hochn.uni-hamburg.de/-downloads/2020-01-16-nachhaltigkeitsverstaendnis-hoch-n.pdf>