

Recommendation by the  
25th General Assembly of  
the German Rectors'  
Conference (HRK)  
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## **Towards a culture of sustainability**

### **HRK German Rectors' Conference**

The Voice of the Universities

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### **Sustainability and education in the global context**

The period from 2005 to 2014 was proclaimed “World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development”. In their joint 2009 declaration “Universities for Sustainable Development,” the German Rectors’ Conference and the German UNESCO Commission pledged their commitment to sustainable development. In that declaration, they adopted the UN General Assembly’s definition of sustainability<sup>1</sup>: The present generation must meet its needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In the global context, sustainability not only encompasses “generational equity” but also “global justice” in the distribution and development of resources, affluence and quality of life, as well as a focus on the world’s poorest.

Under the leadership of the UN, the international community has committed itself to actively promoting the principle of sustainability in all areas, both nationally and internationally, and to aligning government action accordingly<sup>2</sup>. In 2015, 17 global sustainability goals (Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs) were formulated that address the various dimensions of sustainability, social issues, the environment and the economy<sup>3</sup>. They define the framework for overcoming global challenges such as hunger, poverty, gender inequality, depletion of natural resources, climate change and the forced displacement of people due to violent extremism. The implementation of these goals requires a comprehensive and far-reaching transformation of society.

Education plays a key role in this change process and is anchored in Global Sustainability Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all).<sup>4</sup> Education for Sustainable Development contributes to reflecting on global challenges and empowers people to design political, economic and social change.

As part of the UNESCO Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (2014 to 2019), a National Action Plan was developed by the Platform on Education for Sustainable Development in 2017, which should be supported by the Federal Government and implemented in line with its responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> It highlights a number of ways how various levels in the education system can make a contribution to the goal of sustainability. The advisory nature of these measures opens up the opportunity to the various stakeholders in the education system to select the instruments best suited to them in their respective action and competence framework.

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<sup>1</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development (1987); Report “Our Common Future”. U.N. General Assembly, 42nd Session A/42/427, 4th edition 1987, Annex 1

<sup>2</sup> Agenda 21 Conference of the United Nations for Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro 1992. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>;

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.bmz.de/en/ministry/principles/2030\\_agenda/index.html](http://www.bmz.de/en/ministry/principles/2030_agenda/index.html);

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also: UNESCO (2017): Education for Sustainable Development Goals. Learning Objectives. Paris: UNESCO.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bmbf.de/files/Nationaler%20Aktionsplan%20BNE%202017.pdf>

In view of these developments, the German Rectors' Conference has revisited the topic of sustainability and identified the approaches it considers promising in a summarising update of its 2009 declaration.

### **Anchoring the goal of sustainability in German higher education institutions**

Higher education institutions see themselves as workshops of the future for society and develop their role in constant dialogue with all groups in society.<sup>6</sup> As stakeholders in society, they have been involved in the discussion on ways to promote a future-oriented society since the start. Staff members of higher education institutions make important contributions to the implementation of sustainability measures; key contributions to the discourse on sustainability emerge from higher education research and teaching.

A great many higher education institutions have responded to the challenge of finding solutions to major societal challenges and of contributing to that goal by themselves as organisations. Almost one-quarter of all German higher education institutions are already involved in the nationwide HOCH-n group project and sustainability network<sup>7</sup>. Some higher education institutions are using the issue of sustainability to raise their profile<sup>8</sup> and have incorporated it into their management structure. Others have affirmed their responsibility for sustainability in their mission statements, developed sustainability strategies, set up a sustainability office or established the first competence centres for the purposes of implementation. Green Offices that coordinate sustainability efforts are being set up following the Dutch model. Higher education institutions have developed a sustainability code specifically for higher education within the HOCH-n project based on the Sustainability Code of the German Council on Sustainable Development<sup>9</sup>, on which a number of higher education institutions already base their reporting. In addition, the Science Platform Sustainability 2030 was established at the Federal level in 2017 as part of the German Sustainable Development Strategy. Higher education institutions also interact with one another in other associations and numerous regional networks<sup>10</sup> in the context of sustainability. Students and student groups play an active role in promoting sustainable thinking and often act as a driving force.

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<sup>6</sup> Die Hochschulen als zentrale Akteure in Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft. Eckpunkte zur Rolle und zu den Herausforderungen des Hochschulsystems (Higher education institutions as key players in science and society. Key considerations on the role of, and challenges facing, the higher education system), resolution of the HRK Senate in October 2016 (2018 version, available only in German)

<sup>7</sup> [www.hoch-n.org](http://www.hoch-n.org);

<sup>8</sup> Including Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development, Leuphana University Lüneburg and Environmental Campus Birkenfeld. Numerous higher education institutions have now been certified, e.g. by Transfair e.V. The certification criteria should be considered here.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.deutscher-nachhaltigkeitskodex.de/en/the-code/higher-education-institutions.html>

<sup>10</sup> See also at the national level: [www.hoch-n.org](http://www.hoch-n.org); <http://www.bildung-durch-verantwortung.de>; <http://netzwerk-n.org>;

### **Starting points for higher education institutions**

Higher education institutions render services of crucial importance for scientific, economic, social and cultural innovation. Their potential is a product of their unique structure in the academic area, which is the result of research and teaching and cooperation between a broad spectrum of subjects and disciplines.

Higher education institutions educate the leaders, decision-makers and educators of tomorrow. Besides specialist academic knowledge and preparation for the employment market, higher education institutions stimulate personal development and should ideally encourage social engagement. In this sense, students in particular are the change agents of the society of the future. In this role, they can lay the foundations for increased acceptance of the principle of sustainable development in society. By reflecting on values and imparting competences and knowledge, they can promote the necessary transformation processes.

Higher education institutions occupy a key position in the area of research. Researchers seek answers to the question of how we can live and work in the future in a way that no longer exceeds the capacity of our environment and, at the same time, protects human livelihoods around the world. Basic research as well as application-oriented and applied research all contribute equally to these goals.

In addition, higher education institutions can create structures in their organisations that serve as role models and do justice to the principle of sustainable development.

### **Recommendations for creating a culture of sustainability at higher education institutions**

Higher education institutions are workshops of the future for society. With their combination of research and teaching, they can help future generations overcome complex challenges in a globalised world (Grand Challenges). They have set themselves the task of raising awareness for sustainable development among all members of the institution and recruiting them to help shape a future-oriented society. In order for higher education institutions to be successful in their activities, they need to act within a coherent system of societal and political goals. The intention of contributing to a future-oriented, sustainable society that many stakeholders have articulated should translate into a determined course of action by government and society as a whole, in which higher education institutions actively participate.

1. The HRK recommends that all higher education institutions – depending on their profile and requirements – attach special importance to sustainable development in their system of goals. The goal should be an integral part of the fundamental positioning of the higher education institutions (basic regulations, strategy papers, mission statement), taken into account in the structure of

governance and subject to their regular reporting. Specific steps for implementation should be developed on the basis of the guiding principle formulated. The central goal must be to develop a culture of sustainability at higher education institutions. In this process, the individual motivation and the personal commitment of staff need to be supported. A self-reflective attitude to the higher education institution's own research and teaching that takes account of societal aspects should be a matter of course. In teaching, individual skills and approaches that are vital within the context of the challenges of societal sustainability should be nurtured in a targeted fashion.

2. This process must receive support from the state governments as providers and funders of higher education, as well as from the Federal Government and funding organisations. Today, sustainability is reflected in the higher education legislation of state governments and in agreements on goals between state ministries and higher education institutions. The relevant negotiations, which set ambitious goals and also provide funding for the achievement of those goals, should be continued and further developed in view of Agenda 2030, among other things. A range of research programmes have also been launched that promote research with a sustainability focus in close connection with teaching. The HRK will continue to advocate for the relevant incentives to be further expanded over the coming years.

### **Summary**

In order to develop a culture of sustainability in higher education institutions, it is necessary for all strategies relating to research and teaching to take due account of the way the academic and research system functions and the basic right to academic freedom. Guidelines and requirements geared towards small-scale or short-term effects, such as quotas, additional reporting obligations and guidelines in the area of teaching that interfere with the rights of teaching staff and researchers and the autonomy of higher education institutions, must be avoided. Indicators for the achievement of goals should only be developed in situations where quantitative operationalisation is reasonable and feasible. In this case, goals and the achievement of goals with regards to promoting sustainability should become an integral part of the regular reporting by higher education institutions.

Research and teaching need to be promoted in the area of interdisciplinary methodology and processes. Ways must be found to combine knowledge from the wide variety of disciplines and, where beneficial, knowledge from sources outside of the academic and research system and to work in a transdisciplinary manner with stakeholders in society in order to develop a common basis for knowledge and action and, in this way, to improve the understanding of the principle of sustainable development with its inherent conflicts of goals and dilemmas.

Last but not least, rethinking the framework conditions for the sustainable operation of higher education institutions is necessary. Funding needs to be provided for more sustainable solutions, for example in the areas of construction, energy, conservation of resources by means of circulation as well as mobility and campus design. State institutions that have responsibilities in the area of construction and property management must work towards future-oriented solutions that are aligned with sustainability criteria and make greater efforts to conceive construction and operation as one, despite the different stakeholders involved in these processes.