

## The understanding of sustainability by the joint project HOCH<sup>N</sup> – *short version* (Date 17.06.2020)

### Background

---

Many stakeholders of Higher Education Institutions in Germany deal with the topic of sustainability in research, teaching and practical operations. To date, however, there has been insufficient consensus on how the demands for sustainability arising from social responsibility should be understood, shaped and implemented in the context of Higher Education Institutions. This can be seen, for example, in the current debate on the relationship between freedom and sustainability-related responsibility of science.

Within the framework of the joint project, the HOCH<sup>N</sup> collaboration has set itself the goal of developing a shared, university-specific concept of sustainability which was conceived in a participatory process by the eleven collaborating Higher Education Institutions. It is based on the interim results of the HOCH<sup>N</sup> collaboration, the understanding of sustainability of the individual partner Higher Education Institutions within the joint project, the basic concept of sustainability anchored in many international resolutions, and an evaluation of the relevant literature.

The understanding of sustainability is based on conceptual coherence and attempts to work out the normative implications of sustainability in the context of Higher Education Institutions. It offers an orientation framework for the overall institutional integration and implementation of sustainability as an ethical principle in the theory and practice of research, teaching, operations, governance and transfer at Higher Education Institutions in Germany. It by no means precludes individual Higher Education Institutions with their own individual focal points from setting their own priorities and practices. Rather the diversity provided by different understandings of sustainability can be regarded as a positive factor, since sustainability should ideally take into account the respective contexts, framework conditions and protagonists of the individual Higher Education Institutions. However, precisely because there are different approaches, conceptual clarification fulfils the important function of contextually clarifying the scope for interpretation, commonalities and open questions, and making them more concrete for implementation.

The understanding of sustainability provides the basis for the effective implementation of actions at Higher Education Institutions which are regarded as indispensable for any major societal transformation and for the execution of the Federal Government's national action plan 'Education for Sustainable Development' (ESD). The extended version of the understanding of sustainability with explanations on the fields of action of research, teaching, operations, governance and transfer as well as on the literature used can be found here: <http://www.hoch-n.org/2-handlungsfelder/04-forschung.html> (in German)

### The target group

---

This understanding of sustainability is primarily aimed at members of Higher Education Institutions, especially those wishing to deal with the subject of sustainability and to shape change processes. Internal stakeholder groups include, for example, representatives of university management, academics, teachers, students, administrative staff and sustainability officers. The following are considered to be stakeholders external to the university: representatives of state and federal ministries, the German Rectors' Conference and the Conference of Ministers of Culture, politics and civil society.

## The basic understanding of sustainability in the context of Higher Education Institutions

---

Sustainability is a normative principle that can be described as a scale for global and intergenerational justice in the face of the challenges posed by current changes in the earth's system. In ethical-political terms, sustainable development is not an externally defined and prescribed goal, but an open search process with heterogeneous target components, which is therefore pluralistic and culturally variable. Its object is long-term responsibility for ensuring environmental viability, social justice and economic performance. It aims to strengthen the cultural competencies for shaping societal life. Its systemically integrated implementation is regarded as the need for comprehensive societal transformation. The core of which is a change in the relationship between human beings and nature.

The task of Higher Education Institutions is to deal theoretically, conceptually, methodically, critically and reflectively with the processes and conditions of societal transformation. Furthermore, it is also a matter of how the ethical dimension of science (in the fields of action research, teaching and operations) can be respected and implemented.

Postmodern science requires methodical and critical reflection on the significance of normative perspectives. Therefore, ethics analyses the manifold reasons, goals, motivations and resistances of good and just action. In doing so, it is not limited to prescribing ready-made solutions. Rather, it first wants to stimulate reflection and thereby enable freedom. The freedom of science is therefore always to be interpreted as a mandate to independently reflect on its goals in the service of a sustainable society.

The need for ethical reflection and orientation arises above all in situations of radical change. This is the case today in view of the profound change in values and the global, national and regional challenges for sustainable development (e.g. climate change). Therefore, the principle of sustainability sees itself both as an socio-ecological and economic challenge, as well as a cultural task in order to preserve the natural foundations of life for all people, including future generations (cf. Brundtland Commission; Art. 20a GG; SDGs), and the appreciation and protection of the intrinsic value of nature with its biological diversity (cf. Federal Nature Conservation Act §1).

Higher Education Institutions, as central actors in societal discourse, dedicate themselves to this topic in a central position. Within this context and following the joint HRK/DUK declaration (2010) "Higher Education Institutions for Sustainable Development" (orig. *Hochschulen für nachhaltige Entwicklung*) and the HRK recommendation (2018) "For a Culture of Sustainability at Higher Education Institutions" (orig. *Für eine Kultur von Nachhaltigkeit an Hochschulen*), the collaborators of the joint project HOCH<sup>N</sup> take sustainability as a profile-forming and connecting central idea. With this common goal Higher Education Institutions can contribute to the transformation for a sustainable society and the responsible use of planetary resources.

Due to their ethical and socio-political position, Higher Education Institutions have an inherent responsibility to engage with a societal transformation towards greater sustainability. As special strengths they can contribute with empirical and theoretical knowledge, methodological expertise and the ability to analyse. To do justice to the normative content of sustainability means to think methodically about problems in societies, to pose relevant questions regarding the relationship between humans and nature, and to learn to think and act in interdisciplinary contexts. It is a matter of determining how sustainable solutions for dealing with the great challenges of our time can be found globally, nationally and regionally, and then be implemented on a long-term basis at the institutional level. Thereby it is constitutive for ethics to also take a systemic view of obstacles on the way to sustainability. In doing so, it can not only generate target knowledge, but also impart knowledge of design and transformation.

Those involved in the joint project HOCH<sup>N</sup> are striving to implement sustainability in the fields of action of research, teaching, operations, governance and transfer at their own institutions. Therefore, contributing to the practical implementation of aforementioned goals, as well as inducing a continuous improvement process and representing a reliable pioneering role.

Stakeholders of the joint project HOCH<sup>N</sup> are obliged to foster the understanding and implementation of sustainability at their own Higher Education Institutions. Thus Higher Education Institutions contribute to the world wide action plan 'Education for Sustainable Development' of the UN (2015-2019) to which Germany is committed with a national action plan. Additionally, the Higher Education Institutions contribute to the perception, further development and enhancement of both the United Nations 'Sustainable Development Goals' and Germany's sustainability strategy. This is reasonable, since the SDGs do not adequately address central global challenges (such as increasing resource consumption and population growth, externalisation of socio-ecological costs or conflicts of objectives between economic growth and ecological limits).

The Higher Education Institutions are willing to ensure adequate in- and external transparency, to promote continuous, open and reflective improvement processes, to support dialogue with various stakeholders from Higher Education Institutions and to facilitate exchange with society. Therefore, it may prove expedient to analyse the status quo, provide transparent and regular information on their sustainability activities and to communicate these. Sustainability reporting designed in this way helps to reflect the Higher Education Institution's understanding of sustainability, its specific goals and measures, as well as to enter into an exchange with stakeholders.