



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

German Commission
for UNESCO

HRK German Rectors' Conference

The Voice of the Universities

UNIVERSITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Declaration by the German Rectors'
Conference and the German
Commission for UNESCO on Higher
Education for Sustainable Development

A contribution to the UN Decade of Education for
Sustainable Development

Resolution adopted by the 7th General Meeting of the
German Rectors' Conference on 24 November 2009

Resolution by the Executive Committee of the German
Commission for UNESCO on 22 January 2010

Preamble

As a commitment to conserving our natural resources, the principle of sustainability has a long tradition. In its modern form – decisively shaped by the UN “Brundtland-Commission” report (1987)¹ – “sustainability” equally reflects the complexity of material and social living conditions and their interlinkage in global contexts and dependencies, and finds – in normative terms – its expression in the concept of “sustainable development” as an imperative, namely “[humanity] meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.² In the global context, this not only means “generational equity”, but also the goal of “global justice” in the distribution and development of resources, affluence and quality of life, so that today’s societies do not live at the expense of future generations and one region of the world does not do so at the expense of other world regions.

Building on the basis of the “Brundtland Report”, the community of states worldwide has since committed itself in a series of international conferences led by the UN to actively promoting the principle of sustainability in all areas, both national und international, and to aligning political action accordingly. The “Agenda 21” (“Rio Conference”, 1992) marks the beginning of intensive, public debates on the concept of sustainability and a wide range of different action programmes at national level.³ In 2002, the “World Summit on Sustainable Development” (Johannesburg Conference), emphasised the interrelationship between sustainability and education in the continuation of the action programme after taking stock of the national activities, and occasioned the UN to declare the period from 2005 to 2014 as the World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.⁴

I.

Universities and higher education institutions are social institutions which essentially form the core of the science system with their three activity fields: Research, Teaching and Services. Universities are responsible for contributing to the future-oriented development of society. Future-oriented development is today led by the guideline of “Sustainability”. In Germany, this is already expressed not only in the constitutional provisions as a national “state objective” (Article 20a GG) but also in the Higher Education Acts adopted by the individual federal states.⁵ In realising sustainable development in the sense of this guideline, the universities – both institutionally as well as individually for all those working at these – have an exceptionally important role to play, because sustainable development needs social acceptance, which has to be supported and advanced through Education for Sustainable Development,⁶ so as to initiate and embed the required change processes in individual directions and actions in society as a whole.

Universities, in their capacity as education facilities for training future decision-makers, and as centres of research bear particular responsibility here and play a decisive role. They lay the foundations by delivering knowledge, competences and values through teaching and learning, and by engaging in research generate the knowledge and innovations needed for shaping sustainable development. This has to be combined with programmes and initiatives adopted by public and private stakeholders at national and international level.⁷ Education for Sustainable Development must be internationally focused and organised in accordance with the problem at hand and therefore represent parts of the internationality of universities. With their network of international relations, universities have a worldwide infrastructure at their disposal, which needs to be used for tasks in the field of sustainable development. By engaging in international collaboration in the service of Education for Sustainable Development, universities can, both in teaching and in learning, as well as in research with a corresponding thematic-contentual focus, link up with established forms of international collaboration⁸ and continue to expand these, above all in teaching and learning.⁹

II.

With this declaration, the “German Rectors’ Conference” and the “German Commission for UNESCO” take up both the demands made by the Confederation of European Union Rectors’ Conference in 1994, with which the universities were called upon to organise themselves in line with the guidelines of sustainable development,¹⁰ as well as with the call made by the European ministers responsible for higher education to the universities on the occasion of the Bologna follow-up conference held in Bergen in May 2005, to consider the guidelines of sustainable development as an element in the creation of a European Higher Education Area.¹¹

The “German Rectors’ Conference” and the “German Commission for UNESCO” welcome the initiatives and programmes with which universities have already – either individually or in various forms of collaboration – followed the guideline of sustainability, both in the conceptional elaboration as well as in the practical implementation in fields of teaching and learning, research, services, and also in their institutional-administrative working practices.¹²

Universities are called upon to continue to consolidate these approaches so as to transform Education for Sustainable Development into a constitutive element in all their activity areas.¹³

III.

Wherever appropriate in **research** and **knowledge transfer**, subject-specific specialisations should be combined with cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives in order to take the complex interactions between humanity and environment into account. Individually and in social action fields, the global problems of human cohabitation can only be meaningfully explored when the findings and expertise are more strongly combined in the humanities, economics, social and behavioural sciences and well as in the natural sciences and engineering.

In **teaching** and **learning** as well as in **continuing training and professional development**, universities should promote knowledge and compe-

tences of their students, thereby enabling them to recognise and assess problems of sustainable development in interdisciplinary contexts, so that in their respective disciplines and professional working contexts they are kept informed and can act with responsibility. Academic and special knowledge must join together with communicative competences to create participative decision-making and conflict-solving processes. The combination of research and teaching and cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary study opportunities plays a key role.

Institutionally, universities should also orientate their internal working practices and procedural processes in line with the guiding principle of sustainability. Efficient resource management, energy efficient university construction, extensive use of public transport by university staff and members as well as consideration of the principles of fair trade when making acquisitions and purchases, are fields in which universities can act as role models.

University executives are called upon here to communicate the principle of sustainability to all members of the university as basis for their work with reference to individual work areas.

IV.

With a comprehensive orientation towards the guideline of sustainability and the integration of the specified principles of research, teaching and services in Education for Sustainable Development, universities can prove their important and leading role and further consolidate their position as workshops of the future for social development.

The German Rectors' Conference is a voluntary association of public and state-recognised universities in Germany.

The German Commission for UNESCO is an intermediary organisation for Germany's foreign cultural and educational policy. On the basis of a unanimous resolution by the German Bundestag and with the support of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the German Commission for UNESCO coordinates the implementation of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development in Germany.

¹ World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). Report "Our Common Future". U.N. General Assembly, 42nd Session, A/42/427, 4 August 1987, Annex 1); < <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-ov.htm#1> >.

² op. cit., Overview, No. 27.

³ United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992 (UN General Assembly, A/CONF.151/26/Rev. I, Vol. I).

⁴ World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002). "Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development", Johannesburg, 26 August to 4 September 2002 (A/CONF.199/20), Annex, No. 124 d).

⁵ For example, cf. Hamburgisches Hochschulgesetz v. 18.07.2001 i.d.F. v. 26.05.2009 (GVBl. I Hamburg 2009, 23, S. 160), § 3 (Gemeinsame Aufgaben der Hochschulen), Abs. 1 und Berliner Hochschulgesetz v. 13.02.2003 i.d.F.v. 19.03.2009 (GVBl. Berlin 65.2009,6, S. 70 ff.), § 4 (Aufgaben der Hochschulen), Abs. 1-2.

⁶ "Report from the International Commission on Education for Sustainable Development Practice" (2008). New York: The Earth Institute at Columbia University.

⁷ As a forum of "self-organisation" for the exchange of information and experience about single activities, especially of non-governmental stakeholders, the "Round Table of the UN Decade Education on Sustainable Development" is established under the patronage of the "National Committee of the UN Decade" at the German Commission for the UNESCO (DUK). At the conference "Implementation of Sustainability at Universities" at TU Darmstadt 6-7 May 2009, a follow-up event to the previous year's event, the working group "Universities and Sustainability" was formed and institutionalised during the Round Table. At European level, the EU is pursuing the "Strategy on Sustainable Development" adopted by the European Council in 2006, with the relevant research fields and the activities promoted and supported by education institutions < http://ec.europa.eu/sustainable/welcome/index_de.htm > and < http://ec.europa.eu/sustainable/civil_society/index_de.htm >.

⁸ cf. e.g. Richter, W. v.; Seel, H.; Stahr, H. (2000) "Rolle der Hochschulen als Schlüssel für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung" Arbeitspapier, GTZ, Arbeitsfeld 4316: Bildung, Wissenschaft, Jugend, Eschborn, May 2000 < <http://www.gtz.de/de/dokumente/de-hochschule-nachhaltige-entwicklung-2000.pdf> >.

⁹ On this, see the proposals for the new, contentual activity areas directed towards tasks of sustainable development of joint international study programmes of the "International Commission on Education for Sustainable Development Practice".

¹⁰ Resolution adopted by the CRE on Hochschul-Charta für nachhaltige Entwicklung at the COPERNICUS-Programme, Geneva, May 1994 < http://www.eco-campus.net/Misc/copernicus_dt.pdf >.

¹¹ The European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goals. Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Bergen, 19-20 May 2005, p. 4. < http://www.bolognabergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050520_Bergen_Communique.pdf >.

¹² cf. e.g. the Lübeck Declaration "Universities and Sustainability" of the conference of the Northern German Alliance to support the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (BNE) 2005-2014 (NUN), Lübeck, 23.-24. November 2005) < <http://www.fh-oow.de/oe/downloads/18/luebeckererklaerung.pdf> > as well as documents of the conference "Implementation of Sustainability at Universities" organized by Hochschulinformationssystem Hannover (HIS) and TU Darmstadt at TU Darmstadt, 18-20 June 2008 < http://www.his.de/publikation/seminar/Nachhaltigkeit_062008 >.

¹³ For considerations and suggestions for a systematic "institutional development program" cf. Adomšent, M. et al. (2008). "Szenarienentwicklung für die 'nachhaltige Hochschule' - ein Beitrag für die Hochschulforschung?!" Die Hochschule 1 (2008): 23-40.

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Nachhaltigkeit lernen

