

The Sustainability Code for Higher Education Institutions

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Ending poverty and hunger, ensuring access to clean water, sustainable energy and quality education for all while protecting natural resources – these are just some of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals which the international community wants to achieve by 2030. The Federal Government reflects these goals in the German Sustainable Development Strategy.

We must resolve the following challenges in order to achieve the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in its social, economic and ecological dimensions: How can we ensure economic growth but at the same time consume fewer natural resources? How can we feed the world's growing human population while protecting other species? To do this, we need to be bold and above all have good ideas. We are counting on the support of science.

Those who develop strategies to enable sustainable lifestyles must themselves measure up to the sustainability goals. And this is precisely what is happening in the Sustainability in Science Initiative of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. One practical outcome of this initiative is the Sustainability Code for Higher Education Institutions. It has been developed by the higher education institutions themselves on the basis of the Sustainability Code adopted by the German Council for Sustainable Development. Academics, administrators and students all came together to decide what contribution they can make towards a sustainable future and drew up a strategy for transformation in higher education. Ten higher education institutions have been involved in the piloting and further development of the Sustainability Code for Higher Education Institutions. This standard makes the major advances in sustainability achieved in higher education visible and measurable for the first time.

Higher education institutions have a responsible part to play when it comes to young people learning today how to shape our common future tomorrow. This is why it is so important for them to be a credible role model. I am grateful for the dedication of all those involved and hope that it will inspire many other people to act in such a way that our children and all successive generations can lead a good life everywhere in the world.

Anja Karliczek MdB

Federal Minister of Education and Research



The Sustainability Code for Higher Education Institutions

The German Sustainability Code is a (transparency) standard which many companies of all kinds and a number of public institutions use to report on their challenges and achievements with respect to sustainable development. The German Council for Sustainable Development established the Code as a voluntary standard in 2011 following an intensive multi-year participatory process involving numerous companies, investors and stakeholder groups. The Sustainability Code was originally aimed at companies. A number of industries and associations have made sector-specific additions to the Code and developed special guidelines.

On the initiative of several higher education institutions, the German Council for Sustainable Development decided in spring 2015 to adapt the Code to the specific considerations which apply to its use at higher education institutions. Between then and early 2016, a trial version was developed in collaboration with approximately 50 representatives of higher education institutions from around Germany.

Along with a number of other higher education institutions, the lead universities – the University of Hamburg, Freie Universität Berlin and the University of Duisburg-Essen – adopted the trial version and further developed it via a participatory process. They were funded for this by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

The results of the project are now available: the Sustainability Code for Higher Education Institutions consists of 20 criteria. The explanations pertaining to these criteria should not go into unnecessary detail. Focusing information in this way has proved effective in the corporate arena. This approach should also be applied for higher education institutions as they can differ greatly in terms of their size and academic focus. Each higher education institution is therefore asked to provide a specific explanation of the steps it takes with regard to the ecological, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. In a declaration of conformity vis-à-vis the Code, the higher education institution reports in what way it meets the Code criteria (comply) or provides plausible reasons why it does not satisfy a criterion (explain). For this purpose, the service of the Code database of the German Council for Sustainable Development is made available to higher education institutions on the following website: www.sustainabilitycode.org. Application of the code is voluntary. When disclosing its sustainability efforts, each higher education institution should explain its understanding of and approach to sustainable development (e.g. in the form of a mission statement or vision, a sustainability strategy, an ethos or a code of conduct). Using this as a basis, the Sustainability Code for Higher Education Institutions gives higher education institutions a means of collating a wealth of data and information which is already used for other purposes and documenting it in a fashion that suits them. The explanations relating to each of the **20 criteria** should take the fields of action – **research, teaching, operations, transfer** and **governance** – into account. To make it easier to apply the Sustainability Code for Higher Education Institutions, adopters are also provided with guidelines that explore the individual criteria in greater depth with the aid of concrete, real-life examples and make the topic of sustainability accessible to non-specialists.

1 | The joint project "Sustainability at Higher Education Institutions: develop – network – report" (HOCH-N) involves 11 German higher education institutions, who together have embarked on application-oriented research into a number of fields of action since November 2016. These are research, teaching, operations, transfer, governance and sustainability reporting (www.hoch-n.org).

Strategy

1Strategic Analysis

The higher education institution explains how it analyses the effects of its key activities with respect to sustainable development and what understanding of sustainability these are based on. The higher education institution describes how it operates in line with the key, accepted national and international standards specific to higher education institutions.

2Fields of Action

The higher education institution explains which aspects of sustainability are of material importance for the following fields of action, how it takes them into account in its strategy, and how it addresses them systematically:

- a) Research
- b) Teaching
- c) Operations
- d) Transfer
- e) Governance

The higher education institution explains how it promotes sustainability-related activities in the fields of action and how issues of sustainable development will be implemented in these in the future. Furthermore, the higher education institution should demonstrate how sustainability is interconnected across its five fields of action.

3Objectives

The higher education institution explains what qualitative and/or quantitative as well as temporally defined sustainability goals it has set, how these are operationalised and how their level of achievement is monitored.

4Organisational Integration

The higher education institution explains how sustainability aspects are integrated into the activities of the whole institution – including its downstream organisational units – and what steps it is taking to embed sustainability throughout the higher education institution and to continuously strengthen and improve the integration of sustainability.

Process Management: Governance

5 Responsibility

The higher education institution explains roles and responsibilities relating to sustainability.

6 Rules and Processes

The higher education institution explains how it implements the sustainability strategy by means of rules and processes.

7 Ensuring Quality of Results

The higher education institution explains which sustainability indicators are used. It also discloses how the reliability, comparability and consistency of data is ensured and utilised both to ensure quality of results internally and for internal and external communication.

8 Incentive Schemes

The higher education institution explains to what extent its executive organisational units promote and stimulate sustainability processes in both material and non-material ways by means of project-specific or allocated budget resources and how they authorise and support such activities at all (decision-making) levels. It also explains to what extent the management of higher education institutions checks the effectiveness of such incentive systems.

9 Stakeholder Engagement

The higher education institution explains whether and how it identifies internal and external stakeholders and how they are integrated into the sustainability process. It explains whether and how an ongoing dialogue takes place with them and how the results of this are integrated into the institution's sustainability process.

10 Transformation

The higher education institution explains how it achieves a transformation in favour of sustainable development in its key fields of action by means of suitable processes. It also explains to what extent measures within the fields of action trigger a learning process for the whole organisation and third parties and how processes entrenching the desired transformation are driven forward. This also includes maintaining an ongoing dialogue with local authorities, businesses, policymakers and civil society.



Environment: Operations

11 Usage and Management of Natural Resources

In relation to the following areas, the higher education institution explains the extent to which natural resources are utilised for its operation and the mobility of its members. Furthermore, it describes reduction and efficiency targets relating to resource usage and explains how it intends to achieve these by means of current and future measures.

- a) Life cycle of consumables, capital goods and services
- b) Circular economy and disposal
- c) Mobility
- d) Nutrition
- e) Energy
- f) Water

12 Properties, Construction, Open Spaces (Campus Design)

The higher education institution explains how new-builds, extensions, refurbishment, renovations and building operations at the institution are planned and completed in a resource-efficient, climate-friendly way, including the use of renewable energy. This relates to both the way in which building work is completed and the use of space and land, including the impact on biodiversity. Furthermore, the higher education institution should explain whether it manages the buildings itself or uses external service providers.

The higher education institution explains how it designs and manages open spaces (including light smog, noise and surfacing) and how it safeguards and improves the quality of user experience (campus design).

13 Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The higher education institution discloses the extent, type and impact of greenhouse gas emissions and states its targets for reducing emissions and achievements to date.



Society

14 Participation of the Institution's Members

The higher education institution explains how it encourages its members to participate in making the institution more sustainable.

15 Equal Opportunities

The higher education institution explains what targets it has set to promote equal opportunities in relation to health, gender equality, diversity, the integration of people from immigrant families, the inclusion of people with disabilities, work-life balance for employees and students, and commensurate pay for members of the institution (especially when outsourcing is used).

16 Qualifications

The higher education institution explains which targets and measures it has adopted to foster the qualifications and skills of all its members with respect to sustainable behaviour. Furthermore, it outlines how these will be adapted to cater for demographic developments and future challenges.

17 Human Rights

The higher education institution explains which human rights conventions its work is based on and what steps it takes to uphold these in its local, national and international activities, in partnerships and in procurement. It also describes how it is working to raise its members' awareness of associated issues.

18 Common Good

The higher education institution explains how it contributes towards the common good as defined in the UN SDG in its key operating regions (regional, national, international).

19 Social Influence

The higher education institution explains how it influences major decisions by policymakers and within society.

It discloses the main ways in which external social stakeholders influence the higher education institution's decisions. Furthermore, the higher education institution accounts for the origins and use of external funds.

20 Conduct that Complies with the Law and Policy

The higher education institution explains which standards, processes and measures are in place to prevent unlawful conduct and corruption. In particular, it describes how violations of the rules which apply to academic work are prevented, detected and sanctioned.



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