

**Starting an urgently
needed debate***



UniNETZ
Verantwortung für nachhaltige Entwicklung

UniNETZ- Policy Statement

“Transforming Institutions of Higher Education into Pioneers for a Sustainable Society”

2022 – a present day diagnosis, full of disillusionment:

50 years of warnings from the scientific community about the consequences of an unrestrained growth paradigm (1972 Limits to Growth), and

30 years of scientific and political debate on sustainable development in conferences (starting in 1992, Rio Conference) and extensive corresponding research programmes have not brought us any closer to a global solution.

Therefore, in recognition of the fact that

- contrary to better knowledge, humanity is heading unchecked towards socio-ecological collapse,
- humanity, in its pursuit of economic growth, has brought the Earth system to the edge of its ecological capacity,
- the transgression of planetary boundaries and associated tipping points will lead to irreversible and uncontrollable changes in elementary ecological systems and threaten to collapse fragile socio-cultural systems,
- the catastrophic consequences for humanity and the entire Earth system can still be averted by a comprehensive socio-ecological transformation,
- the room for manoeuvre for shaping a sustainable world worth living in is becoming ever smaller in the decisive third decade of the 21st century,
- although the emergency nature of the current situation and the urgency of appropriate action are recognised at all levels, from the UN to the EU to the national, regional and even municipal level, and are also addressed in goals and pledges, the effectiveness of the efforts falls far short of what is required,

and in awareness that

- higher education institutions have a special social responsibility with regard to their claim to be educational institutions for future decision-makers and to provide impulses for innovative, sustainable solutions and motors of sustainable development,
- the claim to contribute to a comprehensive socio-ecological transformation of society as drivers of innovation presupposes the (self)-transformation of the higher education institutions,
- the existential issues concern all higher education institutions equally and must therefore be free of competition and, on the contrary, be a cooperative endeavor,
- the higher education institutions must thus permanently and resolutely enter new territory,

we call on higher education institutions to make maximum social effectiveness their overriding mission in the coming years and to unconditionally align the other fields of action with the goal of sustainable development in the sense of the 2030 Agenda.

This radical, holistic transformation corresponds both to the demands of the International Science Council for “mission driven research” the “Giant Leap” scenario discussed by the Earth for All¹ initiative as the only sustainable solution, and the “Manifesto on Sustainability” adopted by the Austrian University Conference.

Specifically, we demand the immediate start of the implementation of the following short- and medium-term² steps as well as the immediate preparation and initiation of the following long-term³ measures for the transformation of higher education institutions:

In the field of societal dialogue:

- Upgrading and anchoring the area of work previously referred to as “Third Mission” as the “First Mission” of higher education institutions, to which all fields of action must contribute in full (medium-term)
- Assuming responsibility for the transformative implementation of solution-oriented, sustainability-promoting developments in transdisciplinary cooperation with societal actors (short-term)
- Cooperating directly and solution-oriented with societal actors such as government administration and politics, business, interest groups, the media and a broadly understood civil society (medium-term)

In the field of research:

- Focussing on system- and process-oriented, solution-relevant inter-university research (mission-driven research) (medium-term)
- Introducing a new evaluation system for scientific and transformative achievements that is not based on disciplinarity and the currently dominant form of an excellence paradigm (long-term)

In the field of teaching:

- Developing and implementing new, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary study programs at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels that are oriented toward future-oriented issues (medium-term)
- Orientating curricula towards the ability of graduates to act as shapers of sustainable development (medium-term)
- Introducing a mandatory Studium Generale (e.g. Studium 21⁴) for the acquisition of knowledge and competencies on the Global Grand Challenges and their solutions (medium-term)
- Supporting teachers in the acquisition of knowledge and competencies for the transformation (short term)

¹ “Earth for All”. A Report to the Club of Rome (2022). Fifty Years After The Limits to Growth (1972)

² short-term: 2023, medium-term: 2024

³ long-term: 2030

⁴ Studium 21 is a concept created by a working group of the Alliance of Sustainable Universities in Austria and the Network University and Sustainability Bavaria for a new form of a mandatory Studium Generale that addresses the challenges of the 21st century and possible solutions

In the field of operation:

- Introducing a sustainability audit by means of EMAS and a greenhouse gas budget sheet according to the methodology of the Alliance for Sustainable Universities (climcalc) (short-term)
- Ensuring climate-neutral university operations by 2030 (long-term)

In the field of governance:

- Developing frameworks that ensure immediate adaptation of university structures and processes so that transformation can occur adequately to the increasing acceleration of drivers of change (short-term)
- Anchoring an open, critical, innovative and reflective culture of thinking and discussion with equal participation of all university members (long-term)
- Strengthening a university community that is critical of discrimination, reflective of diversity, and gender-equitable (medium-term)
- Developing and implementing a new set of indicators to assess transformative performance of higher education institutions and make it visible to the outside world (medium-term)

In the field of inter-university cooperation:

- Designing and implementing an inter-university institution to support and coordinate the self-transformation of higher education institutions and their contributions to the transformation of society in the national and international context (medium-term)

From Demanding to Acting – Implementation in UniNETZ

Recognizing the deficiencies and aware of our social responsibility as members of higher education institutions, UniNETZ commits itself not only to pointing out and calling for a transformational path towards sustainability, but to immediate real action.

To this end, UniNETZ is doing groundwork in all of these areas of action. More specifically, UniNETZ will initiate and support the necessary processes of transformation in five priority areas (PAs):

- PA I: “Transdisciplinary dialogue with society”
- PA II: “Scientific accompaniment and monitoring of societal transformation”
- PA III: “Transformation in the field of research”
- PA IV: “Transformation in the field of teaching”
- PA V: “Transformation in the field of governance”

UniNETZ participants commit themselves to the development and implementation of concrete measures in the sense of these requirements, both within the framework of the project and in the context of their respective higher education institution.

Transformation – the UniNETZ understanding

Transformation in general

Transformation is understood as a profound process of renewal of the human-environment system Earth, oriented towards the goals of sustainable development in the sense of the Agenda 2030 and shaped by normative frameworks. The aim is to actively strive for new system states and functionalities from the current situation of increasing non-sustainability, which guarantee a desirable quality of life for all people within ecological limits. In the sense of the holistic sustainability principle, economic efficiency, social compatibility, cultural diversity must be coordinated with the intrinsic value of nature and its ecological efficiency and must work together.

(Self)-transformation of higher education institutions

The claim to contribute to the transformation of society towards sustainable development as institutions of self-reflection and forethought presupposes a self-transformation of higher education institutions. The manifold transformation processes encompass all fields of action of higher education institutions and all fields of science and art. Since transformation is only possible through the interaction of all levels, it affects not only the institutional and structural level, but also the individual level. As agents of transformation, all members of the higher education institutions are called upon to reflect on their underlying values, assumptions and habits and, if necessary, to change them (in the sense of the *Inner Development Goals*⁵).

⁵ <https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>

* Creation process of the policy statement:

