

Creating Strategies for a Sustainable and Livable Future – Concept for the Sustainable Development of Hochschule Geisenheim University

PREAMBLE

The leadership team of Hochschule Geisenheim University is steadfast in its commitment to work with all members of the university community to establish sustainability as a guiding principle for the (further) development of the university in all areas of university life. This commitment is not just a statement but a tangible action plan. To this end, holistic organizational development in the sense of a “whole institution approach” has been initiated. This means that the university aligns with sustainability principles in research, teaching, and knowledge transfer, as well as everyday university life in terms of university management, governance and operations processes. In line with the Green Office model, implementation is participatory and inclusive, in cooperation with all members of the university; particular focus is placed on the involvement of students.

OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SUSTAINABILITY

In this context, we understand sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”; a formulation from the so-called Brundtland Report of 1987.¹

We are guided by the priority model introduced in the Brundtland Report, with its three pillars of environmental, social, and economic sustainability: what is sustainable is what can be implemented within planetary boundaries in a socially just and economically efficient manner. Our efforts to make the university sustainable are also guided by the 17 global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations and the UNESCO program “Education for Sustainable Development: Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (ESD for 2030)”.

The 17 global SDGs, in their holistic understanding of sustainability, address all three dimensions mentioned above. From safeguarding basic needs to key issues of justice and climate protection, to infrastructure access and quality combined with economic growth, strong institutions, and partnerships, the 17 SDGs encompass all areas of our lives. Achieving the SDGs thus becomes a task for society as a whole; a task to which everyone can contribute. At the same time, the UN SDGs also involve inherent goal conflicts that must be addressed, reflected upon, and discussed in educational contexts, particularly in the areas of research and teaching.

¹ See Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future.

In this context, we see ourselves as a learning institution and understand our strategic development toward becoming a sustainable university as a gradual, ongoing process. We must continuously review and dynamically develop our goals and measures. This also includes the right to lifelong learning for all university members and a commitment to our role as a social role model and driving force for transformation toward a sustainable and future-oriented shaping of our planet. Especially with regard to the industries and academic disciplines connected to our study and research areas along the entire value chain, and their future viability, there is no alternative to a consistent focus on the sustainability principles.

An integral component of our efforts to make the university more sustainable is our ongoing commitment to gender equality and internationalization, the increased promotion of diversity, and the expansion of accessibility. We are convinced that the transparent and participatory (further) development of our holistic sustainability strategy is the right path forward, and we are committed to pursuing it.

❖ SUSTAINABILITY IN UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

WHAT?

We see ourselves as a learning institution that continuously develops and advances sustainability across all areas of the university. The leadership structure and culture are guided by the principles of sustainable development. In this context, transparent and participatory (bottom-up) decision-making processes have been established, enabling the implementation of sustainability goals in cooperation with all stakeholders (SDG 16). Our sustainability goals are continuously reviewed, transparent, and comprehensible to all, and corresponding measures and developments are published in sustainability reports every one to two years. Our actions are based on tolerance and are anti-discriminatory and inclusive. We embrace the values of the Diversity Charter and the family-friendly university and implement them consistently (SDGs 5 and 10).

HOW?

- Further developing the mission statement and formulating overarching sustainability guiding principles based on the slogan “Creating strategies for a sustainable and livable future”.
- Strengthening the university’s self-conception as a “new type” of higher education institution and positioning it as a pioneer of sustainability among universities.
- Establishing annual sustainability reporting; reviewing, assessing, and further developing goals and measures.
- Building transparent processes in which responsibilities are clearly defined and traceable.
- Establishing (advisory) committees to steer the sustainable development of the university.
- Establishing a sustainability office, modeled on the Green Office approach, to enable cross-status-group coordination and implementation of the sustainability concept.
- Jointly shaping the university: developing participation concepts and communication strategies that advance sustainable development, including regular (target-group-specific) communication campaigns and workshops (in German and English).

❖ SUSTAINABILITY IN UNIVERSITY OPERATIONS AND CAMPUS DESIGN

WHAT?

We align our operations with sustainability principles, both in terms of facilities and operational processes, and actively conserve energy and resources (SDG 7). This means that all operational processes aim to achieve economic viability embedded in social justice and ecological sustainability. We make a strong contribution to nature and climate protection (SDG 15) and promote sustainable consumption and production patterns in the spirit of a circular economy (SDG 12) wherever possible. We promote the health and well-being of our employees (SDG 3) through our commitment to sustainable mobility, occupational health and safety measures, and sustainable human resource management.

HOW?

- Achieving a climate-neutral campus by 2030, including centralized energy and biomass management to minimize the energy footprint by fully leveraging generation potential.
- Establishing standards for construction and renovation measures as well as in the area of mobility.
- Introducing EMAS (plus) certification for comprehensive sustainability management.
- Mandating guidelines for sustainable procurement and operations (including event management and the cafeteria) and continuing certification as a Fairtrade University.
- Organizing regular continuing education and training opportunities, particularly for administrative staff.
- Designing the campus as a living and learning space for sustainability.

❖ SUSTAINABILITY IN STUDYING & TEACHING

WHAT?

We want to empower students to independently reflect on their thoughts and actions in the context of society, and to contribute to solving current and future problems. In line with the Hessian Higher Education Act, we aim to integrate Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) holistically into study and teaching. For us, this means that our teaching is student-centered, competence-oriented, and transdisciplinary. It employs participatory and discursive methods and is oriented toward projects and problem solving. Students are given the opportunity to learn independently in open learning formats and to actively shape creative spaces (SDG 4).

HOW?

- Anchoring Education for Sustainable Development in the university's mission statement for teaching and studying
- Integrating Education for Sustainable Development into the curriculum of all degree programs (knowledge, skills, and methods) and establish it as a multidisciplinary topic.
- Promoting interdisciplinarity and internationalization within all study programs.
- Establishing a unified competence model for cross-disciplinary and subject-specific skills, implementing ideas for competence-oriented teaching, and further developing them.
- Developing a competence model for teaching staff and corresponding systematic training and continuing education offerings (on ESD) for university instructors.
- Strengthening feedback management and teaching evaluation.
- Embedding sustainability/ESD in the quality management of studying and teaching at the university and in degree program development.

❖ SUSTAINABILITY IN RESEARCH

WHAT?

We develop strategies for a livable and sustainable future. The research and teaching focus at Hochschule Geisenheim University lies in specialty crops and their products, as well as in the sustainable development of cultural landscapes and urban open spaces. Climate change, the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 2, 6, 11, 12, 13, and 15), and biodiversity loss are essential components of research questions addressed by Geisenheim scientists at the regional, national, and international levels.

Research is organized around five profile-building focus areas – sustainable cultivation systems, quality and marketing, cultural landscapes and urban spaces, climate change, and digitalization – covering the entire value chain of specialty crops, from landscapes to cultivation, through primary and secondary processing products, to marketing and economics. These areas address topics that respond to the challenges of our time.

HOW?

- Defining sustainable research for Hochschule Geisenheim University and formalizing it in its guiding mission statement.
- Categorizing research projects according to the five focus areas and the SDGs.
- Creating incentive systems for interdisciplinary research and for greater integration of cross-cutting sustainability topics.
- Establishing real-world laboratories for translating research into practice, actively involving people in research and development.
- Raising awareness among early-career researchers for sustainability research, helping them gain qualifications, and strengthening student research.
- Implementing sustainable resource use in laboratories (“green lab”) and in the production of plant material.

❖ SUSTAINABILITY IN KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

WHAT?

For us, sustainable knowledge transfer means that the university develops into a pioneer in implementing holistic sustainability, makes its knowledge available to municipalities, society, companies, and other institutions, and collaboratively develops it further with these stakeholders in a mutual dialogue. In addition, we understand Hochschule Geisenheim University as a local and regional driver of sustainability within the framework of knowledge and technology transfer and as a partner for practice-oriented continuing education formats (SDG 17).

HOW?

- Strengthening alliances and partnerships with other public institutions and networks to promote sustainable development regionally and internationally
- Developing strategies and activities for transferring sustainability-related research results to affiliated industries, academic disciplines, and societal application fields
- Strengthening sustainable technology transfer
- Enhancing advisory services for future-oriented business development and start-ups
- Establishing practice-oriented continuing education offerings for lifelong learning in sustainable development

IMPLEMENTATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION

WHAT?

We are convinced that the inclusive and participatory implementation of the sustainability concept is crucial for success. Participation processes ensure that sustainability is perceived as a holistic principle at the university, as well as an opportunity for new cooperation possibilities and the individual possibility to help actively shape Hochschule Geisenheim University as a place of work or study. By directly involving the expertise and experience of all university members (across status groups), the strategic further development of the sustainability concept can build on the existing commitment and current development processes in the areas of university management/governance, operations, teaching, research and knowledge transfer and be profitably linked together.

A round table on sustainable development at Hochschule Geisenheim University is being established as a low-threshold opportunity to contribute to the university's efforts. Within this framework, university members can contribute their concerns and ideas, exchange ideas and network with each other, implement concrete projects, and follow the current strategic developments for sustainable university design.

HOW?

- Setting up a round table with as diverse a group of participants as possible (regarding status groups, expertise, interests, etc.)
- Attracting different types of volunteers: Long-term committed people, people who want to implement personal projects and are looking for comrades-in-arms, multipliers, and people who want to try it out.
- Establishing participative event formats (see below), which are repeated annually or per semester in a structured sequence and continuously developed further.
- Enabling engagement and participation to evaluate and continuously improve the university's sustainable development in a reliable and low-threshold manner.