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## Learnings from the Road to a Sustainable University – The Case of Leuphana University



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In this article, I share some of my personal reflections on how Leuphana University Lüneburg has gradually developed into a sustainable university since the early 1990s, how it has also become a role model for other universities to a certain extent and, logically, how it was actively involved in the establishment of the "Network on Education for Sustainable Development and Social Transformation" as part of the "UNITWIN Cooperation Program" and is currently coordinating it. As the University of Lüneburg, as it used to be called, it was one of the first universities in Europe, or perhaps in the world, to set out on the road to sustainability. Therefore, this experience, shared from my point of view might be of some interest to those working towards similar directions.

It is not surprising that such a university development process, in which I was involved from the very beginning, does not always run smoothly. However, such a process also has positive aspects and brings with it rewards, such as the German Sustainability Award presented to Leuphana in Düsseldorf in November 2023. I would like to divide Leuphana's development process towards sustainability into three phases, for which I have chosen the following headings: Impulses, Successes and Resistance and Consolidation.

## A. Impulses

1. How did it all begin? From the master's degree in "Cultural Studies" to the diploma degree in "Environmental Sciences"

How did it all begin? It all began with an expert opinion on the question "Is a Master's degree programme in Cultural Studies with a focus on 'Ecology and Environmental Education' viable?", which was to serve as a basis for the ministry responsible for higher education to decide whether to continue this programme. I was asked to write the report in the early 1990s, when I was still working at the University of Hanover.

I can briefly summarize the results of the report: The continuation of a major in "Ecology and Environmental Education" as part of a Master's degree in Cultural Studies makes little sense; instead, an independent, preferably interdisciplinary degree programme in "Environmental Sciences" should be created, preferably in a separate department. The results were presented at a university public event and discussed controversially, especially by students who wanted to keep what they were used to. The university management and the ministry, on the other hand, were very satisfied with the results and recommendations. What happened next?

## 2. Interdisciplinarity in teaching and research: Foundation of the Department of Environmental Sciences

The next steps leading up to the founding of the Department of Environmental Sciences are easy to describe. The university quickly carried out the task required to initiate this process. The position of a professorship in ecology was opened with the suggestion that I could



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apply for it, combined with the expectation that I would help support the founding of a new department and the establishment of a degree programme in environmental sciences. Initially, I was appointed to take over the ecology professorship, which allowed me to drive the founding process forward very quickly together with other colleagues. I then successfully survived the professorial appointment procedure. Between 1993 and 1995, the foundations were laid for the establishment of the new Environmental Sciences department and the Environmental Sciences degree programme.

The following ideas played a role in the preparations for the founding of the department: as the social challenges of environmental problems could not be viewed and solutions were normally developed solely from the perspective of individual disciplines, the department and programme were designed to be interdisciplinary from the outset. We consistently ensured that the natural and social sciences were equally represented and that cooperation with socially relevant stakeholders was possible. In the winter semester of 1996, the first students were able to enrol on the new degree programme, Environmental Sciences.

### 3. First connections at national and international level: COPERNICUS and COPERNICUS Alliance

As you can probably imagine, the department and the degree program first had to juggle themselves until everything



fit together. That took some effort and also left its mark. The public, political and scientific debate moved forward and the challenge of sustainability, not least through Agenda 21, took an ever-greater place in this debate. Student interest in environmental studies grew steadily and funding for environmental research also increased, so that the new department quickly gained recognition both inside and outside the university.

At an international level, we quickly began to seek academic and personal contacts and cooperation, especially after a conference at the University of Lund in Sweden in 1998, at an event where questions were discussed as to how universities should or could meet the challenge of sustainability. In this context, at least in Europe, the COPERNICUS Charter of the European Rectors' Conference played an important role, as well as the growing COPERNICUS network with its regular conferences. The University of Lüneburg was intensively involved in this network, as well as later in the founding of the COPERNICUS Alliance, and was a cooperation in various international projects.

## **B. Successes and resistance**

### **4. Bringing sustainability into the university: Agenda 21 University of Lüneburg and continuation project**

At the university level, during my time as a member of the Senate, the university parliament, I was able to introduce a resolution that the University of Lüneburg

should start an agenda and sustainability process. This resolution was widely supported, but no costs were to be incurred that would have to be covered by the university. So far so good. So we had to look for funding for such a process, which we were finally able to obtain from the German Federal Environmental Foundation for a time-limited project entitled "Agenda 21 - University of Lüneburg" [1999 to 2003]. Representatives from all departments were involved at the beginning of the process. Student participation was made possible through classes and a newly developed 3-semester supplementary programme in sustainability, for which students could apply alongside their main studies.

However, the project was accompanied by heated controversy. Colleagues from the economic sciences in particular, saw the university's downfall. In their opinion, dealing with the value-based idea of sustainability did not belong at a university, as science was fundamentally value-free. Without going into detail, this had a considerable impact on the project work, but could not prevent it. As a result, Lüneburg became the first EMAS-certified university and created a position for a sustainability manager. Given this, other universities became aware of the sustainability process and a few looked for ways to begin a similar process. It was possible to continue the work because the responsible ministry agreed to continue funding for another three years (from 2004 to 2007), so that during this period, in addition to practical activities, more research-oriented projects within the



context of PhDs played a role. The fact that the process was now supported by state funding gave it a different weight and at the same time "official" recognition.

### 5. Understanding sustainability at the university holistically: The "whole institution approach" in concrete terms

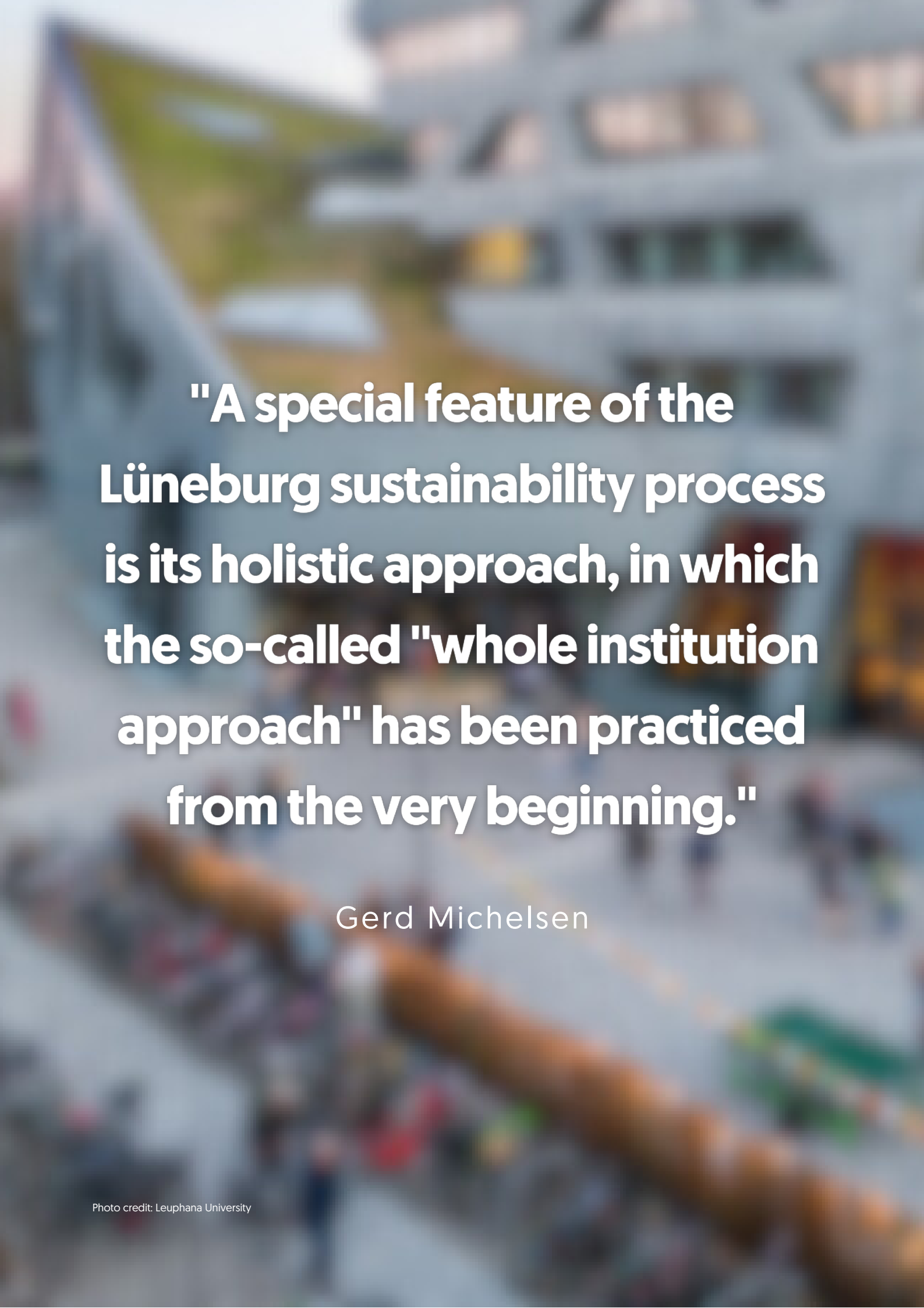
A special feature of the Lüneburg sustainability process is its holistic approach, in which the so-called "whole institution approach" has been practiced from the very beginning, even though it was not discussed as such at the time. This means that the university not only teaches and undertakes research on sustainability and sustainable development, but also orients itself towards the idea of sustainability in its living environment and business practices in order to set an example and demonstrate responsibility for the community. In concrete terms, it is about the management and administration of one's own institution in accordance with the principles of sustainability. Members of the institution use resources consciously and prefer regional and fair trade products for catering. The university's grounds are managed prudently, further training is made possible for all employees and broad participation in decision-making processes is encouraged. In this way, universities can show how transformation can take place using a concrete example.

The University of Lüneburg launched many activities and initiatives in the 2000s. In addition to the EMAS1 certification with regular re-certification, the award as a Fair

Trade University, the establishment of a position for sustainability management, the mandatory compensation of CO2-emitting air travel, the provision of a bicycle pool for students and employees, special study programs with innovative teaching / learning methods were created and an intensive examination of questions of inter- and transdisciplinarity in research was promoted. A successful implementation was achieved because all groups, from students to technical and administrative staff, were and are involved. Intensive communication about the sustainability process was part of the initial phase of the university's development into its current profile, which was supported by the two projects mentioned above. During the project period, a newspaper produced especially for the university (Campus Courier) was widely distributed, the process was made transparent, examples of "good practice" were reported on and the various activities were placed in their wider context.

### 6. New difficult phase: The merger with the University of Applied Sciences and the Vice President "Teaching and Studies"

We thought we were already very far along in the sustainability process when new events seemed to shake up the university: the transformation of the university into a foundation and the merger with the local university of applied sciences, which also existed in Lüneburg with several locations, ordered by the ministry. At the same time, there was another requirement: the conversion of all degree courses to



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bachelor's and master's degrees in less than two years in accordance with the Bologna guidelines. The time pressure associated with this, primarily allowed for discussion of the formal aspects of the conversion of degree programs, rather than the content, which meant that sustainability aspects could hardly be taken into account in this process. The different university cultures also made the communication process between the two merged universities more difficult and led to complicated decision-making processes, not to mention the integration of the various disciplines of both universities into joint departments, a process that I was "allowed" to manage.

During this time, I was asked whether I would be interested in being elected by the senate as Vice President for Studies and Teaching. During this time, I had more influence in the university management, but also more and different tasks than before, which took up time that was lacking for the coordination of the ongoing sustainability process. To ensure that this process did not suffer from my frequent absences, responsibilities were transferred to employees. We all had to get through this difficult time together in the second phase of the project, from the university professors to the academic and student staff. My responsibility as Vice President finally ended in April 2006.

### 7. Internal and external assurance: UNESCO Chair "Higher Education for Sustainable Development"

During the difficult phase of restructuring the university, further initiatives were taken

to safeguard the sustainability process both internally and externally. For example, a Senate Commission on Sustainability was set up, in which all groups at the university were represented and whose main task was to support the sustainability process that had begun and to involve the other departments more closely alongside the environmental sciences. This created a framework for active participation and offered the opportunity for the university's various groups to represent their interests and contribute to the sustainability process.

In the logic of securing current and future initiatives in the university sustainability process, the establishment of a UNESCO Chair was pursued during this period in order to establish a further unique selling point and to expand international cooperation and networking with universities or other UNESCO Chairs who are also facing the challenge of sustainability. The title of UNESCO Chair "Higher Education for Sustainable Development" was finally decided by UNESCO for the University of Lüneburg in 2005, which was then passed on to me within the university. Natural collaborations emerged with other UNESCO chairs dealing with education for sustainable development at different levels.

## C. Consolidation

### 8. Change in the university management: The university turned upside down and reorganized

In 2006, the university got a new president, who initiated a scientific assessment of the



entire university, which revealed fewer areas of strengths than weaknesses. Environmental and sustainability sciences and the ongoing sustainability process were identified as a particular strength and became an important pillar in the reorientation of the university. In addition to a new name - Leuphana University of Lüneburg - the university has given itself a mission statement with a focus on sustainability and sees itself as a university for the civil society of the 21st century. New professorships were initially decided by an external commission. And the spectacular Libeskind building was planned. It is not surprising that such a radical reorientation did not take place without major disputes.

Radical changes were made to research and teaching. Departments became faculties, the structure of which was reorganized. Among other things, a Faculty of Sustainability was created, the first of its kind in the entire university landscape, in which interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity play a prominent role. For the first time ever, a Transdisciplinarity professorship was created. The realignment of the study programs was even more radical and, most importantly, more innovative. For the bachelor's degree, the Leuphana Bachelor still exists, with a major and minor subject, a joint first semester in liberal arts called the "Leuphana semester", and complementary studies from the second semester onwards. For lectures, but also for students, this was all completely new territory and took a lot of getting used to. But also, for me, as I had only just brought all degree programs into the new Bologna format two years before as the responsible Vice President.



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## 9. The flagship Leuphana semester: Teachers and students face new challenges

At this point, I would like to characterize the Leuphana Semester in a bit more detail, as it has attracted the attention of universities in Germany and abroad, and this course offering has become a trademark of Leuphana University. In the first semester, students study the basics of scientific work and its methods, scientific ways of thinking, the responsibility of science and the critical examination of scientific results, irrespective of their scientific orientation. In addition to other courses, the first semester includes the module "Science transforms: responsible acting", which focuses on the idea of sustainability and the concept of sustainable development. As part of project seminars, students work in small groups on self-developed questions on the sustainability-related topics of the respective course, the results of which they present and critically discuss at the end of the first semester as part of Leuphana's conference week. This module makes up a third of the first semester.





In the first few years after the new study program was introduced, both students and teachers found this difficult. Both were confronted with the expectation of organizing a joint work process and were encouraged to "think out of the box", ask questions and not give quick answers. Among the students, there were those who were very discipline-oriented and were just waiting to be able to concentrate on their "subject". But there were also those who were curious about the unusual way of working. And there were those who hoped to be able to deal with questions of sustainable development. In the initial phase of the new study program, students also left the university because of the new study structure; today, students come because of the study concept and the associated topics and working methods.

Lecturers were and are faced with the challenge of making a topic and question accessible, not just imparting pure knowledge on the course topic. This entails formulating a scientific literature and learn by example of how to approach socially relevant problems through scientific work and contribute to solving them. The associated change of perspective from "lecturer" to a "supporter" or "partner" in the research and learning process is a challenge for some teachers, which they find difficult to master, if at all. This change of perspective is also associated with a change in teaching culture, which, after the first few years of experience, is supported by an annual training course lasting several days for all teachers in the module.

## 10. Effects within the university: the Sluggishness and opposition of the faculties

I have already indicated that the opposition within the university was not a marginal factor. Once again, people saw the end of the university coming, mostly for unfounded reasons. As a member of the Senate, I was able to see the university policy battles from very close up, which was no fun for me. Individual faculties voiced considerable criticism of the new study structure, especially the first semester. It was simply considered a waste of time. And the Faculty of Education actually managed to keep teacher training out of the Leuphana semester in the first few years. For some time now, however, the Leuphana semester has also been compulsory for students who want to study teacher training [education].

In the beginning, some lecturers openly questioned the Leuphana semester in first semester courses that they, themselves, taught. Some even used class time to campaign against the "Science bears responsibility" module, as the sustainability module was initially called.

The sluggishness of the faculties can be illustrated with an example from the Faculty of Economics. Students who were studying a major in economics from the second semester onwards were surprised that there was obviously no room in their studies for dealing with issues of sustainable development. Their suggestion to have such courses offered in their degree program was categorically



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rejected with the argument that these issues had no place in economics. Fortunately, this view has now changed, and it is not only young, newly appointed professors, but also seasoned ones, who are integrating relevant aspects of sustainable development into their courses on economics.

### 11. Networking and consolidation

The sustainability process at Leuphana University has now been ongoing for over 20 years and changes have become a routine part of the university. The process is no longer in question, the careful use of resources is a reality, the use of renewable energies is now paying off, climate-relevant measures such as offsetting CO2 emissions from air travel are mandatory, and sustainability management has proven its worth, to name just a few examples. In research, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary play a role not only in the context of sustainable development; colleagues from Leuphana are significantly involved in the founding and development of a 'Society for Transdisciplinary and Participatory Research'. For students, there

is a differentiated range of sustainability courses at the bachelor's and master's level and also in continuing education. Leuphana's scientific expertise is not only in demand from employers in the fields of business, administration, non-governmental organizations, and politics in the region near Leuphana but also far beyond.

A similar picture can be drawn of Leuphana's networking at regional, national, and international levels. The UNESCO Chair has certainly made its contribution in this context by actively participating in various UNESCO and German UNESCO Commission committees and initiating a network of German UNESCO Chairs. Several colleagues represented Leuphana on the advisory committees for the UN World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and the Global Action Program on Education for Sustainable Development. The fact that these activities have resulted in new collaborations and joint projects is part of the logic of these various activities. Last but not least, Leuphana's participation in the UNITWIN Network on Education for Sustainable Development and Social



Transformation (UNiESD&ST) is another, and hopefully not the last, initiative.

## 12. What is next?

We are currently living in a world that we could not have imagined just a few years ago. We live in a state of war, conflict, divergent interests, and global impacts. These are all developments that do not contribute to sustainable development on earth, and indeed stand in the way of social transformation. I increasingly see the need to emphasize the political dimension of social action for sustainable development alongside the ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. The following are a few key words to indicate what plays a role in this context: political interests; power structures; understanding of democracy, right of resistance, participation; and local, regional, and global action. I believe this broadening of perspective is urgently needed in order to grasp the complexity of the various destructive processes that threaten our lives.

These five dimensions must also be considered when it comes to initiating the process of sustainable development and developing concepts combined with opportunities for action that lead to changes in the direction of sustainability. We urgently need to seek transformation. This term refers once again to decisions that are linked to values and changes in behaviour and that are intended to contribute to fundamental social change. Based on scientific findings, we need to repeatedly agree on the decision-making corridor through so-called guard rails. Such

a process is to be understood as a search, learning and design process, which, can only be realized in our social system with the broadest possible participation - participation is the key word here. The needed change in values and attitudes requires that something changes in our heads. How else can this happen than through education? Even if educational processes in the sense of transformative thinking are quite arduous and disturbing.

In my opinion, any higher education institution willing to embark in a process towards sustainability and transformation, should at least take these considerations into account when discussing the vision, the mission, and the focal points of future work.

## Concluding remarks

In conclusion, I would like to return to the sustainability process at Leuphana University and draw the following ten key lessons learned:

1. From the outset, there should be clarity about the goals and the long-term nature of a sustainability process to be pursued.
2. The sustainability process must start with committed and reliable colleagues who are aware of the scope of such a process.
3. To be able to start a sustainability process at all, the university management must support it.
4. The highest political body of the university should make a fundamental decision on such a process.



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5. Formal and informal participatory opportunities must be created for all members / affiliates of the university.

6. The sustainability process should follow the "whole institution approach" from the outset.

7. Representatives from each of the faculties should be actively involved in the process and assigned specific tasks and responsibilities.

8. Great importance should be attached to the communication process about the sustainability process internally and externally, and successes as well as obstacles should be named.

9. Critics of the process should be met with composure and calm; emotional confrontation should be avoided at all costs.

10. The main actors in the process need steadfastness, perseverance, commitment, and tolerance of frustration.