

PROGRAM: SEPTEMBER 21, 2026**Sustainability in Higher Education: Between Transformation and Vibe-Shifts****PROGRAM FOCUS AND OBJECTIVES**

In the late 2010s, a growing number of higher education institutions worldwide positioned themselves as pioneers of a comprehensive societal transformation towards sustainability. The discourse was marked by optimism and a strong belief in the transformative potential of universities as drivers of change. By 2026, this landscape has evolved considerably. The original momentum of transformation has intersected with a proliferation of overlapping crises — geopolitical instability, the rise of reservations towards science, the prioritization of economic considerations, digital disruption, and widespread fatigue surrounding ecological discourse. Within this context, sustainability no longer occupies an uncontested position of prominence but increasingly functions as one concern among many competing priorities.

The conference addresses these shifting dynamics through the lens of a Whole Institution Approach. It aims to critically examine the current status of sustainability in higher education, tracing how the rhetoric of “transformation” has given way to more complex modes of negotiation, adaptation, and resilience. The program offers a self-reflective engagement with the role of science communication, and higher education institutions in advancing climate action, biodiversity conservation, and social responsibility.

The conference will focus on 6 workshops, which will present ongoing research and institutional activities, providing a platform for dialogue on how universities can embed sustainability more deeply within their structures. They will take place in parallel on the second and third days of the event and will address different areas of sustainability. The topics of the workshops are on sustainability governance at universities, teaching/ESD, science communication, biodiversity, and green chemistry – as well as a workshop for students in the Una Europa context. Participants are invited to discuss how sustainability agendas can remain relevant in times of multiple crises, and how higher education can continue to foster the implementation of transformational needs.

Over the next five years, key challenges in higher education will include maintaining sustainability commitments under financial strain, ensuring credible carbon reduction strategies, integrating ecological literacy across curricula, and revitalizing student engagement against a backdrop of climate fatigue.

The conference asks: What’s next when “transformation” becomes yesterday’s vibe?

PROGRAM DESIGN

The Opening Day (September 21) features keynote speeches from renowned experts as well as presentations from representatives from the Una Europa partner universities. The talks will be followed by an interactive format encouraging discussion of the overarching topic.

On Tuesday and Wednesday (September 22-23), we will continue with a program of parallel workshops:

- ["Teaching and Education for Sustainable Development"](#) hosted by Prof. Daniela Niesta-Kayser and JunProf. Dr. Luisa Girnus (Freie Universität Berlin)
- ["University Sustainability Governance in Times of Transformation and Vibe Shifts"](#) Andreas Wanke and Katrin Schweigel (Freie Universität Berlin)
- ["Responsible research – involving circularity and interdisciplinarity from the beginning in the research process"](#) hosted by Dr. Ponnapat Watjanatepin (KU Leuven), Dr. Andrea Haase (BfR), Prof. Dr. Rainer Haag, Prof. Dr. Sebastian Hasenstab-Riedel, Dr. Dagmara Weckowska, and Dr. Susanne Stein (Freie Universität Berlin)
- ["Finding the Right Voice: How Universities Can Communicate Sustainability Without Losing Credibility"](#) hosted Karin Bauer-Leppin (Freie Universität Berlin) and Bastian von Lehsten (Novamondo)
- ["Starting with a new vibe: Handprint and Nature Positivity for biodiversity"](#) hosted by Dr. Rebecca Rongstock and Sabine Heckmann (Freie Universität Berlin), and co-hosted by Alan Peddie (University of Edinburgh) and Dr. Jorrit Holst (Freie Universität Berlin)
- ["Una Europa Student Project Incubator"](#) hosted by Dr. Svenja Herziger, Kirsten Schmiester, and Moritz Zöllner (Freie Universität Berlin)

We have received 60 abstracts from 23 countries for our conference workshops.

All speakers, panelists, and workshop contributors will be published in the [designated section of our conference website](#).

MONDAY, 21 SEPTEMBER • CONFERENCE ROOM -1.2009, FABECKSTR. 23-25

10:00 – 11:00	Registration <i>Room -1.2009</i>
11:00 – 11:15	Welcome Note <i>Room -1.2009</i> Prof. Dr. Günter M. Ziegler, President, Freie Universität Berlin: <i>Navigating the Triple Transformation in Higher Education</i> Facilitation: Caroline Paulick-Thiel, Politics for Tomorrow
11:15 – 12:15	Key Note Speakers <i>Room -1.2009</i> Prof. Dr. Mandy Singer-Brodowski, University of Regensburg: <i>Sustainability under Scrutiny - Rethinking the Role of Science and Higher Education</i> Dr. Felix Matthes, Oeko Institute: <i>Sustainable Development Facing Headwinds. Current Situation and Perspectives</i> Short Q&A with speakers Facilitation: Caroline Paulick-Thiel, Politics for Tomorrow
12:15 – 13:00	Discussion: Key Note Speakers <i>Room -1.2009</i> Prof. Dr. Mandy Singer-Brodowski and Dr. Felix Matthes with Prof. Dr. Lena Partzsch, Center for Comparative Politics with a Focus on Environmental and Climate Politics, Freie Universität Berlin Facilitation: Caroline Paulick-Thiel, Politics for Tomorrow
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch Break <i>Foyer</i>
14:30 – 15:30	Discussion of the opening in 10 small groups <i>Room -1.2009</i> Interactive Session: Based on key questions, participants discuss the topics raised in the keynote speeches and subsequent discussion. To encourage exchange, participants are divided into 10 small groups. Results, opinions and assessments are collected by the facilitator and taken up and discussed by the experts in the following panel discussion. Facilitation: Caroline Paulick-Thiel, Politics for Tomorrow

15:30 – 16:00	Power Break <i>Coffee and Tea in foyer</i>
16:00 – 17:30	Panel Discussion with guests <i>Room -1.2009</i> The session will include an exploration of questions from the audience, the acquisition of a more profound understanding from diverse perspectives, the exchange of ideas, and the creation of a common understanding of what it takes to promote sustainability in Higher Education and beyond the university. • Dr. Julie Newman, Director of Sustainability, MIT • Riina Koivuranta, University of Helsinki • Dr. Jeanette Behringer, University of Zurich • Prof. Dr. Holger Dau, Chair SSC-Sustainability • Thimo von Stuckrad, German Rectors Conference Facilitation: Caroline Paulick-Thiel, Politics for Tomorrow
17:30 – 18:00	Summary of the Day <i>Rooms -1.2009</i> Facilitation: Caroline Paulick-Thiel, Politics for Tomorrow
18:00	Reception and Get-Together <i>Coyote Square at Freie Universität Berlin</i>

Contact:

For general information on the overall conference and registration process please contact Moritz Zöllner: events@nachhaltigkeit.fu-berlin.de .