HOW CAN WE ASSURE QUALITY
AND TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?

HIGHER EDUCATION
VIRTUAL SUMMIT 2020

RATIONALE, CHALLENGES, AND KEY QUESTIONS

Higher education institutions in Europe acknowledge the urgent need for rapid and radical transformation towards sustainable development and agree that higher education has an important role to play in this process (Lozano et al. 2013; Sterling 2004). **But how can this role be assumed, what values should guide the process, what should be transformed, how, and who should lead and who be engaged?** Suggestions and models providing orientation and guidance exist (Lambrechts et al. 2018; Mulà et al. 2017; Scott et al. 2012), but they remain niches, often nested at institutional levels that are **disconnected from relevant larger-scale, standard-defining quality and policy bodies** (Fadeeva et al. 2014).

Among the **challenges** that need to be addressed are the following:

First, value-based research and teaching are often believed to be problematical by academics, who consider freedom of thinking to be the highest good at a university; some still believe that facts and values can be separated (Kläy et al. 2015). Moreover, researchers are often not used to considering that higher education institutions are accountable to society (Schneider et al. 2019). And those who teach are concerned that taking into account society's normative goals conflicts with the "no indoctrination" rule of education ("Überwältigungsverbot": see the Beutelsbacher Konsens (Reinhardt 2016)). *Where can or should sustainability values be included in research and teaching and how can this be done?*

Second, assessment and quality assurance processes are currently measuring what *can* be measured instead of what *should* be measured (Lockhart 2018), and predominant institutional setups of higher education institutions rely on competition rather than on collaboration. *What indicators should be measured to ensure that higher education can play its leading role in transformation towards sustainable development? How can we make publishing of results part of a sustainable development venture? What other outputs could be defined as both "assessable" and "transformative"?*

Third, activities at higher education institutions tend to be compartmentalized; while this is necessary to ensure expertise and efficiency in science, teaching, and operations, it also hampers the systemic, interdisciplinary, and cross-sectoral approach needed for sustainable development and for moving "from knowing to doing" (Rice 2013). In the past thirty years, considerable progress has been made in the fields of inter- and transdisciplinary research; corresponding teaching is also progressing; and higher education institutions are adopting sustainability – *but do we have the structures, policies, and quality assurance criteria we need to ensure that this work has traction power for careers? How can the hinge between disciplinary work and inter- and transdisciplinary work be shaped so that it is transformed from an "either/or" barrier to a creative connector? And*

how can those who have a leadership function adopt servant leadership in an academic world ruled mainly by competition?

Fourth, *are we able to take up the challenge of teaching and researching with sustainable development in mind?* This requires a focus on *competences* in addition to knowledge, as well as a shift from teaching to learning (Barth 2015) and to transformative teaching (Förster et al. 2019); lecturers find this challenging, in particular because there is a notorious lack of professional development to support these changes towards education for sustainable development (Mulà et al. 2017). *How can the community of adult educators support the academic community by sharing experience with ways of teaching that enable transformative learning and education?*

Fifth, students are now challenging their universities to be role models with regard to sustainable development goals, in particular concerning climate change. In light of the fact that sustainability educationalists conceive of students as agents of change (Warwick 2016), students' activities should be seen as an interculturally driven broadening of a higher education institution's mindset, and be adopted as an integral part of the institution (Higgins et al. 2013; Scott 2016). *Can we accommodate and support student initiatives within the existing structures of higher education institutions and if yes, how? How can we balance this support with the necessary freedom and flexibility of student initiatives, and allow for potential contradictions with existing structures? How can students support and facilitate transformative learning for sustainable development? And what place is given to their engagement with social actors?*

Sixth, in addition to research and teaching, the mission of higher education institutions is to serve society and support our common transformation towards sustainable development (Fadeeva et al. 2014). This involves making sustainability-relevant insights from scientific knowledge available to specific audiences through targeted publications, conferences, and scientific mediation. But it also involves implementing collaborative research where research questions and results are co-produced between researchers and society (Heiskanen et al. 2016). *How can these new partnerships between science and society be implemented? With what actors (Public administration? Civil society organizations? Business? Politics?) What types of impact can be expected? What kinds of mechanisms exist at universities to promote them? How can researchers' work in relation to society be acknowledged? What does this imply for quality assurance processes and standards?*

RELEVANCE TO SCIENCE AND POLICY

In the recent past, transformative learning has gained importance in formal education, with an interest that is now increasingly coming from higher education institutions, especially in relation to sustainable development. To date, however, little systematic knowledge and experiences exist on **transformative learning at tertiary level**, on what it implies for teaching and learning arrangements, on what challenges need to be met when developing courses and curricula, on the competences faculty staff need to have, on what structures are needed to support development of transformative learning and corresponding professional development at tertiary level, on what this implies for higher education institutions, educational policy, and quality assurance systems, on what active role students can play in fostering transformative learning for sustainable development, and on how this influences the relation between higher education institutions and society.

An additional, rarely addressed issue is that – while research on the different stakeholders involved in higher education policy and practice exists – there are **very few opportunities for the relevant actors to enter into an exchange** about the implications of integrating transformative learning and sustainable development into the higher education system. Rarely do the relevant communities talk to each other and reflect together on how the challenges can be jointly addressed.

The conference will enable participants from a number of different stakeholder and expert groups interested in transformation towards sustainable development to meet beyond their "natural borders" and to discuss both research and practice-related issues.

OBJECTIVES

1. **Convene key players in Higher Education for Sustainable Development and transformation, foster creative listening, and spark new inspirations across the following communities:**

   - lecturers and researchers at higher education institutions
   - experts in professional development in higher education
   - managers of higher education institutions
   - experts in quality assurance
   - students and lifelong learners
   - civil society actors

2. **Creatively discuss the following challenges:**

   1. Values in transformative teaching and research
   2. Assessing and assuring quality
   3. Knowing, doing and leading
   4. Professional development for sustainability competences
   5. Students as agents of change
   6. Co-producing actionable knowledge with society

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ORGANIZERS

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