

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Workshop: Finding the Right Voice: How Universities Can Communicate Sustainability Without Losing Credibility



Organized by Karin Bauer-Leppin (Freie Universität Berlin)

Deadline for submission: May 31, 2026

Even experienced communicators can feel a little nervous when it comes to sustainability. In politics and the media, it often feels like walking a conversational tightrope. Say too little, and you're accused of ignoring the problem. Say too much, and someone will accuse you of activism. Unsurprisingly, many institutions end up doing the safest thing of all—talking about it as little as possible. Universities, however, cannot opt out: they generate knowledge on sustainability and inevitably shape how it is communicated and debated in society. At the same time, universities compete for attention in an already crowded communication landscape. Sustainability is only one of many topics' institutions must communicate, often with limited resources.

Beyond these practical constraints lies a more fundamental question: What is the role of universities when communicating sustainability? Is the goal to primarily inform about research findings, provide orientation in complex debates, or motivate behavioral change—or perhaps a bit of everything? This question is particularly interesting because different communication roles follow different logics. Science communication relies on trust and credibility, as well as careful contextualization. In contrast, more policy-oriented or action-oriented communication often depends on urgency, clear positioning, and sometimes dramatization to mobilize. Attempting to combine all these approaches simultaneously may result in well-intentioned yet diffuse messages that, in the worst case, risk undermining credibility. At the same time, sustainability communication today takes place in a broader context in which scientific expertise itself is increasingly questioned, particularly in areas such as climate research. In public debates, scientific findings are sometimes attacked or dismissed as mere opinions or reframed as activism. In such situations, universities face an additional challenge: communicating research and standing behind and supporting the credibility of their researchers. Therefore, universities play an important institutional role in protecting scientific integrity while enabling meaningful public engagement. A key question is how scientific knowledge can remain credible and relevant beyond academic circles, especially in polarized debates. Universities do not necessarily have to choose just one communication role, however. One open question—which we hope to explore together—is whether institutions can more consciously reflect these roles and perhaps even assign them to different actors, formats, or public "faces."

Complicating matters further, "the university" is not a single, unified voice in the first place. Communication about sustainability emerges from a complex ecosystem of actors: communication teams, researchers, faculties, sustainability offices, and institutional leadership – with more or less training on and interest for communication. These actors operate with different goals, levels of visibility, and degrees of risk.

This raises crucial questions: Who should speak on behalf of the university—and in which role? Should sustainability communication be centrally coordinated, or distributed across different voices? And how can these voices be aligned without losing clarity or credibility?

Rather than aiming for a single, unified voice, an alternative approach may lie in orchestrating multiple voices. This would require a coordinating function within the institution that helps define roles, frame key messages, and enable different actors—such as researchers, communication teams, and sustainability offices—to communicate in complementary ways. The goal would not be to say the same thing, but to ensure that different perspectives remain coherent and mutually reinforcing. In this way, each part of the university can communicate in line with its specific role while making its perspective transparent: who is speaking—and in what capacity? Are they speaking as a researcher, as a communicator, as an institutional representative, or perhaps in a more normative or advocacy-oriented role? Making these roles visible can help strengthen both clarity and credibility.

This interactive workshop will explore these questions in three steps.

Session 1: Understanding the Challenges

Participants will identify the key challenges of sustainability communication in universities, such as limited attention and resources, competing institutional priorities, questions of roles and credibility, erosion of trust in scientific expertise, and identifying realistic target audiences.

Session 2: Exploring Possible Strategies

Building on this discussion, participants will explore potential approaches, such as defining communication roles more clearly, identifying target groups, supporting researchers in public debates, and experimenting with formats that translate sustainability research into meaningful public conversations.

Session 3: From Reflection to Practice

In a collaborative format, participants will develop initial ideas and practical concepts for strengthening sustainability communication within their institutional contexts.

Ways to participate:

We invite presentations of up to 15 minutes that address concepts or provide good practice examples of aspects raised in all three sessions. We are much looking forward to bringing together representatives from international universities working in various communication roles in all areas of Higher Education. Please, submit your abstracts (250-900 words) until **May 31** via our [registration platform Conftool](#). All selected contributors will be informed by June 15th. Selected proposals will be published in our conference program and on our conference website. Selected contributions from the conference will be published in an editorial volume. You can find information about the [editorial volume here](#).

The workshop will be part of the Sustainability in Higher Education Conference “Between Transformation and Vibe Shifts”. For more information on the conference please visit: <https://www.fu-berlin.de/en/sites/higher-ed-sustainability-conf>.

Contact:

For further information on the workshop please contact Karin Bauer-Leppin: karin.bauer-leppin@fu-berlin.de. For general information on the overall conference and registration process please contact conference manager Moritz Zöllner: events@nachhaltigkeit.fu-berlin.de.