



3-day international conference:
“Sustainability in Higher Education: Between Transformation and Vibe Shifts”

Freie Universität Berlin in cooperation with the European university alliance Una Europa
Campus Dahlem, Fabeckstr. 23-25, 14195 Berlin
21 – 23 September 2026

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, and social responsibility.

The conference will focus on 6 workshops, which will present ongoing research and institutional activities, providing a platform for dialog 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 responsible research – 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?**