How to communicate sustainability on university websites

Universities have a great responsibility for the development of society and for contributing to sustainable development on a global scale. Are you struggling with how to communicate sustainability on your university's website? Here is some help.

Begin with why, to whom, and what

Different stakeholders need and want to know different things about your sustainability work. As in all communication, use the perspectives of the target audiences when creating content.

- **Performance:** Your university's sustainability performance matters to a range of stakeholders, such as funders, business partners, NGOs, and government authorities. Validate your performance by showing data and analytics as well as sustainability strategies, policies, and reports.

- **Reputation:** By transforming the data and information in your reports into engaging content, universities can improve their reputation. This also attracts potential students, potential employees, and the public.

- **Cohesion:** By communicating sustainability internally in a clear and consistent fashion it becomes an in-built part of your company culture – one that your employees and current students can take pride in, increasing their engagement.

Raise the bar

Peoples' expectations on sustainability are rising, so communicating about saving energy or reusable coffee cups just isn't enough. To map your activities is a good thing – and perhaps necessary to start with – but it doesn't develop your university's sustainability work. It's time to raise the bar.

- **Always use established frameworks** for sustainable development (Brundtland Report, Agenda 2030, Paris Climate Agreement, etc.). The concept of sustainable development is understood as three, interwoven dimensions of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. Do not separate climate or the environment from the concept of sustainability as in phrases like "this is what we do for the climate and sustainability".

- **Avoid "superficial language"** about sustainable development. Sustainability is a complex concept, but one that needs to be clarified rather than simplified. One of the most searched for keywords online when it comes to sustainability is "meaning" or "definition". This offers a great opportunity for universities to create communication content that deepens the common knowledge about sustainability.

EXAMPLE: To write about how forests degrade alone is not sustainability communication - it is environmental. Environmental issues are part of sustainable development, but it is not the full story. If you write about the costs for preserving the forest and its use for medical purposes - then you communicate all three dimensions of sustainability. For instance, try to distinguish between the following:

sustainability vs circular economy
sustainability vs CSR
sustainability vs environment
sustainability vs climate

- **Explain and make it relevant.** Provide context and make your message relevant. When talking about CO_2 emissions, consumers can find it hard to visualise what 50 grams or 20 000 tonnes of carbon really means. Relate it to something simple, like driving a traditional car for 10 km or to national emission levels.

- **Choose your voice.** Dare to talk about the serious stuff but stay on a positive note, keep the hopes up! Doom and gloom scenarios are not well received according to communication research.

- **Avoid "greenwashing"** with the help of facts, honesty, and transparency. Be brave.

Be transparent
Claiming to **be** sustainable makes you vulnerable to criticism. Sustainable development is a journey – not a destination.

- Explain **how** you contribute to sustainable development both long-term as well as here and now at a strategic level. What are your goals? What time frames do you have? On this note, many universities and colleges can use what they already have. Link to how your university works with aspects such as equal treatment, work environment, accessibility, purchase, and procurement, investments & partnerships, in your sustainability communication.

- Show both your **positive** and **negative** impact. What challenges do you have? For example, what are your policies on air travel and meetings? How do you consider sustainability factors like CO2 emissions or work environment when constructing or rebuilding university buildings? Do you choose strategic partners based on their sustainability values? What do your purchasing routines look like?

- **If you fail** to meet your targets, be completely transparent. Make it clear as to why and what you are going to do about it.

- **Tell the truth!** Make sure what you say is true. Use experts to check your messages.

Improve the visibility
Universities do a lot on sustainable development, but you need to make the information easy to find. Here are some keys to success.

- Visibility from the start. Show on the start page that you are a university that has sustainability as its highest priority.

- To make overall sustainability information easy to find, use internal search engine optimization, URL suffix, keywords, and placement no more than two clicks from the start page.

- Do not communicate via PDF files. They are difficult to find through search engines and difficult to adjust for accessibility.

- Do not rely on the reports to do the job for you. Create content from the reports to your web.

- Avoid news as your only sustainability communication. The information can quickly feel outdated and does not give an overview of your work.

- If you have a sustainability centre, make sure it is easily found on the university's website.

Develop your work
- Try to incorporate the sustainability perspectives into your existing communication strategies and plans.

- Communicators need knowledge about sustainable development. Add sustainability to your skills development plans.

Let the future generation be heard!
Involve the students in your sustainability communication. It is their future we are talking about.