Managing sustainability communication on campus: experiences from Lüneburg

Angela Franz-Balsen and Harald Heinrichs
Institute for Environmental and Sustainability Communication, University of Lüneburg, Lüneburg, Germany

Abstract

Purpose – Sustainability communication is evolving as a new interdisciplinary field of research and professional practice. The purpose of this paper is to point out the advantage of applying theoretical frameworks and related research instruments for an adequate sustainability communication management on campus. It also aims to highlight the normative constraints and challenges (participation) that differentiate sustainability communication from public relations.

Design/methodology/approach – An interdisciplinary theoretical framework and empirical studies (quantitative/qualitative; audience research) were used for the design of a context-sensitive sustainability communication management concept for the University of Lüneburg.

Findings – Empirical data clearly showed that disciplinary cultures (including their gender specificity) are highly relevant for sustainability attitudes. Continuous visibility of sustainability efforts on campus is critical for people’s attitudes and engagement. Campus community members can be characterized by degrees of “sustainability affinity” vs “sustainability distance”. Too much sustainability-campaigning is counterproductive, whereas listening to campus community members’ ideas and needs seems appropriate.

Research limitations/implications – There is a need for qualitative data to assess “communication culture”

Practical implications – A balanced theoretically, empirically and normatively grounded communication management is recommended in order to establish a participatory communication culture.

Originality/value – The application of sustainability communication theory, including participation research, in the context of higher education for sustainable development is overdue; thesis: sustainability communication wants to initiate structural changes on campus, but is itself dependent on visible structural change in order to be effective.

Keywords Sustainable development, Communication, Communication management, Higher education, Germany

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A prerequisite for a university to commit to sustainability is communication in all forms – from singular or spontaneous communication impulses and initiatives to the professional management of long-term consultation processes and other participatory interactions. The vision of a “sustainable university” is ideally generated in a mutual communication process and is continuously elaborated, thereby stimulating structural changes as well as individual and collective development:

Finding the right way to tell someone about sustainable development, and relating it to their experience has been crucial in engaging universities and colleges with the sustainable development (SD) agenda. Good communication can influence people’s behaviour, create
dialogue, foster understanding and open up dialogue between groups. Without listening and responding to those around you, it is difficult to provide useful educational services or encourage different behaviour (Forum for the Future and HEPS, 2004, p. 15).

The Lüneburg sustainable university project explores sustainability communication both from its overarching research perspective, striving for empirical results and theoretical findings about the characteristics of sustainability communication on and beyond campus grounds, and from a developmental perspective, which means designing and implementing a comprehensive communication management concept for the University of Lüneburg, based on a systemic understanding of the campus sustainability process.

Communicating sustainability on campus – state of the art
The number of publications dealing exclusively or more or less extensively with the communication/diffusion aspect of a campus sustainability process is relatively small (Bogun, 2004; Moore, 2005; Pittman, 2004; Roorda, 2001; Sharp, 2002; Stoltenberg, 2000). Some guidelines for practitioners exist, though; they are meant to facilitate disseminating the sustainability concept in institutions of higher education and rely very much on a social marketing and event marketing approach (Forum for the Future and HEPS, 2004), campaigning, indeed, being an important tool for raising awareness. On the other hand, the special “communication culture” characteristic of sustainability communication in comparison to conventional communication policies is also mentioned in the same guideline: “listens to public, nurtures relationships with stakeholders” (Forum for the Future and HEPS, 2004, p. 17).

Sharp (2002) published results of a broad study comprising more than 30 universities. With respect to communication strategies she recommends “maximize face-to-face communication – dialogue is the most effective means of progressing with the change process, learn the language of other people, active listening skills are essential” (Sharp, 2002, p. 131). Barlett and Chase (2004, p. 17) draw similar conclusions: “personal relationships are critical”.

Corcoran and Wals (2004, p. 1) touch upon the conflictive potential of the normative character of the sustainability concept, pointing out that for such controversial issues an open confrontation allowing for a diversity of positions is essential:

The conflicts that emerge in the exploration of sustainable development [...] are prerequisites rather than barriers to higher learning. Universities in particular have a responsibility in creating space for alternative thinking. They have a profound role to play in developing students’ so-called dynamic qualities or competencies. They will need these qualities to cope with uncertainty, poorly defined situations and conflicting or at least diverging norms, values, interests and reality constructions).

Against the background of the Swedish top-down strategy for higher education for SD Wickenberg (2006, p. 116) studied its chances of success by way of a norm analysis:

We know from experience that requirements and rules have little or no long-term effect on the development of sustainability work, and do not serve to create any self-generating driving force. Whenever new ideas and activities, such as the new sustainability theme, are introduced in higher education, extra committed individuals – called “dedicated key actors” or “dedicated individuals” play a decisive role.
Thereby Wickenberg confirms what several other authors have stressed (Bogun, 2004; Clugston and Calder, 1999; Lidgren, 2004; Lotz-Sisitka, 2004; Orr, 2004; Sharp, 2002). But according to Wickenberg (2006, p. 117), “norm-supporting structures” such as identification of the university leaders with the mission or participatory structures or other social arenas are of complementary importance to stabilize the sustainability process.

Besides, the drivers, the barriers against implementing sustainability at universities have also been investigated. In their worldwide literature analysis Velasquez et al. (2005) identified “lack of awareness, interest and involvement” as a frequent barrier. “Resistance to change” is mainly found in groups that do not want to share their interests with others (Velasquez et al., 2005). Both barriers are significant challenges for sustainability communication management.

Summarizing these findings it can be said that “the human factor” seems to be critical in sustainability communication on campuses. Investigating target audiences could be one way of addressing this difficulty. Also times are changing, the new media are gaining ground in campus communications. A screening of all kinds of communication instruments including the latter seems to be a desideratum. Apart from that, the implications of the normative character of SD demand special attention in communication management. A look at university members’ attitudes concerning this would be instructive.

In the priority list of higher education research themes identified during the Halifax Consultation (Wright, 2005, 2006), one of the top research interests covers the field of communication as it is understood by the authors of this paper, which is as a fundamental element and outcome of institutional culture (Wright, 2005, p. 44). What is missing in this context is investigating the impact of disciplinary cultures. There is evidence that disciplines influence mental models and professional habits of university members (Multrus, 2004). Another research desideratum worked out by the Halifax Delphi touches upon participation: inclusiveness and voice in SD. Diversity and gender issues are mentioned here, but surprisingly not yet attributed to campus structures; they are just mentioned as issues that have to be explored generally (Wright, 2005, p. 41). In a compilation of diverse, isolated aspects, however, two research tasks explicitly point out the need for studies in communication management: “Examining the nature of systemic change and how to stimulate and guide it (rather than control it) within the institution” and “Does social marketing for sustainability on campus work?” (Wright, 2005, p. 30). Consequently, the Halifax Delphi confirms that there is definitely a lack of empirical evidence with respect to sustainability communication in higher education institutions.

Empirical designs, however, have to be deducted from and framed by theoretical approaches. The most crucial ones that we recommend for the design of sustainability communication management on campus are shortly introduced.

**Organisational theory**

Organisational theory is widely used as a reference for authors investigating order examining the development of higher education institutions (Hanft, 2000; Pellert, 1999; Krücken, 2004) or sustainability processes (Bogun, 2004; Cortese, 1999; Clugston and Calder, 1999; Leal Filho, 1999; Orr, 1994; Pittman, 2004; comp. Albrecht and Burandt, this issue) Theories about the idea of man[1] within an organization (McGregor, 1960; Schreyögg, 1996, 219 ff), its follow up by the gender and diversity concept, about
organisational culture, organisational learning and change management – all this is of highest importance for sustainability communication at universities. Sustainability communication wants to initiate change, but it is also dependent on structural change. The question of bottom-up or top-down processes is located here. Owing to organisational theory, systemic understandings of university development are prevailing (Pittman, 2004; Senge, 2000; Sharp, 2002; Sterling, 2004; Wals and Corcoran, 2006).

So-called “postmodern organisational theory” (Schreyögg, 1999; Schmidt, 2004) has not yet been much discussed in this context, although it has much in common with sustainability discourses. Postmodern organisational theory differs from modern theories insofar as it is characterised by scepticism towards generally accepted concepts; uncertainty prevails (Schreyögg, 1999, p. 17). A new key term is the “heterarchical” organisation which is the opposite to the hierarchical organisation. Another remarkable phenomenon in current discourses is the re-entry of a moral-ethical perspective (e.g. corporate social responsibility) into organisational theory. With regard to the challenge of integrating sustainability into higher education institutions, the mentioned approaches in organisational theory emphasize the central role of communication.

Communication management

Professional communication planning goes back to the fields of marketing (Novelli, 1984) and public relations (Bernays, 1928), but has been established as a routine for the internal processes of consultation and in the interaction of organisations as well as for their external communication. Acting professionally in this context means that after a profound assessment of the situation, aims or target-states are defined which are then complemented by a strategy to reach these goals. Short-term decisions of individual members are substituted by systematically planned, long-term concepts that are generated collaboratively.

Central elements of such processes are therefore:

- consideration of plans and actions of others in the field;
- assessment of personal capacities;
- extensive analysing;
- collaborative planning;
- long-term projects in contrast to short-term tactics; and
- measurement/evaluation (White and Mazur, 1994; Mast, 2005, p. 2).

Public relations and especially social marketing (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971) are helpful frameworks for sustainability communication management. Therefore, the first guidelines for sustainability communication on campus focus on these approaches (Forum for the Future and HEPS, 2004; UNEP and Futerra, 2005). They preferably illustrate one-way communication[2] which is not really compatible with the special quality of sustainability communication. Normative constraints and challenges differentiate sustainability communication from marketing and public relations; they have created specific variations of social marketing, e.g. the “empowerment strategy” (Singh and Titi, 1995) or “Community-based Social Marketing” (McKenzie-Mohr and Smith, 1999). The model of the human being underlying these approaches is one of a competent citizen, which is in line with current approaches of sustainability communication where dialogue and participation play a central role.
Feeding from a still wider range of disciplines than mentioned above, e.g. sociology, political science (environmental) psychology, education, ethics and more, sustainability communication theory is evolving as an interdisciplinary theoretical framework for sustainability communicators (Michelsen, 2005). It offers models and tools – such as lifestyle analysis, online-discourses or participatory approaches – for the design of context-sensitive and effective interventions. Since, SD is very complex by nature – because of its multi-dimensionality, interrelatedness and global- and future-orientation – interactive processes are an essential feature of sustainability communication. Participatory approaches are needed in order to harness the pluralism in knowledge claims, interests and values within search, learning and design processes towards SD. Recent developments of concepts and methods in participation research and knowledge communication provide a fruitful basis for dialogic sustainability communication (Heinrichs, 2005, Kropp et al., 2007). Applying the evolving approaches in the context of higher education for SD is overdue.

Based on everything described so far, it can be concluded that both a rich theoretical framework to inspire and practical guidelines to help structure sustainability communication on campus obviously exist. Missing, however, is a body of empirical evidence, challenging the theoretical and practical models by confronting them with the complexity of the university microcosm.

The aim of the communication and participation focus of the sustainable university project therefore was the exemplary design of a context-sensitive sustainability communication management concept for University of Lüneburg, which draws on the just-mentioned theories and others, which is based on empirical data and which is in accordance with the basic norms of the sustainability concept. The research interest goes beyond this, referring to the overarching questions of the sustainable university project: is there a correlation between university practices and (infra-)structures and a specific communication culture, for example communication bridging gaps between departments and stakeholder groups? If sustainability communication as defined above can help to change (infra)structure in higher education institutions (HEI), do changing structures also influence the communication culture within HEI?

**Empirical study: understanding the case**

*Interventions – media mix and more*

From the very beginning of the sustainable university project, a systematic screening of existing and possible communication channels for sustainability took place. A range of communication tools/strategies for the diffusion of the idea of SD on campus and for the participation of all groups of university members were tested. Visualisation of (un)sustainability and of efforts to act in a sustainable way was considered crucial. This was in response to a specific German discourse on the particular challenges of sustainability communication, e.g. the challenge of coping with the lack of visuality of SD (Sustainable Development Commission, 2001; Rat für Nachhaltigkeit, 2004). To detect university members’ expectations and wishes concerning sustainability on campus was considered equally important to stimulating and facilitating participation.

Two classical mass media channels were used regularly for one-way communication on campus grounds: a newspaper called “Campus Courier” (CC) and an environmental radio programme. Lecture series and film programmes with subsequent discussions were partly interactive and situated on the threshold between...
lectures and leisure. Special events, exhibitions and interventions on campus were used
to draw attention to special issues, e.g. fair trade. Student activities of all kinds (study
projects, social marketing, interviews and articles for the CC, radio and film
production[3]) guaranteed students’ involvement as well as their critical comments on
the sustainability process. Regular round tables with stakeholders were initiated in
order to allow participation and to foster networking, but had to be given up because of
participants’ lack of time. Informal networking was intensified and showed results in a
growing number of collaborative projects. Transdisciplinary projects bridged the gap
between campus and the local community.

Apart from all these visible or tangible processes and products dynamic, invisible
processes occur (knowledge transfer, snowball-effects of networking), the results of
which ought to be taken into account by communication management. Therefore, it
was important to know as much as possible about these dynamic and complex
communication processes and to measure their effects. One method of achieving this
was to research university community members themselves.

Listening to the campus – methodology
Audience research is essential in both sustainability communication and in
communication management in general. Two main foci out of a broader set of
empirical investigations are reported in this paper. University members’ attitudes and
daily routines were measured in an online survey as part of the so-called situation
analysis, which is always the start up in communication management. A media
reception study was carried out, designed not only to evaluate campus print media, but
also to find out more about information behaviour, knowledge and interests of campus
community members. Both research aspects are part of step one in the Lüneburg case
study: understanding the complexity of the case.

Online survey
In order to obtain a profound situation analysis of the campus, various empirical steps
were taken, e.g. secondary analysis of existing data on campus members’ attitudes
concerning their university or interviews with “key informants[4]”. Most prominent
was an online survey in 2005, covering both the research interests connected to the
overarching questions of the sustainable university project as well as relating to the
specific dimensions of the subprojects.

Items of the questionnaire aimed at assessing the character and state of
sustainability-relevant attitudes und habits of campus community members. How
many have heard of SD? Do they accept the basic principles of the concept? Which
further steps toward a “Sustainable University” might meet their interests? What is their
notion of a good university? From the point of view of communication management most
thrilling was the attempt to design a set of items measuring a complex manifestation of
“sustainability affinity” – in analogy to the construct “environmental awareness” used
in the representative studies on environmental awareness of the German public
(Kuckartz, 2002, 2004, 2006). A favourable condition for this undertaking was the fact
that the University of Lüneburg at that time offered an ideal experimental setting: Four
campus sites of very distinct disciplinary cultures and varying exposures to
sustainability communication and activities were to be compared.
Media reception analysis

Media reception analyses yield data about the media investigated and, at the same time, about the recipients. Both were of equal interest in our study.

The “Campus Courier” is a periodic (two issues per year) print publication in newspaper-styling that is edited by the “Sustainable University Project” involving students as reporters, authors and photographers. It addresses all campus community members, offering information about the Lüneburg sustainability process, about national and international contexts with a strong focus on higher education policies, and last but not least about the sustainable university project itself. It also gives campus community members a voice (portraits, interviews, comments or articles). From the research perspective, “Campus Courier” (Figure 1) is a vehicle to find out in how far journalistic writing (including visual documents and stimuli) can be an instrument for providing a profound insight into the relation between HEI and SD. Further, it is a vehicle to find out how a newspaper can serve as a feedback tool to committed individuals or groups (Fietkau and Kessel, 1981) or as a tool to capture attention. This has to be seen against the backdrop of the rise of new media in campus communication.

A media reception study of the CC was carried out in 2006, using a kind of experimental setting which made sure that informants initially did not know that the main research interest was the “Campus Courier”. Reader Scan Analysis[5] was the central element. It allows for detailed observation and documentation of informants’ reading habits and thematic preferences. In a second step (“think aloud-technique” Huber and Mandl, 1994) informants were given ample space for commenting on articles, and for sharing their reactions.

Results: strong influence of campus infrastructures and disciplinary cultures

The online survey was supported by many university members comprising all status groups (see the paper titled “Transferability of approaches to SD at universities as a challenge” by Adomssent, Godemann and Michelsen, elsewhere in this special issue). A selection of results that are of relevance to the communication of sustainability on campus are reported.

The degree to which the term “SD” is known among respondents is amazing (86.8 per cent), compared with the average result of 22 per cent for the German
population in 2004 (BMU, 2004, p. 69). The degree varies from campus site to campus site, however. The main campus with its tradition of Agenda 21 activities reaches the highest values. Notions of sustainability vary significantly between faculties, one reason being differing assessments of the relevance of global justice for SD, another the partly one-dimensional notion of sustainability as environmental programme. The members of the technical faculties (traditionally male domains) show least consent with basic issues of sustainability, instead showing confidence in technical solutions for global problems. Female respondents show a little more advocacy for environmental protection programmes, a more biocentric understanding of nature protection; they are also less convinced that SD is just a “buzz-word”. Altogether, however, the concept of SD is highly feasible among Lüneburg campus community members.

In order to find out whether SD is seen as a means of sharpening the profile of universities, some notions of higher education institutions that would be compatible with a sustainable university were offered for consent. More than 95 per cent of the respondents agreed that “higher education institutions should be examples for society”. Consent was also high for the statement “higher education institutions ought to have a mission statement supported by all members” (82 per cent). Nearly, 100 per cent agreed that “there ought to be an open dialogue between academia and society”. About 91 per cent understand that universities should teach more than expert knowledge to the students.

Students’ and faculty/staff participation in projects, initiatives or committees was measured via reported behaviour. Again, disciplinary cultures and gender are critical here: Male students tend to engage in long-term initiatives and political committees, female students prefer engagement for singular events or projects, mostly in the social sphere. Environmental sciences students are willing to commit themselves more than others. Like faculty/staff members they often do this beyond campus grounds (44 per cent average of all groups). Among faculty/staff members engagement is relatively high, especially in committees or work groups. The field of engagement is often related to the respective disciplines.

The internet has become a very important communication channel for more than 90 per cent of all respondents, the university web site being crucial. Nevertheless, face-to-face communication ranks higher still (96 per cent). Campus events are popular (64 per cent). Factor analysis yielded four types of media users:

1. Type A is campus life-oriented and reads all papers distributed on the campus, including the “Campus Courier”.
2. Type B is interested in the local area and reads the local newspaper and city magazines, for instance;
3. Type C is sociable, interested in events and personal exchange.
4. Type D is curriculum-oriented, regularly attends lectures and seminars and frequently consults the university web site.

What themes would campus community members like to learn about? Research projects and future perspectives as well as international contacts are of great interest to more than half of the respondents. In topics like gender issues, health issues and
environmental protection, which were used to characterize “sustainability affinity” only a minority (20 per cent) is interested.

*Media reception: results of “reader scan analysis” and “read aloud-technique”*

The “Campus Courier” (CC) is competing with other print products and is definitely less popular than gazettes that are edited by students only, CC ranking equal to papers edited by the university administration. Whereas, the layout of CC appeals to most of the interviewees, students consider the newspaper format as not ideal (can not be read in class). Newspaper-style is identified as contradictory to a print product that does not appear in short intervals. Most important, however, are the informants’ unanimous statements that “Campus Courier” is successful in transporting the message that a relationship exists between higher education institutions and SD. The read-aloud technique, which documents readers’ associations while they are reading an paper, revealed that individual articles can illustrate very well what universities can do to meet their tasks and functions under the challenge of SD. The recommendation was given, however, not to overload “Campus Courier” with the sustainability issue.

**Discussion and consequences**

Both approaches to campus audience research yielded results that gave very precise information on how to develop a context-sensitive sustainability communication management at the University of Lüneburg. The effort built into the online survey to assess “sustainability awareness” or “sustainability disposition” of individuals proved successful. Clusters of campus community members could be characterized by their degree of “sustainability affinity” vs “sustainability distance”. This again can partly be assigned to their work or study environment. The empirical data clearly showed that disciplinary cultures are highly relevant for sustainability attitudes. Consequently, relatively precise definitions of target audiences and their special needs were possible: Those highly affinity to sustainability can be understood as waiting for challenges like transdisciplinary study or research projects, whereas the “sustainability distant” groups first of all need basic information and motivation, although their right not be bothered ought to be respected. Sub-audiences were also defined along locations, disciplines and gender. Even though gender differences were not spectacular with respect to higher education and campus life, in combination with the disciplinary cultures as male or female domains Gough’s (2004, p. 153) statement “there is a gender dimension in all academic activity”) is confirmed by our data. More significant were differences between women and men concerning SD. Female respondents are less convinced than males that sustainability is a “buzzword” they tend more towards strong sustainability[6] and trust technical solutions less. The impact of norms of masculinity and femininity on individual understandings of SD is definitely strong (Franz-Balsen, 2005). For communication management this means that special attention should be paid to male disciplinary cultures.

Considering the differing exposure to sustainability processes at the four locations of the University of Lüneburg, it could also be concluded from the outstanding results for the “Agenda 21 campus” that structural change, the visibility of sustainability efforts on the campus, plus sustainability communication is critical for people’s attitudes and engagement. Obviously some kind of collective identity[7] had developed on that site. Does this entail a special communication culture? If the normative
implications of the sustainability concept are taken seriously, respect of individual opinions, tolerance and trust are shaping the style of communication, the idea of man behind participatory processes being that of the competent and committed individual. The groups of campus community members with high sustainability affinity might be interpreted as carriers of such a culture; they are very consistent in their sustainability profiles.

The results of the media reception study show that it is not so difficult to convey the links between higher education and SD of society if there is a room to explain and illustrate the interrelation for instance via a newspaper and when it is translated into people's language and linked to their interest to learn more about current research projects and the internationalisation of their university. Since, communication habits are changing and the internet has become routine for all campus groups, the next step to take is to try the same with Web 2.0; this marks the qualitative step from one-way to bi-directional media. This will be an additional measure, because – as the typology showed – the full media-mix is necessary to reach all “information types”.

Last but not least the reception study pointed out that too much sustainability-campaigning is counterproductive. Listening to campus community members or giving them a voice – which is also dialogue – seems much more appropriate. The data concerning campus community members’ participation are encouraging, too – for a very process-oriented, adaptive communication management.

Conclusion
The few empirical data reported here were only part of a much broader attempt to assess and understand our case, the University of Lüneburg. They have to be interpreted in the context of our whole set of interventions, observations and experiences around these interventions, for instance a surprising rise in students' initiatives for sustainability. They also have to be contrasted with or complemented by the theoretical frameworks mentioned above. Moreover, to really understand the system, parallel processes of change in HEI, the Bologna Process and gender mainstreaming (Dudeck and Jansen-Schulz, 2007) have to be taken into account as well and are of course, considered in the broader project context. Universities in Europe are undergoing reforms that also affect organisational cultures.

Confronting such complex situations, the combination of the perspectives and measures taken here can be recommended: theoretical frameworks and audience are used for the design of a strategic sustainability communication concept. This is brought to balance with the normative demand for participation, but also with current models in organisational theory (heterarchical organisation, gender and diversity), all characterized by confidence in the competence of individuals. The result of this is an open way of managing sustainability communication, adaptive to the needs and the creativity of the stakeholders involved as well as to the overall situation of the university.

But communication has its limits, as our data also show. Without the structural changes accomplished by other features of the long-term process at Lüneburg University, the findings of the online survey (high degree of sustainability affinity) would not have been the same. Sustainability communication wants to initiate change, but for success it is also dependent on structural changes, whether gradual or ad hoc decided by the university leaders. Owing to the experimental setting of Lüneburg
campus sites, there is some evidence that structural changes might influence changes in (communication) culture just as vice versa. This conclusion is to be validated in the future, the intriguing question being what adequate tools to assess academic “communication culture” could be.

Notes
1. The German term “Menschenbild” is not really captured in the English term “idea of man”. Point of reference is an individual or an organisation the behaviour of which is determined by its interpretation of human nature, especially in the work environment. Current organisation theories assume an intrinsic attitude towards work on the part of the members of the organisation.
3. One of the film projects was a means of engaging students in exploring the relation between gender issues and sustainability on campus; others had the task to document and visualize the foci of the Sustainable University Project (study programme, sustainability report, arts and culture, communication).
4. Key informants are individuals that have more insight into and more contacts within an organization than others.
5. Reader Scan Analysis was developed by Carlo Imboden, media researcher; it has been widely applied for audience research by German newspapers since 2004. www.bpb.de/veranstaltungen/L7SAKV,0,0,Entzauberte_Mythen.html (accessed 15 June 2007).
6. The academic discourse on concepts of strong sustainability vs weak sustainability was initiated by the ecological economist Hermann Daly (Daly, 1996).
7. A critical analysis of this phenomenon would be interesting; are new norm constraints being built up?

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**Further reading**


About the author
Angela Franz-Balsen, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Lüneburg, Institute of Environmental and Sustainability Communication; coordinator of the subproject “Communication, Participation and Knowledge Transfer” of the “Sustainable University” project. Angela Franz-Balsen is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: franz-balsen@uni-lueneburg.de

Harald Heinrichs, is a Junior Professor at the University of Lüneburg, Institute for Environmental and Sustainability Communication, head of division “Participation and Sustainable Development”. E-mail: www.uni-lueneburg.de/infu

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