

Sustainability at UM - Our Experience, Frustration, and Hopes

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Introduction

In this report, we share the experience of two active students with sustainability at UM in the past two years. We want to share how we experienced governance of sustainability at UM, what has frustrated us and the hopes we have for UM's sustainability governance. It is important to us to share this to enable the Sustainable UM 2030 Taskforce (SUM2030) to improve itself and inform other stakeholders at UM, such as the Executive Board, the Supervisory Board and members of Faculty Councils and the University Council. This report is written for three main reasons. Firstly, based on our experiences, we foresee that UM is not on the trajectory to meet its ambitious target of being “a fully sustainable university in 2030”.¹ Secondly, there have been some new developments at UM which have not been included in the last report² and the UM Climate Letter³. Thirdly, we are missing a reflection of UM's governance of sustainability.

UM itself recognises sustainability as a priority on paper and refers to itself as “a caring and sustainable university” in the headline of its 2022-2026 strategic plan.⁴ In November 2020, KANParty published a report on the structural issues with accountability, capacity and decision-making in regard to sustainability at UM.⁵ At that point, missing reporting on the progress of the SUM2030, lacking human resources and a lack of clear division of responsibilities and decision-making power were criticised.

Since November 2020, there have been some new developments in sustainability at UM. For example, the SUM2030 has partially revised its ambitions in the “Business Case SUM2030” written in September 2021.⁶ We perceive this revision generally as a positive development. However, we still see significant shortcomings that we elaborate on below and in the analysis. Although the general ambition of “sustainability is part of the university's DNA” was taken on from other documents, the Business Case is more concrete than preceding vision documents. Notably, this document includes a case for a larger SUM2030 budget and the budget itself. Whereas we acknowledge the need for more capacity for sustainability at UM, a larger budget in and of itself will not solve structural governance problems. Apart from the new information made available in the Business Case, the SUM2030 has gained more FTEs with its Coordinator working full-time and the support of a communications officer. Lastly,

¹ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/file/umstrategicprogramme2022-2026a4engpdf> p.10

² <https://www.kanmaastricht.nl/sustainability-report>

³ <https://www.kanmaastricht.nl/um-climate-letter>

⁴ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/file/umstrategicprogramme2022-2026a4engpdf>

⁵ <https://www.kanmaastricht.nl/sustainability-report>

⁶ Business Case Sustainable UM 2030 - UM's Impact on a sustainable future 2021-2026 (Version September 8, 2021) - Please contact friederike.c.leppert@web.de for information on access

some progress has been achieved with the SUM2030's first systematic conversations with Faculty Boards in 2021 and the reinstatement of a Green Office in summer 2021.

Transparency of UM's Sustainability efforts has not significantly changed since November 2020 because there is still no integrated and systematic reporting. However, the SUM2030 has attended at least four University Council meetings since the 2020/2021 academic year, which is significantly more than in the preceding year. This contextualisation shows that although there have been some improvements regarding sustainability at UM, underlying structural problems persist.

We are basing this report on our own experience, which we built in the last two and half years by being members of the representative bodies of UM, organising and participating in various formats of meetings with a wide variety of stakeholders on sustainability at UM including an internship in the SUM2030.⁷ These experiences have led to insight on the governance of sustainability at UM. Whilst we have met a large number of dedicated students and staff on the ground, a lack of leadership and institutional commitment has led to frustrations. Even though we are frustrated, we still have hope for improvements, which we will elaborate on at the end of the report.

Analysis

Vision

This section evaluates the coherence of UM's vision on sustainability. A coherent vision is needed in order to systematically work on and track implementation. A helpful vision is explicit about how UM envisions itself as a sustainable institution and builds on everyday practice at UM. UM seeks to contribute to sustainability in two main ways. First, it aims to lead by example in research, education, and operations.⁸ Second, it seeks to amplify its potential impact through its network.⁹

The SUM2030 defines its ambitions for sustainability in terms of three main goals, which in turn build on a transformation in the three pillars of research, education, and operations.¹⁰ This is very broad and statements like "sustainability is part of the University's DNA"¹¹ require a more specific definition of what sustainability entails in order to be

⁷ Consult the Annex "About the Authors" for more information.

⁸ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/sustainability> accessed 24.02.2022

⁹ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/file/umstrategicprogramme2022-2026a4engpdf> p. 10

¹⁰ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/sustainability>

¹¹ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/sustainability>

operationalised. Although some aspects of what it means to be a sustainable institution are included in the chart above (Figure 1), there is no documentation of how UM plans to pursue these goals. Thus, we are concerned about UM's ability to follow up on its vision with action.

Ambitions Sustainable UM2030

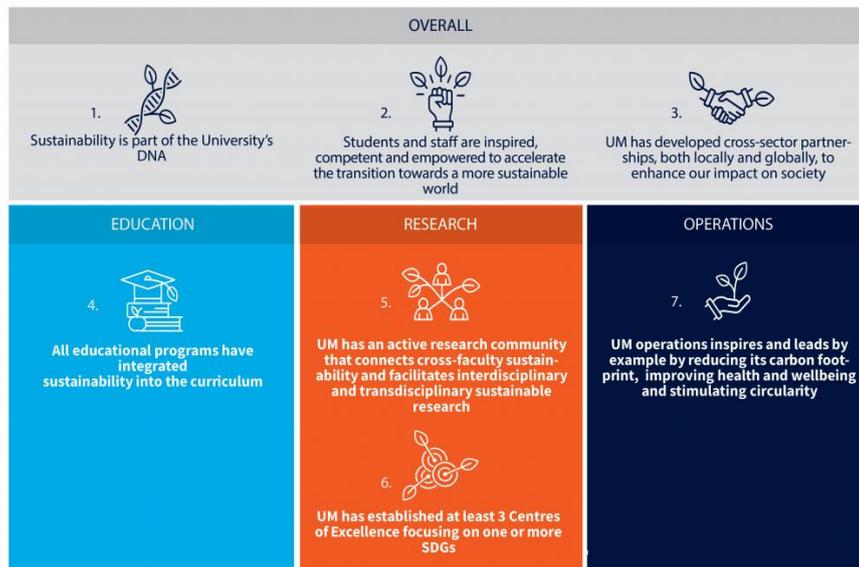


Figure 1: Ambitions Sustainable UM2030¹²

The unclear definition of sustainability at UM had already been addressed by the UM Climate Letter in April 2021.¹³ When the Climate Letter was delivered to the Executive Board, the UM community was assured that a definition of what being a sustainable institution means to UM was in the making. Only after some follow-up questions by KAN Party members in the University Council did the Executive Board provide a definition. In a letter to the University Council, sustainability was defined as contributing to all SDGs on the basis of the Brundtland report.¹⁴

Another definition for sustainability at UM is provided in the Strategic Programme published mid-2021. The document underlines UM's focus on certain SDGs, including good health and wellbeing (SDG 3), quality of education (SDG 4), climate action (SDG 13), peace, justice and strong public institutions (SDG 16)¹⁵. UM's latest attempt at defining sustainability for itself is provided in the Business Case SUM2030, which was presented in the University

¹² <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/sustainability>

¹³ <https://www.kanmaastricht.nl/um-climate-letter>

¹⁴ Letter to University Council dated 19.11.2021 C21.004554-MW - Please contact friederike.c.leppert@web.de for information on access

¹⁵ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/file/umstrategicprogramme2022-2026a4engpdf> p. 5

Council Plenary on 24 November 2021. The Business Case explain how UM seeks to embed sustainability:

In 2030, sustainability will be embedded in the DNA of the UM. Academic staff will actively integrate sustainable development into our curriculum and additional programs. We will deliver research results that will boost the development of a sustainable society and alumni who are able to act as change agents, both within their professional life and as citizens of tomorrow's society. We aim to create thought leaders, who will actively contribute to regional and global development for a sustainable world.¹⁶

Whereas this explanation outlines ambitions for certain roles more clearly than previously mentioned partly contradicting definitions, it is not actionable. The description remains vague, establishing lofty goals that are not in touch with everyday practice at UM. For example, everyday practice at UM shows that staff members do not receive sufficient support in overhauling curricula and therefore, can only engage with requests for changes in a limited way.

In addition, it often remains unclear in documents such as the Business Case SUM2030 and the Strategic Plan whether the content is envisioned, part of a plan, or already in the implementation phase. When the Business Case outlines "academic staff will actively integrate sustainable development into our curriculum (...)"¹⁷, this can be connected both to the limited extent in which staff members are already doing this and to the wider ambition of all course coordinators pursuing this plan. This intransparency about the status of sustainability efforts at UM limits the ability to assess progress and hold the SUM2030/UM accountable.

Extensive efforts were made by us to receive more clarity on UM's definition of sustainability and its roadmap for achieving it, including questions in the University Council and the collection of more than 1000 signatures by students and staff of UM with the Climate Letter. However, UM does not seem to have drawn up the clear vision that would enable an effective transformation.

¹⁶ Business Case Sustainable UM 2030 - UM's Impact on a sustainable future 2021-2026 p.2 (Version September 8, 2021) - Please contact friederike.c.leppert@web.de for information on access

¹⁷ See above

Accountability and Implementation of the Vision

Accountability and the implementation of the vision are large sources of our frustration. From our perspective, the actions that are being taken to implement UM's vision on sustainability are not sufficiently impact focussed and the progress is not systematically assessed. The SUM2030 started its work on making the university sustainable in 2017. Unfortunately, few indicators are available that would make it easy to assess the progress made. The Taskforce does not systematically report on the sustainability of UM's operations, research, and education. Whilst the University Council does receive update presentations on an irregular basis, these presentations contain a mixture of actions taken and planned without distinguishing between the two. Additionally, the information given does not seem to follow a systematic logic or clear plan that would allow UM to achieve its goal of being sustainable by 2030. Instead, it seems that the actions taken are relatively low hanging fruit. This can be seen as a good start; however, it is not sufficient for a Taskforce that has been in place for 5 years and is not in line with UM's ambition of being sustainable by 2030.

Some actions taken by the SUM2030 are not impact-oriented but rather focus on ad hoc community-oriented events. The vision to make UM sustainable includes the integration of sustainability into curricula and leadership in reducing carbon emissions. The further elaboration of these goals and the ambitions for 2026 focuses on ad hoc events and community building:

We focus on growing an active community (students, academic and non-academic staff) in which innovative ideas and initiatives are stimulated. Knowledge and solutions will be co-created in living labs or hubs, where our community works together on relevant topics.¹⁸

This focus on community building manifests itself in the key ambitions for 2026.¹⁹ A large emphasis is put on a "Market-Place" and a "SUM Portal and Platform" with a focus on creating awareness and engagement around the topic. The ambitions also include extracurricular informational activities and the facilitation of the Sustainability Hub as the space for collaboration. These actions have an unclear impact, as they are unconnected to and have no deliberate impact on the structure of the university or curricula. Furthermore, the SUM2030 has not taken up these actions consistently and followed up on them. The management of the

¹⁸ Business Case Sustainable UM 2030 - UM's Impact on a sustainable future 2021-2026 p.2 (Version September 8, 2021) - Please contact friederike.c.leppert@web.de for information on access

¹⁹ Business Case Sustainable UM 2030 - UM's Impact on a sustainable future 2021-2026 (Version September 8, 2021) - Please contact friederike.c.leppert@web.de for information on access

Sustainability Hub lies in the hands of students. The events organised on sustainability, such as workshops bringing faculty liaisons together, or sustainability week, often rely on student initiatives. While students can be enthusiastic and motivated, their expertise may be limited, their institutional influence small and their stay at the university relatively short. A vision that relies on a transient junior community of untrained volunteers is highly unlikely to achieve its goals. Furthermore, the community building focus seems like a beautiful framing for pushing work on untrained volunteers.

The impact focused actions, such as including sustainability in education and systematically mapping UM's greenhouse gas emissions, often seem to lack the support to put these complex tasks into practice. The project coordinators, who are officially not part of the taskforce, are working hard on these topics but to have a real impact, they need to have the institutional support of the Chairs, Deans of the Faculties and the Executive Board. The willingness to take up these big and transforming tasks is there. These actions are, of course, difficult to implement and may create friction and face opposition from different sides. If UM wants to achieve its own goals, more ambitious decisions need to be taken and the project coordinators need to be sufficiently supported.

The unclear defined leadership for sustainable transformation at UM makes it difficult to hold the responsible leaders accountable. The formal leadership of the SUM2030 lies with its two chairs, Peter Møllgaard and Nick Bos, and its coordinator, Anja van Bogaert. Although the roles are clearly separated in the Taskforce's scheme, no information is available on the official division of tasks and responsibilities. It is unclear how the relation between the two chairs and the coordinator is structured. The issue of unclear leadership roles and task divisions extends to the other positions in the SUM2030: the "project owners" and "coordinators".

The SUM2030's hierarchical scheme (*Figure 2*) and other documents do not clarify the difference between formal roles. The fuzzy boundaries between official roles and individuals' responsibilities do not allow people to effectively follow up on progress made. Moreover, the members of the Taskforce may find it empowering to know the detailed scope of their work and tackle challenges more effectively. Information about the scope of the Taskforce members' responsibilities should be publicly accessible and clear to all staff members.

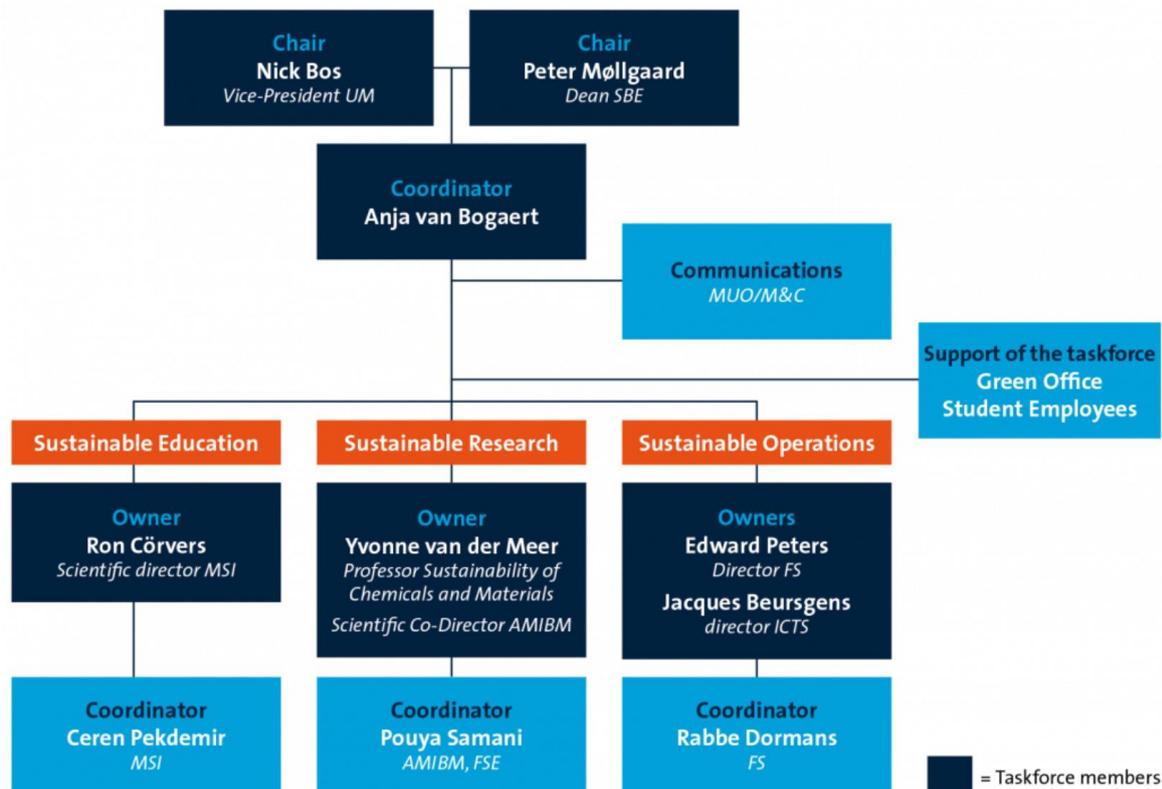


Figure 2: Structure SUM 2030²⁰

Leadership

Transforming a large, complex institution like UM in the 13 years between 2017 and 2030 requires bold leadership for sustainability. We need leaders who know their responsibilities and decision-making capabilities. We need confident leaders who take action in accordance with their role by prioritising impact-oriented interventions. We need leaders who have the time to and feel empowered to take action.

A challenge for transformative leadership at UM is the pattern those responsibilities on paper regularly do not materialise in practice. This creates a disconnect between UM's formal ambitions toward sustainability and its everyday operations. When the Taskforce's coordinator was approached about the absence of project owners in the context of a UM-wide sustainability workshop in October 2022, she stated that the owners were preoccupied with other tasks. It should be clear on paper and in practice how the project owners contribute to the SUM2030. If leadership is unassumed, it is likely others feel obligated to fill in gaps, adding to the general issue of work pressure. In another scenario, unassumed leadership results in

²⁰ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/sustainability/sustainable-um2030-programme-team>

work not getting done. Thus, formal responsibilities must materialise in practice so that UM gets the effective leadership for sustainability that it needs.

Overall, the roles of the two chairs are unclear. Moreover, it is unclear what decisions can be made independently by the Coordinator. In the SUM2030's current structure, its coordinator is the first person who is supposed to lead in the Taskforce without having another senior administrative position at the same time. As the SUM2030's only full-time employee next to the communications assistant, the Coordinator should initiate innovative steps toward a sustainable transformation at UM. In the SUM2030's hierarchical structure, the Coordinator is the Taskforce's main person equipped with the capacity to make bold, transformative decisions. However, the Coordinator's decision-making power does not seem to materialise in practice. This pattern particularly applies to interactions between Anja van Bogaert and Nick Bos, for example while organising the debate with ABP and UM on 17 February 2020. Thus, a strategic division of tasks is not recognisable in informal interactions of the SUM2030 with other stakeholders, either. This creates uncertainty not only for the Coordinator herself, but also for those who work with her. As a result, decisions are delayed, and collaboration becomes difficult. An approachable, efficient leadership requires clearly communicated and assumed responsibilities.

The Coordinator's official title and FTEs are not the only aspect indicating her leadership role. The budget of the SUM2030 suggests that UM adequately reimburses the leader of its sustainability transformation. However, the Coordinator does not initiate this transformation to the extent that her role sets out. It took three months of biweekly meetings between a KANParty representative and the Coordinator to start the SUM2030's conversations with faculties. Additionally, UM-wide workshops on sustainability connecting people across faculties were not facilitated by her. Instead, the planning and facilitation was coordinated by her intern at the time and a UM alumnus. Moreover, the SUM2030 Coordinator often does not make the decisions she is responsible for and rather opts to defer them. One example of an inappropriate deferral is her asking a member of KANParty for their definition of sustainability at UM. Ironically, KANParty was thereby approached to define sustainability at UM approximately half a year after KANParty had been promised a definition in response to the UM Climate letter. This suggests that the Coordinator's expertise does not lie in facilitating sustainable transformations. However, the SUM2030 Coordinator must be able to make transformative decisions in order for UM to reach its strategic goals.

Green Office

UM's Green Office was the first of its kind and was set up to be part of the Green Office Movement. The Green Office is a team of student employees that aim to “work on different sustainability initiatives, projects and events in collaboration with Taskforce Sustainable UM2030”.²¹ This, however, should not mean that the Green Office members act as interns to the SUM2030 Taskforce.²² The Green Office should be able to act independently of the SUM2030 Taskforce and its Coordinator and represent students on sustainability within UM.

When the SUM2030 was founded, the UM Green Office lost its independence, as it reports to the Coordinator of the SUM2030. Due to the close relation to the SUM2030 and the dependence on the approval of the SUM2030 on its actions, the Green Office is not in a position to act on sustainability and criticise UM's sustainability governance. In 2019 the Green Office members, despite their best efforts, acted more as interns for the SUM2030 than as an independent Green Office.

More information, especially on a way forward for the Green Office, can be found in Dr. Alex Baker-Friesen's PhD about sustainable transformations at universities. Most importantly, the way forward for the Green Office should be developed primarily by the Green Office with the support of UM to enable their independence.

Reliance on untrained Volunteers

Sustainability initiatives and action at UM largely depends on untrained volunteers. Volunteers are an integral part of:

- SUM2030's ties to the faculties through the faculty liaisons
- Managing the Sustainability Hub
- Green Impact

Whilst it is a strong positive feature that members of the UM Community are willing to dedicate their free time to sustainability at UM, UM's accomplishment of its strategic goals should not depend on volunteers. However, this is the case. Relying on volunteers limits the continuity and time dedicated to the matter. Moreover, UM does not offer substantial guidance

²¹ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/sustainability/green-office>

²² Rootability & Leuphana University (2017) The Green Office Model. In Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (Ed.) Establish a Platform to Invite Students, Staff and Academics to Contribute to your Institution's Sustainability Efforts (p. 46)

or training to the volunteers. Competent and paid staff working on sustainability increases the ability to reach goals in time.

The only ties of the SUM2030 to the faculties are the faculty liaisons. Although the faculties are a crucial point to the implementation of UM's vision on sustainability, the volunteers have not received sufficient training or compensation and do not receive sufficient guidance from SUM2030. Insufficient guidance and limited time available decrease the ability of the faculty liaisons to make impactful progress at their faculties. If UM is serious about being a sustainable institution, faculty liaisons need to receive training on sustainable transformation of an institution and get support in navigating the structures in the faculties. Furthermore, a timely and substantial transformation can only happen, if sufficient time and leadership support is available to drive this transformation. The current framework of the faculty liaisons is a starting point for a transition but not a tool to create the substantial change that is necessary.

Another prominent example for UM's reliance on insufficiently supported volunteers is the UM Sustainability Hub at Tapijn A. Although UM lists the Hub as a "dedicated space for collaboration"²³, the presence of the SUM2030 at the Hub and its role in the coordination of the Hub have been very limited. All of the recurring management meetings are organised by volunteering students. The volunteers at the Hub are eager to contribute to shaping the space, but their initiative is not supported with an independent budget or effective and timely communication. Due to the lack of secure funding, students used their own resources to purchase some furniture cheaply and sustainably. When the SUM2030 communicated these purchases could be reimbursed, the procedure was detached from the volunteers' practical reality and needs. Therefore, some financial burden remained for the volunteers. Whereas this may have been acceptable in a "test-run", the SUM2030 Coordinator did not indicate any intention to set up a better institutional facilitation of funding procedures.

Overall, the situation at the Sustainability Hub is discouraging volunteers because of inherent contradiction. On the one hand, volunteers are not trusted to manage their own budget or host larger events without permission. On the other hand, volunteers have been managing the building from day one and navigated emergencies by themselves. The volunteers at the Hub do appreciate the idea of collaborating with UM. However, collaboration must come with a fair agreement, part of which is mutual trust and decision-making powers which match the volunteers' responsibility in practice. UM's structural dependence on volunteers must come with adequate structural support.

²³ <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/about-um/sustainability/collaborations/sustainability-hub>

Conclusion

In this report, we have outlined our experience with working on sustainability at UM. We have shown that we do not feel like there is a clear vision and definition of sustainability. We have experienced insufficient ability to create impact-oriented action plans and are missing empowerment for a substantial transformation from leadership. This report has formulated a harsh verdict on UM's sustainability governance. These things needed to be said but UM does not have to stay this way.

Whilst we may have a ton of ideas on improving sustainability governance at UM, we believe that the improvements must come from within to create a stronger intrinsic relation to improving sustainability governance at UM. If the actors involved are not ready to embark on this journey, recommendations from other sides will never be effective enough to create the substantial change needed. Once UM leadership is ready to embark on this transition, a great community of professors, lecturers, PhD candidates, students and alumni is awaiting them to make UM sustainable, together. We have met many dedicated people, who have supported us and give us hope that this journey continues. Among them are researchers like Dr. Alex Baker-Friesen, who has written his PhD on transformation towards sustainability in universities.

For the set up and the start of a sincere process for change, we want to highlight two seemingly obvious things. First, the process should be based on scientific knowledge and expertise, which exists in the UM community. Second, open and collaborative communication is the key to succeeding in this process. In the past, communication has often been shaped by a situation in which two sides have confronted one another and we are surely guilty of contributing to that as well. With a clear backing to create change, a collaborative approach will bring UM closer to its goals with less strain on the mental health of the persons involved.

When UM organises consultations on its transformation and these consultations are supported with structural resources and political will for change, we are happy to share some of our ideas in more detail. It is noteworthy that such consultations have already occurred without the aforementioned support, for example during the two interfaculty workshops on sustainability at UM in 2021.

This report is a result of our experiences at UM and harbours many of the frustrations we have. We did not and are not losing hope thanks to the great people we have met and who have given us guidance, also on this report. UM lives and exists thanks to the passionate people working and studying here.

Annex: About the authors

The authors are two Bachelor students at UM who have focused their extracurricular activities on UM's transition to a sustainable university. Moreover, they each have two years of experience in UM's representative bodies, having been elected in 2020 and 2021 to advance sustainability at UM.

Friederike Leppert



- Chair Strategy Committee, UM University Council 2021-2022 (KANParty)
- Member Strategy Committee, UM University Council, 2020-2021 (KANParty)
- Held regular meetings with the SUM2030 Coordinator to facilitate progress and a connection to bottom-up initiatives
- Had regular contact with current and former members of sustainability initiatives, including the Green Office
- Co-authored a previous report on governance problems in the SUM2030
- Rallied the support of the UM Community on this report via the UM Climate Letter
- Repeatedly met with several SUM2030 project coordinators on their work
- Contributed to the development of new courses on sustainability in the sustainability-minor and the SUBLIM Master programme

Charlotte Lenhard



- Member Research and Education Committee, UM University Council 2021-2022 (KANParty)
- Vice-Chair FASoS Faculty Council, 2020-2021 (KANParty)
- Held regular meetings with the SUM2030 Coordinator to facilitate progress and a connection to bottom-up initiatives
- Had regular contact with current and former members of sustainability initiatives, including the Green Office
- Co-authored previous report on governance problems in the SUM2030 and rallied the support of the UM Community on this report via the UM Climate Letter
- Had a semester-long internship with the SUM2030 on developing the UM Sustainability Hub
- Started sustainability structures at FASoS and helped apply them to other faculties and was appointed FASoS liaison for sustainability by the SUM2030 in 2021
- Co-organised two workshops to create a network between students and staff working on sustainability