

Qualität in der Wissenschaft

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A case study

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Zeitschrift: Qualität in der Wissenschaft (QiW)

Jahrgang: 19 (1)

Seiten: 11-17

Verlag: UniversitätsVerlagWebler

Ort: Bielefeld

DOI: 10.53183/QiW-2025-1_11

1 | 2025

Impressum / Verlagsanschrift

UniversitätsVerlagWebler, Reepeweg 5, 33617 Bielefeld

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Der Fachverlag für Hochschultemen



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Implementing education for sustainable development collaboratively: A case study



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Universities should be role models in promoting sustainability by educating students and giving all university members opportunities for information and networking, at best including the university's external partners. This paper illustrates the setting-up of a one-week long event at the University of Applied Sciences Coburg as part of the German-wide 'Public Climate School' campaign with various (extra)curricular events. The events implemented were based on principles of Education for Sustainable Development and Sustainable Entrepreneurship Education. The aim was to involve as many internal stakeholders as possible (teaching staff, students, non-academic staff) as well as partners from the university's local environment. From the experiences and the feedback of those involved, we found that internal communication, engagement of students as well as informal events to exchange ideas and get to know local players are critical to success. We derive practical implications for universities when planning and implementing the programs.

Introduction

Modern higher education – also in the sense of providing a learning environment for implementing sustainable thinking and acting – primarily takes place through educational courses to provide students (and teaching personnel) with the necessary mindset and skills to address challenges facing society (McDonnell-Naughton/Paunescu 2022). However, in line with a modern understanding of teaching and learning, efforts should be made to reach beyond the single classroom into the higher education institution (HEI) itself and its surrounding community (Leal Filoh et al. 2023). Awareness with respect to socio-ecological innovative thinking and acting, necessary knowledge, and action potentials should be enhanced (ibid, Dryjanska et al. 2022), not least because teaching and knowledge transfer are two of the major tasks of HEIs nowadays (cf. Shahid/Alarifi 2021). This requires collaboration within a university across faculty boundaries and with the active participation of students and external partners.

The promotion of sustainable teaching and transfer at HEIs is often attributed to individuals within the organizations, which means that it is often thematically narrow and rarely systematically integrated (cf. Schmitt et al. 2024). Collaboration in the aforementioned sense is therefore likely to be an area in which HEIs have little experience. However, it is probably this type of cross-disciplinary collaboration that is important to

make the topic of sustainability more present within the organizations and should help to reach potential addressees in a broader context. Finally, also in the context of sustainable higher education institution development (regarding teaching and other tasks of HEIs), the practiced and experienced organizational culture is decisive for the extent to which sustainability is implemented and offerings are received (cf. Adams et al. 2018; Leal Filoh et al. 2025).

Education for sustainable development (ESD), i.e. in the context of this piece of work raising awareness, facilitating information and exchange, and fostering collaboration within universities as well as between universities and the local environment (e.g. Leal Filoh et al. 2024; Lopes et al. 2018), needs formats that are accessible to all university members. Therefore, extracurricular offerings should also be used and/or be linked to curriculars. This is challenging both in terms of organization and personnel resources during regular periods of teaching.

Although the annual German-wide 'Public Climate School' (PCS) campaign offers a solid starting point for focusing attention on ESD, there is little literature that helps with the practical implications of implementing formats with an impact on the entire HEI and the local environment. As a result, this paper offers a useful contribution by presenting experiences that may help other HEIs facing similar challenges. It starts with a description of *how the Public Climate School Campaign*

was implemented with students, lecturers and external partners at Coburg University of Applied Sciences (HSCO). The paper also illustrates how feedback was gathered from various contributors and target groups. Based on the experiences and feedback from participants and members of the organizing team, we share our learnings with the higher education community.

1. Public Climate School as a Learning Environment for Students and University Members – The Coburg University of Applied Sciences Approach

1.1 Responsible and involved internal and external groups

For several years HSCO has been an active member of the PCS, which is an initiative for teaching sustainability issues on any educational levels. The target of the initiative is to augment attention towards climate crises and the need of socio-ecological transformation. Teaching is therefore seen as a key promotor (publicclimateschool, n.d.). Every year, the PCS offers a week-long program with different formats such as lectures, discussion panels, or exhibitions. Every educational institution is invited to stream this program as a „consumer“ or to actively participate as a provider by offering own events. Until 2023, the events at HSCO as part of the PCS campaign were mostly independent activities by a few committed members of the university. There was a general consensus on part of the university leadership (hereinafter referred to as the „steering committee“) to make committed individuals visible, to get them to network, and thereby to create a greater awareness of the topic throughout the university. The commitment of the higher education institution's leadership is a relevant success factor despite the transfer of responsibility to students and employees. A leadership style in which topics are placed as relevant for the organization, which at the same time enables opportunities for co-creation and the transfer of responsibility to organizational members, is a relevant framework condition for sustainability-oriented organizational development in the HEI context (cf. Leal Filoh et al. 2025; Lyrtas et al. 2024). So, in 2023, it has been decided that the PCS at HSCO was carried out under the main responsibility of the university's student-led Green Office (GO). Various events provided opportunities for interaction and information (see below).

Internal, and external partners in sustainable development were involved to support the GO and to support the overall program:

- The university's vice president for sustainability and transfer, and the university's sustainability representative acted as the core advisors („steering committee“) of the GO-team.
- Members of project ERIC (a project funded by the Bavarian Ministry of Science and Arts to encourage a sustainable entrepreneurial mindset in university education offered a course as part of the so called „Studium Generale“ (a compulsory course area with elective courses).

- Teaching staff of all faculties were invited to take part, and some offered regular classes with sustainable contents for interested students.
- External partners of HSCO took part as speakers and supporters.

1.2 The program at HSCO alongside the PCS campaign

The GO-team organized an extracurricular program for three days. The activities were mainly offered during the afternoon and evening hours to avoid conflict with regular classes and working hours and to attract as many members of HSCO as possible. A wide variety of topics was provided to reach people with different interests. The aim was to show the wide range of sustainability partners in the university's environment, the different topics they are working on and to facilitate (further) networking and exchange among internal and external stakeholders. Examples of the extracurricular program were as follows:

- Sustainable development in the skilled crafts sector and career options for students (Handwerkskammer Oberfranken) – keynote and workshop on SDGs.
- Fashion and Sustainability – how to become a responsible consumer? (local sustainable fashion-shop-owner) – keynote and discussion round.
- „MEAT“ the vegans: how to plant sustainable food and create dishes. Consumer behaviour change (regional civic organization) – keynote and discussion, vegan meal.
- Market of Opportunities (MO): how to act sustainably within and outside of the university (seminar accompanying the PCS, students and lecturers of HSCO) – details see below.

19 „open lectures“ taken from faculties' regular curricular courses were available to all and included topics such as:

- „Ecosocial work & green work“ (master degree program „Social work“).
- „Sustainable investment – sustainable insurance“ (bachelor degree program „Insurance and Management“).
- „Human contribution to greenhouse emission“ (bachelor degree program „Bioanalytics“).
- „Planetary health: think global act local – the systemic view of the issue“ (master degree program „Health Promotion“).
- „Climate justice and sustainable cities“ (bachelor degree program „Architecture“).

An accompanying regular curricular course was offered within the Studium Generale program. Five bachelor students of Business Administration, Social Work and Health Promotion took part in this course, which was a part-requirement of their regular study program. Students took part in the aforementioned extracurricular program and acted as organizers of a student-led initiative, a „Market of Opportunities“ (MO-Team). This MO was planned and implemented independently in close collaboration with the GO-team. The result was an event for information, exchange and networking be-

tween university members and external partners with exhibitors from a local food sharing association, several HSCO student initiatives, the regional *Fridays for Future* initiative and a local association for sustainable consumption and lifestyle. This provided an opportunity for actively involving a group of students (in their regular studies) to assess potentials for learning and to gather feedback on the overall program.

1.3 Pedagogical and didactical goals and backgrounds

The GO-team and the MO-Team each received a financial budget with which they could create a constructive and stimulating atmosphere for the respective formats. The GO- and MO-Team each had to interact with the other and got feedback from the responsible lecturers as well as from organizational members, responsible for sustainability at the university (see above). According to didactic advice concerning Sustainable Entrepreneurship Education (SEE) and ESD (e.g. Alourzhal/Hattabou 2021; Planck et al. 2024; Rosário 2024) this was reasonable because students:

- worked in an interdisciplinary group,
- developed a solution for a challenge facing society (raising awareness of sustainable acting in private and professional life),
- drew up a joint project plan with binding milestones and responsibilities to work towards the common goal,
- set up a project on their own initiative,
- collaborated with external stakeholders in the university's immediate vicinity,
- were given a financial budget for the implementation of the project, which they had to use in a goal-oriented and responsible manner,
- had to consider the conditions for implementing the project and clarify them on their own responsibility (e.g. legal issues),
- were responsible for all internal processes, e.g. room bookings and equipment,
- were responsible for marketing issues.

As members of a University of *Applied Sciences* our aim is to raise awareness of responsible (future) professional and entrepreneurial innovative thinking. In accordance to SEE and ESD, the objective was to make participants aware of the socio-ecological challenges of our time and to identify and develop solutions, or at least to encourage a particular mindset as an important prerequisite (cf. Planck et al. 2024). It is recommended, that this should be done in close collaboration with the university's internal stakeholders as well as external partners from business, civil society, communal administration etc. in direct neighborhood of the university (Leal Filoh et al. 2023).

To inform university members, the overall program including extracurricular formats and open lectures was distributed via various media. Advertising was primarily carried out via the intranet, the university homepage and the social media channels of HSCO. At the request of the GO-team, conventional poster advertising was largely dispensed for reasons of sustainability.

2. Collecting Feedback to Evaluate and Optimize the Overall Program

The core objective was to implement a program for ESD and SEE, i.e. to engage in 'teaching practice'. Everyone involved in the implementation process contributed to this alongside their normal obligations e.g. teaching in the regular study programs. Nevertheless, we also wanted to collect feedback from those who were involved in implementing the program ('contributors') and those who were targeted ('participants'). Using individual assessments, we collected data

- on formal and organizational aspects,
- on content-related aspects of the program.
- on the perceived extent to which the program could address the goal of 'building awareness' for socio-ecological thinking and acting.
- on the aspect of possibly providing knowledge and action potentials.

This would give us the possibility to identify opportunities for improvement for further university-wide ESD contributions and the upcoming PCS campaigns at HSCO. Our aim was therefore not to carry out a scientifically-substantiated evaluation study, but to highlight useful aspects of the overall format and those that could be improved. So, we decided to manage this in a resource-efficient way alongside all our other areas of responsibility concerning the event and within our institution in general.

In the first stage, we surveyed participants of the extracurricular events using a *questionnaire* that we developed for this purpose. The results served the GO-Team and the steering committee as a point of reference for future considerations regarding appropriate events. They also gave insight into how participants' individual awareness concerning sustainability could be enhanced. Questions were aimed equally at formal-organizational aspects as well as perceived learning opportunities by participating in the events. The questionnaire contained the following partly open, partly closed questions (4-point Likert scale from agree to strongly disagree):

- In your opinion, was the timing of the events appropriate?
- Did the events increase your interest in sustainability?
- Did the events make you aware of the importance of sustainability?
- Did the events give ideas on how to make your lifestyle more sustainable?
- What channels did you use to find out about the events?
- Which additional topics related to sustainability would be interesting?
- What kind of events would appeal to you?

24 participants filled in our questionnaire, which represents around almost a fifth of the total number of participants in the various extracurricular events. 15 respondents were students, four were lecturers and five were other university members (non-academic staff). Although the HSCO has several campuses at different loca-

tions, the events all took place at the main campus. Respondents consistently stated that their courses/workplaces were at HSCO's main campus.

As a second step, we provided an *open feedback session* that took place two weeks after the end of the PCS campaign at HSCO with the students and lecturers of the MO-team as well as the GO-team. This related to the preparation and implementation of the MO and the corresponding internal collaboration. Answers to these questions were intended to help the GO-team and the steering committee to plan such events in the future and give insight into how mindset, knowledge and potentials for acting (in line with SEE and ESD and the so called 'Key Competencies for lifelong learning', EU Commission 2019, Planck et al. 2024) could be enhanced. The following key questions were generated for the moderation of the open feedback round:

- How was the collaboration within the university carried out during the planning and preparation of the MO?
- How do you think, the overall event helped you to acquire relevant knowledge on the topics of sustainability and sustainable engagement?
- How do you think, the overall event helped you to raise awareness of the topics of sustainability and sustainable engagement?
- What did you miss in the overall event regarding these points?
- What could be improved?

All five students of the course within the Studium Generale program (=MO-Team) and the two lecturers were present in the feedback discussion. Two members of the GO-team also took part. The first author of this work was present, writing a protocol.

In the third step, all involved university members (four of the five GO-team members, the two members of the steering committee as well as project ERIC-team members) came together to discuss openly how collaboration between different stakeholders within the university can be implemented as part of such events. Furthermore, whether the overall event within the framework of the PCS at HSCO could strengthen innovative thinking and acting in sustainability at the university and its environment, or whether other offerings could be better suited. Beneath the responsible university members' own impressions, the data gathered in step 1 and 2 was used for this purpose, which was subjected to a further descriptive, inductive analysis to address the issue of the low number of participants in the previous surveys. The discussion was recorded and protocolled.

We analyzed all data together inductively as a joint team of authors. Finally, we held a *triangulation discussion* with the GO-team to compare our assessments from the analysis against theirs on the positive aspects and optimization potential. We also consulted the steering committee for this reflection.

3. Future-Oriented Results or How to Elevate Sustainable Thinking and Acting in HEIs

The results of the reflection process reveal various aspects that were perceived as positive with some areas for improvement, especially in terms of formal-organizational matters and issues relating to the content of the events. The results are presented below, including examples of feedback from respondents and discussion round participants. Reference is also made to subjectively perceived learning outcomes. However, these should be understood as representing individual opinions that have not been validated by further measures.

3.1 Aspects of formalities and organizing

Students (across all feedback stages) named word-of-mouth as the most important medium for becoming aware of such events. Regarding the preparing of the events, it is of note that the German-wide PCS took place very early in the regular semester cycle. In the discussion session with the MO-course students, the lecturers and the GO-team, the following statement was made:

„[...] more time would be needed to prepare the event and to be able to advertise it more precisely“ (student during the open feedback session).

It was pointed out that giving more information about the internal and external exhibitors at the MO would have been important in this respect.

Regarding the positioning of the time slots for the events, most respondents reported that these were largely useful. Most of the survey's participants agreed.

In the final reflection discussion with the GO-team, Project ERIC members and the steering committee it became clear that the open lectures were generally poorly attended beyond the regular students. Possible reasons for this could be a general lack of interest and/or a clash with regular courses. Other members of the organization probably stayed away due to their day-to-day obligations within the institution.

During the open feedback session, the question of internal collaboration in planning, organization and implementation was also discussed among all participants. The existence of a mediating person was mentioned as a success factor for collaboration and coordination between the student groups (GO-team and MO-team). This came about by chance as a member of the GO-team was also a participant in the seminar and took on this role. During the reflection discussion, it was clearly stated that:

„[...] should no member from the Green Office participate in the accompanying seminar, a mediating person is needed between the seminar group and the GO-team in order to coordinate activities“ (student during the open feedback session).

The coordination and collaboration did primarily meet overall objectives, and the program generally ensured a sensible fit and integration of single events and to use the financial budget effectively.

The final reflection group also discussed whether the collaboration with all internal and external stakeholders ran smoothly. It was determined that, although it makes sense for those responsible to take on a dual role (e.g. as a member of the extended planning team and lecturer in the seminar group), this is not a guarantee for success. A general lack of routine in collaboration may be a hindrance. If sustainable innovations from within the university are to be truly effective, it is necessary that the common goal is equally important to all departments and must be pursued accordingly through appropriate measures.

3.2 Aspects of content and type of events

When asked which topics would be of interest to participants in relation to sustainability, feedback came from 22 respondents in the survey. Topics that were frequently mentioned were "housing", "finance and investment", "technology" and "travelling".

When asked which formats participants would like for such events, all 24 participants responded naming "workshops", "discussion rounds", "lectures" and "excursions" most often.

The triangulation discussion also revealed that, overall, workshops and discussion rounds (generally participatory, informal events) were viewed as interesting, and that target group orientation was important.

However, some students felt that there were too many hands-on elements of the events. They would have liked more theoretical foundations:

"If there had been more time, it might have been nice to have more basic knowledge [about sustainability]" (student during the open feedback session).

Nonetheless, the possibilities for information, exchange and networking via the events were considered positive: *"We got to know many new aspects and also organizations/associations that deal with the topic. Above all, the existing opportunities and organizations in the region and what you can do yourself have increased as a result of the event"* (student during the open feedback session).

The course group also saw the opportunity to come together in an informal setting as important to potentially interested participants. This may be because the events took place after regular work and study hours:

"It takes a 'catchy' action, such as free hot wine, to generate attention. Such campaigns must be strategically linked to the other campaigns [actual thematic focus]" (student during the open feedback session).

For example, a non-alcoholic hot wine bar ("one drink for free") was installed parallel to the market of opportunities to successfully receive more attention. Overall, the participants were positively surprised by the wide range of social-

ly and ecologically sustainable activities, and groups in the local vicinity of the university. Most of them were previously unaware of this. It was considered positive that, for example, people were able to linger at the MO and exchange ideas. Participatory activities involving local partners are generally regarded as a good format.

3.3 Possible outcomes for individuals (and the university)

When asked whether the participation in the single events of PCS was able to raise awareness of the importance of sustainability and sustainable engagement, almost all of the survey's 24 respondents answered "agree" and "tend to agree". Only two respondents answered, "tend to disagree" (see table 1).

When asked whether their participation in the single events of PCS increased their interest in sustainability and sustainable engagement, 22 respondents answered "agree" and "tend to agree". Only one person answered, "strongly disagree".

When asked whether their participation in the single formats of PCS was able to provide practical ideas for sustainable everyday life, most of the 21 respondents answered "agree" and "tend to agree", with only two respondents choosing the option "tend to disagree".

Tab. 1: Participants' self-reported outcomes in the extracurricular events

Item	"agree"	"tend to agree"	"tend to disagree"	"strongly disagree"
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
Did the events make you aware of the importance of sustainability?	15	7	2	-
Did the events increase your interest in sustainability?	16	6	-	1
Did the events give ideas on how to make your lifestyle more sustainable?	15	4	2	-

Note. *N*=24 participants.

Regarding the question of how students can be encouraged to actively participate via accompanying courses, (and maybe also voluntarily), it was mentioned in the further feedback sessions by students of the GO-team that the possibility of setting one's own thematic priorities seems to be important:

"As it was very open in which direction we wanted to go, you could deal with the topics that corresponded to your own area of interest" (student during the open feedback session).

There was also positive feedback from the MO-student group regarding the importance of the experience gained from participating in the PCS for their own future:

"It has contributed greatly to dealing with the topic in the future and encouraged us that sustainability should also play a role in later professional life" (student during the open feedback session).

It should be noted that during the discussions with the students of the accompanying seminar (MO-team) as well as with the students from the GO-team we noticed that they seem to gain awareness in sustainability, but mostly stated in their feedback that they perceived experiences and skills 'simply' in the course of project management and collaboration.

However, the final reflection and the triangulation discussion revealed that, overall, the interest in participating in sustainability-related activities and the personal relevance to sustainability often do not yet appear to be very pronounced among many university members. Although many lecturers opened up their regular lectures and integrated topics concerning sustainability, few internal non-academic staff and hardly any students took part alongside the regular students. An exception was the MO, which was held at a central location on the main campus and had quite an informal setting.

Summarizing the experiences, feedback from the contributors and participants and the impressions of the final triangulation meeting, three topics emerge as central:

- (1) Suitable ways of communicating such events internally must be found. This applies both to the initiation of collaboration as well as participation in the events. Different target groups should be addressed in different ways.
- (2) Student participation with responsibility (e.g. initiatives like a student-led Green Office) is fundamentally important for events aimed at (sustainable) university development. However, students should be supported by university staff and management/leadership personnel.
- (3) Events where people can informally gather information and exchange ideas on sustainability and get to know local players seem to be a popular counterbalance to 'day-to-day business' and can be successful.

4. Recommendations for HEIs that Wish to Promote Sustainable Thinking and Acting Among Their Members

Although there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach, we would recommend for HEIs a number of points:

Regarding formal-organizational aspects:

- *Lecturers and university members should be involved in the planning of such events at an early stage.* We found that many lecturers include topics relevant to the PCS in lectures, but would like to receive information early and, in some cases, receive more active support.
- *Accordingly, existing formats and structures at the university should be used as a basis.* These need to be identified beforehand. To reach as many members of the university as possible and in the interests of sustainable organizational development, it is important to look at what is already being done at the university and find out where it makes sense to collaborate.
- *Extracurricular events should be adapted to the respective student body as there are differences in the*

students' wishes and requirements. As a „commuter university“, many students are less interested in staying on campus in the evening after their regular classes. This is likely to be different at other university locations where evening events could work better. As the students at our university often had full teaching days, *the opportunities for informal get-togethers were particularly well received* (see MO). Incentives may help to convince students staying longer for getting involved.

- *A target group-specific way of reaching students and university members should be considered.* Since word-of-mouth seems to work well, we would recommend advertising formats such as the PCS directly in (larger) regular lectures, for example. Although we were able to reach several students of HSCO's faculties, these were primarily those with regular classes in the immediate vicinity of our event location (central campus). We would recommend including all university locations and campuses.

Regarding content design:

- *Students prefer topics that are close to their everyday lives and enjoy getting to know people from the university's local community.* The events should therefore provide practical everyday advice and opportunities for exchange and networking with stakeholders from the university's direct environment.
- *Activities that encourage participation and informal interaction seem to be popular.* Students would rather gather information in a more laidback atmosphere afterwards a long day with lectures. In this way, interest in the intended contents (in our case sustainability) can be aroused without participants having the feeling that topics are being forced upon them.
- *Teaching staff should provide opportunities and support to ensure that learning gains are achieved and, above all, recognized.* This may simply require more frequent and intensive reflection with the students.

To conclude: There is consensus at the level of the HSCO's steering committee to continue being part of the PCS. It is important that there is a commitment to this at the level of the higher education institutions' leadership, although realization is in the responsibility of each member of the institution and is participatory. The planning for participation in the next PCS campaigns should take place with a longer lead time. This would allow collaboratively organized events with internal and external university partners to be explored and prepared in a concentrated manner. However, we are encouraged by the feedback, especially from the students, that most of them were able to develop or strengthen positive attitudes and interest in sustainable development. With a view to the university, it was also possible to make the topic and committed stakeholders visible both internally and externally and to identify possible barriers that should be addressed in the further process of collaborating in the sense of offering suitable events on ESD.

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