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CO₂: LEBENELIXIER UND Klimakiller
Band 5, 304 Seiten, Halbleinen, farbigen, mit vielen Fotos und Abbildungen, 34,90 Euro
ISBN 978-3-86581-118-9

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OECOLOGISChe PERSPEktiven füR Wissenschaft UND Gesellschaft
ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR SCIENCE AND SOCIETY
2 | 2012
Science Meets Practice: A Winter School Offers New Perspectives

SAGUF is engaged in a winter school aimed at enabling PhD students to successfully work at the science-society interface. The winter school integrates theoretical reflection with practical experiences.

Keywords: education for sustainable development, science communication, science-society interface, transdisciplinarity

Science-society interfaces have been a central aspect in the 40 years of organisational history of the Swiss Academic Society for Environmental Research and Ecology (SAGUF), Since its foundation in 1972, SAGUF has supported exchange processes not only in the interdisciplinary field of environmental sciences, but as well with stakeholders from policy, industry and administration. The work beyond the boundaries of the academic community is challenging and needs serious attention in the training of young researchers. An annual winter school addressing this specific challenge has been developed with the help of SAGUF members.

Background and Embedding of the Winter School

The pleas for more interaction of scientists beyond science have become stronger recently and have been broadly discussed in the scientific literature (Cash et al. 2003, Ja

Es tut sich was in der Nachhaltigkeitsforschung in den deutschsprachigen Ländern – davon zeugen nicht zuletzt diese GAIA-Mitteilungsseiten: Die SAGUF stellt die PhD winter school „Science Meets Practice“ vor. Das Departement Umweltwissenschaften blickt zurück auf 25 Jahre Umweltwissenschaften an der ETH Zürich und behält dabei die Zukunft der Ausbildung im Blick. Die DGH präsentiert das Leu phana-Semester der Universität Lüneburg, in dem alle Studierenden verpflichtend das Modul „Wissenschaft trägt Verantwortung“ belegen. Das BMBF berichtet Neues aus den Forschungsprogrammen FONA (Forschung für Nachhaltigkeit) und SOF (Sozial-ökologische Forschung). Das Österreich-Konsortium eröffnet Vorschläge für die Revitalisierung der einst pionierhaften Nachhaltigkeitsforschung in Österreich. Der NaWis-Verbund berichtet aus der Initiative Transformatives Wissen schaffen, die Best-Practice-Beispielen einer transdisziplinären Nachhaltigkeitswissenschaft ein Forum bietet.
manifest in 2009. One of the aims of CCES is “to achieve a visible societal impact”. It is evident that this necessitates close interaction with society – a challenge CCES explicitly addresses by establishing “a strong wide-ranging education and outreach program”. In response, CCES initiated a new training programme for PhD students that brings together experts engaged in transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary settings as researchers and practicing intermediaries and communicators. A majority of these experts are members of SAGUF, an institution who has made major contributions to improving the science-society interface during the last decades (Stauffacher et al. 2009).

Preparation and Concept

To prepare and implement the programme, the expert team intensively worked together, extracting key content of their semester-long courses into a winter school programme spanning over two block weeks (see table for an overview of the structure and programme). Although the majority of lecturers had known each other for years, the winter school offered a nucleus for collective search process for solutions. The transition from theoretical and conceptual inputs to practical and implementation work is set out to be receptive to the ideas and motivations of the participants. The teaching arrangement is based on a partnership approach that involves changing roles: lecturers become coaching mentors; participants become active partners.

Implementation

As of today, the CCES winter school was offered twice. The first winter school 2011 was a pilot running with a group of 16 international participants from the ETH Domain as well as from Swiss, German, and Austrian universities, and has been evaluated as highly successful, while showing room for improvement. The comprehen-
Doubts remained with the participants whether the investment in the processes of creating, organising and managing the science-society interface may indeed jeopardise their individual academic careers. A critical reflection on the roles of science and scientists is certainly necessary here. The lecturing team is convinced that the skills and competences taught – spanning from communication to collaboration – are essential for societally relevant sustainability research. This reflects a shared mindset among the lecturing team, a majority of whom can draw on and benefit from the competence developed over many years from interacting within and inspired by the activities of SAGUF.

Conclusion and Outlook

The past two winter schools have been both challenging and rewarding for the lecturing and coaching team. Challenging, because the institutional and disciplinary backgrounds of students were highly diverse; rewarding, because exactly this enabled an intensive and educational exchange of views and perspectives. The open-minded and mutual respect of all individuals involved made such interactions highly rewarding (see Zingerli et al. 2009).

Decisive for success was a core team of experienced lecturers who know and trust each other; a dedicated person to coordinate, coach and guide the students throughout the programme; a supportive advisory board with key faculty from the ETH Domain; a well-equipped and nicely located seminar place outside the regular university setting; an existing network of stakeholders; and last but not least groups of highly motivated PhD students and Postdocs with various backgrounds.

The winter school will be offered again in 2013. 2 This continuity will contribute to the education of a new generation of researchers informed about the functions of the science-society interface, existing communication and interaction tools, and committed to integrate societal perspectives into their scientific work. From SAGUF’s point of view this is a promising achievement – institutionalising science-society interfaces as an important element in research related to sustainable development.

References


2 www.cces.ethz.ch/winterschool