

Co-creative and transformative learning environment: “I-week on Sustainability” international conference for Bachelor students

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We would like to share the story of our course “I-week on Sustainability” and at the same time look out for partners and feedback from others on how to improve the i-week formula. I-week was set up to offer bachelor students in business economics a first experience with the theme of sustainability while at the same time developing intercultural competences and personal orientation. Over the years, we have transformed this one week course into an international conference with students and speakers from 5 different continents.

The I-week takes place in a hybrid learning environment: it can be followed online, in class or both. All sessions are livestreamed for all international students to follow at home using the Blackboard Collaborate platform. In the March 2022 edition, 157 students from UAntwerp followed the course and 101 international students from partner universities across 5 different continents joined them.

We explicitly aim for Bachelor students for which this is their first extended contact with the theme of sustainability. Speakers are a mix of academics, practitioners and NGO’s coming from the different continents and the aim is to diversify the view on sustainability but we do retain a business orientation (students are almost always business students).

Our second goal is the development of intercultural skills. We organise a cultural mix and match where students can digitally meet the other students participating in the I-week. As we yearly welcome about 30 different nationalities, the digital mix and match gives them the opportunity to foster an international exchange of ideas and get in touch with each other in an informal way.

A third perspective is that of personal development around sustainability. This is done through active tasks like a group competition on living more sustainable (food habits, cloths, etc.) and contributing to a circular economy (e.g. collecting phones). A personal reflection on sustainability, is also part of the task and should support attitude formation around sustainability.

Students are divided in international groups of 5 to 6 students to work on a paper and a connected ‘pitch’ presentation. During the week, dedicated timeslots are foreseen to work on this group assignment and frequent feedback moments with each group are planned. To guide the students even more, short tutor sessions on creativity, writing a paper and giving a pitch are given during the week. We also evaluate students individually, by letting them make a vlog or blog inspired by one or more of the sessions and we have an individual test.

The i-week is a very intensive week for the students as well as the team. The intensity is an explicit target and heightens the chance that this becomes a transformative experience. It is also quite intense for the team running the conference and there are a number of issues we struggle with. This course demands extensive support by a diverse team and is in this sense quite costly. Cost is reduced by inviting colleagues from other participating universities to help us steer and evaluate the student groups. This reduces the cost but mainly adds to the cultural mix as well as the diversification of views on sustainability. Yet at the same time we feel the need for a core perspective on sustainability in order to maintain a comparable evaluation framework. Content wise this poses the dilemma of ethical imperialism versus ethical relativism.

A second problem is that the intensity of the course is often a challenge for students who are not familiar with the formula and exhausted by the end of the week. This can weigh on the reception of the different contributions and even provoke a counterreaction in their personal blogs and vlogs.

We would like to ask for feedback and suggestions on our setup, look for dimensions that are missing, and discuss possible extension of this course with additional partners.