Promising practice:

University: Wageningen University

Academic discipline: All departments at Wageningen University: Social Sciences, Plant Sciences, Agrotechnology and Food Sciences, Environmental Sciences, Animal Sciences

Course title: Academic Consultancy Training

Course description:

The Academic Consultancy Training (ACT) course is a 9 ECTS course, spread within 8 weeks. During this course students work in teams on a "real world" multi-disciplinary project for an external client or comissioner. The ACT course engages about 900 MSc students each year, executing about 150 projects for external commissioners such as CSOs, governmental organizations, businesses, etc. Projects deal with a range of challenges related to Wageningen University's areas of research, such as food, circular economy, liveable metropolis, well-being, clean water and biodiversity. Projects that deal with entrepreneurship get the label "Entrepreneurial ACT" (E-ACT projects), and projects that deal with sustainability transitions get the label "Sustainability ACT"(S-ACT projects). The external commissioners have a query or face a problem in relation those range of challenges. The ACT team of students tackle it and provide a scientifically sound and practically relevant consultancy advice to their commissioners. This may entail advice about the design of new technologies, a policy, a business strategy, a communication plan, etc. It is crucial that ACT teams reach an interdisciplinary synthesis of the compiled information and translate this into an advice on future actions for their client.

The students starting ACT should have successfully completed at least 24 credits of MSc-level courses in order to have the competencies needed for the ACT course. Since students differ in disciplinary backgrounds and interests, the course offers a large variety of multi-disciplinary projects for which the students can apply. Teams of four to seven students are assigned to a project. These ACT teams are composed on the basis of required disciplinary mix for the execution of the project and the interests students have expressed in an application letter to the course coordinator. In their application letter, students indicate what their disciplinary knowledge will add to the execution of the project. Each ACT team has an assigned process coach, who coaches the team throughout the project execution, especially in terms of personal and professional competencies and team development. Each team also has an assigned content advisor, who provides scientific advice with regard to the content of the multi-disciplinary project they are working on. The team follows various workshops supporting project development and execution, including workshops about "project proposal writing", "communication and personal development", "methods of social research" etc.

Alongside this, students can follow a Modular Skills (MOS) course of their choice for a total of 3 ECTS. Depending on the skills ones wants to deepen and on the project assigned, a selection of an appropriate MOS course can be made. Examples of MOS courses are: "Pursing and realizing interpreneurial projects" (see: https://ssc.wur.nl/Schedule/Course/ECS-66700) and "Supporting and understanding sustainability transitions" (see: https://ssc.wur.nl/Schedule/Course/ECS-66700). Other possible MOS courses are Management skills, Negotiation skills, Consultancy skills, Career Development and Planning, and many others.

Some course activities and characteristics

Team meetings: During the course, teams have formal meetings, which the process coach regularly attends. With the assistance of the coach, students regularly reflect on the functioning of the team and of individual members.

Assigned team functions: Prior to starting, the students will be assigned functions with a clear task description: team manager, secretary, financial controller, member.

Meetings with commissioner: Students organize and prepare meetings with the commissioner. During at least one the coach will be present as observer.

Work plan: Teams prepare a project plan, a first concept is discussed with a project planning expert. Work plans should address the mission/vision of the team, specific consultancy research questions, the working plan, the stakeholder analysis, go/no-go decisions and involved risks. The draft plan is further assessed by the commissioner and the assigned advisor before a final plan is made. When needed, the team will negotiate with the commissioner in order to meet commissioner wishes, academic standards and project risks. During project execution the team checks the work-plan and negotiates adjustments when and if needed.

Project execution: During project execution a certain division of tasks is needed, yet the team should not start to work as a task group, with only one or two persons working on the integration of elements. Interdisciplinary requires that all members actively work on synthesis and participate in the formulation of the final product and recommendations to the client.

Project deliverables: All groups deliver an oral presentation, in English, to their commissioner, peers and coaches involved in the ACT. Further deliverables for each project are defined in the work-plan in interaction with the commissioner and the content and process coach.

Individual assignments: Students compile a (self) assessment dossier. This includes: the application letter, expectation paper, reflection forms, mid-term reflection paper and final reflection paper. The reflection papers are meant to foster reflexivity about learning goals, personal development, team dynamics, individual and team communication skills, etc. During the starting, mid-term and final interviews the coaches give feedback on the dossier. Elements of this dossier are discussed during group meetings.

Learning outcomes:

After this course students are expected to be able to:
- determine, with a team and in interaction with a client, the goals of a project and formulate tasks and a project plan on the basis of their disciplinary knowledge and general academic skills and attitude;
- adjust, with their team and in interaction with the client, the formulated project goals and plan if and when necessary;
- defend and sell their viewpoints and conclusions in a professional, representative and academically correct way;
- contribute at an academic level to the execution of an interdisciplinary project both in terms of process and content related to their own disciplinary training, by gathering, selecting and analysing information and integrating this into project deliverables;
- implement reflective learning by an assessment of their personal functioning in, and contribution to, a professional team and reflection on this in writing and during an assessment interview;
- assess the contribution of other team members and other stakeholders on team functioning and execution of project tasks, and appropriately reflect on these and give feedback in writing and verbally.

How students' learning is assessed:

The final mark is calculated as follows:
- project proposal: 15% (of which 50% coach and 50% proposal writing teacher);
- product: 42.5% (of which 50% assigned expert, 25% coach and 25% commissioner);
- team process: 10% (100% coach);
- individual process: 32.5% (of which 50% coach and 50% mutual assessment team);
All parts: written self-assessment, project proposal, product, team process and individual process, have to be sufficient (5.5 at least) to pass the course.

How students learn with civil society organisations through this course:

In this course students get the possibility to work in a team on a 'real world' project for an external client. Students execute a project for their client. Those clients can be businesses, community organisations, research centres, shops, freelancers etc. The course builds no long term relationships with the commissioners and the cases are idenfitied by Education Project Services Wageningen University or the Wageningen UR Science shop.

How students learn about dimensions of RRI through this course:

Anticipation*:* for example future oriented creative and critical thinking, forecasting: The ACT team are working on a real life problem of a commissioner. In their final advice they need to consider the future orientation of the project and anticipate possible challenges, etc. However they may not be be asked to include in this future perspective the sustainable issues of society at large

Reflexivity: for example context awareness, perspective taking ability, reflexivity leadership, critical thinking: Students are asked to take the context of the project and the perspective of the commissioner in consideration In this course ACT teams are assigned a coach to critically reflect on personal competencies like self-reflection, personal team functioning, accepting and using feedback, commitment, communication, flexibility, innovativeness/creativity and independence. Although teams are mean to address the query as asked by the commissioner, they may also want to challenge the commissioner and encourage reflexivity about the specific query posed.

Inclusiveness: for example nurturing diversity, multi-disciplinary collaboration, multi-perspective communication, building partnership. The ACT team work within a multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary context. The team need to build a partnership with the commissioner. It depends on the commissioner and the problem if the students need to adapt a participatory approach in the execution of the project.

Responsiveness: the ACT team are meant to provide a response to a challenge posed by the commissioner. Besides this, wether this dimension is included depends on the project and the context. In general however, given the short time of the course, aspects related to flexible design, monitoring and evaluation, etc. are not much integrated. In some cases students are asked to deal with wicked problems.

RRI keys integrated in the course:

The RRI keys are not explicitly and formally integrated in the whole ACT course. It depends on the topic of the project and the background of the team members working on the project to what extent the students come across those keys. For example the key "Sustainability" is well integrated in the ACT course, for all those ACT projects that deal with sustainability and when students follow the MOS course "Supporting and understanding sustainability transitions "

RRI process requirements integrated in the course:

Anticipation; Reflexivity; Inclusion; Responsiveness

Further information:

ACT presents some aspects connected to RRI and has the potential to train students on RRI but at this moment this is not a learning goal. To integrate RRI further within the ACT course we need to have projects with an RRI component and train students on RRI competencies (through for example an appropriate Modular Skills Training course on RRI). A first attempt in this direction has been made in Nov.-Dec. 2015 for the first time, by including RRI competencies training within the Modular Skills training course "Supporting and Understanding Sustainabilty Transitions" which is followed by ACT students that participate to an ACT project dealing with sustainability (an S-ACT project)

Staff at WU should be trained in RRI competencies, if we want to train our students on this topic. For example if a lecturer/advisor/coach does not know how to approach a wicked problem, then it is difficult to expect students to be able to do it.

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