Out of the Box

The University of Vechta is a young, modern campus university with excellent conditions for studying and a clearly delineated profile. For the about 5000 students and 400-odd staff, the campus offers a familial atmosphere conveniently coupled with the infrastructure of a modern university. The Bologna Process has been fully implemented, with the emphasis on quality – attractive, forward-looking courses, personal support and global exchange programs are the hallmarks of a high quality degree program.

The University of Vechta has set out to present a clear profile to the business, social and cultural world. The region Weser-Ems in northwest Germany, where the University of Vechta is located, offers the perfect laboratory for addressing a range of issues impacting on the future viability of our global society – an economic boom region in the heart of the countryside, a provincial global player, a unique cultural and social identity, natural spaces and intensive agriculture; contrasting factors which resolve into an excellent quality of life. The University of Vechta’s development plan defines the rural space as a framework for profiling the areas of education, aging, social services, cultural change and regional development. The choice of focus represents a conscious response to the University’s location, which delineates it from urban spaces and creates additional research prospects, including at the international level.

Across the various life stages, issues pertaining to the future of society – education, aging and cultural change – are key areas of academic discourse. The profile is rounded off by gender studies and business ethics, generating further cross-faculty learning and research opportunities. By adopting this strategic orientation, the University of Vechta has deliberately chosen to strike out in new directions, which, in both the research and teaching spheres, provide space for an intensive exploration of the political, social and individual challenges confronting people and society in the 21st century.

Open access to science – the idea of participatory science is the focus of activity at the “Science Shop Vechta/Cloppenburg”. The Science Shop Vechta/Cloppenburg is a service facility that shows the public engagement of the University of Vechta in the region Weser-Ems in northwest Germany.

The “Science Shop Vechta/Cloppenburg” considers itself as a hub between population and science that is always close to citizens, companies, local communi...
ties, organizations and associations. Basically, knowledge and education shall be made accessible for those people who usually do not have a possibility or direct connection with these topics. Everybody is supposed to be able to co-create science.

Science does not only take place in isolated laboratories or behind university walls. Every citizen can become an expert, contribute to new findings, and therefore make a contribution to society. The work of the “Science Shop Vechta/Cloppenburg” is designed to be participatory. The inclusive and integrative approach at the Science Shop emphasizes a concept of science that is wide and construed for society.

The first CBR course was offered in the summer term of 2016. One module on CBR is offered in the general studies area (the out of the box course), some other courses are offered in individual subjects, but not fixed through curricula. “Out of the box – participatory research with people from the region” is paid by funds of the University of Vechta.

Training in CBR

The course “Über den Tellerrand – Partizipative Forschung mit Menschen aus der Region” (engl: Out of the box – participatory research with people from the region) focusses on participatory research projects in student groups with regional actors. The course is open to all students from different study programmes and with different disciplinary backgrounds, as it belongs to the special profile module/key competence module (General Studies) and is transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary.

The teaching of the courses followed the philosophy of competence orientation, self-responsibility of the students, and learning and researching together with regional partners. The teachers acted as learning guides and used a constructivist understanding of teaching and learning. The course equates 6 Credit Points and 4 hours in classroom per week.

An examination of essential approaches and concepts of transdisciplinarity and „Responsible Research and Innovation“ as well as participatory research and action fields (science shops, community-based research, etc.) take place. The topics of participation and Citizen Science are processed in a way that is relevant to practice. In student projects, the theoretical knowledge gained in relation to research processes is deepened. Against the background of the developed theories and concepts, participatory research projects are developed and implemented by the students together with regional partners (e.g. CSOs, social businesses, community partners).

Learners and trainers profiles

Learner profiles:

The target audience is undergraduates, but also some Master students attend the course. Since it is part of the special profile module/key competence module (General Studies) which makes it transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary, there are no fixed students’ profiles. Most of them complete the course as part of their Bachelors in higher semesters. Some already have knowledge in research, others don’t.
Teachers:
Prof. Dr. Marco Rieckmann, University of Vechta: Professor of Higher Education Development with focus on key competencies, education for sustainable development/global education, and competence development.
Karin Bokop, University of Vechta: Science Shop Vechta/Cloppenburg, EnRRICH-Project, Responsible Research and Innovation, CBR

Capacity building

The students gain...

• basic knowledge of transdisciplinary research approaches.
• basic knowledge of community-based research, participatory research methods and science shop work.
• basic understanding of the concept „Responsible Research and Innovation“.
• understanding of „experts“ and the role of researchers in participatory/collaborative research processes.
• understanding of the relevance of research in society and the potential impact of research on individuals, groups and society as a whole.
• skills to develop their own research projects, together with civil society and other business partners (scientific and practical research questions, research design, data collection and analysis).
• understanding and ability to reflect on the role of university in society and the integration of practice partners (civil society, associations, etc.) in research.
• Students will be able to...
• describe the concept Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI).
• describe transdisciplinary research approaches.
• develop complex real-world issues and be able to recognize and understand relationships and deal with contradictions and uncertainty.
• work with practice partners and students of different subjects and disciplinary perspectives, and relate to each other.
• apply acquired theoretical knowledge in scientific and practical contexts in projects.
• reflect, analyse and solve problems.
• coordinate a team with external partners.
• be responsible for subtasks and merge them to a complete task.
• structure results of their work and present them.
• take part in discussions about values and social responsibility.
• reflect critically on theories, opinions and practice.
• reflect critically on their own values, perceptions and actions.

Conclusions and Future actions

The difficulty of participatory research from the students’ side is not the research itself, but how to communicate with people outside the university and how to design participatory research. Each group is different and so is each partner from practice. It is also important to be open to the students about the workload from the start of the course. It is quite an intensive module compared to others and it should be assured, that the students know what they sign up for before they meet the partners from practice for the first time. The expectations of the partners have to be limited by the lecturer, since most of the students are still undergraduates and are not really experienced with doing research. The participating students are highly motivated to work in their research projects since the research, they provide, is not just something to gather credit points but it will be useful for the partners from practice, who really need and want answers to the research questions. This is a huge motivation for the students. The fact that they are quite free in designing the research process themselves – of course in agreement with the partners - works also quite well and most of the results were satisfying for the partners.

The future plan of our institution is to continue with the module on CBPR and include different partners and different research topics to offer a greater variety for the students to choose from.

Colophon / Contact

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