

Abbreviated Version

Sustainable Development in Economic Sciences

Topics, Learning Methods and Competencies
in Degree Courses at Swiss Universities

Swiss universities are bound by the principles of sustainability. They promote sustainability-relevant topics in teaching and research and the transfer of this knowledge to the public. In their operations, they strive to deal responsibly with the ecological and social environment.

(Message on the promotion of education, research and innovation 2017–2020, Swiss Federal Council 2016)

Conclusion from WWF's Point of View

Sustainable Development is far from being adequately integrated into all Swiss economic science degree courses. This conclusion can be clearly drawn from the results of the survey:

- By no means are all sustainability topics covered that are relevant to a field of study.
- The partly complex topics are usually only discussed briefly (1-6 hours).
- Which topics are dealt with in compulsory and which in elective courses is rather random.
- Practice-oriented learning methods are used to a rather limited extent, especially at universities and in economics degree courses.
- The learning methods most closely linked to the practice (*Problem Based Learning, Project Based Learning, Action Learning, Service Learning*) are rarely applied.
- Although in most of degree courses design skills are promoted, there are considerable differences in some cases regarding the field of study, university type and language region.

The many individual results make the hypothesis appear very plausible that there are hardly any strategies and concepts for the targeted integration of Sustainable Development for economic science courses in Switzerland.

Starting Point and Goal

Transformation to a sustainable economy is indispensable for Sustainable Development. Research and probably even more teaching in economic sciences could and should make an important contribution to this transformation – and for the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, both on a business and economic level. Because the topics, contents and learning methods shape the thinking and actions of the students – the future specialists and managers in business, administration and politics.

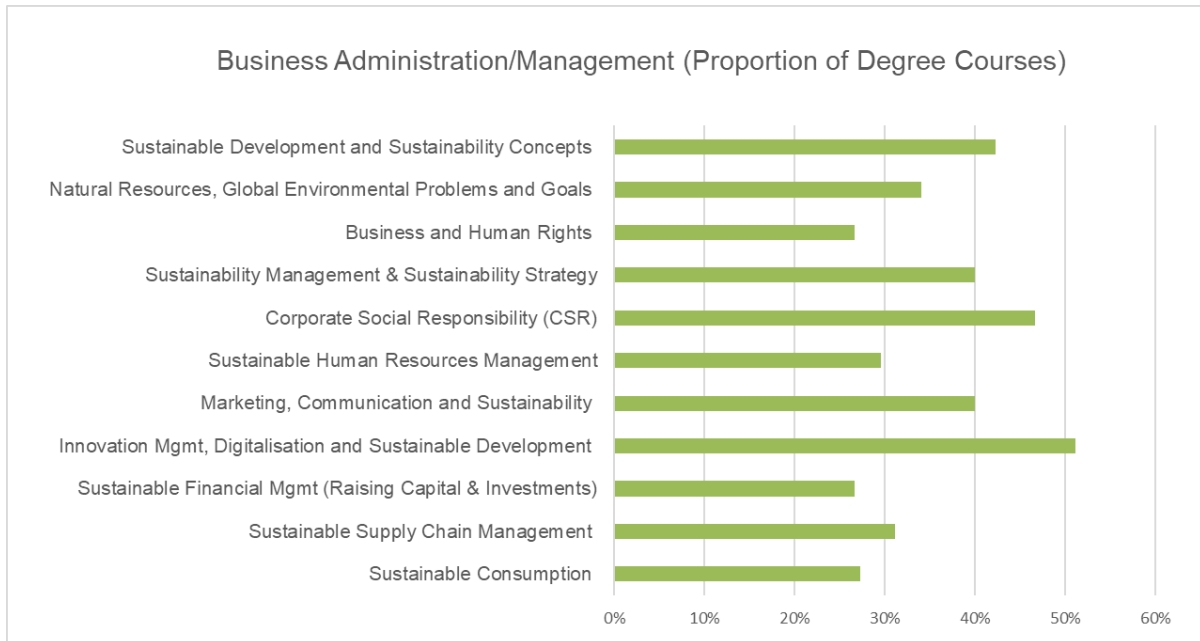
The aim of the survey was to obtain information on how Sustainable Development is anchored in economic science degree courses at Swiss universities, particularly on:

- Topics of Sustainable Development
- Practice-oriented learning methods
- "Gestaltungskompetenzen" (shaping competencies for Sustainable Development)

Of the 98 bachelor's and master's degree courses at all recognised universities and universities of applied sciences in Switzerland, the online survey was completed for 82.

Results

Topics in compulsory courses: The topics of Sustainable Development are dealt with in very different depth – both regarding the individual topics and the fields of study. Rather extensively dealt with (>6h/topic) are the sustainability topics at VWL and Banking&Finance in an average of 11% of the degree courses, at business administration in an average of 36% and at business administration/economics combination in an average of 47% of the degree courses. On average, 3.9 topics per degree course are dealt with rather extensively in business administration.

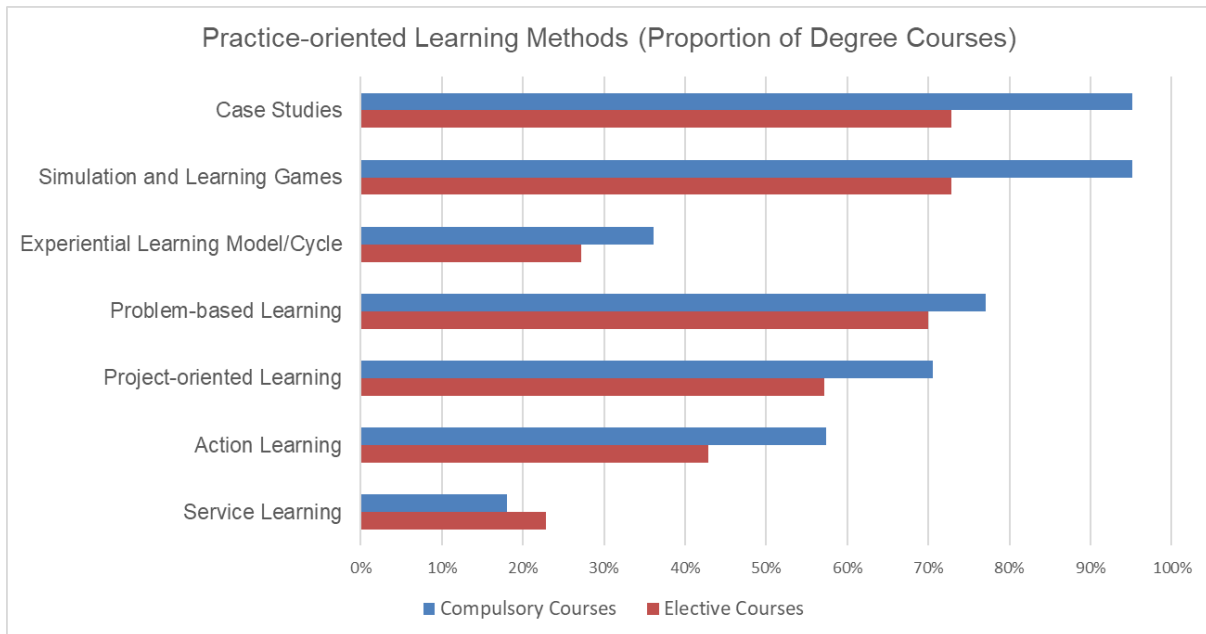


The topics covered in most business administration courses are *Sustainable Development and Sustainability Concepts*; *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)* as well as *Innovation Management, Digitisation and Sustainable Development*. The least frequently treated are *Sustainable Consumption*, *Sustainable Financial Management*, and *Business and Human Rights*.

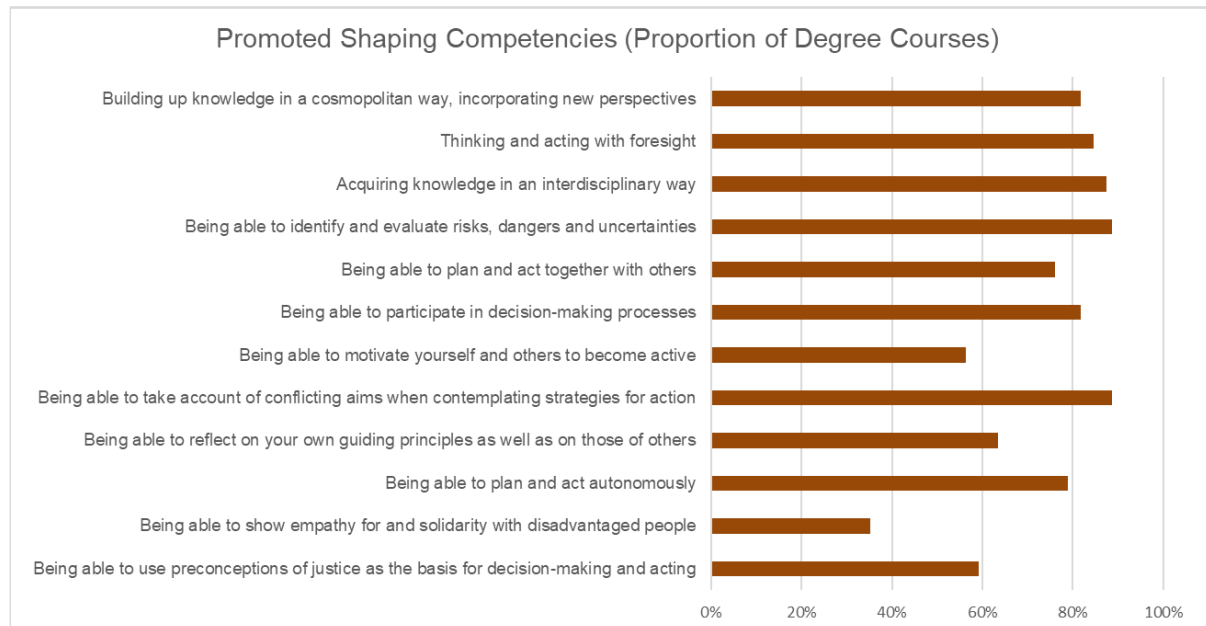
Topics in elective courses: The topics covered in most of business administration courses are *Sustainable Development and Sustainability Concepts*, *Sustainability Management & Strategy*, *Corporate social Responsibility (CSR)* as well as *Innovation Management, Digitisation and Sustainable Development*. *Sustainable Human Resources Management* is treated the least often. In comparison, a smaller proportion of possible topics are dealt with in electives in Banking & Finance degree courses than in other fields of study.

Practice-oriented learning methods: On average, practice-oriented learning methods are applied to Sustainable Development topics in 39% of the time.

On average, the individual practice-oriented learning methods are applied in compulsory courses in 64% and in the the elective courses in 52% of the degree courses. All the surveyed learning methods are used in the compulsory courses in a larger proportion than in the elective courses - except for Service Learning, which is used in elective courses with a slightly larger proportion.



“Gestaltungskompetenzen“ (shaping competencies for Sustainable Development): On average, the surveyed individual design competencies were promoted in 73% of the degree courses. With almost 90% of the degree courses, the most frequently promoted are "Being able to identify and evaluate risks, dangers and uncertainties" and "Being able to take account of conflicting aims when contemplating strategies for action". "Being able to show empathy for and solidarity with disadvantaged people" is the least frequently promoted with only 35% of the degree courses.



University types: For all business administration topics, the proportion of sustainability topics treated rather extensively at universities of applied sciences (on average 43% of courses) is larger than for universities (on average 24% of courses).

All practice-oriented learning methods surveyed are used at universities of applied sciences for a larger proportion of degree courses (72% on average) than at universities (55% on average).

All the “Gestaltungskompetenzen” (action skills for Sustainable Development) surveyed are promoted at universities of applied sciences (on average 77%) in a slightly larger proportion of degree programmes than at universities (on average 71%).

Bachelor vs Master: In business administration, the individual topics dealt with rather extensively are on average at Bachelor level in 40% of degree courses and at Master level in 33%.

All the practice-oriented learning methods surveyed are applied to a slightly larger proportion of Bachelor's programmes (71% on average) than to Master's programmes (60% on average).

The differences in the design competencies supported are small and only slightly in favour of the Bachelor's degree courses (on average 75% and 73% of the degree courses respectively).

Fields of Study: In business administration courses (46%) the proportion of practice-oriented learning methods is twice as high as in economics courses (23%). The other fields of study lie in between: Business Administration/economics combination (28%) and Banking&Finance (36%).

The proportion of business administration courses with practice-oriented learning methods (69% on average) is slightly higher than that of other courses (56% on average). There are major differences in the *Experience-Based Learning Cycle*, *Action Learning* and *Service Learning*.

All design skills are promoted in a larger proportion of business administration courses (79% on average) than in the sum of other courses of study (66% on average); only in "*being able to plan and act together with others*" there is hardly any difference.

Language regions: In German-speaking Switzerland, the individual business administration topics are on average in 42% of the study courses dealt with rather extensively, in Latin-speaking Switzerland in an average of 22% of the courses. For all subjects, the proportion of degree courses with topics dealt with rather extensively is higher in German-speaking Switzerland than in Latin-speaking Switzerland.

Practice-oriented learning methods are used longer in German-speaking Switzerland (43% of the time on average) than in Latin-speaking Switzerland (33% of the time on average).

All practice-oriented learning methods surveyed are used more often in German-speaking Switzerland (average 64%) than in Latin-speaking Switzerland (average 44%).

In German-speaking Switzerland, the individual design skills are promoted in a larger proportion of degree courses (81% on average) than in Latin Switzerland (60% on average) - although there is hardly any difference in "*Being able to reflect on your own guiding principles as well as on those of others*".

Recommendations

For teaching in economic science to make in the future an important contribution to the transformation towards a sustainable economy, it is recommended that clear strategies and effective concepts for the integration of sustainability are developed for the degree courses. The following recommendations are derived from the survey results for the individual aspects:

- All students receive a sound introduction to *Sustainable Development and Sustainability Concepts* as well as to *Natural Resources, Global Environmental Problems and Goals*.
- All topics of Sustainable Development relevant to a field of study are covered in the degree courses - with the importance and complexity of an appropriate amount of time - i.e. in most cases significantly longer.
- Topics that are only relevant for some of the students are dealt with in more detail in elective courses.
- Practice-oriented learning methods are used on a larger time scale, especially those with intensive practical relevance (*Problem Based Learning, Project Based Learning, Action Learning, Service Learning*).
- Design competencies are promoted in all fields of study and types of higher education institutions. More intensive efforts are generally being made to develop the competencies around *empathy and solidarity, reflecting guiding principles and motivating people to become active*.

Recommendations for the individual **fields of study**:



- In business administration, all students deal in depth with the subject of *Sustainability management & Sustainability Strategy*. The topics *Sustainable Financial Management*, *Sustainable Value Chains*, *Sustainable Consumption* as well as *Business and Human Rights* are dealt with rather intensively.
- In economics all students are provided with a sound introduction to Sustainable Economy. In addition, the topics of *Transformation to a Sustainable Economy* and *Sustainable Finance* will be strengthened.
- In the Banking&Finance courses, all students acquire a deeper understanding of *Sustainable Finance*. In addition, *Sustainable and Responsible Investment (SRI)*, *Sustainability Performance Evaluation of Organisations* and *Microfinance* will be discussed more intensively.

Impressum



Suggested citation: WWF Switzerland (2018): Sustainable Development in Economic Sciences. Topics, Learning Methods and Competencies in Degree Courses at Swiss universities (Abbreviated version)

Evaluation and report: Simon Zysset, WWF Switzerland
Data collection and support for evaluation and report: Rolf Arnold, WWF Switzerland

Report online available at:

-  www.wwf.ch/wirtschaftswissenschaften (Abbreviated version)
-  www.wwf.ch/wirtschaftswissenschaften-bericht
-  www.wwf.ch/sciences-economiques
-  www.wwf.ch/economic-sciences

Study Guide online available at:

-  www.wwf.ch/studienratgeber
-  www.wwf.ch/guide-etudiant
-  www.wwf.ch/study-guide

30. June 2018

WWF Switzerland

Hohlstrasse 110
Postfach
8010 Zurich

Tel.: +41 (0) 44 297 21 21
Fax: +41 (0) 44 297 21 00
www.wwf.ch/kontakt
www.wwf.ch
Donations: PC 80-470-3

