



Documentation of the results of the symposium "Shaping change: Anchoring sustainability in continuing education institutions" on 27 March 2025 at Martinsclub Bremen

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Sustainability in continuing education institutions was the topic of discussion at Bremen's Martinsclub on 27 March 2025. Organised by the European Agenda for Adult Education together with the Department of Continuing Education of the Senator for Children and Education in Bremen, the symposium for employees in continuing education took a comprehensive look at the topic of sustainability - from internal change processes and approaches to communicating sustainable action to the tension between digitalisation and sustainability. The central question of the event was how to equip adult education institutions for sustainability and successfully integrate the topic into their organizational structures.



Dr Antje Brock, who advises the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the National Platform for Education for Sustainable Development (NP ESD) on behalf of the Institute Futur at Freie Universität Berlin, presented new insights on the Whole Institution Approach (WIA) in adult education in a keynote speech. Given the „global situation“, she

began by emphasizing why it is important to advocate for sustainability, especially in times of multiple crises, and what motivates people to develop the relevant competencies. Brock said: "There are no rational processes without emotions playing a role. Even the most abstract facts trigger emotional impulses in us. In this sense, emotions always matter, especially when it comes to sustainability."

Brock emphasised that this was also crucial for the question of how to implement ESD. She drew a line from global inequalities and a society increasingly weary of change to the particular challenges for educational work, particularly in adult education. There is

often a danger of procrastination here, following the mindset: the younger generation will sort it out somehow. This is fatal, as the people who are already responsible today have different scopes for action than the younger generation. Therefore, it is crucial to raise awareness of sustainability within adult and continuing education institutions – not just as an individual concern, but a part of a collective agenda. A 2024 United Nations (UN) survey showed that around two thirds of the 75,000 people surveyed in 77 countries were very concerned about the effects of climate change on the next generation. This indicates a strong awareness of the problem, but that it is difficult to motivate people to take action.

Creating access and trust

An important aspect in this context is access to options. Brock emphasised: "We need to meet people where they are and build trust to make it possible on changing things." With this in mind, she also confronted the participants at the symposium to reflect on whether the programmes offered by the respective institutions contribute to these goals and what role the learning environment plays in that regard. After all, ESD can only be successful if learners are positively empowered in their actions. The learning environment plays a crucial role here, as it creates incentives for sustainable action.

This is where Brock built the bridge to the Whole Institution Approach and its holistic approach. The aim of the WIA is to consider the various aspects of sustainability within the context of the entire organisation: from resource management and procurement of materials and food to the design of buildings. It is about showcasing good examples of how sustainability is practised within an institution and about communicating this internally and externally. A central issue in this context is also how much the commitment to sustainability is valued and supported by the leadership. As part of the International ESD Alliances (see page 5) - which were also represented at the project market during the event - the content of the WIA for adult education was broken down into four areas of work: the organisational structure, the teaching and work environment, the educational programme and engagement in networks.

In principle, according to Brock, the WIA can be applied in any institution. It has been proven that where sustainability is implemented in a holistic manner and in line with the approach, both teachers and learners are significantly more motivated. A commitment to sustainability contributes to the well-being and motivation of all those involved. It is advisable to take a target-group-orientated approach, where often it is less about what is being done and more about how it is being done. Openness and recognition as well as communication and good role models are of fundamental importance for the process.

Workshops address key topics



The practical implementation of the WIA topics and the aspects involved were the focus of three workshops that addressed motivation in the change process, communication, and the tension between digitalization and sustainability. Workshop 1 focussed on the question of how to successfully shape the change process within one's own organisation and how to inform, motivate and involve employees along the way. Dagmar Müller, Head of the Programme Society - Sustainability - Digital at the vhs Berlin Mitte, shared her experiences and success stories, and together, concrete steps for implementing the topic in

the institutions were discussed.

The fact is that there is still a need for discussion in many institutions regarding what ESD actually is and focus areas should be prioritized. Therefore, it is especially important to develop a shared vision and strategy to create commitment and appreciation for the topic. Impulses for this could also come from participating in sustainable events organised by other institutions and through network collaboration. To involve employees in the process, topics and results should be communicated interactively and participatively, for example, through low-threshold best practices and sustainability events as well as through formats like energy-saving competitions or business trip tracking.

The results of the second workshop on the topic "Being Attractively Sustainable - Communication Strategies for Educational Institutions" were closely linked to the discussion in Workshop 1. Communication expert Dr Johanna Köster-Lange from eco!, an agency for ecology and communication in Bremen, focused the discussion on refining the sustainability profile and communicating ESD. The first step, she emphasized, should be to create clarity and define which sustainability goals should be specifically addressed. Especially in times of limited resources, it is not possible to address everything, so setting priorities is crucial. Sustainability is not just an issue, but something "we must always keep in mind".



At the same time, the communication of ESD topics should not remain abstract, but must tell stories that motivate others to take action. This is not only about success stories but also about describing the difficulties of the process and letting go of perfectionism. The actors should be aware of their "strongest card" and communicate the ESD topics authentically and in an understandable way. This often requires courage, but above all, it requires a decision from the institution to support this effort.

The tension between digitalisation and sustainability was the focus of workshop 3. The workshop content aimed to think about the transformation in a complex and nuanced way, examining the interaction between sustainability and digitalisation, particularly in continuing education institutions. According to workshop leader Dr Florian Hofmann from the non-profit Institute for Ecological Economy Research (IÖW) GmbH, the topic has gained increasing importance over the past five years. It also looks at the social and ecological impacts of digitalisation, as it has not only a technological side. Although it is currently possible to calculate ecological footprint of a smartphone, the extent of the transformative effects of digital key technologies such as the Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, or Big Data is only partially measurable.



Regarding continuing education institutions, the participants agreed that digitalisation offers significant opportunities for participation, administration and new learning environments, but at the same time, it increases energy and resource consumption. Measures that could be of interest to institutions in the coming years include topics such as green IT infrastructure, sustainable procurement, ecological hosting and adjustments to the portfolio of educational programmes, for example, in terms of teaching and learning methods. The advantages and disadvantages of online events and digital learning platforms were discussed controversially. At the same time, it is important to explore new learning paths and actively use content and formats such as gamification and game-based learning.

Good ideas and examples on the project market



Additional inspiration was provided to the approximately 50 participants from Bremen, Lower Saxony, and the neighboring Netherlands through a project market held alongside the event. It offered the opportunity to learn about strategies and practical examples from other institutions and to use them as inspiration for their own work. Once again, the event covered a range of topics from low-threshold projects at the local and regional level to major change initiatives in line with

the Whole Institution Approach.

Klimahaus Bremerhaven and Musikszene Bremen were two local project partners represented, each addressing the topic of sustainability in different ways. While the Klimahaus offers a unique learning environment where sustainability is not only taught but also implemented in management, the Musikszene Bremen has developed a

reusable service with a mobile dishwashing unit in order to make events more resource-efficient and environmentally friendly.

Henrike Welpinghaus, main coordinator for education at the Klimahaus Bremerhaven, believes that the uniqueness of her offering lies in the fact that visitors can immerse themselves in various climate topics with and experience them emotionally through all their senses. She says, "Currently, around 400,000 people visit us each year. In the future, we want to expand our offerings to include further education and adult education. We plan to launch this by 2025."

The major challenge for Manuel Jänig, board member and project manager for sustainability at Musikszene Bremen, is the „Breminale“ festival, which takes place in July 2025. "Over the course of five days, 250,000 visitors will attend. We want to integrate our offering into the festival and ensure that less waste is produced while raising awareness about sustainability." The initiative was launched in August 2024 and is currently experiencing strong demand.

There was also a "home game" for the Erasmus+ project "Circular Economy Passways for the Energy Transition", which was presented by Dr Andreas Saniter and Myrthe Reinsberg from the Institute of Technology and Education (ITB) at the University of Bremen. The cooperation partnership, which includes institutions from Poland, Portugal, Turkey and Italy, focuses on developing materials for the circular economy. These materials could also be used in continuing education institutions, for example, when it comes to best practices for understanding and the logic of the circular economy.

Speaking of Erasmus+: Elisa Goldmann from the Fachhochschule des Mittelstandes (University of Applied Sciences of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) in Bielefeld brought two projects: the completed GoBeEco project and the ongoing follow-up project SHIFT2GREEN, which is led by Poland and runs until April 2025. Both projects have used and are using the gamification approach to translate sustainability into concrete actions: once with a focus on private daily life, and once in a professional context.

"The idea for the new project emerged from GoBeEco as many participants suggested that we could also use the gamification approach for companies. We implemented this together with our partners, creating content-specific focuses for the various missions, such as energy, waste, or circular economy." The approach is always playful and aims to engage users emotionally. What is also exciting is that it targets not only the employee level but also the leadership level – in line with the Whole Institution Approach.

This also plays a central role in the project "International BNE Alliances," which was implemented with financial support from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) between 2021 and 2024. Eva Heinen, a consultant in the area of cross-state sustainability alliances (eLeNA) at the German Adult Education Association (dvv), summarises the project's idea as follows: "In terms of content, twelve adult education organisations from seven different federal states, under our

coordination, wanted to explore how the Whole Institution Approach could be adapted in adult education. While it was already relatively established in other areas, there were no materials or recommendations in adult education up until that point."

An important result of the project is that the WIA requires specific areas of action (see page 2) where concrete work can be done, but at the same time it is also essential to embed the whole process in a structured manner, one that is supported by both the leadership and the staff. If this is not the case, it typically remains a sporadic approach, according to Heinen. She recommends involving the management from the outset in the process to secure backing for the mandate and time needed. This is also advisable because the processes - if the topic is taken seriously - often have a profound impact on the structures. Heinen aims to continue the work of the International ESD Alliances through her presence at events like the Bremen Symposium and the guidebook created within the project, which acts as a mini self-learning course, offering practical tips and enabling others to implement the idea of sustainability and the WIA.

The Erasmus+ project Tale (December 2022 to November 2024), also implemented by the dvv, focused on how people can learn from one another to promote green transition in organisations. As part of Tale, adult education organisations collaborated with learners, social movements and grassroots initiatives to gain new insights into transformative learning. Through the development of relevant methods, the project contributed to capacity building – both in adult education and in grassroots initiatives. One result of the project is an interactive toolkit which serves as a collection of materials summarising key insights and practical examples – presented in an accessible and well-structured way.

From neighbouring Netherlands, EPAL Ambassador Lidwien Vos de Wael came to Bremen to present practical examples from the "Sustainability and Adult Education" dossier, which has been available on EPAL Netherlands since 2021. She provided insights into the completed ERASMUS+ project "The Green Step," initiated by the social organisation "NetwerkPro," which aims to improve the professional position of women with a migration background. A curriculum and a versatile toolkit were developed to motivate female participants towards a more sustainable lifestyle and to equip them with essential skills that they can apply in their daily lives.

"In principle, I believe that sustainability is not as firmly embedded in Dutch adult education as it is in Germany," reported Vos de Wael. This is also related to the organisation of adult education in both countries. While in Germany, for example, there are institutions such as adult education centres (Volkshochschulen) for which sustainability is an important topic, in the Netherlands much depends on the commitment of individual people. This brings with it creative ideas such as working with theatre, podcasts, and climate psychologists, and approaching the topic in an emotional and playful way. It is precisely for this reason that Vos de Wael was also impressed by the Klimahaus in Bremerhaven: "We need such approaches to embed the topic in public awareness and in society and to bring it closer to them. This also helps to make the idea of the whole institution approach more tangible."

Symposium with practical suggestions

But what might concrete pathways look like to embed sustainability within one's own organisation? This question was posed by moderator Sabine Bertram, who herself supports educational institutions in development processes, at the end of the symposium. The ensuing discussion made it clear that, to achieve this, key issues within the organisation must first be clarified, such as the understanding and vision of sustainability, and the question of where to start and what can already be built upon. This also involves processes of separation in order to create resources for the new and to counter the often present feeling of being overwhelmed. Sustainability needs room to manoeuvre so that it can truly serve as an impulse for organisational development.



Ina Mausolf, Head of the Department for General, Vocational and Political Continuing Education and Non-School Vocational Training at the Senator for Children and Education in Bremen and co-organiser of the symposium, summed up the credo of the symposium as follows: "I realised today that it is always worthwhile to start such processes and that it is not necessarily the length of the steps, but about taking steps. Whether they are small or large, at least they get you moving."

Support can also be provided by the workbook created for the event, which, in addition to structuring the conference content into the four action areas of the WIA for adult education institutions, includes tasks, suggestions, and space for thoughts, notes, and networking contacts – a useful tool for structuring the insights from the conference and using them as an impulse for one's own work.

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