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Report

“Shaping Sustainability Discourses through Academic Writing”

Saint Petersburg State University, 03.07.-23.07.2017

With the financial support of the University Alliance for Sustainability, I developed and conducted a three-week course at Saint Petersburg State University which brought together students and academic staff from various disciplinary backgrounds with the aim to enable students to be active in shaping strategies, initiatives and technologies for sustainable futures.

Background and Rationale

In view of the complex challenges associated with unsustainable patterns of resource-use, ecosystem exploitation and human impoverishment, the issue of cooperation between social and natural sciences has acquired a new urgency. No longer can we approach questions about the natural environment, social cohesion, cultural diversity and technological advancements in isolation from one another. Students need to learn to adapt to different disciplinary approaches, in order to tackle the complexities inherent to the challenge of building sustainable futures and to be able to play an active role in facilitating the necessary social changes. The course “Shaping Sustainability Discourses through Academic Writing” was therefore designed to encourage participants from different disciplinary backgrounds to exchange their ideas about sustainability on the basis of their specific fields of expertise. In mapping out existing synergies and identifying opportunities for co-supervisions and joint publications, the course also helped to strengthen partnership ties between the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) and Saint Petersburg State University (SPSU).

Participants

The course was successfully advertised at SPSU in collaboration with the Institute of Earth Sciences, the Division of Research Support and the International Office and attracted participants from different levels of study, ranging from bachelor's students to junior researchers. Participants approached the topic of sustainability from various disciplinary backgrounds, including geo-ecology, history, medical technologies, geo-chemistry and public health. Seven participants successfully completed the three-week course. Small-group teaching allowed for a vibrant exchange between participants and close guidance on students' individual writing projects.



Photo: Nikolai Bobylev

Course Design

The course design facilitated discussions about research *on and for* sustainable development. In other words, participants were encouraged to reflect on sustainability as an interdisciplinary research theme and on the ways in which research can be more sustainable. The first part of the course focused on examining how various stakeholders define and discuss sustainability. Participants learned to identify different stakeholders and to evaluate their interest in and influence on the research project and its outcomes. On the basis of the stakeholder analysis, participants reflected on possible communication strategies, differences between genres of scientific writing and the potential impact of their research. The second part of the course was structured around different writing exercises which enabled students to improve their (self-)editing skills. For this purpose, students completed written assignments, which they exchanged and discussed in class. Exercises were organized in such a way as to simulate a peer-review process. For additional guidance, I commented on each written assignment. This move from the shared thematic focus to a topic of specific interest to the individual participant contributed towards a better understanding of sustainability as a cross-cutting issue and of the importance of quality assurance in academic communication.

Outcomes and Next Steps

At the end of the course, participants were able to compose an academic text that is shaped according to a specific purpose, genre, occasion, and audience. Particular attention was given to the formats of a journal article and a policy brief, in order to facilitate participants' efforts to communicate with both academic and non-academic stakeholders involved in agendas for sustainability.

Furthermore, the course introduced students to new opportunities for interdisciplinary learning and joint supervision made available through the strategic partnership between the FUB and the SPSU. Participants were specifically encouraged to submit an improved draft of their written assignments for a joint publication to be published as part of the UAS Working Papers Series. In particular, doctoral candidates also expressed a strong interest in applying for the UAS mobility scheme.

Finally, the course served to kick-start the planned teaching cooperation, as part of which two colleagues of the SPSU will teach two courses on urban development and sustainability at the FUB over the course of the winter semester 2017/18. In this way, we aim to make sustainability an integral part of study programmes and research efforts at the two partner universities.