

Sustainability Challenge – BE PART OF THE CHANGE

General information

The [Sustainability Challenge](#) is a unique, innovative and transdisciplinary university course related to sustainable development and the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) of the UN. It has taken place since 2010 on a yearly basis and is held by Vienna's **four main universities**: Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU), University of Vienna, Vienna Technical University (TU) and the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU). The Sustainability Challenge is managed by [RCE Vienna](#) and works in close collaboration with external partners, such as companies, ministries and NGOs. Currently, the Austrian Development Agency provides the largest part of funding.

The Sustainability Challenge is dedicated to the objectives of sustainable development, embracing the topic through varying key issues such as sustainable urban development (2014 - 2017) or the SDGs (2017 - 2020). Every year, **60 - 80 master, Ph.D. and advanced bachelor students** from all fields are selected through a detailed application process. The sustainability challenge offers two participation tracks: service learning and start-up.

The structure of the challenge

The Sustainability Challenge lasts two semesters, starting in October until June of the following year. During the first semester students gain a broad overview of theoretical sustainability concepts, highlighting sustainable development under the diverse disciplinary angles of the participating universities. Inputs are given by renowned university experts on **climate change** (Helga Kromp-Kolb & Benedikt Becsi), **ecological economics** (Christian Rammel), **political sciences** (Alice Vadrot), **architecture** (Karin Stieldorf) and **urban engineering** (Petra Hirschler).

At the same time, 40-50 of the participants are also introduced to the **service learning method**, receiving tools and knowledge that help them to understand the scope of service learning and to collaborate with their external partners. The remaining 20 students are introduced to **sustainable entrepreneurship** by ECN's (Rudolf Dömötör), BOKU's (Michael Ambros & Dominik Schmitz) and WU's (Christian Rammel) start-up experts.

The students then begin working on their **projects in small groups of 5-7 people**: While the start-up track's participants develop their **own start-up ideas**, the service learning track's participants are confronted with a specific **challenge from a company, ministry or NGO** (e.g. in 2018 Bank Austria, BMNT, ÖAMTC, Siemens Mobility, see below for past examples), around which they develop their project in close cooperation with their partner. All project groups, service learning and start-up, are supervised and mentored by the participating university experts. At the **end of the first semester**, all student groups present their project concepts as well as start-up ideas at the **public stop-over event**.

In the second semester, the service learning students **implement their service-learning projects** for and together with their partners while the start-up students **develop a business plan**. Some even begin implementing their start-up activities during the semester. While doing so, all participants again receive intensive **coaching from university teachers, start-up experts and the RCE**. The **public touch down event**, where the student groups present the **final results of their service learning projects and their start-ups**, wraps up the second semester of the Sustainability Challenge.

The **RCE Vienna, Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development** is the regional network for research, education and knowledge interactions on questions related to regional and trans-regional sustainable development. It is situated at the WU and acknowledged by the United Nations University (UNU).

Examples of completed Service Learning Projects (2017/2018) related to the SDGs and sustainable urban development:

- **Verbund**, a leading hydropower producer and seller in Austria, worked on a concept for affordable photo-voltaic systems in apartment buildings in the city together with their group of students.
- **Bank Austria**, a member of UniCredit, worked with their team of students to find a way to measure their activities related to the SDGs and how to make them visible. A comprehensive catalogue of over 70 scientifically supported measures for major enterprises was developed.
- **ADA (Austrian Development Agency)** engaged its student team to draft a concept for implementing more sustainability-driven activities in companies while at the same time fostering the knowledge and awareness of the SDGs in the companies in order to support them. At the same time a matchmaking event was implemented and organized by the students.

If you want to find out more about this year's ongoing projects, click [here](#).



Project partners and teachers meet each other in an introductory workshop.



In a teambuilding session the students first encounter their interdisciplinary teammates.



After keynote speeches (pictured: Matteo Landi, UNIDO), student teams and service learning partners discuss first steps at the kick-off event.