

Press Release
15 July 2026

16 Years of the Sustainability Challenge: Over 200 Projects for a Sustainable Future – and a Leap Onto the World Stage

At the Touchdown Event on 18 June 2026 in the Kuppelsaal of TU Wien, we celebrated 16 years of the Sustainability Challenge and more than 200 projects together – and right in the middle of the celebration, we were able to share some big news: the Sustainability Challenge as we know it will no longer continue – but an exciting new project is already on the horizon.

16 Years of Building Bridges Between Science and Society

Under the motto “BE PART OF THE CHANGE”, students, faculty and practice partners came together to celebrate what has grown over 16 years – and to see how far the teams had advanced their projects over the course of the year. That the Sustainability Challenge is far more than an ordinary course is evident in its role as a realization of the Third Mission – the third core mandate of universities alongside teaching and research, through which they make their knowledge useful to society and further develop it in exchange with society. The Sustainability Challenge thus sits precisely at the intersection of teaching and the Third Mission and embodies the ideal case in which a university fulfills several of its missions at once: students develop their knowledge not only in the lecture hall but together with practice partners from business, the public sector and civil society – carrying it directly into society.

Since its first run in 2010, the transdisciplinary course has grown into one of Austria's largest cross-university SDG programs. Carried by currently 7 universities – including WU Vienna, TU Wien, BOKU, the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Montanuniversität Leoben, the University of Graz and the University of Vienna – more than 200 projects and start-ups have emerged, developed by students from over 20 universities together with more than 100 practice partners from business, the public sector and civil society.

Just how vibrant and varied this looks was shown most recently by the 2025/26 cohort: one team advanced technologies with HanfBauSysteme that bring circular economy practices into construction; the start-up Bananig combined inclusion with rescuing crooked bananas; and AGES – the Austrian Agency for Health and Food Safety – had its own stand at the Touchdown Event to raise awareness about nutrition and the Planetary Health Diet.

What sets the Sustainability Challenge apart from a classic course is the step outside the lecture hall: for a full academic year, students work on a real project with a real partner organization – in the Service Learning Track together with companies, or in the Start-up Track on their own sustainable business idea. A student from the University of Applied Arts Vienna in the 2025/26 Service Learning Track describes what that feels like:

“What set the Sustainability Challenge apart from other courses was that you got a real look inside companies and could see for yourself the impact they achieve – it was hugely important that it wasn't just theory, but that you could actually make a difference yourself!”

Just as students benefit, so do the practice partners benefit from this exchange. What companies and organizations take away from the Challenge is not a finished report but a set of perspectives they would not otherwise have gained – the view of an interdisciplinary team on their own questions. Partners have confirmed time and again over the years that it is precisely this diversity of perspectives that is most valuable about the collaboration.

How close these collaborations have become over the years is evident when looking at these partnerships. Some partners have stayed loyal to the Challenge for much of its history: Siemens Mobility Austria has

contributed a new project almost every year since 2018 – ranging from last-mile logistics to energy transition and diversity to urban heat islands and biodiversity. The ÖBB Group has been involved through several of its companies, and PORR Umwelttechnik keeps anchoring the topic of circular economy in construction within the Sustainability Challenge time and again. These collaborations also reflect the thematic patterns of recent years: from climate, energy and mobility with partners such as Wiener Stadtwerke, ÖBB and the City of Vienna (2013–2018), through circular economy and sustainable construction (from 2019), to diversity, biodiversity and, most recently, sustainable food systems. Geographically, too, the Challenge has grown beyond Vienna: from Graz and Leoben to its first project abroad in 2025/26 – “Northern Skies Resort” in Canada. It is precisely here, at the threshold between a proven format and new horizons, that the next chapter begins.

What Comes Next: The Sustainability Challenge International

A first step in this direction has already been taken: in a one-year pilot program, students from Algoma University in Canada were part of the Sustainability Challenge – and for both sides, the collaboration with the sustainable tourism practice partner “Northern Skies Resort” was a complete success. More information on this pilot project can be found [here](#).

This internationalization is made possible by reliable funding: the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) has supported the Sustainability Challenge since 2017 and now also supports its international development. This allows the unique platform for universities' Third Mission in Austria to continue and its impact to grow. Students, academia, the public sector and businesses will therefore continue to be brought together through the Sustainability Challenge to work jointly on pressing questions of sustainable development – going forward, simply within a larger framework.

Students who want to be part of the first international round can already register [here](#). Universities and institutions that would like to help shape this next phase are also warmly invited to get in touch with us – see below.

The Sustainability Challenge began 16 years ago with the conviction that students, academia and practice can achieve more together than any side could alone. It is exactly this conviction that is now carrying the program beyond Austria. Together we become stronger, and together we shape a better, more livable world for the next generations. The horizon is open!

Further Links

- Details on this year's [Service Learning projects and start-ups](#)
- [Register for the Sustainability Challenge International](#).
- For questions or interviews, we are happy to assist at any time. On request, we are also glad to put you in touch with one or more project teams.
- Inquiries about collaboration (universities, companies, other institutions and organizations) to Adam Greene: adam.greene@wu.ac.at
- Press contact and public relations: Clara Mehringer, clara.mehringer@wu.ac.at



**Sustainability
Challenge**



RCE Vienna
Regional Centre of Expertise
on Education for Sustainable Development

Images



Thank you to all participants of the last Sustainability Challenge in Austria



Project presentation from the Service Learning Track



The first international team (Canada)



Start-up presentation from the Start-up Track



The SDGs as the guiding framework



Touch Down Event in the Kuppelsaal of TU Wien

About

Anyone who wants to help shape a sustainable, future-proof world needs knowledge and experience. In the Sustainability Challenge, students from all fields of study get both: theoretical knowledge from renowned faculty and the chance to put that knowledge directly into practice. As a cross-university course, the Sustainability Challenge offered students the opportunity, over 16 years, to either tackle concrete real-world business problems together with partner companies in the Service Learning Track, or receive support in implementing their own sustainable business idea in the Start-up Track. The unique, innovative and interdisciplinary course on sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was held jointly by several universities: WU Vienna, TU Wien, the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU), the University of Vienna, the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Montanuniversität Leoben and the University of Graz. The team of RCE Vienna (Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development Vienna) at WU Vienna organizes the Sustainability Challenge in close cooperation with faculty as well as external project partners such as companies, ministries and NGOs. The project's main funder is the Austrian Development Agency (ADA). The Sustainability Challenge 2025/26 was the final edition in its familiar form; from autumn 2026, the program will be further developed and continued as the Sustainability Challenge International.



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