



UNIVERCITY
ACTION LAB

Belgium

Good Practice Case Study

The Urban Academy

Alina Meloyan
Hacer Tercanli

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PROJECT PARTNERS



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GENERAL INFORMATION

Title of the case	The Urban Academy		
Sales pitch	A 'collaboratorium' in the face of wicked sustainability issues in Ghent		
Organisations	• Department of Political Sciences + Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ghent University		
Country	Belgium		
Authors	• Alina Meloyan • Hacer Tercanli		
Nature of interaction	Residential community and university tackling a city challenge		
Level of mechanism	<input type="checkbox"/> Government policy (e.g. law, funding framework) <input type="checkbox"/> Organisational strategy (e.g. university/business/agency) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Structural element (e.g. centre, lab, office) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Operational level (e.g. activity or programme)		
Length of programme	Full year of work	Formality	Formal
Curricula-bound, co or extra-curricular?	Curricula-bound	Level of initiative	Cross-disciplinary

Summary

The Urban Academy (for complex sustainability challenges) in Ghent is a 'collaboratorium' in which policy makers, civil society actors, citizens, companies, academic staff and students think together about problem definitions and possible solutions, future visions and strategies, (living lab) experiments and upscaling initiatives, etc., and seek to translate these issues into concrete assignments for master theses work, group writing assessments, policy-oriented research, etc. First of all, in this transdisciplinary setting, students from different disciplines think and work together towards an ecologically sustainable and socially just city, but the Urban Academy can also function as a living lab. They only focus on wicked sustainability problems in the city of Ghent and/or at Ghent University.



CASE STUDY PROFILE

BACKGROUND

The idea for The Urban Academy emerged from a number of existing initiatives:

Transition UGent has been launched in 2011 at UGent, building further on a transition initiative of the City of Ghent who also has adopted the transition management approach, placing sustainability and transition thinking on the agenda. The initiative has acted as an open innovation network of more than 200 knowledge workers, policy makers, and practitioners from all UGent departments. The group has combined engagement and expertise and tried to make the system changes that are necessary for the transition to a more sustainable university with a memorandum, small-scale experiments, and campaigns.

This initiative was followed by the **Platform for the sustainable city of Ghent**, an attempt by various UGent academics to conduct interdisciplinary research on a number of challenging sustainability issues in Ghent. Particularly in the area of living and food, a number of pathways were carefully started up. While the network of the platform has gained attention of the city stakeholders, the platform struggled to break away from more traditional consultancy assignments and found insufficient space to start working with a different perspective on knowledge development. The platform wanted to tackle wicked sustainability issues, whether or not there are clear answers, and find a vehicle where the stakeholders can try, and fail, to work together and learn from each other.

The search for the right platform for collaborative knowledge development was inspired by the **International Thematic Network** SEDwise in which committed UGent lecturers, together with

renowned international partners focus on education as a main driver for complex sustainability issues, and investigate collaboration opportunities. The idea of the Urban Academy was born in line with this focus in 2017 for the exploration and tackling of sustainability issues through student work. The academy is built around the principles of sustainable development, as well as urban planning.

CONTEXT

The Urban Academy operates in an institutional and local political environment that is favourable for design and implementation of activities fostering sustainability transitions. The city of Ghent has started up the 'climate arena' in 2011 based on transition management (TM) to develop a plan and implement actions to reach climate neutrality by 2050, and to involve actors from the city in the process. UGent has also adopted principles of sustainability in its mission statement that prioritize 'substantial foundation for sustainable development', 'integration of sustainability in education, research and services' and 'implementing sustainability in the business management and organisation'.

OBJECTIVES AND MOTIVATIONS

The goal of the Urban academy is to play a role as a collective learning platform for clients, users, policy staff, academic staff and students for the tackling of sustainability issues that confront society, the city, and the university.

The Urban Academy actively seeks out synergies with urban services, its residents, civil society organizations, and companies to discuss aspects of sustainable transitions.

STAKEHOLDERS

Ghent University and its students, academics and central administration staff, the City of Ghent, Urban Planning and Housing offices, NGOs.

PROCESS

INPUT

The Urban Academy is currently not receiving any structural funding for its activities. However, discussions are in progress within the steering group formed by university and city stakeholders regarding the status, challenges, and funding of the institution. This group contains 10 UGent professors, staff from central administration, 6-7 civil servants from the City of Ghent, as well as students.

The Urban Academy is located within the Ghent University Green Hub. This open space, with free desks for students to work, is shared with the Green office of UGent.

ACTIVITIES

The activities of the Academy are listed below:

- **Urban Academy Sessions** are open seminars and workshops where sustainability issues of Ghent are discussed together with urban civil servants, civil society actors, external knowledge partners, and UGent academics and students. During the sessions, the urban stakeholders work on common definitions of problems that can be dissected and translated into concrete research questions that students can discuss in the content of their master's thesis. Through the platform, the Urban Academy helps to facilitate and to build a symmetrical discussion among academic and non-academic partners about urban issues that are not addressed within the compartmentalised policy structures or disciplines. In the afternoon, session experts are asked to outline an approach to the problem in a short pitch and to make a number of suggestions for possible research topics. This is followed by a discussion on the subject with urban actors, academics and students. In the evening there is a public event with a lecture and a public debate.
- **Courses:** The Academy offers the 2-semester 5 ECTS elective course 'Sustainable Cities' to UGent students with a different theme every year. The Urban Academy is naturally linked to the course program, as a dynamic platform for the students to further explore and discuss the topics with relevant stakeholders. For the 2018-2019 academic year, the theme is identified as the 'urban food issue' and the development of an urban food policy. As described on the Urban Academy website, during the course, teachers and students will map the food issue and the central sustainability challenges, by starting with questions to find out the critical uncertainties that determine the issue, and continuing with developing possible futures and a robust urban food strategy for the Ghent region. The course is formed in lectures, e.g. focusing on sustainability and transition thinking; 'future exercises' during which students focus on explorative scenarios; public discussions on solutions; and the Urban Academy Session (Please see above).
- **Multi-Day 'Innovation Camps':** With the support of European funds, the Academy participated in cross-border partnerships with knowledge institutions and city governments to jointly explore urban sustainability matters. Organised within this scheme, the 2019 Multi-day Innovation Camp hosted 15 students from the Netherlands (Radboud University Nijmegen) and 10 students from Belgium (Ghent University), as well as representatives from the Municipality of Nijmegen, Radboud University, University of Applied Sciences of Arnhem and Nijmegen, and the City of Ghent. The aim of this particular camp was to explore multiple possibilities of urban development in the neighbourhoods of Nieuw-West (Nijmegen) and Nieuw Gent (Ghent). Adopting a 'living lab' approach, the students and participants were involved in a co-creation process with support of residents, civil society organizations and economic actors. They investigated innovative spatial, social, ecological, economic practices that might contribute to the complex societal and sustainability issues.

- **Masters Workshops** are offered to UGent students, with the most recent two focusing on the themes of university as a living lab, and the complex urban sustainability issues. While the students' master's theses remain as mono-disciplinary with a supervisor from their programme, the Academy supports the research to take place in an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary setting. Academics from different faculties and non-academic actors work together within the Urban Academy to support the development of the research.
- The Academy also takes part in several collaborative **Action Research** initiatives. One is commissioned by NGOs with the support of Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen (Refugee Work Flanders) and focuses on the development of an innovative residential program for refugees and vulnerable groups in the housing market. Others focus on socio-spatial analyses of neighbourhoods in Ghent (e.g. 'Gent Sint-Pieters' and 'Baudelo').



OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

OUTPUTS

Since 2017, the Academy has organised 9 Urban Academy Sessions, with the participation of over 500 attendants, dozens of successful master theses, several lectures, several research projects, etc.

IMPACTS

The Ghent Urban Academy supports the development of an ecologically sustainable and socially just city of Ghent. With this initiative it offers an open platform to the urban stakeholders, including the academics, researchers, and students as knowledge generators. The transdisciplinary approach to problem identification and following research offers directions to local policy makers.

SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENT & SYSTEM

SUPPORTING MECHANISMS

The shared vision of the regional stakeholders striving for sustainability transitions can be considered a crucial supporting element towards the success of the initiative. We all acknowledge the wickedness of some major sustainability challenges. Sustainability has been identified as a strategic goal in the agenda of both the City of Ghent and the University of Ghent that provides a solid ground for the long-term collaborations to be jointly initiated and implemented.

Currently the activities of the Urban Academy are managed by some members of faculty on the side of their work, however, 1-2 coordinators are planned to be assigned to organise the Urban Academy Sessions and build networks between the academia and the city. The City of Ghent is interested in continuing collaboration with the Academy and prepared to co-invest in the human resources and activities of the centre.

BARRIERS AND DRIVERS

The two barriers against the Urban Academy to sustain itself as a vehicle for urban collaboration are mentioned as the weak involvement of the university leadership in the collaboration processes between the Urban Academy and the City of Ghent, and the lack of institutional funding opportunities. The Academy also does not find sufficient support from some of the faculties and leadership due to doubts about a complexity-acknowledging and transdisciplinary approach in the identification and tackling of societal issues.



LESSONS LEARNED

CHALLENGES

The Transition UGent initiative that the Academy is built on has encountered challenges in the early years of its operation due to the nature of transition (management) processes that could not stand against the power dynamics and complexity of the system it was operating in.

As part of the transition management approach, the initiators organised a number of meetings in the first two years performing a system analysis, discussing visions for the future, and potential transition pathways, followed by linking actions, implementing experiments, developing networks within the university, and finally preparing to place the new ideas in the dominant old system, the “regime”. Transition UGent operated/operates in a power free setting, not within the policy commissions, that led to the rejection of some sustainability solutions by the university leadership at the time. At present, huge disputes do not exist anymore, and the challenges encountered are no more about the direction, but more about the speed.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Joint vision of the regional stakeholders towards urban sustainable development and their joint approach to tackle wicked societal issues can be considered major success factors in the launch and further development of the activities in the Urban Academy.

In addition to the commitment of academics from different faculties and the support from the City of Ghent and the civic groups, the public awareness and the established culture of sustainability in the region contributes greatly for the Academy to achieve its goal to serve as an open platform for co-creation to occur.



FURTHER INFORMATION

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Professor Thomas Block, director of the CDO, received the **Hermes Award**, which was awarded “due to his tireless battle for a more socially just and ecologically sustainable university” with the award panel commenting that “his commitment to initiatives in the context of Transitie UGent are an example to many.” [1]

TRANSFERABILITY

The model is transferable in the contexts where there is an embedded culture of participation and collaborative innovation, also supported with regional and institutional policies, and mechanisms.

PUBLICATIONS

1. Waas, T., Hugé, J., Block, T., Wright, T., Benitez-Capistros, F., & Verbruggen, A. (2014). Sustainability Assessment and Indicators: Tools in a Decision-Making Strategy for Sustainable Development. *Sustainability* (Vol. 6). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su6095512>
2. Block, T., Goeminne, G., & Poeck, K. (2018). Balancing the urgency and wickedness of sustainability challenges: three maxims for post-normal education. *Environmental Education Research* (Vol. 24). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2018.1509302>
3. Deleye, M., Poeck, K., & Block, T. (2018). Duurzaamheid binnen universiteiten en hogescholen. Een multi-level perspectief op het Vlaamse Hogeronderwijssysteem.
4. Poeck, K., Læssøe, J., & Block, T. (2017). An exploration of sustainability change agents as facilitators of nonformal learning: Mapping a moving and intertwined landscape. *Ecology and Society* (Vol. 22). <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-09308-220233>
5. Van Poeck, K., Östman, L., & Block, T. (2018). Opening up the black box of learning-by-doing in sustainability transitions. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2018.12.006>

LINKS

<http://destadsacademie.be/>

CONTACT PERSON

• Prof. dr. Thomas Block & Prof. dr. Michiel Dehaene

Department of Political Sciences – Ghent University

Director Centre for Sustainable Development

Poel 16, 9000 Gent, Belgium

Thomas.block@ugent.be

RESOURCES:

- 1) Sustainability Report Ghent University (2016) https://www.iau-hesd.net/sites/default/files/documents/ghent_university_2016.pdf



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Contact us!

Porto Business School
Av. Fabril do Norte 425,
4460-314 Sra. da Hora, Portugal

Rui Coutinho, Executive Director
Center for Business Innovation
Email: rcoutinho@pbs.up.pt
Tel: +351 220425069 / +351 937727215

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