Supporting student volunteering at universities

Practical report and guide to the project Your Goal - Your Action

Greetings

The topic of sustainability still plays a secondary role in German teaching and research operations. Only a few universities view sustainability as a necessary comprehensive process that must permeate all areas of the institution. Another issue is that while students can acquire theoretical knowledge on sustainability in some study programs, they usually lack practical experience in implementing sustainability projects. Often, students also lack incentives and support to apply and test their theoretical knowledge in projects.

The goal of the model project Your Goal – Your Action, funded by the German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU), was to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the context of sustainability. It aimed to provide students with targeted information about sustainability and its wide range of topics and, above all, to support them in implementing their ideas for more sustainability in everyday (university) life within a specialized educational program. For example, targeted information about the SDGs, project inspirations, and learning videos were made available on a dedicated website. Internal and external university funding opportunities were also highlighted. In addition to local support through training, consultations, and networking, student-led projects were evaluated, presented to the public, and particularly successful projects were awarded.

Your Goal – Your Action significantly differs from other sustainability initiatives at universities, which primarily focus on changes in research, teaching, and administration/organization. The emphasis here was on the students themselves, who became sustainability actors and shaped change processes at the university through concrete, smaller-scale practical projects. This model can serve as an example for many other universities. The present guide, which provides numerous suggestions and valuable tips for initiating similar measures, aims to support and accelerate this process.

A special thanks goes to the Department for University Development, the project team, and last but not least, all the participating students!

Dr. Thomas Pyhel
German Federal Environmental Foundation (DBU)

Since 2003, the University of Hildesheim has operated under the auspices of a public law foundation.
As a foundation university, it is keenly aware of its special role and responsibility toward society. In addition to its core tasks of research and teaching, the university prioritizes fostering dialogue among those who wish to contribute to a sustainable transformation of society.

Volunteering builds networks, and networks create opportunities. Especially where students commit themselves to their ideals, it is essential to support these processes to collectively shape a sustainable future. As President, I have had the privilege of witnessing the remarkable diversity of individuals at our university who look beyond the horizon and dedicate their ideas and efforts—often outside the formal curriculum—to creating a more sustainable world. This deserves our full support.

Through the activities of the Green Office and programs such as Your Goal – Your Action, the University of Hildesheim has, in recent years, provided students with reliable structures for developing and implementing sustainable projects. We are eager to share the experiences we have gained with other universities and institutions.

In this spirit, I warmly invite you to use this publication as a source of inspiration and wish you an enjoyable read.

Prof. Dr. May-Britt Kallenrode
President of the University of Hildesheim

The Green Office Hildesheim emerged at the end of 2015 from an initiative by committed students who sought to systematically embed sustainability within the university.
As part of its mission, our sustainability office sees promoting student engagement in sustainability as a core task. Since its establishment, countless students have approached the Green Office with concrete ideas for making the university more sustainable. Supporting the implementation of student projects is both a challenging and time-intensive task. It often involves helping students overcome various obstacles: sometimes it's a lack of financial resources, sometimes advice on project management is needed, and other times there's a great idea but no teammates to bring it to life.

Our Your Goal – Your Action educational and advisory program enables us to provide tailored support to students in realizing their ideas. The combination of structured E-learning components and personalized consultations has proven particularly effective during the project phase.
We warmly invite you to utilize the materials we have developed to foster student sustainability engagement at your university.

Julia Witter
Former Coordinator of the Green Office

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Project Overview

Project Name: :	*Your Goal – Your Action*
Project Duration:	October 2019 – January 2026
Project Funding:	Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt (2019 - 2023), Study Quality Funds of the University of Hildesheim (2023–2026)
Implementation:	University of Hildesheim Foundation, Department for University Development, Green Office
Homepage:	www.uni-hildesheim.de/deinprojekt

Project Summary

Your Goal – Your Action is an educational and advisory program offered by the Green Office at the University of Hildesheim. It supports students in developing and implementing social, cultural, or ecological projects with a focus on sustainability. The goal is to mobilize more students for volunteer engagement and provide them with the necessary support.

Your Goal – Your Action assists students from the initial idea through implementation to successful project completion.

To achieve this, we offer a compact and free E-learning program on our homepage, where students and interested individuals can learn about project management and sustainability. An online catalog of project ideas is also available for inspiration.

In addition, we have established a consultation center on the main campus where students can present and discuss their projects. We provide tailored and needs-based answers to all questions and offer advice on topics such as project financing or public relations.

The Your Goal – Your Action team connects students with each other and with sustainability actors in Lower Saxony. These actors contribute their expertise and professional experience to support the realization of projects. We are constantly working to expand our network.

As part of a project seminar, students also have the opportunity to earn credit points for implementing their project ideas, depending on their program of study. To showcase engagement on campus, we organize an annual traveling exhibition featuring completed projects and award certificates to all project participants.

Why Supporting Student Volunteering is Essential

Achieving sustainable development requires people from all disciplines to harness their interests and strengths for the greater transformation. University studies are a formative period for many individuals, offering significant potential to inspire long-term engagement in sustainability. A key demand, therefore, is to structurally anchor sustainable development more firmly in universities—not only in teaching but also across all other areas.

Every academic discipline has diverse connections to the SDGs. Exploring these connections empowers students to become multipliers who integrate the SDGs into their varied career paths. Engagement is the ideal opportunity to practically apply theoretical knowledge from one's studies while pursuing personal skills and interests. Initiatives like Your Goal – Your Action, which empower individuals to implement their ideas, are immensely important for transitioning from thought to action. Engagement provides the chance to experience self-efficacy and reinforces the belief that one can make a difference in the world.

Sustainability is not a fixed state but an ongoing process, requiring organizations and individuals to continually set new goals, pose questions, and reassess their approaches. For this dynamic to thrive within universities, we need students to bring fresh energy and ideas.
We can demand change, contribute new perspectives, and actively shape our institutions!

Anna Struth
Speaker, AG netzwerk n

Voluntary engagement provides the opportunity to stand up for one's ideals, take on social responsibility, and drive transformational processes. Young people also use this form of participation to strengthen and shape the community.
University is a formative time, not only in a professional sense but also for personal development. During this period, students have the opportunity to engage with various academic discourses, experiment within different fields of study, and gain practical experience. In addition to in-depth knowledge and the latest research, universities can also offer opportunities to develop both hard and soft skills. Social involvement through voluntary engagement can be further promoted through informal learning opportunities.

Unfortunately, volunteers often face similar barriers that hinder their work. In addition to a lack of resources such as time or money, there is often a shortage of skills (e.g., project management). Volunteers sometimes also lack contact persons within the university structures, such as those familiar with official procedures who can offer guidance. Educational and advisory services that support the execution of social, cultural, or environmental volunteering or help realize individual project ideas can help reduce these barriers and support students in their engagement.
Universities that, alongside providing quality teaching and research, also strive to promote student volunteering through innovative third-mission activities, offer their students not only essential educational opportunities but also the chance to participate in societal transformation processes.

In its development plan MINERVA 2025, the University of Hildesheim defines four key themes that particularly address societal challenges and enable academic positioning: Education, Culture, Diversity, and Digitalization. Education is understood as „the process of self-development of a person through the acquisition and critical engagement with knowledge." Education „enables openness in dealing with ‚Others' (alterity), creative handling of uncertainty and ignorance, anticipation of future individual, cultural, societal, and technological developments, as well as the willingness to actively participate in addressing the societal and individual challenges that arise."

Within their studies, students acquire both subject-specific knowledge and interdisciplinary (key) competencies. These interdisciplinary competencies can greatly support their subject studies. Additionally, they help prepare University of Hildesheim students optimally for the demands of their future professional careers.

The educational and advisory program Your Goal – Your Action contributes to this in two ways: First, students receive targeted support in planning and successfully implementing their own sustainability projects. Second, the program imparts project management skills to students. Through this, Your Goal – Your Action enables students to actively contribute to addressing societal and individual challenges, thereby contributing to the key theme of Education.

Dr. Johanna Jobst
Head of the Department for University Development, University of Hildesheim

The Offers of Your Goal – Your Action

Consultation Sessions

To provide project teams with a point of contact, consultation sessions were established as part of Your Goal – Your Action. These sessions offer students the opportunity to discuss individual potentials and challenges, as well as ask questions, within an hour. The consultation sessions can be utilized multiple times during the project implementation as needed. They can be booked through the Your Goal – Your Action website and are held in person or as online meetings. The consultations are conducted by the project coordination team and are offered multiple times a week. Common topics discussed during these consultations include project financing and public relations.

E-Learnings

On the Your Goal – Your Action website, three on-demand e-learning offers are available. A look at various sustainability models and the history of the term can be found in the approximately 40-minute „Sustainability Basics“ module. In the „Project Management Basics“ module, questions about project financing, team structure, or public relations are addressed in about 60 minutes. The „Working in Intercultural Teams Basics“ module was developed in collaboration with the International Office and the Institute of Business Informatics. The goal of this learning package is to impart key terms, methods, and practical tools for successful collaboration in international and intercultural teams. A special highlight is the digital escape room.

For participants, the e-learning offerings provide easy and free access to knowledge in the form of videos, texts, or playful quiz units, which help them in their project implementation. Additionally, they can choose, based on their knowledge level, whether to complete all units at once or spread them out over multiple days. The e-learning materials also serve as a useful knowledge repository for coaching, allowing for reference to frequently asked questions. This makes them an efficient complement to the consultation sessions. The e-learning is further supported by information sheets on suitable funding options and templates for a cost and financing plan.

Certificates

After the completion of the student projects, all participants receive a certificate acknowledging their commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals. This official document serves as recognition of their work, which they can attach to future applications to highlight their engagement.

Exhibition

To show appreciation for the students‘ project work and increase the visibility of the projects, an annual traveling exhibition is organized. It visits various university locations and presents all the projects completed within a year. The exhibition consists of several stands with banners, complemented by a flyer rack. Each project is showcased with a photo, a brief description, a list of the team members, and an assignment of the relevant Sustainable Development Goals. The content of the traveling exhibition can also be used for a supplementary digital exhibition, such as through social media.

Project Seminar

While the initial focus of Your Goal – Your Action was on voluntary project work for sustainable development, students can now also earn credit points for implementing their project ideas. In the „Sustainable Development Goals“ project seminar, students are tasked with realizing their own practical project related to the Sustainable Development Goals. This project must be completed in at least 90 working hours and should fall within the ecological, economic, or social sustainability sectors. The international project seminar „Sustainable University: Attune your Actions - Sustainable Campus Projects,“ held during the Winter Semester 2023/24 and Summer Semester 2024, was conducted in cooperation with the Erasmus+ project „ATTUNE - Activate the University for Climate Change.“

In this seminar, participants conducted data collection on topics such as mobility, sustainable food, energy savings, and waste management, and implemented their own sustainability measures on campus.The courses are available in both German and English and can be credited in various modules for international exchange students.

Project Catalog

A digital catalog on the Your Goal – Your Action homepage collects project ideas and formats that can be realized through student engagement. It is important to ensure a variety of project content so that students from different fields of study and interest groups feel addressed. The ideas can also include an estimated time commitment, allowing students to find a project that suits their capacity.

Projects that have already been completed or are currently being implemented can also be listed in the project catalog to serve as a source of inspiration or to attract new team members.

Team Recruitment

Some teams or individuals who register a project idea with Your Goal – Your Action are looking for additional personnel support for general or specific tasks. Some teams also need temporary staff reinforcement during particularly stressful project phases. To assist the project teams in their search, we collaborate with them to create a call for help, which is shared via social media and email. The more personal the call and the more specific the tasks are described, the higher the chance of finding additional team members for support.

Workshops

As part of Your Goal – Your Action, the workshop „Introduction to (Sustainable) Project Management" has been offered several times. In this workshop, participants receive a brief introduction to the educational and advisory offerings and engage in creative methods to identify their own skills and interests or to find solutions to problems. The workshop is typically offered once per semester and is aimed specifically at students or project beginners and participants of Your Goal – Your Action who still lack a project idea. The workshop lasts about 1 ½ hours and can be conducted either online or in person.

Web Presence

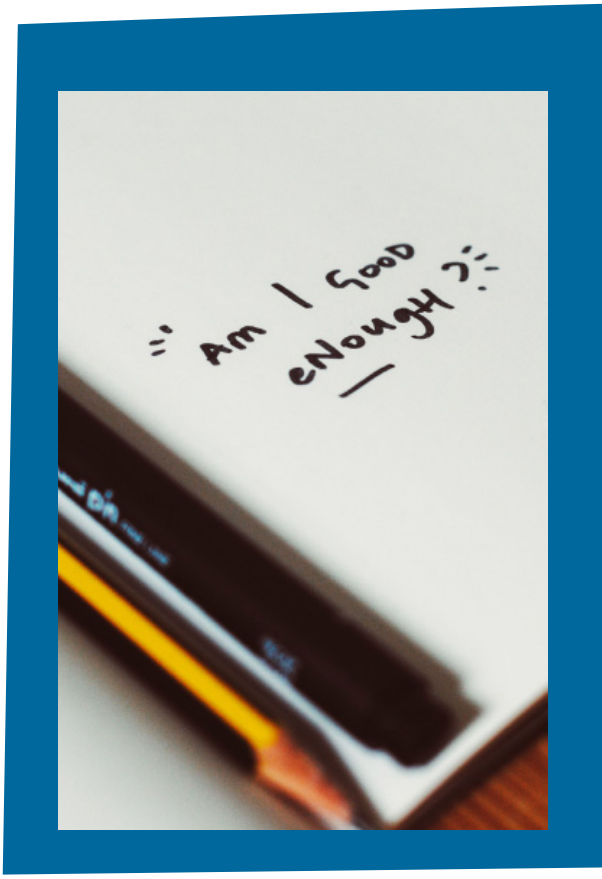
Many of the support offerings from Your Goal – Your Action are available online. In addition to the e-learning and project catalog, which are exclusively available on the Your Goal – Your Action website, services like consultation sessions and the exhibition are also supplemented by digital formats (see above).

Your Goal – Your Action is also active on social media, particularly on Instagram accounts @greenofficehildesheim and @unihildesheim, as well as on Facebook. These platforms are used to showcase student projects, share team searches, promote Your Goal – Your Action campaigns, and post regular updates (e.g., a glossary on sustainable project management). Social media channels also offer the opportunity to expand the reach of specific posts through paid advertisements.

Networking with Stakeholders

Your Goal – Your Action has created a network that includes various sustainability stakeholders from the Hildesheim region. In addition to social and cultural institutions and regional offices of various NGOs, companies and retailers with ecological offerings are also represented. These stakeholders are contacted by Your Goal – Your Action in consultation with the student teams, for example, when there are thematic overlaps.

Examples of Student Engagement

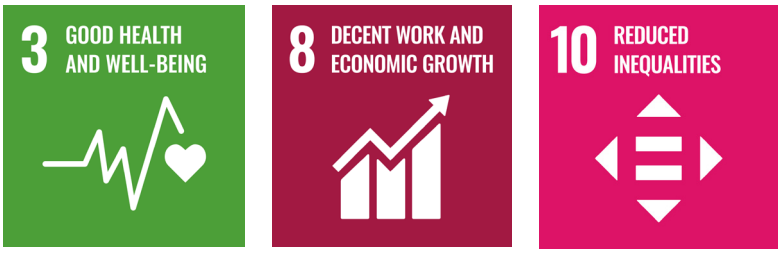


1. Diagnose:Arbeitsfähig

The initiative serves as an interface between businesses and academic professionals entering the workforce with mental health conditions.
The transition from university to employment is often significantly more challenging for students with mental health issues. Reasons for this include gaps in the current support system, which is primarily focused on the needs of people with visible disabilities. Additionally, existing professional support measures rarely address recent graduates with academic degrees.

The project team engages with this issue publicly and actively works to adapt the structures of the labor market to better include this previously neglected group.
The initiative „Diagnose: Arbeitsfähig“ (Diagnosis: Able to Work) seeks to engage in dialogue with companies, individuals affected, and other relevant institutions in the labor market to inclusively integrate academic professionals with mental health conditions in a way that aligns with their needs and qualifications — ensuring that university does not become a dead end for those affected.

Processing Time:	Ongoing project First event after approximately 5 months
Team:	Sarina Wassermann, Ronja Rasche, Marvin Koschlick, Angelina Oetter, Julia Leibgan, Liliane Artmann, Nils Jorzenuk, Marie Pischel
Contact:	diagnose-arbeitsfaehig.de or www.instagram.com/diagnose.arbeitsfaehig/



2. Zu Tisch! Das Foodture Game

In the project „Zu Tisch! Das Foodture Game," a theater-pedagogical game format was developed as part of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) on the topic of sustainable food consumption. In a playful setting, participants reflected on their own approach to food and were inspired to make their daily lives more sustainable.

The topic of sustainability is often associated with negative emotions, blame, and fear of sacrifice.

To counteract these feelings, the game format focused on an area that is close to the participants' lives and that they can influence: food consumption and nutrition. Our food industry and eating habits have a significant impact on the consumption of resources such as energy, water, and land, thereby affecting climate change.

The project allowed participants to reflect on their own actions and engage in constructive exchanges with others. Through the playful format, similar to an escape room, easy access to the topic was created, and communication among participants was facilitated. The format was designed to stimulate thinking processes while also being enjoyable! By generating positive emotions, it created strong motivation to question and adjust one's thinking and actions.

Processing Time:	8 months
Team:	Jonas Hartmann, Mareike Kuch, Laura Wirthmüller, Maximilian Haen, Maria Hager, Jonas Peter
Contact:	https://www.instagram.com/zutisch_dasfoodturegame

3. Slow Fashion Week

The project „Slow Fashion Week“ is a themed week focused on the sustainable use of fashion. Due to its popularity, the project has already been held twice and was supported by the StuPa and Grünen Topf.

During the Slow Fashion Week, there was a clothing swap party, a sewing workshop in collaboration with the Faserwerk, social media posts on the Green Office channels, and informational posters in Building I about fast fashion, sustainable alternatives, and tips for students on how to make their clothing consumption more sustainable.
The goal of the themed week was for students to learn more about the impacts of fast fashion and sustainable fashion, while also being shown practical ways to take action. In the sewing course, for example, students learned how to alter damaged or oversized clothing, allowing them to wear those garments for longer.
Through the clothing swap party, students had the opportunity to exchange clothes they no longer wore with each other, based on the principle of the sharing economy. This also increased the appreciation and longevity of clothing items. By collaborating with local sustainability actors like the upcycling studio Faserwerk, students were introduced to ways they could continue engaging with sustainable fashion after the themed week or seek help with questions about sustainable fashion.

Processing Time:	5 months
Team:	Sarah Langstein, Hong Ngoc Ly, Marie-Kristin Springer

4. Hier darf es wachsen

The project „Hier darf es wachsen“ focuses on promoting biodiversity on the University of Hildesheim campus.
By designating and maintaining meadow areas that are mowed only twice a year, the species diversity here increases significantly compared to the surrounding species-poor lawn areas. Within the first year, the number of species on the project areas has risen from around 10 species on frequently mowed lawns to 35 to 65 species.
The designation of species-rich meadow areas on the main, Bühler, and Samelson campuses was carried out through discussions between the involved parties.
They support the project both in terms of maintenance and planning, as well as through scientific monitoring to evaluate its success. To raise awareness of the meadow project and to educate the public about areas that differ from the usual campus green spaces, signs were installed explaining the purpose of the initiative, while interested individuals can access more information via a QR code linked to the Green Office homepage.

Additionally, three bat boxes were installed on the Bühler and Samelson campuses to support the growing biodiversity by encouraging the settlement of bats, which benefit from the increased insect population that emerges from the growth of many plant species.

Processing Time:	6 months
Team:	Daniel Goss, Eva-Maria Kowolik, Kai Hobritz, Clara Wiese, Katalin Kuse, Ingo Voigt, Frederik Igel, Paul Schulte
Contact:	https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/greenoffice/uni-betrieb/biodiversitaet/

5. „Local Seasons“ (part of Erasmus+ Project ATTUNE)

As part of the Erasmus+ funded project „ATTUNE – Activate the University for Climate Change,“ students planned the design of a wall calendar featuring information about seasonal and regional foods, their origins, and monthly recipes.

The seasonal calendar, funded by the StuPa and Grünen Topf, will be distributed free of charge to the students of the University of Hildesheim in June 2024, with an initial print run of 500 copies. The purpose of the informational pages is to raise awareness about the variety of local foods in Germany, as well as to provide information about farming methods and reasons for choosing regional and seasonal products.

The remaining 12 pages artistically depict the seasonal fruits and vegetables for each month. On the reverse side, students will find appealing and affordable recipes featuring the respective fruits and vegetables, many of which are vegetarian, some are vegan and gluten-free.

In addition to its primary goal of knowledge dissemination, the calendar also aims to inspire creativity in cooking. It is also an attempt to consciously influence the purchasing decisions of students when it comes to fruits and vegetables and encourage them to reflect and rethink their habits. Furthermore, as a year-round calendar, it is reusable and a practical addition to any student or shared apartment kitchen. The seasonal calendar follows the example of the wall calendar released in 2021 as part of the „Wo Studis gerne futtern“ project.

Processing Time:	8 Monate
Team:	Amelie Kruschewsky, Sarah Langstein, Hong Ngoc Ly, Laura Suppe
Contact:	https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/greenoffice/attune/

Establishing Your Goal - Your action at Your University

Do you want to support student volunteering at your university?

Yes! We would like to hire at least **one employee**. (Part-time)

Create the following offers:

Offer weekly **consultation sessions**.

Design **e-learning opportunities** on topics such as sustainability and project management, tailored to the needs of your student body. *

Provide **certificates** to project teams for completed projects. *

Make student volunteer work visible through **exhibitions** and **award ceremonies**. *

Support engaged students in **finding team members**.

Network project teams with sustainability stakeholders in your region.

Create a **project catalog** with inspiring project ideas. *

Offer regular **workshops** as an introduction to sustainable project management.

Yes! We have the capacity for a **student assistant position**. (min. 40 hours/month)

Assign the student assistant to a suitable position at the university. This could be, for example, a Green Office, a sustainability officer, as well as staff units or professorships related to sustainability.

Create the following offers:

Offer regular **consultation sessions**.

Use our free **e-learning offerings** on sustainability and project management for your students.*

Issue **certificates** for completed project teams.*

Ensure a wide external impact of the offering through concise **advertising campaigns**. In addition to social media posts, info emails to the student body, information booths, flyers, or posters can achieve the desired effect. *

Create a **web presence**. This could be a single page where you describe your offer and provide free access to our e-learning resources. *

*Upon request, we can provide templates or our implementations for free.

Data and Insights from the Project Evaluation

Young people with creative visions come to the university – the perfect time to support and further develop them. When more engagement is expected from young people, institutions like universities should lead by example and provide opportunities for self-actualization. A realistic implementation of this is offerings like Your Goal – Your Action, where engagement is valued and encouraged.

The personal development that happens during these years is crucial for later career choices and, thus, for influencing our surroundings. It doesn't really matter how exactly one gets involved. What matters is feeling within oneself and realizing whether there is an interest in it.

More and more people feel lonely. When someone gets involved, it is usually done in community with others. Therefore, engagement enriches social bonds and creates new networks. In a socio-political project, people can come together for a common goal, and that connection is powerful. People who participate want to achieve something, do good, and help. To bring about changes at the institutional level, their conviction that what they do is worthy of support should be reinforced by external organizations.

When I look around on campus, the things that stand out positively are mostly the result of volunteer engagement – not infrequently supported by the Green Office. The desire to shape one's environment enriches living spaces. Those who engage actively automatically become creators, and creativity and motivation are strengthened and expanded. Many see engagement as an enrichment of their own abilities and experiences. No wonder: those who actively engage also enhance their life skills such as empathy, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and conflict resolution. In this unique time our society is currently in, there can never be enough people who are engaged. Many of the current developments are irreversible beyond a certain point, and today, tomorrow, and in the future, we need people who are willing to commit! People who think outside of preset frameworks and drive change. And who, if not our educational institutions, should support these people?

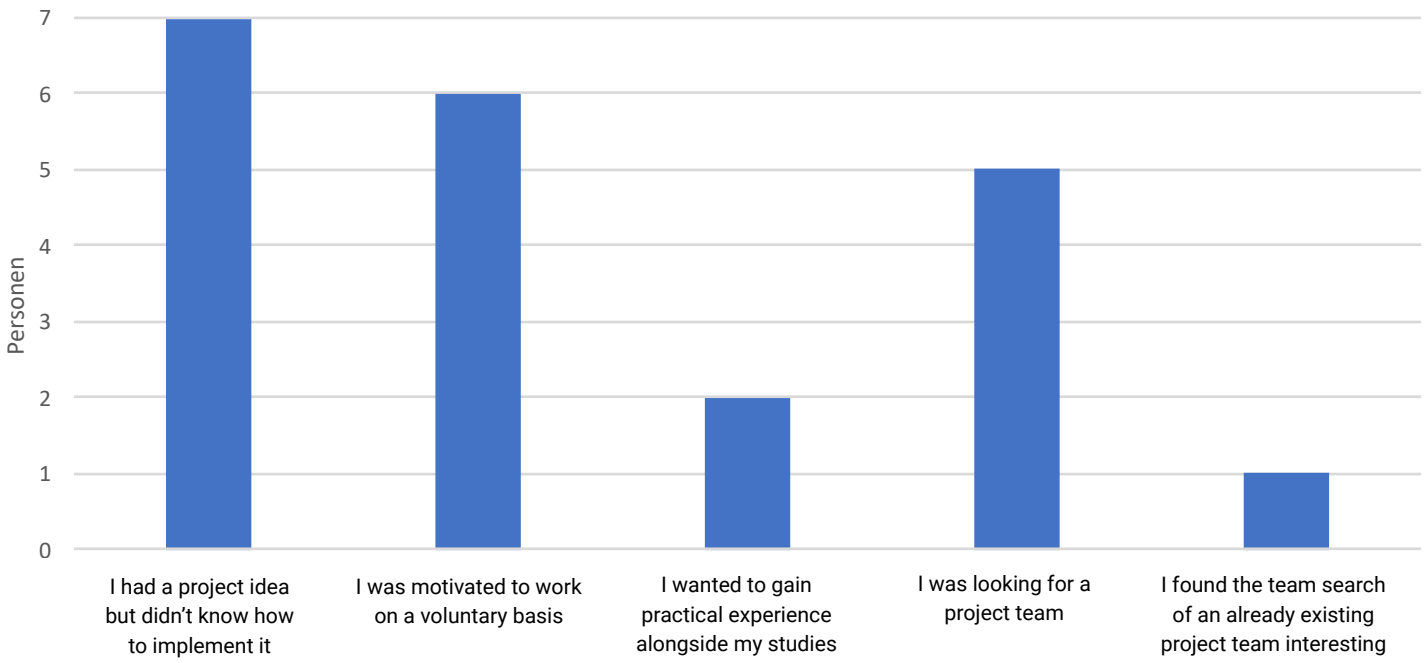
Paula von Knobelsdorff-Brenkenhoff
Project "Winterwunder"

Questions for the participants

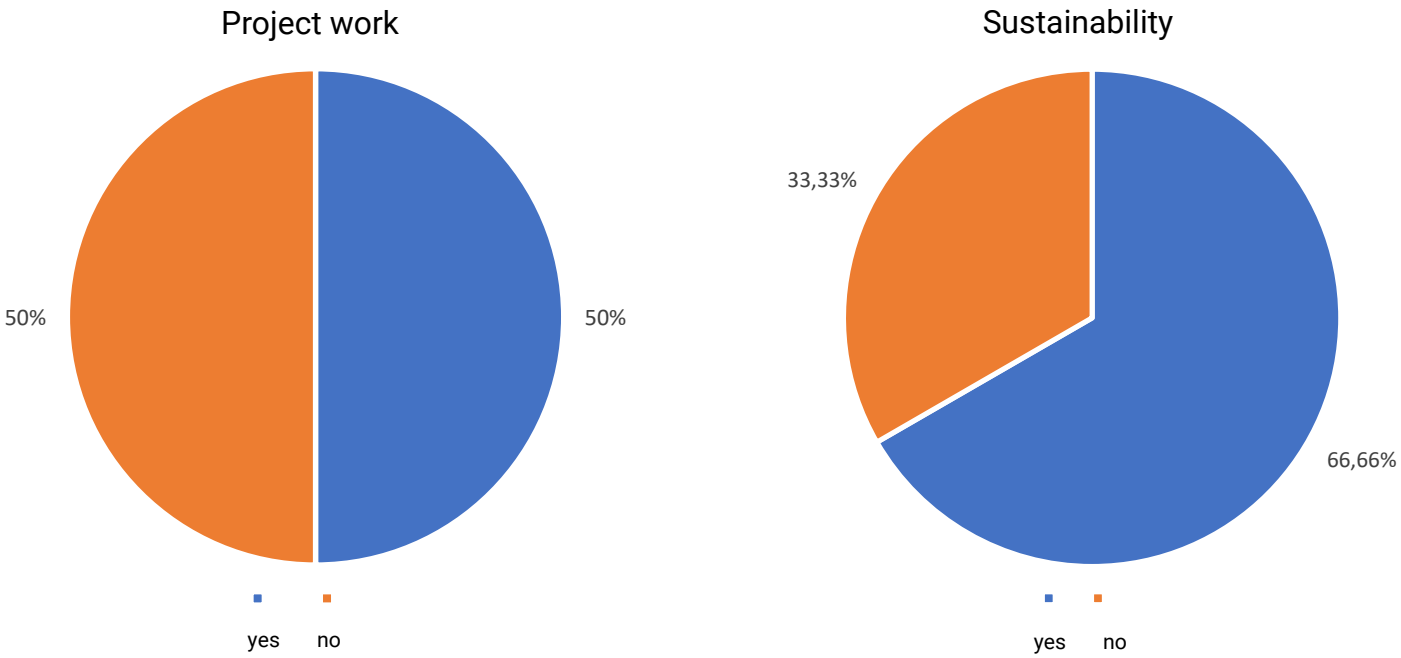
After the offerings of Your Goal – Your Action had been accessible to the students of the University of Hildesheim for approximately one year, an evaluation was sent to all teams of the projects completed up to that point. This evaluation provided important insights for Your Goal – Your Action, especially regarding the usage of the various offerings and the reasons for registration.

The average project duration **is 8.2 months.**
On average, participants worked **8.2 hours per week.**
The projects reached approximately **120 people each.**
The teams consist of at least **5 people.**
The participants are approximately **24 years old.**

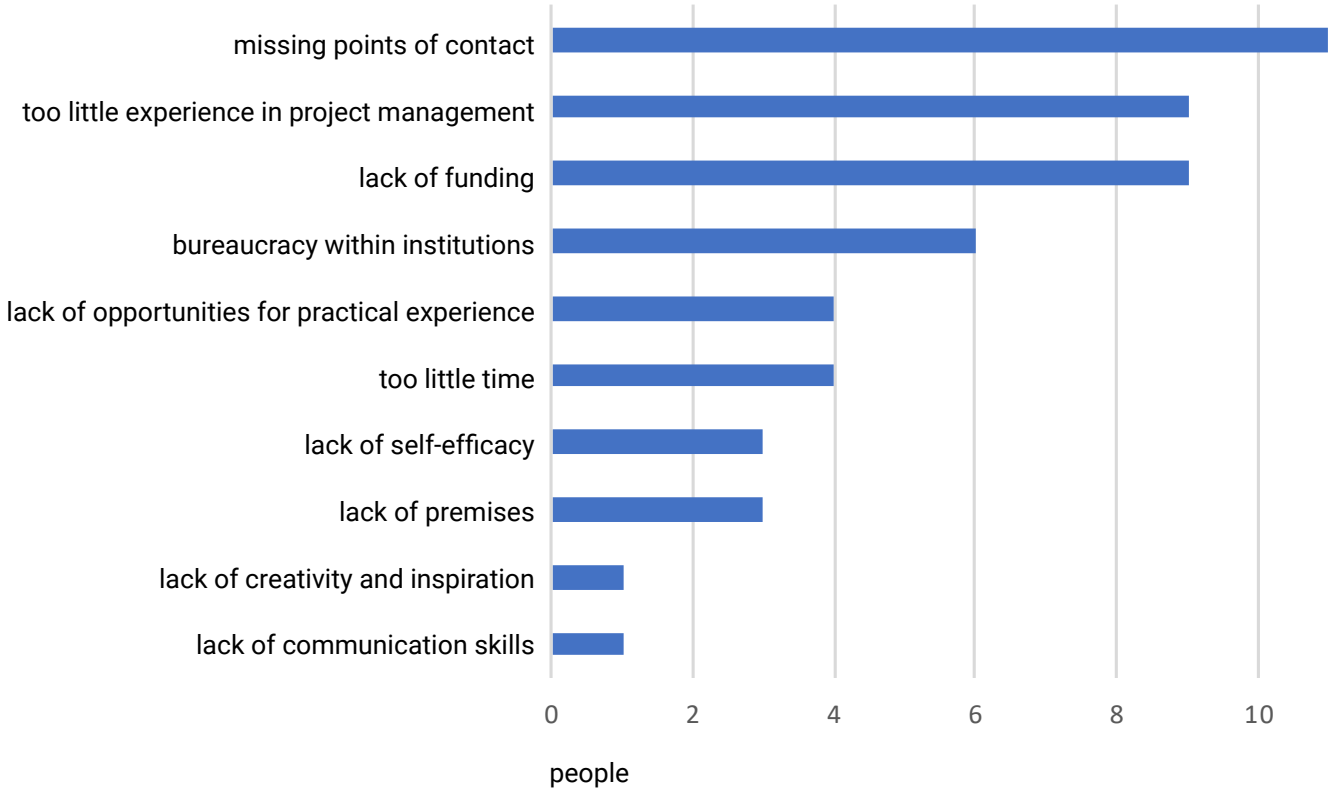
- ### Why did you sign up for Your Goal – Your Action?



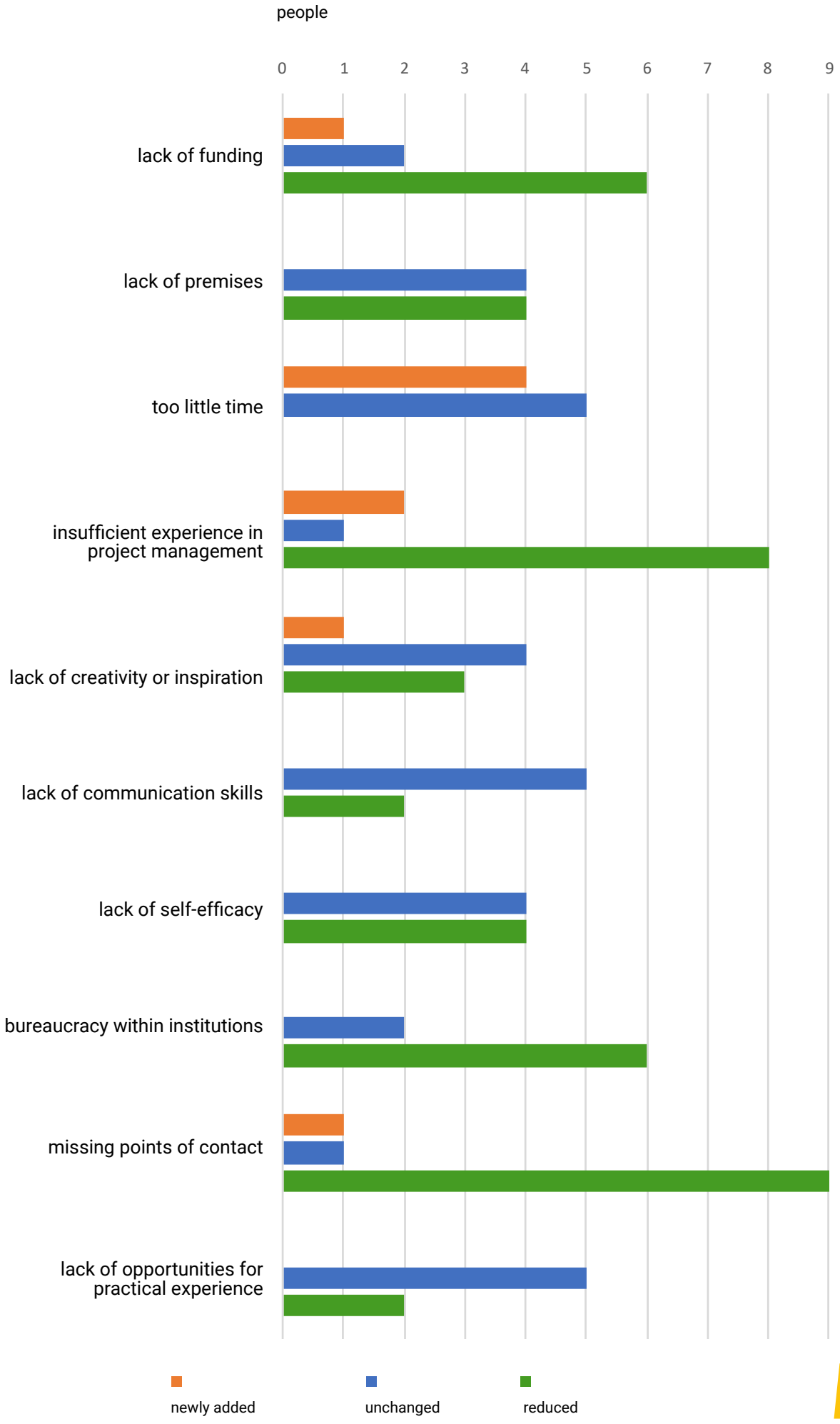
- Had you already gained experience in the following areas before signing up for Your Goal – Your Action?



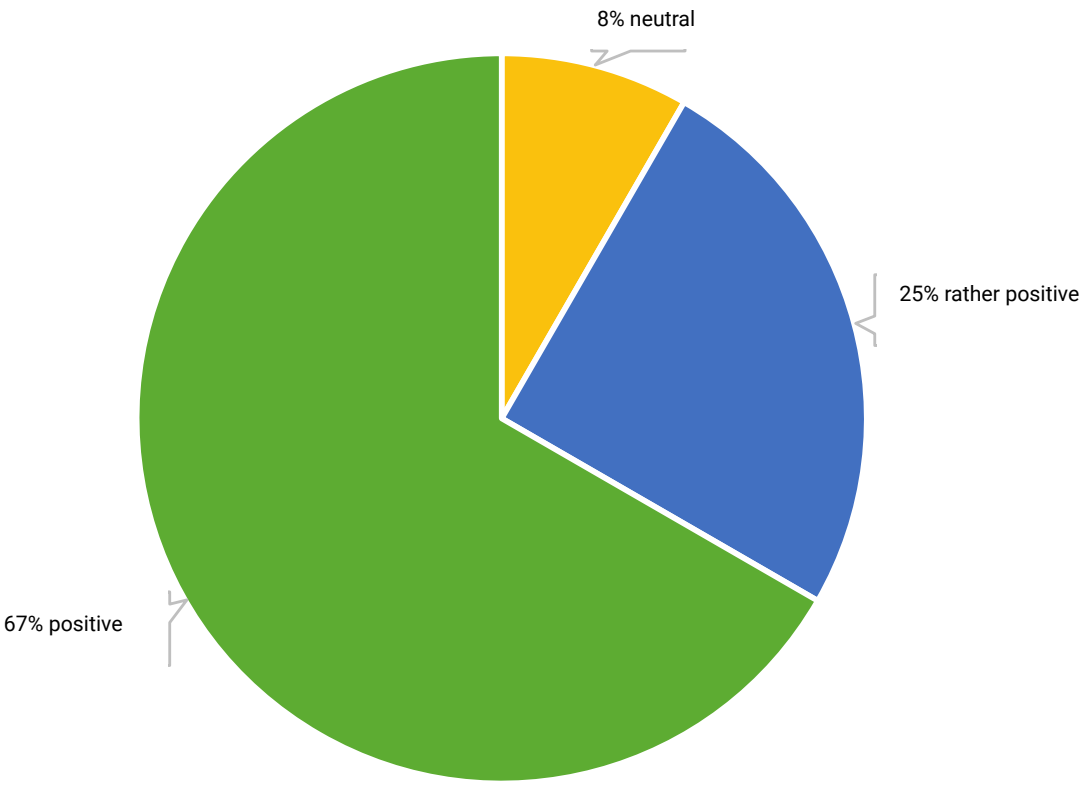
- What barriers to voluntary engagement did you perceive before contacting Your Goal – Your Action?



- How have these barriers changed through Your Goal – Your Action during the course of your project?



- What overall impact did Your Goal – Your Action have on the course of your project?



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