

PUTTING PEOPLE BACK INTO THE EQUATION

"And what do you do with such a degree once you finish university?" might not be an unusual question for students of Social Sciences. When a high school student decides to enrol in Medicine or Teacher Training, the future profession is evident. However, if a young person opts for Social Sciences, he/she will soon realise that career paths are not as straightforward.

Anthropology or Sociology students learn skills in their studies to master subject-relevant tasks such as conducting accurate studies or writing papers on societal issues. At the same time, they often do not learn how to apply their knowledge and translate it into skills useful for companies, businesses and industries. Many Social Sciences students are unsure about their future and to where to apply with their degree, resulting in a relatively high unemployment rate.

The Knowledge Alliance (KA) PEOPLE decided to tackle this mismatch. Project coordinator Gregor Cerinšek recalls: "It started as a promising idea with a clear goal to rethink, reposition, articulate, and widely promote the added value of social sciences and humanities in general and anthropology in particular in tackling the contemporary challenges of our societies".

Students develop practical competencies through a novel pedagogical approach involving real-life case studies and collaboration with "real" partners from business and industry. However, the results of this alliance go much further. Students helped their partners from industry integrate social science expertise, improve their products and services and enable educators from different disciplines to develop authentic interdisciplinary learning opportunities in higher education.

DESIGN VS HUMANS?

The key point of departure was the genuine anthropologic observation that understanding people and their needs should be a central part of any development. In this alliance - under its full title "People-Centred Development Approaches in Practical and Learning Environments" - nine partners from Slovenia, Czech Republic, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands joined forces under the lead of the Institute for Innovation and Development of the University of Ljubljana. They established a new concept of teaching and learning based on novel people-centred learning cycles.

In each partner country, students of Anthropology, together with professionals from the energy sector and educators from Anthropology and Engineering chairs, collaborated to work on real-life business challenges in sustainable living and energy. This per se unusual combination is a truly interdisciplinary setup: Many companies in this sector search for solutions to improve energy management and efficiency, energy transition and sustainable mobility. While the innovative designs work fine per se, applying these in real life and under real working conditions might not always fulfil the desired outcome. A thought-through system to regulate the climate in a large building might meet technical requirements and improve energy usage and sustainability. But

What are: **Knowledge Alliances?**

This initiative of the European Commission supported (2014 – 2020) 158 international collaborations between partners from higher education institutions and businesses. Still, it is open to any sector and involves a wide range of stakeholders on all levels. These consortia bring their particular expertise together, amplifying innovation across their fields through collaboration by developing new and multidisciplinary teaching & learning approaches, providing entrepreneurial mindsets and relevant skills to participants, and stimulating knowledge exchange.

The fields of action are broad and include current topics such as ICT, (green) economy and sustainable energy, education, life sciences, societal challenges, etc.

In the end, the results of KAs strengthen Europe's innovation capacity in the form of novel curricula and study programs, open educational and e-learning resources, accelerators, hubs and start-ups, new products and prototypes.

engineers often do not reconsider the necessities and wishes of the occupants, their everyday lives and practices within this building.

"We were always struggling how to best demonstrate and present the applied value that anthropology can bring to the industry environment"

PEOPLE accommodates all of these aspects. To focus on the individual human and his*her needs, the alliance uses applied anthropology methods and integrates a participatory and collaborative ethnography into the people-centred development model. The students bring their skills and knowledge right from their auditorium and can apply these in practice. They do not just observe the occupants of the building. They rather explore their lives and interactions with the building and the technology inside and reveal what matters to them. This distinctive perspective and joint fertilisation between higher education institutions and industry contributes a real added-value, helps achieve innovation

and results in new products, services, and business strategies. Furthermore, it underlines the significance of social and cultural contexts within projects.

THE PEOPLE LEARNING CYCLE

The central innovation of PEOPLE lies in the implementation of people-centred learning cycles. This new method was tested and applied in all partner universities, resulting in toolkits for future applications as well as integration in existing and new study programmes – guaranteeing a permanent effect on the formation of future generations of anthropologists. The cycle is divided into four stages:

In the **preparatory stage**, industry mentors and academic instructors jointly identify primary challenges. Student teams present proposals to tackle these and formulate their research plan. Together they reflect on the common goals as well as each stakeholder's goal of the university-industry partnership.

At the beginning of the **research phase**, students conduct fieldwork through interviews, observations and focus-group discussions, and combine these with quantitative research methods and data from buildings (e.g. generated through sensors). Equipped with their anthropologic expertise, they gain insights into the occupants' needs, habits and lifestyles. At the same time, students engage with the companies to gather information about products and services, discuss the usability of products, undertake ethnographic inquiries with staff members and identify target groups outside the company.

In a third step, the conducted data gets **analysed and interpreted**. What is important to people when it comes to sustainable living and energy? What could influence them to behave in a more energy-efficient way? Could smart buildings be tweaked or data from sensors be used to support energy-efficient behaviour? With data from sensors in the buildings, students create, for example, patterns of behaviour and contrast these with data from interviews to address and explain observations.

The people-centred learning cycle concludes with the **result phase**. During evaluation meetings, students and mentors explore the emerging findings and discuss ideas to improve existing processes. Finally, the conclusions are presented to the company management in the form of student theses and recommendations for fit-for-industry products, showing the particular added-value of this anthropological perspective.

FROM FIT-FOR-ACADEMIA TO FIT-FOR-INDUSTRY

Graduates of Anthropology will also in the future face questions about their career plans. However, thanks to the innovative approach of PEOPLE, participating students have learned to give good answers. The following anecdote from project coordinator Cerinšek puts it into a nutshell: "At a certain point one company representative declared publicly to our anthropology team of students that his company would not pay for this kind of research. On the one hand this was quite a harsh statement and made some students feel disappointed; but on the other hand, the students realised that it is very different to survive in the market than sit listening to theoretical courses at University. So they completely changed their strategy and prepared a quality company-fit presentation demonstrating real added value, using the business language. As reported by students this was one of the most enriching experiences they had."

For further information on the Alliance, please consult the following links:

PEOPLE official website: <http://people-project.net>

Active8-Planet Knowledge Alliance (2020), also coordinated by Gregor Cerinšek: [Active8-Planet Project](#)

Contact: info@people-project.net

DIRECT IMPRESSIONS - Q&A with PEOPLE and the project coordinator Gregor Cerinšek:

How (and in what moment of your lives) did you develop the idea for PEOPLE?

As a group of anthropologists we were always struggling how to best demonstrate and present the applied value that anthropology in particular and social sciences in general can bring to the industry environment. We realised that on the one hand industry and business professionals are not aware of how anthropology and anthropologists with their methods can help in developing new products and services or improving existing company processes; and on the other hand, students are also not able to express it in a clear manner (or are not even aware of it since the subjects are thought in a decontextualized manner). The key is moving from the expert mind-set – from which we design and develop new products from expert engineering perspective – to the people-centred mind-set in which we place PEOPLE at the core of the development processes. And here, ethnography and qualitative methodologies from anthropology can greatly help. So the knowledge alliance programme provided a suitable platform to combine several aspects we wanted to include and tackle: the university-business cooperation, interdisciplinarity collaboration and co-creation (especially between engineering and anthropology), people-centred development, and improving teaching courses and learning experiences of anthropology students.

From your point of view, how is the project contributing to the beneficiaries' real life and activities? Could you provide examples?

PEOPLE is not considered a project in its conventional meaning but rather as an ongoing initiative and learning experiment. In the preparation phase, it started as a promising idea with a clear goal to rethink, reposition, articulate, and widely promote the added value of social sciences and humanities in general and anthropology in particular in tackling the contemporary challenges of our societies. On our journey we were (and still are) dealing

with different challenges, such as overcoming existing stereotypes; aligning different – sometimes contradictory – agendas of students, teachers, and business professionals; and connecting different expertise, perspectives, paradigms, and working principles, such as engineering mind-sets, anthropological deep insights, emic vs. etic perspectives, big data vs. thick data, ethical considerations, etc. In its essence, PEOPLE was an experiment that helped to redefine roles and change mind-sets within academia and industry when it comes to interdisciplinary university-business collaboration and co-creation between social sciences and humanities on the one hand and engineering on the other. In addition, the unconventional approaches, experimentation and reconceptualising of higher education are needed to equip students with the required and radically different understanding of the environment, society, and socio-economic processes. Both require a shift from a mono-disciplinary expert mind-set to a development approach which combines technical expertise with socio-cultural knowledge, insights, and rigorous ethical considerations. What started as a PEOPLE project has now grown into an **Active8-Planet initiative (www.active8-planet.eu)**, bringing a shift from predominantly “ego-centric” to a future-oriented “eco-centric” mind-set laying ground in shaping new applied sciences and supporting the transition towards a balanced life on our planet.

Which moment made you laugh a lot?

At our PEOPLE co-creation camp, we hosted a prominent applied anthropologist from Australia. When she had finished with her presentation the Director of the coordinating Institute, a university professor, came to pick her up to drive her to the airport (since she was a bit in a hurry). She did not know that this was our director so after she returned to Australia she wrote me a long e-mail about how she was amazed that in Slovenia the taxi drivers are so knowledgeable – and that they both had a wonderful conversation about key contemporary challenges of our world.

And what was the most rewarding moment?

When we heard that two of our PEOPLE anthropology students had got employed in the energy efficiency sector especially due to the reference and their practical experiences in the PEOPLE project working with energy companies.