

## **Case-based Methodology in Higher Education: A Pilot Application in “Organic Farming and Public Finance”**

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**Practical and theoretical background:** Widening Interdisciplinary Sustainability Education (WISE), a Strategic Partnership Project, funded under the Erasmus+, aims to build an international network of academic teachers and researchers on sustainable development issues who will develop and promote integrated interdisciplinary thinking and create useful innovative multidisciplinary tools for higher education to support the enhancement of environmental studies about sustainable development.

**Questions, purpose:** In the framework of WISE, case-based methodology was utilized. In particular, pilots were run in three countries on the topic “organic farming & public finance” to assess the changes of students’ attitudes towards the topic after having participated in a role play debate and students’ satisfaction regarding the strategy.

**Case description:** Organic agriculture is supported under the Rural Development Programmes (2nd pillar of Common Agricultural Policy, EU), providing incentive payments to farmers who voluntarily adopt organic farming systems. Support is given to compensate for income forgone and increased costs due to compliance with stringent farming practices required for organic farming.

Case-based methodology is a discrete approach to interactive group-based learning with the added advantage to evoke interest in students by placing them in a dilemma taken from a real-life example. By providing a real-life context, the students tend to put themselves into the role of the actors in the case, which facilitates student’s engagement in the activity and in the learning process. As a result students develop more complex/higher levels of cognitive learning, critical thinking and decision making capabilities.

The steps of the organic farming pilots were as follows: Firstly, a comprehensive lecture on the topic was addressed to the students in order to provide basic information on organic farming, certification and financial support. Afterwards, students were split into four interest groups (farmers, consumers, policy makers, taxpayers); support material and further sources were provided. Finally, a role playing debate took place in the class through groups’ presentations, discussions among and within groups for seeking a mutual agreement.

**Analysis:** 44 university students from three different countries and academic disciplines (Greece, Poland and Sweden) participated in the pilots. Questionnaires were administered before and after the pilots. Data analysis shows that students exhibit improved beliefs and attitudes towards organic farming as well as that they are satisfied from the exercise as compared to traditional instruction.

**Conclusion:** Given that new knowledge itself does not motivate people/student toward pro-environmental and responsible behavior and does not develop the students' competences, the WISE project proposes the case-based methodology to address Sustainability and Sustainable Development issues in higher education. This approach has proved to be effective mainly in changing students' attitudes towards organic farming and public support as well as students' satisfaction along with some positive impact on the students' interpersonal competence.

Case-based methodology stands for a socio-constructivist perspective in which the teaching staff, rather than transmitting knowledge, should play the role of facilitators developing the students' interpersonal competences (including cooperation, communication, or decision-making) and providing the students with the opportunity to solve issues of their own choice. Learning should occur as a result of the students' action and reflection. Overall, Higher Education Institutes should become an agent of change; they should develop students' citizenship competence, instead of transferring only solid knowledge.

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