

A checklist for analyzing and triggering reflection on the application of sustainability principles in higher continuing education programs

The dissemination of a culture of sustainability through higher continuing education

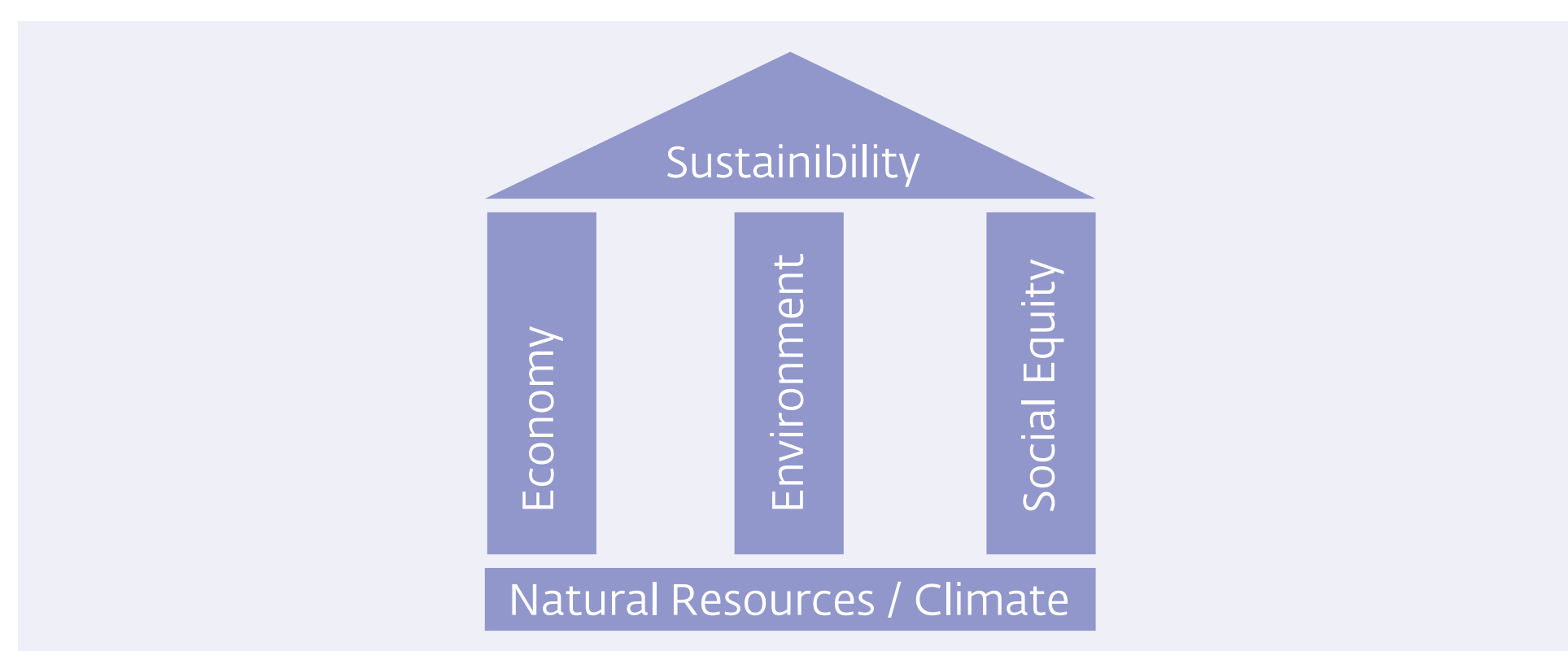
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Introduction

Higher education institutions play a key role in educating aware and engaged citizens who will participate in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Leal Filho et al., 2019). However, often, heads of study programs and lecturers don't know [how to integrate sustainability in their courses](#).

At the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), participants to continuing education are [experienced professionals](#) from various sectors. Through continuing education, they can become attentive in their daily practice and analyse the impact that their choices, actions and management methods can have on the protection and enhancement of the environment, people and culture (García-Feijoo et al., 2020).

Therefore, it is essential that [heads of study programs develop an awareness about integrating sustainability in their programs](#).



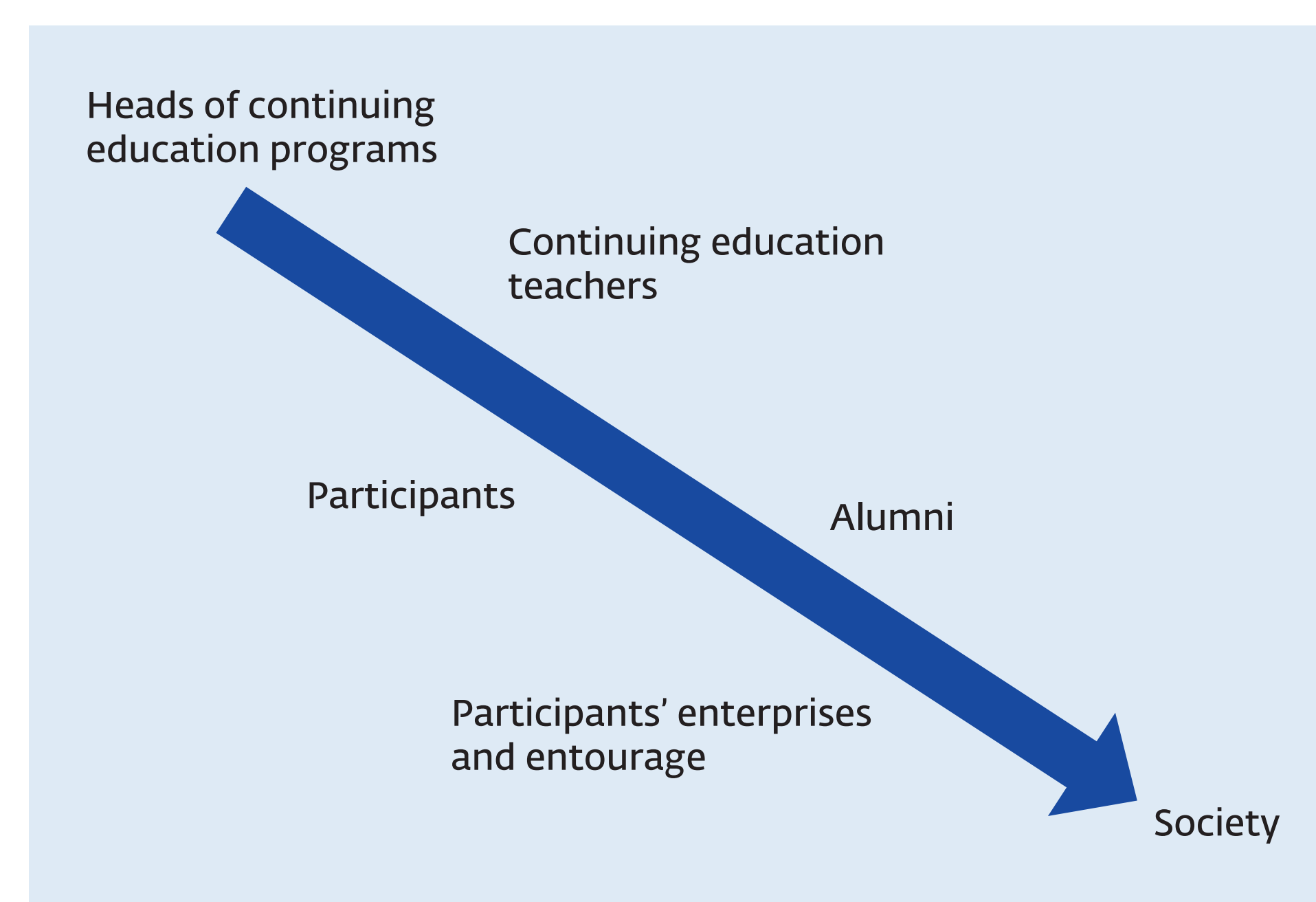
Strong sustainability (Daly, 1990): sustainability at the environmental level as the foundation of sustainability at the economic, cultural and social levels.

Objectives

The study was developed in 2021-22 for the first SUPSI sustainability report

The objectives of the study were:

- 1 Investigate the [degree of application of sustainability principles](#) in continuing education programs.
- 2 Have a [transformative](#) impact by encouraging heads of study program to reflect on the best ways to [promote and spread a culture of sustainability](#) among continuing education participants and, through them, into society.



Methods

Sample

[19 heads of study programs](#) evaluated their continuing education courses from several sectors (information technology, health, social care, arts, business and economics, construction, etc.).

Instrument

A [checklist with four dimensions of sustainability \(environmental, social, economic and cultural\)](#) and keywords related to them.

For each keyword, the heads of study programs were asked to indicate the relevance and extent of transfer and describe practices related to the keywords.

Procedure

Before and after the self-assessment with the checklist, heads of study programs participated to a kick-off and a follow-up session with the research team.

The follow-up was organised to present and discuss the results and share some considerations about the activity. This step was useful for raising awareness among the heads of study program about the extent and how the principles of sustainability are applied (or not) in their courses.

Results

[To what extent are economic, social, cultural and environmental sustainability represented in continuing education programs?](#)

The four sustainability dimensions are well and evenly represented. The environmental dimension has less coverage. Results show three tendencies (see Graph):

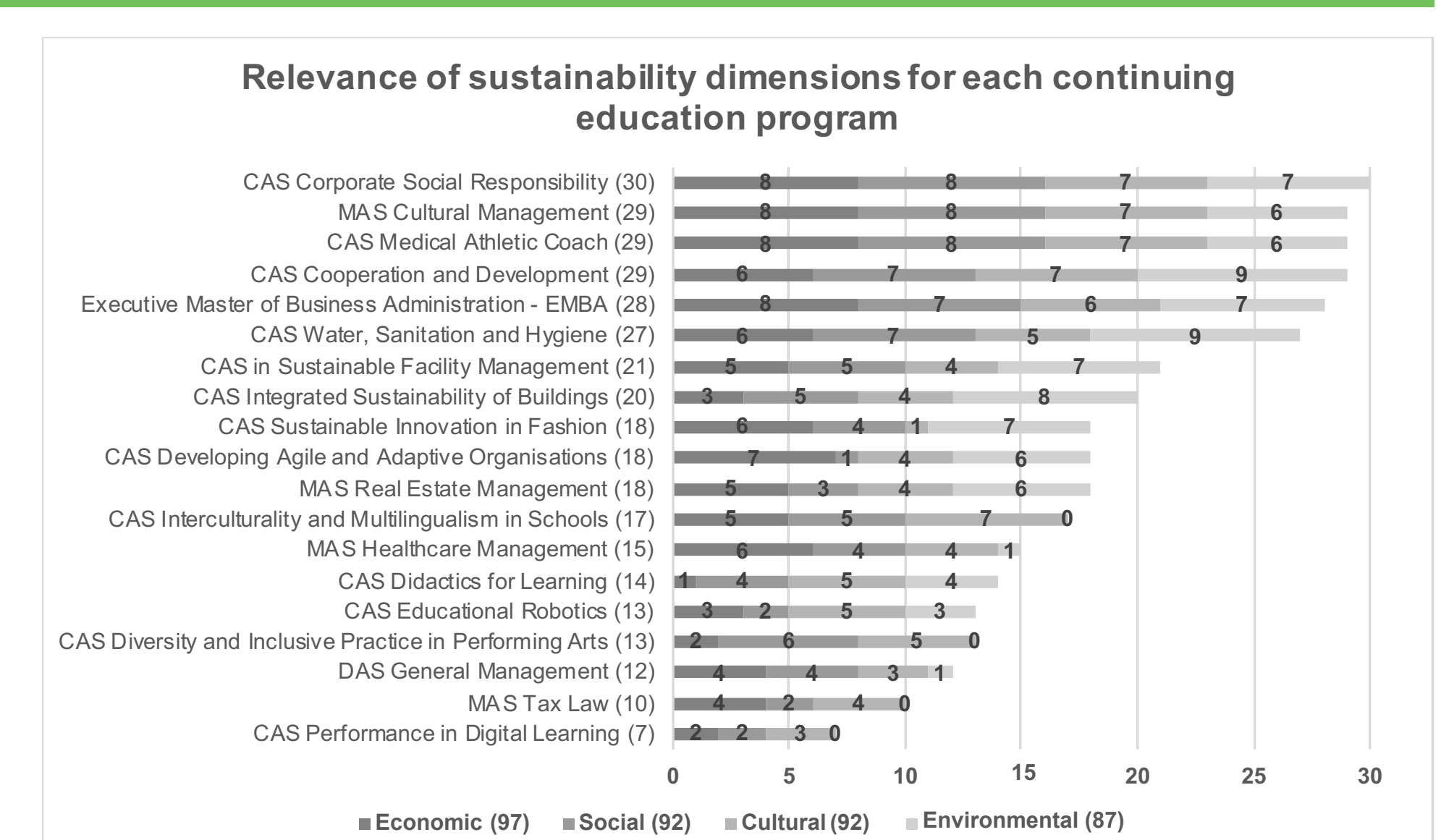
- Programs in which the four dimensions of sustainability are strongly and equally represented (e.g., Corporate Social Responsibility).
- Programs in which the four dimensions of sustainability are averagely and/or unequally represented (e.g., Sustainable Facility Management).
- Programs in which one of the four dimensions of sustainability is poorly or not represented (especially the environmental dimension). E.g., Healthcare Management.

[How are sustainability contents mainly transferred in continuing education programs?](#)

- The most widely used method for transferring sustainability related content: [lectures, webinars, conferences and papers](#) (considered 'narrow transfer').
- Few courses where sustainability is integrated into an [entire module or program](#).

[After the pilot study...](#)

Most of the heads of study programs have repositioned their course – some extensively, others in a more targeted manner – but all with the aim of integrating the four dimensions of sustainability. The newly integrated content was likely to create an awareness in participants of the impact they can have in their companies and organisations by applying themselves socially responsible behaviours.



Note: The score was calculated by assigning one point to each relevant keyword mentioned for the program. Total scores by dimension and by program are indicated in brackets.

Conclusions

The study allowed to:

- Map the coverage of sustainability principles in continuing education programs.
- Identify potential areas of improvement in terms of sustainability in continuing education programs.
- Increase the awareness of heads of study programs in terms of transversality of sustainability: several dimensions of sustainability can be integrated in a program, regardless of the discipline.

- Foster a culture of sustainability: several heads of study program became proactive in integrating sustainability in their courses.
- Set up a working group on sustainability in continuing education that promotes awareness and devises new measures to transfer sustainability values into continuing education.

References

Daly, H. E. (1990). Sustainable development: from concept and theory to operational principles. *Population and development review*, 16, 25-43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2808061>

García-Feijoo, M., Eizaguirre, A., & Rica-Aspiunza, A. (2020). Systematic review of sustainable-development-goal deployment in business schools. *Sustainability*, 12(1), 440. <https://doi.org/10.3390/SU12010440>

Leal Filho, W., Shiel, C., Paço, A., Mifsud, M., Ávila, L. V., Brandli, L. L., ... & Caeiro, S. (2019). Sustainable Development Goals and sustainability teaching at universities: Falling behind or getting ahead of the pack?. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 232, 285-294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.05.309>

Scan QR code for more information on this project!



Campus challenges

Once a year, SUPStain launches sustainability challenges to the entire SUPSI community. Adopting a playful approach, it raises the awareness of the student, administrative and academic body and spurs them to action, encouraging more sustainable collective practices in daily campus life (waste management, mobility, food, paper consumption, solidarity, volunteering, etc.). These initiatives transform SUPSI campuses into laboratories for social experimentation and create opportunities for action-research, fostering change through direct experience. Moreover, they foster a sense of belonging to a cohesive community, attentive and sensitive to sustainability issues. Finally, they provide an example for external institutions, with a multiplier effect for the territory.



Iterborea Project

Every year, SUPStain launches a different challenge. In 2023, it launched Iterborea, a digital installation to promote the use of public transport and active mobility (walking, cycling) to reach SUPSI campuses.

Iterborea is a beautiful cherry tree, depicted on a large screen at the entrance to SUPSI campuses. It is a sapling, little more than a sprout, that needs a lot of vital energy to grow and become big and majestic. Anyone who attends the campus can help it grow!

Those who reach SUPSI on foot, by bicycle or by public transport, fill up with vital energy on the way: every time they arrive on campus, they can donate it to Iterborea. To contribute to help Iterborea grow, simply scan the QR code that appears on the screen with your phone. Those who reach SUPSI by car or by motorbike unfortunately have no vital energy to give to Iterborea - they have already lost it all in the traffic on the way! Will the SUPSI community be able to donate so much vital energy to Iterborea, until it becomes a century-old tree?



SUPStain is a project of the SUPSI Undergraduate and Graduate Studies and Sustainability Group.

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University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland

SUPSI

SUPStain - The SUPSI platform for sustainability

A contribution to the transition to a more sustainable society, to motivate, inspire and support the SUPSI community in the implementation of ideas, projects, and initiatives.



SUPStain encourages the creativity and design of the student body, acting on two fronts:

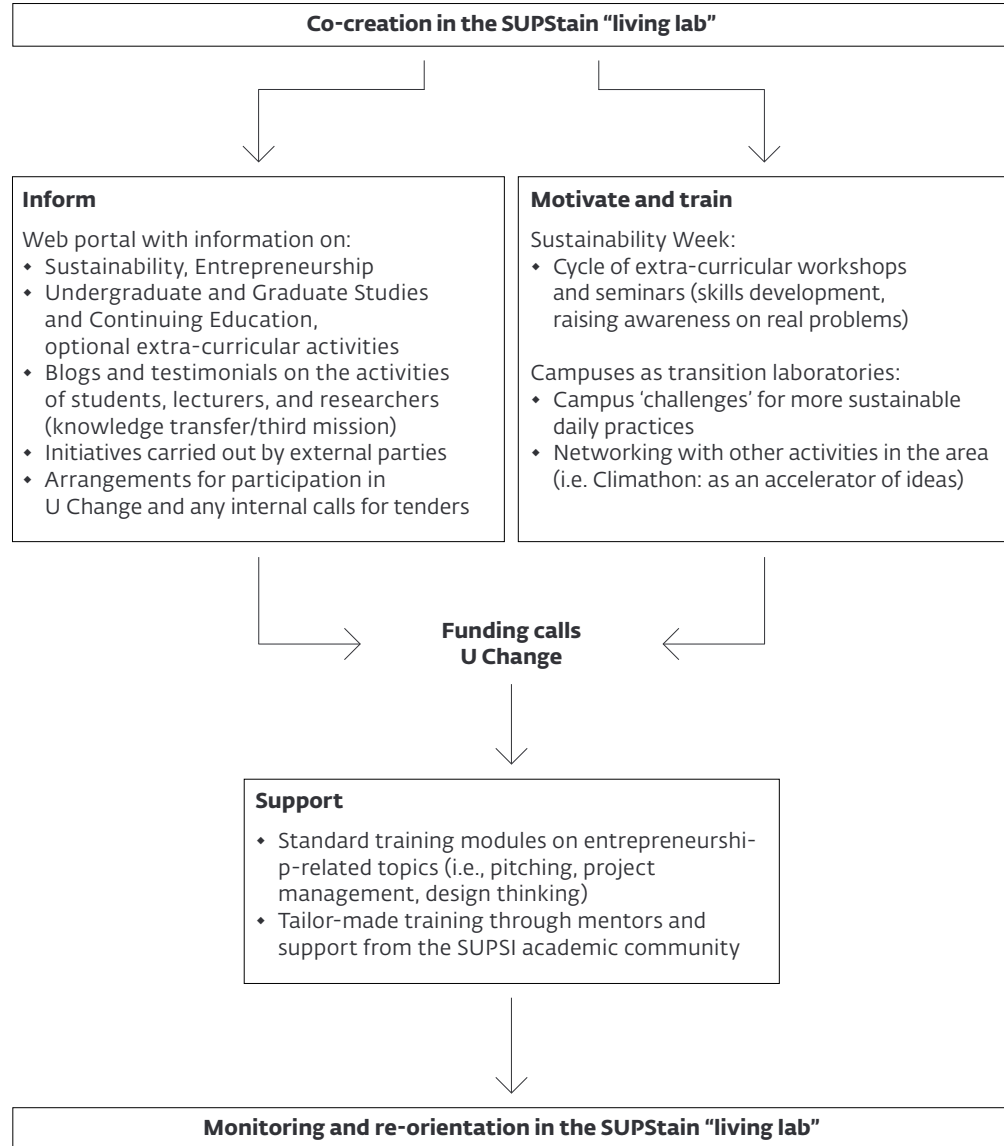
- Informs, motivates, and trains students through extra-curricular activities.
- Motivates the SUPSI academic and administrative body, to create a fertile substratum in which creativity and student projects can best fit into.

SUPStain fosters a SUPSI community sensitive to the values of sustainability, open to the contribution of all its members and to interaction with external stakeholders. In implementing the commitments enshrined in the SUPSI Charter of Sustainability, with SUPStain SUPSI becomes a laboratory of experimentation and innovation (living lab) for the benefit of the whole territory.

The web and the SUPSI student portal

The SUPSI web pages dedicated to sustainability are being expanded to offer information on key concepts, activities, and events, in the form of a blog.

Emphasis is placed on direct testimonials from students, lecturers and researchers involved in initiatives in the fields of education, applied research and innovation initiatives in favour of the local area, and knowledge transfer. In parallel, a specific space on the SUPSI student portal offers news and material aimed at the development of initiatives and projects by the student body.



Sustainability Week

To create interest, raise awareness and ensure a common pool of expertise on the principles and ways of working that underpin sustainability and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, SUPStain is promoting Sustainability Week. Designed and implemented together with the Association of SUPSI Students, it offers extra-curricular activities open to all students and interested collaborators, involving expert speakers, internal or external to SUPSI. Workshops and seminars promote learning through simulations, practical examples, and field exercises. The activities are organized on an itinerant basis in the various SUPSI sites and are held at times that are compatible with normal teaching schedules to encourage broad participation and reduce barriers to access. The first SUPSI Sustainability Week took place in March 2023.

Accompaniment

Having created the motivational base and the fertile substratum to entice students to action, SUPStain promotes the periodic U Change calls to the student body, through simple guides for accessing and using funding (rules and conditions for participation, obtaining SUPSI co-funding, reporting of the work done etc.) and by organising brief meetings to present the calls and opportunities they offer.

In addition, SUPStain participates in many events organised by SUPSI in collaboration with local actors, with its own exhibition stand or targeted thematic activities. Between 2021 and 2022, for example, SUPStain participated in the Long Night of Careers, the Entrepreneurship Fair, the Climathon and the Sustainable University Day SUD22. These initiatives act as accelerators of ideas, supporting the development of U-Change student projects.

