

Teaching and learning comparative perspectives on local democracy and climate adaptation

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Objectives

The Circle U. course “**Comparative perspectives on local democracy and climate adaptation**” was held as a combined field visit (and seminar at UniVie) between **Humboldt University of Berlin (HU-B) and University of Vienna (UniVie)**. It brought together 22 undergraduate and postgraduate students and three lecturers from both universities to learn from each other and to share and reflect on their perspectives. It aimed to equip students with skills and competencies to comparatively analyse the **democratic and political formats, instruments, and processes of integrating climate adaptation into urban planning and development**. It covered a variety of interdisciplinary and disciplinary perspectives, including geography, spatial planning, political sciences and urban studies and brought together theoretical approaches with practical experiences. Over the course of one semester, students worked intensively in **intra- and inter-university teams** on selected sub-topics related to local democratic processes for climate change adaptation, such as scalar dimension of climate-just urban development, or citizen participation in climate adaptation programmes.



Motivation

This course was initiated and designed as part of the **Circle U. European University Alliance**. It brought together two Circle U. universities (UniVie and HU-B) and two of the Circle U. Knowledge Hubs (Climate and Democracy), represented by two of their Academic Chairs (Univ.-Prof. Dr.ⁱⁿ Kerstin Krellenberg (UniVie, Climate), Univ.-Prof. Dr. Henning Nuißl (HU-B, Democracy), which enabled fruitful comparative learning and knowledge exchanges across themes, cities and institutions. With two Circle U. partner universities, the course started at a small-scale but has revealed potential for upscaling in the future. Moreover, students benefited from contributing with posters and videos to the first **Circle U. Climate Day at University of Vienna (June 5, 2025)**, which was attended by researchers, local government practitioners, civil society organisations, among others. Finally, the course team was keen to closely monitor, document and reflect on this course in formats that can be made accessible to other interested Circle U. partners. Hence, **COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) funding** was acquired and used to develop student surveys, detailed documentation and a “translation” of the course content, pedagogical approach and organisational aspects into a **Course Guide**.

Methodology

The course was conducted during **summer term 2025** and consisted of **joint field visits in Vienna and Berlin, online meetings** to prepare this work, and **seminar series** at each of the universities. Specifically, the components were:

1.
A **preparatory online seminar series** that frames common themes and the methodology of the course.

2.
Tandem group work (students work in teams of 4) to research initiatives along 6 sub-themes, including environmental justice, urban social movements, direct democracy and multi-scalar approaches to climate change adaptation.

3.
Complementary in-person seminars that are conducted separately at each of the institutions to prepare for the role of hosts in their own city as well as to reflect on lessons learned.

4.
Two 5-7day **field trips** to/in each of the cities (June and July respectively). This included participation in, and contributions to, the Circle U. Climate Day at University of Vienna.

Outputs

The students prepared a series of outputs related to their thematic research, including a 2-3 hour time slot that was developed by each group for the excursion, and individual reflective blog posts. Preparing these outputs facilitated learning not only regarding the content, but also in terms of soft skills such as teamwork, facilitation and moderation, and engagement with partners from practice.

Wenn Hitze nicht alle gleich trifft!

Vulnerable Gruppen in der Klimawandelanpassung

Baba Gastherme, Hallo Zukunft?

Der Umstieg von fossilen zu erneuerbaren Heizsystemen in der Stadt Wien

Wien baut Oasen für alle

Wie Wien mit Parklets gegen urbane Hitze vorgeht

Euer Wien, Eure Idee?

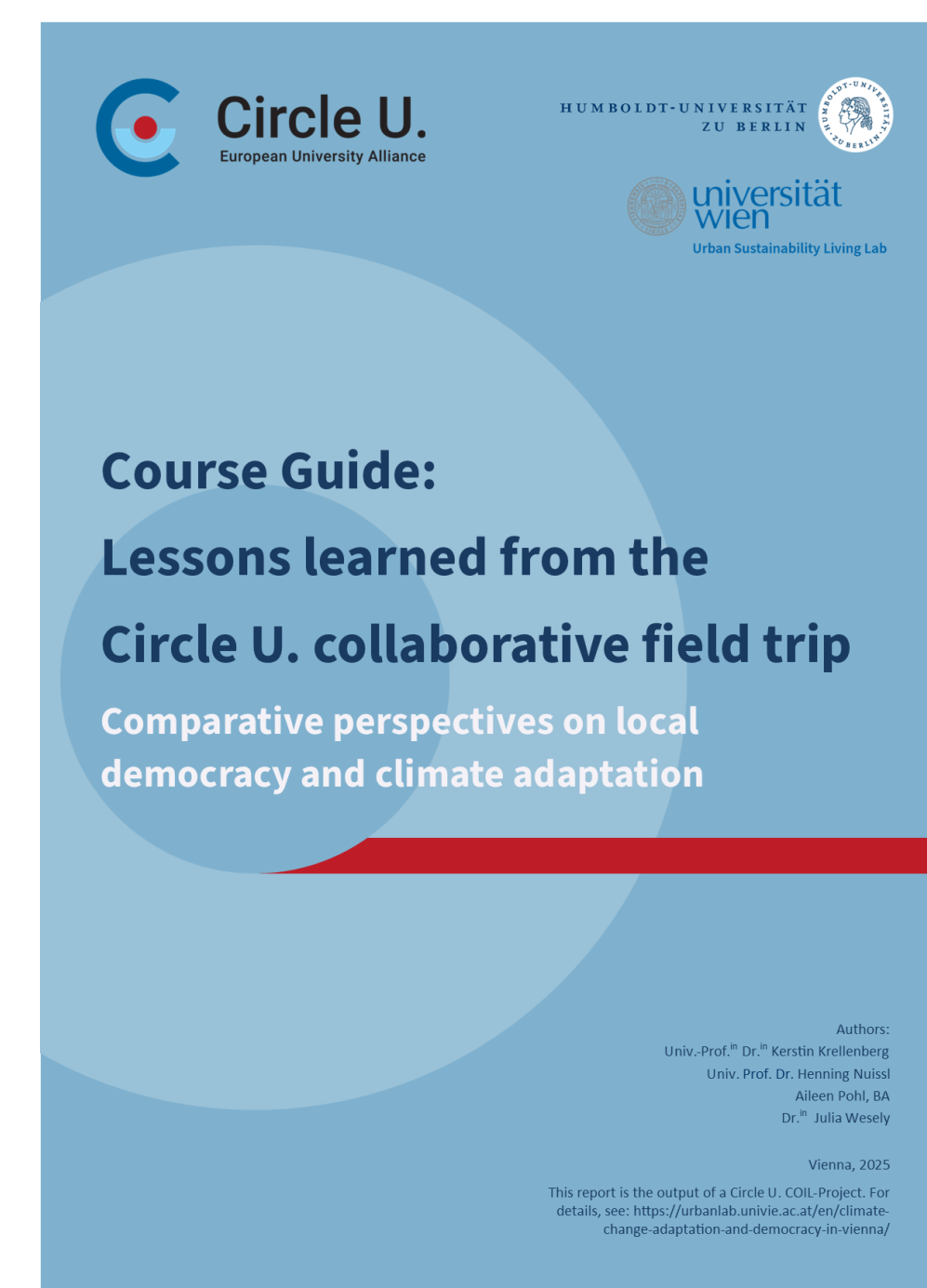
Fokus Klimakommunikation — Eine Analyse des Wiener Klimateams

4 student posters on urban heat, renewable energies, cool spots and climate teams in Vienna, which were presented at the Circle U. Climate Day.

Explore the **video playlist** of student contributions to the Circle U. Climate Day



Explore the **video** of the Circle U. Climate Day



You can find further student reflections on our website: —→



“*Before the course, I foremost learnt about participatory processes in Vienna and the direct comparison with Berlin opened up a new perspective. Comparative learning helped me to critically analyse known structures, and to better understand complex social challenges.*”

(Jakob Kühnberger, student at University of Vienna, translated quote)

Outcomes

Based on the course evaluation, students stated that they had learned strongly about the content, group work and facilitation methods. For their further studies, they mentioned the following effects:

- Greater openness and appreciation of expert inputs from practice and **learning "in the field"**,
- Competencies to do **comparative work in an international context**, and
- An expanded "**map**" of **specific initiatives in the two cities** which can be interesting to study further.

Lecturers experienced and reflected on the challenges and opportunities of co-teaching across universities. The shared teaching experience was particularly challenging in regard to logistics and coordination of course content and methods at a distance, as well as assuming different roles as guests and hosts in the respective cities. However, it also stimulated fruitful discussions and supported the interdisciplinary and multi-perspective character of the course. Insights from designing, planning, implementing and monitoring this course can be found in the **Course Guide**.



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Outlook

In addition to the learning experiences of students and teachers, the course format strengthened the relationship between UniVie and HU-B, and between Circle U. Climate Chairs/Hubs.

One of the central questions for the future is therefore **how such formats can become more institutionalized** through, for example, embedding them in existing study programmes or long-term partnerships. Hence, in addition to offering a Course Guide that allows for expanding similar course offers, it is essential to find ways of building on what has already been learned and making sure that international collaborative courses like this become part of universities and partnerships in a sustainable manner. This can ensure that the experiences and networks that originate between students, teachers and staff do not just remain isolated projects, but can instead **develop long-lasting collaborations**.

About COIL

COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) is an innovative way of teaching, which brings together students from different courses and universities in formats starting from a single joint session to a whole seminar. The course design is flexible, as the key focus is on getting teams of international students to work together using digital tools. The development of the Course Guide „Comparative perspectives on local democracy and climate adaptation” was supported by COIL Funding.

