FACILITATING CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR THROUGH EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHING CIVIC PARTICIPATION TO FUTURE CIVIL SERVANTS IN GERMANY

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Abstract

To counter current political trust and legitimacy crises, political actors in western democracies are introducing participatory involvement measures. For these measures to be effective, certain prerequisites are necessary. Firstly, civil servants' attitude to public engagement must be positive, they need to appreciate and be willing to encourage deliberation processes and inclusion (willingness). Secondly, public sector officials need to be appropriately equipped with practical skills to know how to introduce and manage civic participation (skills). This paper argues that afore mentioned prerequisites are not sufficiently present, and that education of future civil servants needs to be adjusted in order to qualify graduates of public administration adequately. The paper outlines the structure and methods employed in a practice-oriented course at a German school of public administration.

1. Introduction

"In an age that is often defined by 'polarisation, populism, and pessimism' [1], the future of public governance and – more broadly – of democracy are prominent concerns. Books about democracy's end, death or crisis have proliferated in the past few years." [2] In fact, the trust citizens have in institutions, and also their degree of formal participation – such as voter turnout or membership in political parties – has been decreasing in Germany since the mid-1980s [3–6]. But legitimacy is one of the most crucial factors for stable institutions [7, 8]. To recover from legitimacy crisis and regain trust, "[a]cross the globe, public authorities are increasingly using representative deliberative processes to involve citizens more directly in solving some of the most pressing policy challenges." [2]

Deliberative processes nowadays take place in differentiated public spheres through various communication channels within a virtual political system [9, 10]. Participatory initiatives by authorities and by citizens are embedded in the digital systems that impacts power and influence. Hence, a democratic divide between "those who do and do not use the multiple political resources available on the internet for civic engagement" [10: 12]. This leads to the question of how digital technologies impact the public sphere.

In line with Kneuer [11], we adopt the view that digital transformation and the change of political communication do not operate in a social vacuum, and the impact of digital media depends on the actor's motives for its use and therefore needs a frame in which e-democracy tools can be effective. Consequently, democratic processes can be either undermined or supported through online-interactions. The crucial factor here is not (only) the technology itself, but the qualities and capacities of political institutions and public administration, as well as the citizens' expectations and

capacities. On this basis, the public sector can contribute to institutional stability by implementing civic engagement and participation, and thereby improve both public service itself, as well as the quality of public discourse contributing to the responsiveness of a democratic system.

Implementing (digital) participatory measures requires civil servants who hold favorable opinions on public engagement, and who appreciate and encourage deliberation processes and inclusion (*willingness*). Furthermore, public sector officials must be appropriately equipped to introduce and manage civic participation (*skill*). To implement and diffuse participatory measures in public administration, university curricula must be adapted in order to qualify graduates adequately. The paper outlines the structure and methods employed in a practice-oriented course at a German university of applied sciences of public administration in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg focusing on students´ willingness to implement citizen participation in their future professional occupation. The preliminary evidence shows that the course is successful among students and practice-partners alike. Overall, the paper illustrates how universities of public administration can contribute to (digital) civic participation by collaborating with municipalities and empowering students to manage and drive civic participation in the public sector.

Firstly, we describe what politicians, in this case the regional government of Baden-Württemberg, expects from public administration and public administration universities as regards to citizen participation. Secondly, we show that public administration education does not meet these political expectations yet: future civil servants are not prepared well enough to apply and diffuse sustainable citizen participation. Thirdly, we give an example of how a practice-oriented course in civic participation can improve education curricula and facilitate civic participation in the public sector.[1]

2. Political setting: Public governance in Baden-Württemberg

As pointed out in the introduction the promotion of public involvement and with it the introduction of participatory democratic elements ranks high on the political agenda. By upgrading participation measures and new democratic innovation forms, citizens become structurally involved in the political process as regards to the preparation and the taking of decisions [13]. The state of Baden-Württemberg serves as an instructive example here, as in recent years it has intensified public involvement.

Baden-Württemberg, a regional state in South-West Germany, has been headed by the Minister-President Winfried Kretschmann (Green Party) since 2011. Kretschmann led the coalition between the Green Party (Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen) and the social democratic party (SPD) from 2011 to 2016 and since 2016 the coalition between the Greens and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).[2] After the German regional state elections in 2011, the government set out four central goals. One of the goals was that Baden-Württemberg should become a model regional state of democratic participation and appointed Gisela Erler as State Counsellor[3] for Civil Society and Civic Participation in the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg – a function that had not existed before 2011. Her unit developed a lot of starting points and measures for more citizen participation [14].

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[1] This leans on another study that deals with the facilitation of digital transformation through education [12].
[2] Elections will be held in March 2021.
[3] With the appointment of State Counsellor, Minister-Presidents can underline political domains where they consider the matter to be important.

In order to build the setting for cutting-edge models for participatory and digital democratic initiatives, Baden-Württemberg introduced several legal norms and regulations to enforce citizen participation, for example the regional government authority procedure law (Landesverwaltungsverfahrensgesetz LVwVfG), the local government law (Gemeindeordnung GemO), the law for freedom of information (Informationsfreiheitsgesetz) or the administration regulation for public participation in the planning and admission process (Verwaltungsvorschrift VwV) [13: 11] [15].

To achieve this, the government of Baden-Württemberg believes that education and training in connection with citizen participation is important for professionals in public administration. Its aim is to build capacities and participation competence at the staff college (Führungsakademie) as well as the two (regional) universities of applied sciences of public administration in Kehl and Ludwigsburg. The goal is to improve education to achieve transparency, citizen-friendliness and administrative efficiency [16]. While the underlying rationale is comprehensible, it assumes that public administration schools currently provide education programs that prepare (future) professionals in public administration sufficiently to be able to organize and implement sustainable and innovative citizen participation – a claim that must be substantiated, by taking a closer look at the current teaching practice and curricula.

3. Fitness for purpose or fitness for transformation?

The following section will show that public administration education does not yet live up to the political expectations. Future civil servants are not prepared sufficiently to apply and diffuse sustainable citizen participation, as curricula – content and didactics – change slowly in universities of applied sciences for public administration. Such organizational inertia has interested many researchers – among the best known are Hannan and Freeman. In their article "Structural Inertia and Organizational Change" (1984) the authors mention the difficult change of a university's curriculum as an example of structural inertia [17]. This also holds true in the case under review, the curricula of universities of applied sciences of public administration: despite political and societal expectations to upgrade citizen participation in public administration they are slow to adapt.

In the last decades, a first change of expectations in Germany took place from a professional rule- and hierarchy orientation to a managerial market and competition orientation (new public management). The second change was to shift towards community and participation orientation (public governance). Hence, there is a growing chasm between the expectations (societal expectations fueled by new management models) and administrative personnel's established values and patterns of attitude. As described, it can occur in the state-administration-society triangle that the state has different expectations than the citizens towards (new) public administration employees (and their education). Especially academic institutions that are attached to state institutions where historical traditions and hierarchical structures are deeply rooted, are changing the curriculum more slowly. Interestingly, in the here studied case of a university of applied sciences, the academic institution is subordinated to a ministry of the regional state of Baden-Württemberg. Schröter and Röber (2015) point out that one of the most crucial reasons for the gap lay in the socialization processes which are the *education for public sector employment* and can be analyzed on the basis of three dimensions in education programs – the key for the professional socialization: 1. institutional characteristics and status; 2. course content; 3. teaching and education didactics [18].

Nevertheless, the public sector and its institutions in Baden-Württemberg are aware of these shifts and have therefore started to implement new teaching and education impulses promoting an open,

transparent administration with innovative citizen participation. Despite the strong focus on judicial content in the curricula of universities of applied sciences on a federal level in Germany, desk research on existing trainings and education forms on citizen participation education illustrates a certain level of change. On the one hand many trainings for public servants for citizen participation[4] in Germany and hence Baden-Württemberg exist.[5] This "secondary" socialization is important as public services face aging workforce challenges in order to catch up with new methods of participation. On the other hand, public administration universities of applied sciences/ polytechnique universities are preparing students dual system educational programs in Germany, to join the civil service at senior level.[6]

Drawing on the sample of public administration universities of applied sciences [20] that are a member of the so-called rector conference, an umbrella institution for 37 universities and academies[7], respective curricula available online were evaluated regarding the availability of citizen participatory courses.[8]

Among the 37 members 14 offer public administration B.A. programs whereas the other universities offer mostly financial, police, archive or judicature programs, 3 universities do not have self-contained websites. The desk research shows that 10 universities include courses on citizen participation, but only 7 universities offer entire modules.[9] We are aware that not every course or event on the topic of citizen participation might be published on the website of each university. Nevertheless, this explorative desk research shows that citizen participation is integrated in several public administration universities of applied sciences in Germany (see figure 1 below) – even in some universities with special orientations as for example police or archive colleges.

[4] To look further: W. Jann and S. Veit, 2015 [19].

[5] I.e. Führungsakademie or Digitalakademie in Baden-Württemberg

[6] There are 5 levels (or grades) in the German civil service. For the three lowest levels students are prepared by academies, the second highest by public administration universities of applied sciences and for the highest degree in Universities (minimum: Master degree)

[7] 38 are mentioned on the website, but one university is listed twice (Hochschule Harz, Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften), http://www.rkhoed.de/hochschulen/

[8] In our desk research, we compare not only universities of applied sciences in Baden-Württemberg, but universities of applied sciences throughout Germany as the implementation of citizen participation in public administration is a nationwide objective.

[9] Apart from curricula in the member universities of the rector conference, a well-documented example for citizen participation in curriculum can be found at the Hochschule Darmstadt, https://creativebureaucracy.org/program/ fest ival-2020/innovative-ausbildung-fur-die-verwaltung-am-beispiel-des-grosten-stadtentwicklungsprojektes-aller-zeiten- in-pfungstadt-hessen/; Besides, only one Master of participation exists in Germany (Master´s study program Public Planning and Participation at the University of Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg).
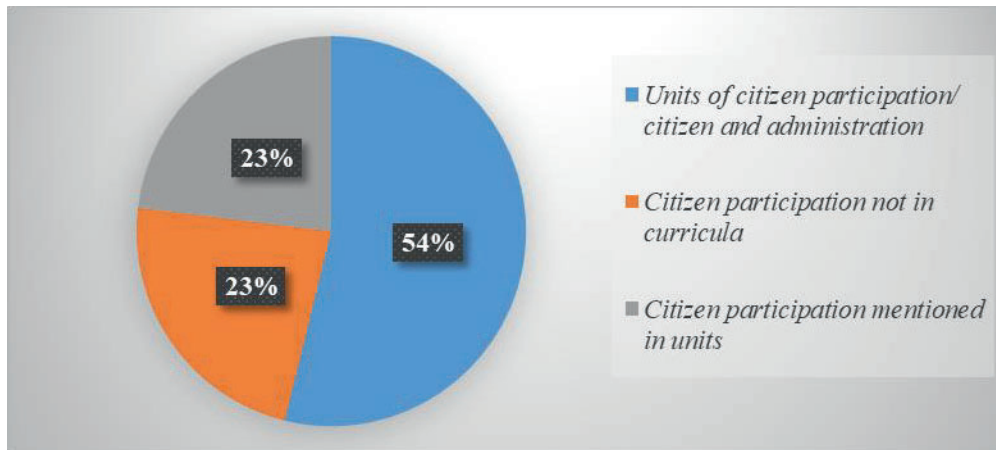
**Figure 4*: Citizen participation in curricula of B.A. public administration programs
at universities of applied sciences for public administration***

We conclude from this desk research that the universities of applied sciences which offer B.A. programs of public administration preparing for the second most senior public service grade have already adapted to the demands to include citizen participation in their curricula.

Teaching the content of citizen participation is an important prerequisite to introduce participatory involvement measures in public administration effectively. Apart from this prior condition, civil servants' attitude on public engagement must be positive, they need to appreciate and want to encourage deliberation processes and inclusion. Consequently, we studied patterns of attitude regarding (digital) citizen participation among students. Insights of the survey are presented in the next section.

4. Patterns of attitude

The survey was addressed to students in the Bachelor study program in Public Administration graduating in spring 2021 and looks at patterns of attitude concerning citizen participation – especially digital citizen participation. The dual program includes compulsory practical work experience in traineeships combined with vocational education. The program provides salaried education and a secure job as students often become civil servants after signing the study-and-employment contract [21]. Consequently, the scientific profile of the University of Applied Sciences Ludwigsburg is practice-oriented research. Moreover, as students are aspiring to have a career in the civil service, their role-identification is marked by their future professional status.

We therefore chose items to gather insights concerning the student´s state of knowledge about – mainly digital – citizen participation and their attitude to (digital) citizen participation and their change of attitude concerning citizen participation. As the students´ future positions are very often in municipal administrations, the study is focused on experiences on a local level. We asked students graduating their B.A. in spring 2021. The survey's response rate was about 30 percent of a statistical population of 300 graduating students (n=85). The questions focus on local citizen participation as graduates mostly work in decentralized administration units.

The first question addressed the educational experience of students. While one out of five students had never taken a course on citizen participation (21%), 36 % had singular courses and 42 % completed a learning course module. For one, this finding seems to support the claim that universities of applied science have started to alter their curricula in line with political expectations.

Secondly, it also reflects a certain level of willingness among students to reflect on the issue of citizen participation. It does however not tell, if students "believe" in citizen participation.

The belief in the power of citizen participation could be "sparked" during the practical training that future bureaucrats have to go through. However, the practical experience of citizen participation seems to be limited in the case of the students participating in our survey: more than two thirds had no or little experience in public participation during their studies and one third did not encounter the use of public participation tools during their on-the-job trainings. Another possibility to engage students may be their own active experience in citizen's digital participation, but as the survey shows, personal experience seems to be rather limited. Students have marginally experienced digital citizen participation practically (except online surveys) – concerning online citizen dialogue with the mayor they have almost no experience at all.

	Never used the tools	Little experience	Sum (no or little experience)
(Official) municipal Facebook pages (1)	51%	27%	78%
Signed an online-petition (2)	56%	28%	84%
Online tools for complaints (3)	74%	10%	84%
Online Survey (4)	2 %	12 %	14%
(Official) municipal or regional Online participation Platforms (5)	54%	28%	82%
Online citizen dialogue with the mayor (6)	88%	1%	89%

Figure 5: Percentage of students´ who never or rarely used the following tools to participate politically[10]

In contrast to digital, informal citizen participation, almost all students vote always at municipal elections. But when it comes to the engagement in political parties, a small minority of the students are active members. Interestingly, 45 percent of the surveyed students[11] cannot in any way picture themselves participating in a political party in the future.[12]

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[10] Answer categories: (1) I have been on an official municipal Facebook page. a) No, never b) I have already liked something or added an emoji c) I comment or post sometimes d) I am regularly active on one or several official municipal Facebook page(s) e) I comment, post, and I am administrator of one or several official municipal Facebook page(s); (2) I participate actively via online petitions. a) I cannot picture myself participating via online petitions b) No, not yet c) I wanted to, but have not had the time yet d) Yes, at least once e) Yes, signed, administrated or initiated (3) I have used only tools for complaints. a) No, not at all b) No, not yet, but I would be interested in c) I already have visited an online tool for complaints, but have not communicated any complaint d) I have at least once communicated a complaint e) I already have practical experience as administrator of online tools for complaints (4) I am versed with online surveys. a) strongly agree e) strongly disagree (5) I use (official) municipal or regional online participation platforms to participate. a) never e) often (6) I have already been involved in online citizen dialogues with the mayor a) Not at all b) I have been on platforms on which it is possible to exchange with the mayor c) I have already been observer of online citizen dialogues with a mayor d) I discussed in an online citizen dialogue e) I gained experience in organizing an online citizen dialogue

[11] 95 percent of the surveyed students are between 20 and 30 years old. 79% of the students´ home municipality has less than 30.000 inhabitants.

[12] Possible explanations for this result: 1. Public service employees are required to be politically neutral in their professional role; 2. Reflects the general tendency in the total population.

	No engagement	High engagement
Engaged in a political party	87%	6%
Vote at local elections	0% (vote never)	96% (vote always)

Figure 6: Traditional political participation among graduating students

These results show that interviewed students mainly participate in classic participation formats of representative democracies (elections). Approximately half of the surveyed students gained practical experience in on-the-job trainings. Multiple responses concerning the formats in on-the-job trainings were surveys, participation for planned construction projects[13], information events for citizens, question times and public petitions.

Concerning the attitude, only few respondents think that citizen participation incurs high costs and the administration hardly benefits, but the majority agrees that local participation can strengthen the citizen´s confidence toward public administration and that it is a municipality's
duty that all citizens can use offered participation tools.
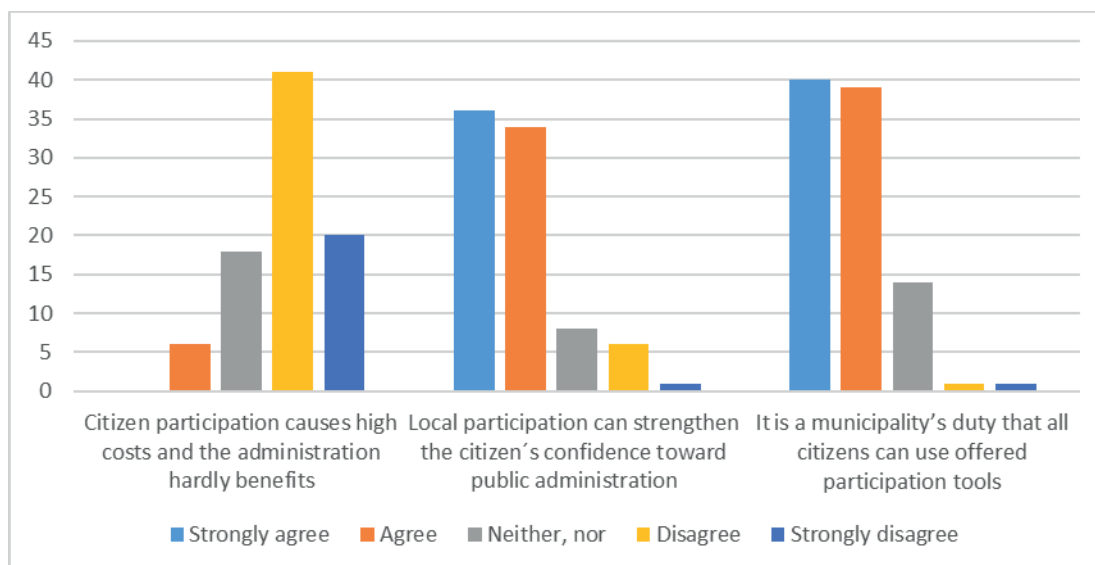
Figure 4: Potential advantages and disadvantages of citizen participation in administrations

And whereas most of the respondents agree that digital participatory tools are a valuable completion to classic participatory tools and that they can activate targeted population groups more than through the use of classic participation instruments, the minority of the respondents think that local civil servants support digital participation. This contrast is very interesting. Confirming this contrast, students "would actively implement citizen participation in their future workplace if their professional environment is not against it" only with a very slight majority. And despite the mostly positive, not enthusiastic, but rather positive, opinion on advantages of citizen participation, only a minority of the respondents "would actively implement digital citizen participation in their future workplace if their professional environment is not against it". Furthermore, over half of the students assume that citizen participation prolongs procedures.

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[13] Obligatory in public work

To sum up the empirical insights, most of the students attended at least one course of citizen participation during their studies. At the same time, their practical experience with and willingness to implement measures of citizen participation is rather limited. Hence, applying more knowledge and practical experience is important to gain confidence to initiate and implement innovative participation.

To support transformation towards good citizen participation in administrations, courses on citizen participation need to offer practical knowledge as it increases the probability and the willingness to apply knowledge (on participatory methods). Especially positive experiences with innovative citizen participation motivates individuals to share their knowledge with their environment and to act as multiplicators. The next section lines out how such education courses could be conceptualized.

5. The course module: Municipality, Administration, Citizen

Managing real-world problems needs both theoretical and practical competencies. Since graduates have problems transferring theoretical knowledge to the reality of daily work [22] we chose the method of problem-based learning. Additionally, the students have to manage time and resources, as well as their task and role differentiation. They work in small teams with teachers as advisers [23].

The starting point of the course always focuses on a real case. In 2020 this case was an ideas competition funded by the regional state of Baden-Württemberg to finance local online marketplaces in municipalities [24]. 7 municipalities won the competition. Hereafter, in a practice-oriented way, the students were split into groups and one municipality was assigned to each group. The aim was that at the end of the course the student groups develop a local participation concept for the municipal stakeholders to accompany the development of an online market place as part of a local way of becoming a smart city.

The setting of the module is based on applying what has been heard in small groups in parallel to the competencies developed in the face-to-face classes.

This method allowed students to apply the theoretical knowledge, they were taught in accompanying courses. At the end of the module, students present their communication and participation concept (3 to 4 pages per student) including drafts for advertisements, mock-ups etc. for the online market place to the mayor of "their" city.

To identify the course content, we worked through different concepts of participation and identified key components of the module, which are compiled in the following figure:
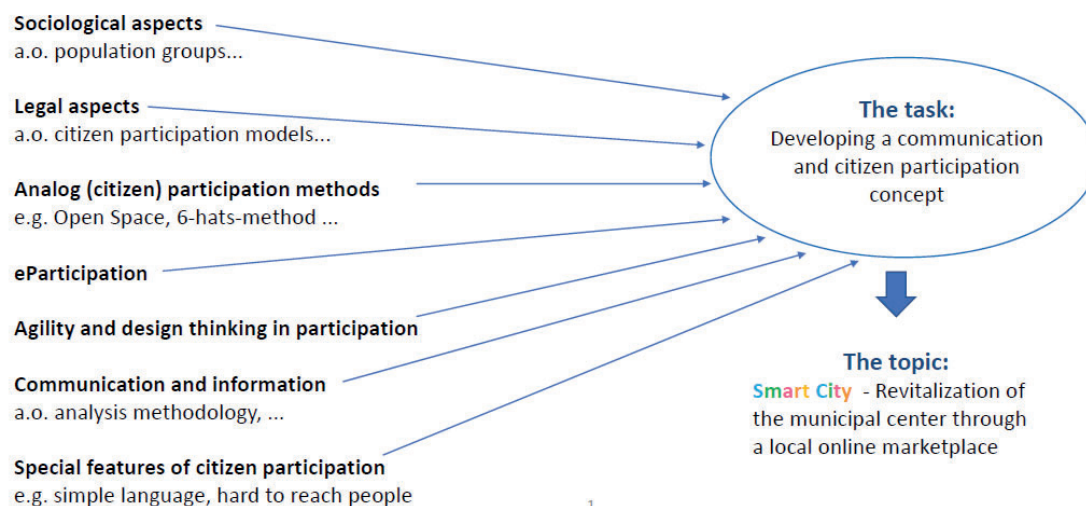
Figure 5: Content of the course module "Municipality, Administration, Citizen"

To learn to minimize risks of participation projects students simultaneously need to learn to minimize them by using agile methods of project management. Therefore, the whole group of students (up to 50 people) should be split into teams e.g. maximum five people. They then work as a project team and enhance their abilities of collaboration and team-work as well. Each team must use a collaboration platform of their choice and a learning platform [1], giving them the additional possibility of extending their competences in digital literacy, interaction and learning. Each team has to solve the task for one special city.[14]

6. Discussion

Implementing citizen participation and therefore strengthening transparent administration can be considered an uncontested political goal. In order to obtain it, the educational content and didactics for future civil servants need to be realigned. Moreover, we found in our survey that graduating students have little practical competence of online participation tools. So more practical courses are needed as they can offer positive experiences concerning citizen participation and foster students´ willingness and skills to implement more and better citizen participation in administrations.

Courses teaching practical know-how on innovative citizen participation are not yet standard in B.A. programs of public administration in universities of applied sciences in Germany, and few education best practices have been published. The survey results show that despite a relatively positive attitude towards citizen participation, the will to implement – especially online citizen participation – in future workplaces is rather low. In order to increase practical competencies, we presented a practice-oriented course in which 50 students could prepare and experience the development of a citizen participation concept for a local online marketplace in 7 municipalities.

In light of the empirical limitations of the results presented in this paper, we believe that carrying out a long-term survey of students who have participated in courses on citizen participation would be very useful and show which didactics and contents are effective. In addition, an international

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[14] Unfortunately, we did not test the impact of the new course design on the willingness of students to implement measures of citizens' participation, which would have been possible by administering the survey before and after course participation to relevant students. The authors will pursue such an "impact assessment" in the upcoming teaching cycle.

comparative study would help to find out where citizen participation is already well integrated in educational programs of civil servants and how historical patterns influence the capacity for transformation in connection with citizen participation in public sector education.

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