CHARTER OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ONLINE COURSE CONTENT:
INTRODUCTION TO THE EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IMPLEMENTED BY DSW UNIVERSITY OF LOWER SILESIA 2024-2025

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OBJECTIVE

As part of the process of developing the course "Introduction to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)", all partners organised focus groups regarding the course curriculum in their universities. The aim was to explore participants' perceptions about the course structure, content and learning outcomes, as well as its relevance and adaptation to the local contexts. Additionally, the goal was to identify possible areas for improvement to ensure the course effectively addresses the expectations and requirements of a diverse target audience.

The four focus groups were conducted by the partners over a period of three months. Discussions were moderated by project researchers and involved university teachers, researchers, doctoral students, master's students, and representatives of civil society organisations. More specifically: 16 participants from the DSW University of Lower Silesia, 12 participants from the University of Gothenburg, 9 participants from the University of Algarve, and 8 participants from University Milano-Bicocca.

Summaries of comments and recommendations from the focus group discussions are presented under the following themes:

1. Course title

2. Credentials

3. Participants' profile and its relevance for the course design

4. Course learning outcomes and assessment

5. Course content

6. Teaching/learning methods and student involvement

7. List of obligatory and additional reading

COURSE TITLE

The course title was positively evaluated, primarily due to its clarity and simplicity, making it easily understandable for the intended audience. However, participants identified certain challenges and suggestions for improvement. It was noted that the current title closely overlaps with existing courses at the participants' universities. This overlap could potentially lead to confusion or redundancy within the existing academic offerings.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Adapt course title based on local university's current academic offerings to avoid overlapping or confusion.

CREDENTIALS

The certificate awarded upon completion of the course should constitute an attractive factor for different professional groups. More specifically:

i. **Doctoral students:** the award of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – ECTS (academic credits) represents a clear motivation, particularly for those who need to complete extra-curricular credits to reach the number needed to finalise their training.

ii. **Childhood Educators and Primary and Secondary School Teachers:** certification can meet mandatory training requirements, benefiting teachers who need to fulfil specific accreditations for their career progression and/or continuous professional development.

iii. **University Teachers:** ECTS can be used as a contribution to academic career progression.

iv. **Public Administration Technicians and Professionals:** ECTS can be recognised as equivalence for career progression.

v. **Other professionals:** for trainees in technical areas, ECTS complement training may be required by the labour market and contribute to obtaining professional qualifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Include the logos of the promoting institutions on the certificate.

- Explicit reference to the skills developed during the training, for example: developed skills in building ESD intervention programmes.

PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE COURSE DESIGN

The target group was considered not clearly defined as the course seems open to a wide audience (external stakeholders, even 'generic' individuals) but the content and methods seem more 'academically oriented'. Therefore, there is a need to clarify whether the main aim of the course is to educate for sustainable development or to promote direct actions related to the theme. It is also important to highlight what kind of previous knowledge – if any – is required for participation at the course and provide good reasons as to why participants should apply. In addition, aligning the course to participants' needs and backgrounds should also be considered when planning the education.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Clarify the main aim of the course. If the aim is to train educators, the focus should be on developing pedagogical, communicative, and mediation skills (educating to act). If the aim is to train direct action agents, the skills to be developed are more practical, oriented towards activism, organisational management, and the implementation of concrete projects (acting directly in the context of sustainable development).

- Indicate specific skills and competences of the course graduate, i.e. what specific skills are to be developed and what participants can share with others in their communities.

- Gather information about the participants – such as their prior knowledge, motivations and expectations – right at the start of the training, to align the course with their needs and interests. This initial information should be continually reviewed and integrated, ensuring that the participants' objectives are considered.

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

The learning outcomes (LO) were assessed as relevant and meeting the course requirements. However, issues related to the ways of defining effects as well as linguistic inaccuracies were identified during the focus groups. Attention was also drawn to the need to expand collective activities/tasks to be performed in a group or in pairs.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **LO1:** Clarify what the formulation "in various contexts" refers to, to avoid ambiguity.

- **LO2:** Replace "Demonstrate knowledge" with "Formulate an assessment".

- **LO4:** Specify what the term "communities" refers to by providing examples in parentheses.

- **LO5:** Specify the meaning of the expected outcome in more detail, e.g. "Evaluate and intervene in contentious issues concerning ESD" instead of "Relate to different and contested positions concerning ESD".

- **LO6:** Remove the term "social" as there are different kinds of values regarding the communities' role in ESD actions. Use a different verb, e.g. "Create values/Support in building values".

- The role of the creator and leader of the course graduates should be emphasized in the course learning outcomes. An educator/animator of local education for sustainable development both designs activities and creates values of sustainable development, which have been lacking in the local community so far.

- In certain languages (e.g., Swedish), it is recommended that abbreviations are avoided when stating the LOs.

COURSE CONTENT

The structure and content of the course were evaluated positively, and the modules were considered relevant and clearly defined. The topics of the modules have been carefully selected and fully correspond to their titles and the objectives of the course. Each topic brings substantive value and allows participants to explore sustainability issues in a systematic and comprehensive way. In addition, the emphasis on locality is a huge advantage and determines the course's attractiveness. Course participants may enrich the course with concrete examples relevant to their regions by bringing concerns, projects in which they have participated or of which they are aware, as well as the specific needs of their communities.

However, further recommendations were made to enhance conceptual coherence. The idea of offering a plural vision on the definition and use of sustainable development was very much appreciated and this part should be articulated and implemented in a more practical way (e.g., which kinds of consequences in terms of planning, designing, and implementing projects emerge from different assumptions?). In addition, including an intercultural perspective would encourage reflection on how sustainability is named and practised in different cultural contexts, as well as questioning whether the concept of sustainable development is in fact universal or whether there are alternative ways of understanding and implementing it, adjusted to cultural specificities.

Focus group participants also encouraged the development of a philosophical debate based on reflecting on fundamental ESD questions, such as: Does educating for sustainable development mean remedying existing problems ('putting bandages on wounds') or preventing their occurrence ('not hurting')? Furthermore, integrating the concept of 'non-humans' into the initial foundations of the training was suggested as a way to challenge the traditional anthropocentric sovereignty that places humans at the centre of all decisions, recognising that such a view has contributed significantly to the current environmental and social crises. This concept could be explored to question traditional development practices that disregard the impacts on other species and the balance of ecosystems.

Regarding the specific modules, it was argued that Module 2 i) lacks practical elements that could establish a more effective link between theoretical concepts and practical application, especially in the interventions proposed in the final module and in future projects, and ii) focuses predominantly on the European context. The ways of implementing Module 3 need further clarifications regarding the case studies to be analysed, evaluated, and compared. The question was raised as to why the course contains only two and not four examples in a consortium of four universities. Finally, the absence of a clear guide for drawing up projects was pointed out as an obstacle in Module 4.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Concretise the teaching content in terms of 'criticality' (Module 1, Topic 2 and Module 2, Topic 2). What is 'criticality' supposed to be about – education in general or sustainable education more specifically?

- Include examples from other regions, such as North America, Latin America and Africa, as well as representations of different scales and contexts to broaden identification and applicability in Module 2.

- Design dedicated exercises/tasks in groups in Module 2 and especially in Module 3, e.g. as a joint task – to indicate the pros and cons of solutions, assess risks in ESD activities and project implementation. These solutions will prepare students for independent work in Module 4.

- Introduce one case study example from each country participating in the consortium in Module 3.

- Create a structured form in Module 4 that includes questions such as relevance of the proposal, main objective, resources needed and expected impacts to support participants in developing projects.

- Module 4 could be titled: Designing own intervention for ESD (to be consistent with previous modules)

- Create an extra module, dedicated to identifying funding opportunities, enabling thus participants to turn ideas into concrete initiatives.

- Integrate local associations and hold specific sessions or lectures in which these associations that already work on the issues addressed by the course can share their practices, the problems they face, the challenges they seek to overcome, the approaches used, as well as the results achieved.

- Adapt content to real possibilities of implementation, considering that some SDGs depend directly on citizen action, while others require action by legislators or decision-makers.

TEACHING/ LEARNING METHODS AND STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

The teaching methods were appreciated for their mix of practical and theoretical approach, which increases the effectiveness of the learning process and the involvement of course participants. The presentation of case studies was specifically raised as having high value. There is a need to diversify the strategies used, thus broadening the pedagogical approaches throughout the course, which can also serve as an example for the course participants themselves in their future interventions/projects. Students' involvement in the course was positively considered as there is a more structured part and a more 'agentic' one with the elaboration of a personal project. It is not clear, however, whether the individual projects would be shared in group or not.

The hybrid structure available for the course was widely recognised as the most suitable, being considered a balance between the advantages of the face-to-face and online formats. More specifically, the face-to-face format was seen as having benefits, such as promoting more collaborative and reflective learning, as well as facilitating active participation. Some activities, such as the discussion of case studies in Module 3 and project presentations in Module 4, would perform better in this format. The online format, on the other hand, offers greater accessibility and makes it possible to reach a wider number of participants, as well as being effective for activities such as autonomous work and more theoretical sessions. Use of interactive methodologies, such as quizzes, discussion forums and collaborative tools in the online modality may promote collaboration in small groups, guaranteeing interaction and active participation. Possible challenges identified during the focus groups regarded the adaptation of the methodologies to the format (face-to-face or online) considering the number of participants and the need to employ trained facilitators to plan and conduct activities in both face-to-face and online formats.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Create proper moments for reciprocal oral presentations in order to initiate debates and the emergence of criticalities and unforeseen possibilities.

- Organise study trips to places where various aspects of reality block the idea of sustainable development. Analyses conducted in such places are of key importance for the course and prevent excessive 'overtheorizing' of the course.

- Increase the hours for the students' own work in Module 2 and Module 4.

- Encourage course participants to look for case studies in their own spaces of life activity.

- Promote evaluative activities: At the beginning of the course, invite participants to reflect on initial definitions, attitudes, and preconceptions about the topics covered. Analyse the changes in participants' attitudes and conceptualisations over the course of the training. At the end, promote individual reflection to analyse changes in perceptions and attitudes after the training.

- Enact participatory methodologies: Use of the 'impact story' approach at the end of the course, inviting participants to reflect on the journey they have made throughout the training, identifying changes in their perceptions, knowledge, attitudes and practices.

- Use audio-visual resources: Considering the vast production of documentaries and other audio-visual materials that offer impactful representations of relevant issues, these resources could be used as pedagogical tools to provide reflective debates. These materials can serve as a starting point for philosophical discussions, problematisations, and conceptualisation processes.

LIST OF OBLIGATORY AND ADDITIONAL READING

The reading list is seen as meaningful and interesting, especially on the epistemological and theoretical side. Along this dimension, a more practical view is needed. One of the challenging sides of sustainability at this point is its integration in community actions, so it is important to also suggest articles and books based on good practices, implemented projects, and examples from the field. These materials should be selected on the basis of their relevance for community development but also in relation to their potential in promoting a critical point of view.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Supplement the literature on the methods of implementing educational projects and projects in general, e.g. for NGOs.

- Include key publications from central actors, such as UNESCO.

Partners: