

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	3
2	POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COURSE DEVELOPMENT	5
3	CONCLUSION	8

1 INTRODUCTION

There is a noticeable surge in awareness, frustration, and enthusiasm among Europe's youth to actively participate in ensuring a sustainable future.

“Climate change is real. And we all know we need to do things differently. Change the way we do things. Change the way we see things. Not just some of us. All of us. Together. Work together as governments, companies, organisations, universities, and industries. Work together as people. Crossing boundaries and borders. Working towards a common goal, a healthy planet. Our healthy planet. Let's not be afraid: of change, of others, the unknown. Let's embrace complexity, other views and surprising solutions might arise. Let's be brave and make a change. Together.”

(from the Active8-Planet introductory manifesto)

Despite the growing recognition at research and policy levels of the necessity for a comprehensive, interconnected approach to sustainability, the integration of these principles into higher education curricula and learning methods has been slow. To tackle the respective challenges, the Active8-Planet project has explored, experimented with, implemented, and evaluated unconventional and innovative teaching and learning methods that aim empower and mobilize students toward climate and sustainability actions in collaboration with their academic supervisors and non-academic professionals. We aimed to enhance the transformation of the conventional academic teaching, research and knowledge creation into concrete planet-centred interventions. We aimed to encourage and provide young people a platform to act.

“Do you feel a superpower inside you? Are you ready to mobilise your passion and use your knowledge to fight the Dark Matter? If you decide to follow this difficult path, you will not stand alone. You will help transform society by acting and learning within interdisciplinary teams.”

(from the Active8-Planet animation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnuVJQz7lTg>)

Our approach moved further from the conventional teaching by integrating four planet-centred development principles into a collaborative learning and exploration:

- (1) Interdisciplinary & Intergenerational Co-creation,**
- (2) People-centred Design,**
- (3) University-Business Collaboration,**
- (4) Environmental Ambition and Action.**

The 2 implemented and evaluated learning cycles (study years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023) involved eight diverse interdisciplinary, intergenerational, transnational, and cross-sectoral 7+1 team projects. Learning cycles consisted of four iterative phases: **(1) challenge exploration; (2) Researching and discovering the unmet needs; (3) Analysis and interpretation of data; (4) Co-creation of concept.** In these projects, students,

professors, non-academic experts, and other relevant external stakeholders collaborated to develop concepts, interventions, prototypes, and other similar research & development outcomes addressing challenging issues and paving the way for sustainable futures. The “+1” represented the “servant leader” who facilitated the collaboration process and ensured that members stayed focused and connected to each other and to the ultimate Active8-Planet mission. Through our project activities we raised the first cohorts of active and passionate individuals – the so called “Planeteers” – becoming our ambassadors, who stand for and share our key values and principles across geographical and sectoral boundaries.

This document helps educators, course developers, and higher education management to take into account experiences and key insights from the Active8-Planet project when establishing and developing the Active8-Planet learning cycles and 7+1 team projects.

2 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COURSE DEVELOPMENT

Developing an interdisciplinary & cross-sectoral study course involving students, teachers, and non-academic representatives working on real-life sustainability projects and involving people (citizens, users, customers etc.) as final beneficiaries of developed products, services, and solutions is however a commendable initiative. To ensure the success and effectiveness of such a program, the following 17 policy recommendations at higher education level should be considered:

(1) Foster partnerships with industries and other non-academic representatives that have a track record of **strong commitment to sustainability**. This will ensure that projects align with sustainable practices and will provide students with exposure to external stakeholders actively working on environmental solutions. Moreover, encourage real-life challenges and projects that emphasize sustainable innovation, including the development of eco-friendly technologies, renewable energy solutions, circular economy practices, sustainable mobility etc.

(2) Set **clear and realistic objectives, learning outcomes, and expectations** at the very beginning. Ensure that these align with both academic goals and non-academic needs and requirements of involved external stakeholders. Continuous assessment and management of expectations during course implementation is essential for project success. The Active8-Planet methodology provides more detailed guidance on this subject.

(3) The process should involve **collaborative curriculum and project co-design**, together with challenge exploration. This will ensure that the content is relevant, up-to-date, and addresses real-world environmental and societal challenges. Implement a system for continuous evaluation of the program's effectiveness. Use feedback from students, teachers, and non-academic partners to make timely adjustments and improvements. The Active8-Planet methodology and evaluation strategy provide more detailed guidance on this subject.

(4) The **course structure should be flexible enough** to allow for adaptation to evolving industry trends, technological advancements, and other external factors. This flexibility will enable the incorporation of the latest challenges, tools, methods, and practices.

(5) **Managerial support** is critical for establishing cross-disciplinary courses based on planet-centred development and problem- and project-based learning, in cooperation with external, non-academic partners. The key goal in any institution is to explore the most viable administrative, legal, and financial means for promoting such courses.

(6) **Problem-based and project-based learning** should be emphasized to provide students with hands-on, real-life experiences. Projects should resemble real-world scenarios, encouraging problem-solving skills, teamwork, critical thinking, people-centred research & development, project management, and ethics & environmental responsibility.

(7) Although 7+1 team members are equal collaborators, it is important to ensure in practice **continuous inputs and feedback from non-academic representatives**, who are not directly involved in the study course. Therefore, an open communication channel with external stakeholders should be maintained to ensure ongoing relevance and alignment with non-academic needs.

(8) Think about the potential **benefits and incentives for non-academic representatives**, who are not directly involved in the study course, such as recognition, networking opportunities, access to student talent, new ideas or even people-centred innovation. This will encourage their sustained engagement and commitment.

(9) Develop **assessment and evaluation methods** that reflect real-world skills and performance. Consider a combination of traditional assessments (e.g., exams) and industry-relevant evaluations (e.g., project presentations, portfolios, hackathons, co-creation events or industry-sponsored competitions). The Active8-Planet evaluation strategy provides more detailed guidance on this subject.

(10) Encourage **inter- or transdisciplinary collaboration** not only between students and industry but also among students from different disciplines (e.g., engineering, environmental science, business, anthropology etc.) to address complex environmental and sustainability issues comprehensively. This will promote a holistic approach to problem-solving and will prepare students for diverse workplace environments.

(11) Facilitate **fieldwork and practical experiences** that will allow students to witness the real-life impacts of environmental challenges. This hands-on approach will enhance their understanding of the interconnectedness of ecosystems and human activities.

(12) Encourage projects that address local environmental and sustainability challenges, fostering a sense of responsibility and **connection to the community**. This engagement can lead to more practical and context-specific solutions.

(13) Include discussions on **ethical considerations** and **responsible research & innovation** related to the non-academic projects. Emphasize the importance of responsible and sustainable practices, promoting awareness among students and non-academic partners. Moreover, integrate discussions on ethical considerations specific to sustainability projects (such as social justice, equity, and the impacts of environmental decisions on vulnerable communities). This will enhance students' awareness of the broader implications of their work. A good example is the Active8-Matrix.

(14) Integrate **sustainable practices** into the course structure and project implementation, including the use of eco-friendly materials, waste reduction, sustainable mobility, and energy-efficient technologies. This will align with the principles being taught and will promote a culture of sustainability.

(15) Arrange **guest lectures and workshops** by external experts in sustainability and environmental science to provide students with deeper insights into current challenges, best practices, and emerging trends in the field. A good example is the Active8-Planet SDGs Academy. <https://active8-planet.eu/sdg-academy/>

(16) **Explore partnerships** with other educational institutions, research centres, or environmental organizations outside of the 7+1 team partnership. Collaborative initiatives can bring diverse perspectives and resources to address sustainability challenges more effectively.

(17) Include training in **communication, dissemination, and public outreach strategies**. This will equip students and other team members to communicate complex environmental and societal issues to the public, fostering awareness and understanding.

3 CONCLUSION

The steps above are important to consider but are difficult to achieve without funding and institutional support. The success of the Active8-Planet project reveals a great potential of interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral university-business collaborations and stands as an encouragement for future initiatives. However, the project also reveals difficulties in setting up and promoting such planet-centred collaborations (see Evaluation documents). With this in mind, we advise great care and patience in setting up similar projects and promoting planet-centred methodologies.

The afore-mentioned support could come from a follow-up project or through local initiatives. When approaching possible external, non-academic partners, educators and course leaders should keep the following in mind:

(-) **The value of the research process:** the Active8-Planet project has produced a significant impact (for a detailed listing, please see the Impact Table). However, in approaching the non-academic stakeholders we recommend emphasizing the need for clear expectations about what each partner can bring to the table: the research process might engender new findings but might also simply reveal what is already known.

(-) An academic/student-run research project could provide a detached perspective, as they are not paid consultants. There is a tendency among consultants to produce convenient findings that match the expectations of the companies/institutions that commission them. However, the academic research needs to follow scientific standards, not resulting in **confirmation bias**.

(-) It is important that the research project is **short enough** to be useful for the non-academic partner (so that the potentially useful input can be put into practice) – a common preconception about collaborations with academia is the lengthy process.

(-) The greatest challenge in the future will be **resource related**. Who will pay or use their own resources to host students in their companies? We recommend approaching institutions that have a budget for consultancy projects and convincing them to set aside a small part of that budget for a planet-centred project.

(-) Once the project results are disseminated according to the guidance above, we recommend establishing a single point of contact within the university.

All in all, our project re-affirms the need for and value of planet-centred approaches for industry and other non-academic external partners. Although challenging, it is important to find financial resources and institutional support.