

4/ ECO CAMPUS:

Thematic learning networks in Flanders, Belgium

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▼ Meeting of the Learning Network for Business Studies (10/02/2015)



1 OVERVIEW

The Ecocampus project was officially launched in 2008 by the Flemish government, Department of Environment, Nature and Energy to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in the transition towards a more sustainable future¹. In order to help HEI to structurally embed (E)SD in their mission statements, curricula and competence profiles, it offers a wide range of materials and initiatives: from guidelines, manuals and theoretical frameworks for conferences and seminars to workshops, debate cafés and best practices from various HEIs, etc.

One of the initiatives promoted by Ecocampus is the organisation of thematic learning networks. Ecocampus wants to bring together educators from various HEIs and create accessible opportunities for them to enhance their teaching practice in the field of ESD. The meetings are open to all educators of HEIs, experts, non-profit organisations, etc. and focus on the following aspects:

- knowledge building/theoretical frameworks for sustainability in HE;
- methodologies/didactic approaches to integrate ESD competences in the classroom;
- the opportunity for the participants to network and to learn from each other by sharing their experiences, successes and problems.

2 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

In the academic year 2014–2015, three thematic learning networks (LN) are organised: the learning network for social work (LNSW), the learning network for teacher training (LNTT) and the learning network for business studies (LNBS). Furthermore, a new network was created for ESD professional development, aimed principally at policy makers in HEIs in order to enhance the possibilities of professional development for ESD. Currently, there are plans to create a learning network for architecture and health care and to reactivate the learning network for engineering.

In this case study, we will describe the LNSW, the LNTT and the LNBS, since they are the most representative for the way the LN are conceived. A visual representation of the functioning of the LN can be found in Figure 4.5.

2/1 How the Learning Networks work

Each LN organises three meetings of ½ or 1 day each per year. In general, the meetings are attended by 15-20 participants:

- the president of the LN (HE educator, often a “pioneer” in the field of ESD, with a certain authority in ESD);
- an Ecocampus employee (who organises the meetings in close collaboration with the president);
- experts/keynote speakers (professionals, non-profit organisations, ...) who are invited to provide background on the theme that will be discussed;
- participants (mainly HE educators, but also researchers and students).

Even though there is no strict format, each meeting is characterised by the following principles:

- Introduction and discussion of theoretical concepts/models/frameworks (e.g. seminar on systems thinking; conferences by invited keynote speakers with academic background; etc.)
- Testimonials, case studies, best practices of introducing theoretical concepts into the classroom (e.g. classroom project developed by a non-profit organisation with a clear focus on systems thinking); visit to projects (e.g. LNSW visited some social projects in the multicultural Rabot quarter in Ghent).
- Development of practical tools that can be used in the classroom, with input from Ecocampus, external partners (mainly non-profit organisations) and the participants themselves (e.g. in 2013, an ESD competence profile was developed for teacher trainers. In 2015, the LNTT developed another publication that presents good examples of classroom practices that incorporate the different ESD competences).

¹ In Flanders, the Ecocampus project is one of the initiatives that meet the objectives of the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development adopted in 2005. It was launched in 2008 for a term of three years and renewed in 2011 for another four years. In 2015, the Flemish government will decide on which way the Ecocampus project will be shaped in the future.

The themes discussed during the meetings are inspired by suggestions made by the participants, on topics that have been discussed in the media, or on projects that allow some kind of collaboration (e.g. the Flemish Material Program launched by OVAM-The Flemish Waste Management Company).

2/2 What is asked of participants

The LN try to deal with the workload of educators by creating optimal conditions to share and to put into practice the key concepts of ESD. As participants attend the meetings on a voluntary basis, much importance is attached to the degree of efficiency of the meetings: one of the main goals is to provide HE educators with concrete ideas and materials that can be integrated into their own course practice without significant extra work, e.g. didactic presentations on a specific topic which can be adapted and used by other participants.

Furthermore, co-creation is one of the key factors of the meetings: participants are invited at all times to discuss the themes proposed, make suggestions, participate in the development of output materials, etc. This idea of “co-creation” even seems to be a premise to make the LN succeed. Without a “common goal”, LN face the risk of not providing added value for the participants.

3 ESD FRAMING

3/1 Ecocampus reference guide

Ecocampus has developed its own ESD guidance framework to stimulate the debate on sustainability in HE. The framework was written by a group of researchers and is based on a rigorous analysis of the literature published in the field of higher education for sustainable development (HESD)². It proposes definitions for the concepts of sustainable development, sustainable higher education and education for sustainable development, and describes different drivers and barriers that can be encountered in the transition process towards a more sustainable higher education. The Ecocampus reference guide not only presents educational aspects in HESD, but also

refers to the other key roles of HEIs: research, outreach and campus operations (Waas et al., 2012).

3/2 ESD frameworks and the Learning Networks

The learning networks focus primarily on the key competences for ESD as described in the UNECE framework (2012) and by authors like Wiek et al. (2011), Rieckmann (2012), Rororda (2010) and Lambrechts et al. (2013). Although different sets of key competences are defined and presented in different ways, they all refer to the same theoretical concepts: systems thinking competence, normative competence, anticipatory competence, strategic competence and interpersonal competence (as presented by Wiek et al., 2011). These competences and the key concepts defined in the Ecocampus reference guide served also as a starting point for the *Guide sustainable development as a compass in the preparation of learning outcomes* (2014). The competences as defined in the UNECE competence framework were adapted to the context of teacher training, which resulted in the ESD competence profile for teacher training that was published in September 2013.

In April 2013, a seminar on systems thinking was organised by Ecocampus. The seminar was the starting point for a series of meetings on the integration of systems thinking in the different subject areas of the learning networks. Another key concept used in the LN is the concept of “wicked problems” (Rieckmann, 2012; Wiek et al., 2011) that is often used to describe the challenges related to SD: complex social problems that require an inter- and transdisciplinary approach in order to deal with them and find solutions. The concept encourages educators and students to start experimenting in order to find answers to the problems posed whereby the process is more important than the solution itself. In the long term, this approach aims to make educators and students act sustainably in almost every aspect of their everyday life.

3/3 Approaches to learning

The methodologies used by and/or presented during the LN are very diverse and depend on the goal of the meeting and the activities

² The framework is available at <http://ebl.vlaanderen.be/publications/documents/50318> (scroll down the document for English).

proposed. However, most of them meet the following principles:

- Multi-, inter- and transdisciplinarity: even if each LN is related to a specific discipline, the focus is on the interaction between the various subject areas within that discipline.
- Problem- and project-based learning: the materials and methodologies presented are often presented as case studies and projects where practice leads to theoretical insights, reflection and awareness, and attitudinal change.

Examples of methodologies promoted by the LN are (based on Lambrechts et al. 2009, Lambrechts et al., 2013):

- Interactive and participatory methodologies (e.g. group discussions, role plays which take into account the different stakeholders involved in the process, Socratic method);
- Research oriented methodologies (e.g. CSI smartphone, which invites the students to analyse the materials used in their own smartphone and to measure the impact of them in terms of SD (Wals: 2014); road pricing: what are the benefits for government? And what's the ecological impact?)
- Action oriented methodologies: project weeks, internships, company visits, etc.

4 KEY QUESTIONS

The issues and challenges that the initiative addresses are:

Q: How can we reach the various small islands of (E)SD in different HEIs and connect them so that they can share experiences and find the support needed to embed ESD in their HEI?

Q: How can we equip educators with both the theoretical knowledge and practical methodologies that can easily be used in everyday classroom practice? How can we contribute to this “sustainable reflex” that ensures that ESD is not a matter of one or two isolated courses, but will be integrated into the whole curriculum?

Q: How can we develop instruments and toolkits that are general and flexible, but at the same time concrete and precise enough, and useful for the diversity of curricula in Flemish higher education?

Q: How can we reconcile the complexity of “wicked problems” and the need of an inter- and transdisciplinary approach (which, in the most ideal context, would require an important curriculum shift) with the actual landscape of Flemish higher education?

Q: How can we involve our students in the ESD process and equip them with the competences they need to face future challenges (e.g. systems thinking, holistic thinking, etc.)?

DIAGRAM

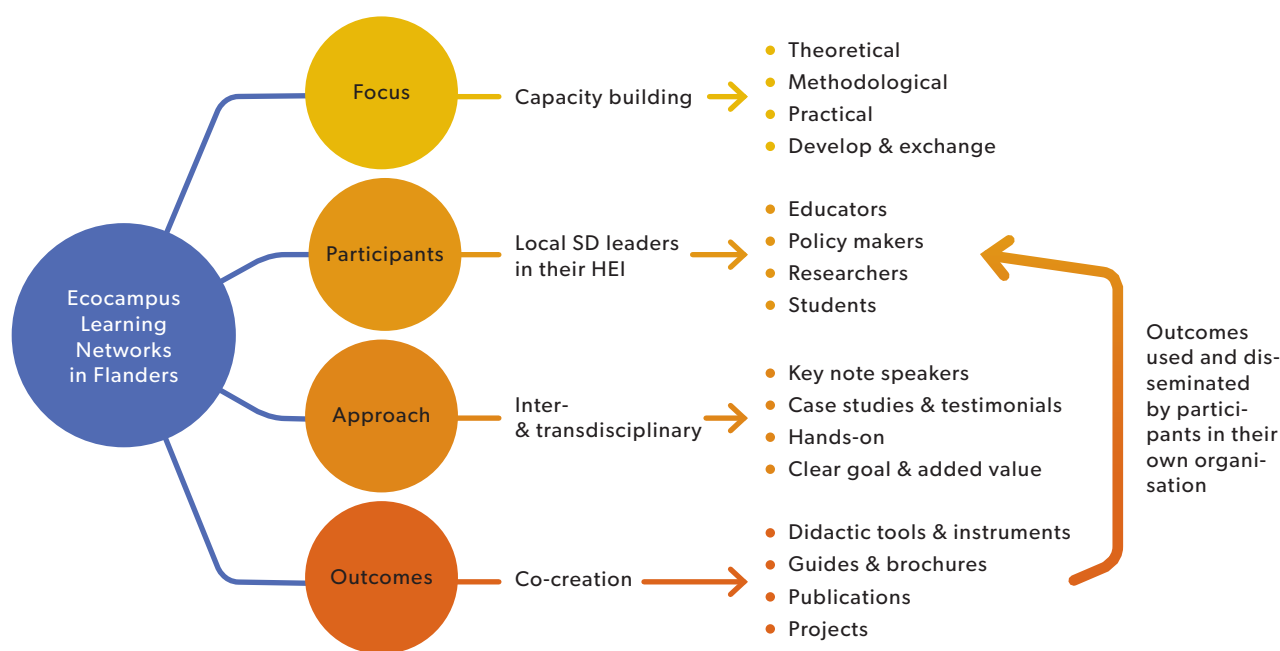


Figure 4.5 – Ecocampus Learning Networks in Flanders

5 PRACTICALITY

The key lessons learned are:

- **Capacity building:** the small number of LN members (about 20 members per network) facilitates the interaction and makes it possible to adopt a collaborative approach.
- **Participation:** it is essential to build a strong relationship with the educators involved in the process in order to ensure the continuity and the quality of the meetings and outcomes.
- **Inter- and transdisciplinarity:** the input from experts and representatives of civil society is considered essential added value.
- **Co-creation:** participants see the clear added value of their participation in the LN thanks to the hands-on approach of the meetings. This added value could be defined as the co-creation of a shared outcome or product, e.g. a didactic presentation, a publication, etc.
- **HEI profile:** educators who attend the LN mainly come from university colleges that offer professional bachelor programs. The way these programs are designed, seems to be more open for the collaborative, inter- and transdisciplinary methodologies promoted in ESD.

6 REFLECTIONS OF ORGANISERS AND FACILITATORS

The LN are a very effective way to enter into a dialogue with the different actors in the field of ESD. The focus of the LN and the way they are designed evolve with the needs of the participants.

“The goal of the LNBS is to help teachers in developing their course on sustainability, corporate social responsibility and business ethics. Apart from dealing with the question whether sustainability should be integrated into the traditional courses of a study programme in economics or whether it should be a separate course, the network especially focusses on hands-on material for teachers. At the beginning not a lot of material in relation to sustainability was available on the market. Teachers were asking for these guiding tools and learnt from each other through the exchange of experiences. The focus of the network

gradually evolved from a rather top-down approach to a bottom-up approach. The aim is no longer to only invite experts in the topic of sustainability, but also to give the opportunity to the learning network to develop study material in the field of sustainability than can be used by teachers in higher education for economics.”

Professor Ingrid Molderez, President of the Learning Network for Business Studies

The idea of co-creation can be considered as the key to the success of the LN. The quality and the impact of the LN sessions rely on the expertise of the different stakeholders involved:

“We started working with Ecocampus eight months ago. From the beginning, we shared the same ideas and values. During one of the meetings, Catapa received the possibility to present a resource exploitation case. Thanks to the input of the Ecocampus team, we could adapt the case to the context of ESD. The feedback we receive from the participants of the LNBS helps us to further develop the tool and to come up with a final version that can be used in various Business Studies programs.”

Charlotte Christiaens, Coordinator Catapa vzw³

Despite the success of the current formula, it may be appropriate to explore other options as well.

“HE is changing substantially, educators don’t always have the opportunity to physically attend the LN meetings. Therefore, it can be useful to rethink the organisation of the sessions, for example by meeting virtually through the Internet. Moreover, more and more organisations offer PD programs specifically in the field of ESD. Why not engage with them in an attempt to coordinate (parts of) the PD initiatives?”

(Peter Schildermans, Ecocampus)

7 REFLECTIONS OF PARTICIPANTS

Participants recognise the opportunities created by the LN to enhance their knowledge and teaching skills in the field of ESD.

“As a lecturer in Social Work, I taught an optional course on Sustainable Development. A wide range of topics were discussed: energy (poverty), housing, mobility, nutrition, social welfare, etc. The LNSW not only helped

³ Catapa is a voluntary organisation that deals with (alter-)globalisation and sustainable development. Its main focus lies on mining industry, especially in Latin America.

me to build knowledge with regard to these topics – after each session, I went home with new insights and various resources I could use in my class –, but also to adopt a more critical attitude towards initiatives that deal with sustainable development (e.g. poverty reduction: why not wealth reduction? Are electric cars really a more sustainable alternative? etc.).”

Patrick Vleeschouwer, former Lecturer in Social Work, Artevelde University College

They also appreciate the variety of backgrounds of the participants and the networking possibilities offered by the LN.

“As a marketing lecturer, I had the chance to attend the LN session in December 2014. The session proved to

be very useful to me. On the one hand, I gained new insights on SD initiatives by both government and NGOs which I will be able to use in case studies during class. On the other hand, the meetings provide an interesting platform to bring different business schools together in order to share good practices and discuss priorities, as the topic is vast and relatively new for many of us.”

Sebastiaan Boussauw, Marketing Lecturer, University Colleges Leuven-Limburg

“Corporate social responsibility is becoming a priority in many companies and sustainability is also an important topic in our University Colleges. The LN is a place where people from different disciplines and with a different background can share best practices and come up with new tools to help teachers in preparing student to face the challenges in a fast moving world.”

Anne De Cort, Sustainability Coordinator and Lecturer, University Colleges Leuven-Limburg



▲ An illustration designed by Delphine Frantzen for the ESD Competence profile for Teacher Trainers. Ecocampus tries to collaborate with young artistic talents to add some ‘added value’ to the materials they publish. Artists tend to think “out of the box”, the way they interpret ESD principles can create an extra dimension to the (often) more abstract concepts used in ESD frameworks.”

8 OUTCOMES

The output of the LN meetings is published on the Ecocampus website. Reports, PowerPoint presentations and reference guides are downloadable from the website. Best practices are published on an online “inspiration wall”.

The LN we discussed above all led or will lead to some concrete outcomes:

- LNSW: didactic presentation on the link between social work and SD, which can easily be used and adapted by individual educators in their own courses⁴. Publication of best practices in the book *A resilient society. Social work and sustainable development* (Peeters, 2010).
- LNTT: ESD competence profile for teacher training (2013)⁵. An additional booklet with practical examples and case studies will be published in 2015.
- LNBS: toolkit which provides two case studies on mining extraction (Peru) and landfill mining (Belgium) that can be used in the curricula of business studies (toolkit

⁴ The presentation (in English) can be downloaded from http://www.lne.be/doelgroepen/onderwijs/ecocampus/acties/netwerken/lerende-netwerken/sociaal-werk/archief-in-sociaal-werk/SocialSustDevelopment_ENSACT.pdf.

⁵ The booklet (in Dutch) can be downloaded from <http://www.lne.be/doelgroepen/onderwijs/ecocampus/kennis-en-instrumentenhub/edo-competentieprofiel>.

developed in collaboration with Catapa and OVAM; expected publication date: September 2015)

Participants of the LN assume the role of “LN ambassadors” and spread their insights with relation to ESD amongst their colleagues.

Recently, a LinkedIn group was established to reinforce the interaction within the LN communities and a broader network of HEI representatives.

The concept of LN seems to attract educators from other disciplines as well. For example, explicit interest has been shown in creating LN in the fields of architecture and health care.

Further information:

<http://www.lne.be/doelgroepen/onderwijs/ecocampus>



Case study and additional materials at the UE4SD Online Platform of Resources (access via the UE4SD project website):

<http://www.ue4sd.eu/>



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