

## Universities in Dialogue with Society: Review of the Podcast Series 'Voices of ESDEUS: Exploring the Frontiers of ESD'

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The podcast series *Voices of ESDEUS: Exploring the Frontiers of ESD* is a key component of the ESDEUS project—*Enhancing Sustainable Development in European Universities and Societies*—which is implemented by a consortium of four universities from Poland, Sweden, Portugal, and Italy. This project aims to strengthen the role of higher education as a vital player in social and institutional transformation toward sustainable development. Its activities are aligned with global and European strategies for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the broader framework of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) responsibility.

The project aims to evaluate existing curricula in light of ESD priorities and propose ways to develop them to address contemporary social, ecological, and economic challenges. It emphasizes identifying effective collaboration between universities and their surrounding communities, including non-governmental organizations, local governments, enterprises, and civic initiatives. Additionally, the project analyzes examples of successful ESD practices from various European regions, facilitating the exchange of experiences and creating a shared repository of knowledge about effective pedagogical and institutional approaches.

From a theoretical perspective, the ESDEUS project is positioned within the broader discourse on the *civic university* (Goddard et al., 2016; Li & Frieze, 2016;

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Ostrander, 2004) and the framework of *transformative learning for sustainability* (Boström et al., 2018; Lange, 2019; Mezirow, 2000; Singer-Brodowski, 2023; Sterling, 2024). Both perspectives emphasize that contemporary higher education should extend beyond merely transmitting knowledge; it should also foster the development of reflective, ethical, and social competencies that enable active participation in processes of change. As Barth and Rieckmann (2012) argue, transforming curricula in the spirit of ESD requires not only new teaching content but, more importantly, a shift in institutional culture—toward openness, collaboration, and the co-creation of knowledge with stakeholders outside academia. In this sense, ESDE-US embodies the principles outlined by UNESCO (2020), which view sustainability as a pedagogical category rather than a purely economic or environmental one. Universities serve as mediators between scientific knowledge and social practice, making learning a communal and participatory process. This approach positions education for sustainable development not as a discrete field, but as an integrative framework that connects teaching, research, and civic engagement—activities that collectively shape the agency and responsibility of both academic communities and local societies.

The ESDEUS consortium achieves its goals through intersectoral learning, project-based collaboration, and partnership-driven exchanges of experience between universities and their stakeholders. This approach strengthens relationships between universities and their communities, fosters the development of local and regional partnerships, and supports the ecological and digital transformation of higher education.

Within this context, the *Voices of ESDEUS* podcast series serves a dual purpose. First, it functions as a communication and dissemination tool, showcasing partners' experiences and promoting the values of ESD in the public sphere. Second, it acts as an educational resource, making the principles of sustainable development accessible to diverse audiences—students, academic staff, institutional representatives, and local community members—while illustrating the practical implementation of ESD across Europe.

As a dialogical medium, the podcast format allows for the presentation of multiple perspectives—academic, social, and institutional. Its content embodies the principle of learning through collaboration and exchange, resonating with the ethos of education for sustainable development. In this way, the series complements the project's core activities, particularly *ESD in Local Communities: Joint University-Stakeholder*

*Actions and Global-Local Coalition for ESD: Campaign and Dissemination.* Consequently, *Voices of ESDEUS* strengthens the project's educational and outreach dimensions, advancing its overarching aim of building a European community of universities committed to sustainable development at both local and global levels.

## Concept and Structure of the Series

The series *Voices of ESDEUS: Exploring the Frontiers of ESD* consists of four episodes, each developed within a coherent thematic and narrative structure. While each episode functions as a self-contained unit, together they create a broader narrative about implementing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in both academic and social practice. The titles of the episodes are as follows: Episode 1: *ESDEUS Dialogues: Unveiling ESD Practices*; Episode 2: *Collaborative Journeys: ESD in Action*; Episode 3: *Faces of Activities for ESD*; and Episode 4: *Experiences of ESD in Local Community*.

Each episode is based on case studies and interviews conducted in Portugal and Italy, featuring representatives of academia, leaders of local organizations, and community members engaged in sustainability initiatives. Through these conversations, the podcasts showcase a wide range of ESD-related activities—spanning educational projects, civic initiatives, and university social responsibility practices. Collectively, they highlight how higher education institutions can become active participants in local transformation processes, co-creating spaces for collaboration between science, education, and society.

The first episode serves as an introduction, outlining the fundamental principles of education for sustainable development and explaining how the ideas underpinning the ESDEUS project are put into practice. It foregrounds the importance of dialogue, inter-university cooperation, and learning through the exchange of experiences. The second episode focuses on concrete examples of collaboration, demonstrating how partnerships between universities, organizations, and local communities lead to tangible changes in educational, environmental, and social spheres. The third episode centers on the work of non-governmental organizations in and around Milan, which play a vital role in shaping practices of sustainability and civic education. The fourth episode presents the case of an agricultural cooperative near Bergamo, operating within the framework of the social economy. This story illustrates how values of shared responsibility, solidarity, and local engagement can be realized in both economic and educational practice.

The entire series is designed to transition from reflection to action, moving from conceptual to empirical dimensions. This structure reflects the philosophy of the ESDEUS project, which views learning as a dialogical and communal process rooted in the co-creation of knowledge. The podcasts are not lectures or one-way presentations; instead, they capture authentic conversations in which participants collaboratively construct meaning, analyze experiences, and share practices. This format fosters mutual understanding among various actors in the educational process and reinforces the belief that education for sustainable development requires cooperation, openness, and continuous learning from one another.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Across the *Voices of ESDEUS* series, three main interrelated thematic threads emerge, providing coherence and analytical depth to the podcasts. The first theme concerns the social mission of universities and their relationship with local communities. Each episode raises the question of how higher education institutions can function not only as academic entities but also as active contributors to social life and catalysts for community development. The university is depicted as part of a local ecosystem where science and education serve as tools for addressing real-world challenges. Throughout the discussions, participants frequently emphasize that the university's role extends beyond traditional research and teaching functions to include the formation of civic attitudes, the promotion of cross-sectoral dialogue, and the initiation of actions for the common good. The examples presented in the podcasts illustrate concrete forms of such engagement, including partnerships with non-governmental organizations, schools, and local authorities. These initiatives encompass ecological education, social projects, and efforts to foster the inclusion of diverse social groups.

The second thematic strand emphasizes the translation of knowledge and communication between academia and civil society. In the Portuguese episodes, the recurring notion of "translation" highlights the need to make academic concepts, ideas, and research findings comprehensible and useful to those outside the university environment. In this context, the university serves as a mediator between theory and practice, bridging the language of science and the language of social life. This understanding of the university's role aligns with the principles of Education for Sustainable Development, which advocate for knowledge to be co-created, shared, and developed collaboratively rather than confined within institutional boundaries. In this sense, the podcasts portray ESD as a dialogical process, where both educators

and learners contribute their experiences and perspectives, creating a shared space for interpretation and collective action.

The third theme, reflected in the participants' accounts, addresses the challenges and limitations of cooperation between universities and social partners. Interviewees describe institutional barriers such as bureaucracy, time constraints, and the difficulty of reconciling the logic of academic work with the dynamism and immediacy of grassroots initiatives. They also point to cultural and social differences that can hinder collaboration or occasionally lead to misunderstandings and tensions. Particularly noteworthy are the segments devoted to work with marginalized groups, including the Roma community. These examples show that implementing the principles of Education for Sustainable Development requires not only theoretical understanding but also empathy, communicative competence, and cultural sensitivity. The speakers emphasize that effective collaboration in this field demands continuous reflection on issues of power, representation, and responsibility, as well as a willingness to learn through practice. Taken together, these threads construct a complex image of the university as an engaged, reflective, and cooperative institution—one that plays a vital role in the broader social transformation toward sustainability.

### **Authenticity and Educational Value**

One of the most distinctive strengths of the ESDEUS series is its authenticity, which sets it apart from many other educational materials on sustainable development. For instance, listeners can hear a conversation among participants at the headquarters of a Portuguese organization. This immersive experience makes it feel as though we are present at the meeting, as their voices convey reflection, enthusiasm, and the uncertainty that comes from communicating in English. The power of the podcast lies in its ability to evoke emotions. The recordings capture the everyday experiences of participants and the contexts in which they operate. Listeners can also hear the natural sounds of the environment—background conversations, street noise, the sounds of work, nature, or the bustle of the city. These elements give the podcasts a documentary quality, enhancing the sense of presence and creating an impression of direct contact with the social realities being discussed. As a result, the audience does not merely listen to abstract ideas about sustainability; they gain a sense of participation in the lives of communities where these principles are genuinely enacted and experienced daily.

This form also possesses significant didactic value. It demonstrates that sustainable development is not merely an abstract academic concept but a concrete social, cultural, and ethical process that takes shape in people's and institutions' everyday practices. Through its narrative structure and authentic voices, the series becomes a tool for experiential learning. It can be effectively used in higher education, particularly in courses related to Education for Sustainable Development, civic education, university-community cooperation, and the development of communicative and intercultural competencies. The dialogical form of the podcasts encourages critical reflection and discussion, consistent with the principles of transformative learning described by Mezirow (2000). Such an approach enables students not only to acquire knowledge but also to analyze and reinterpret their own beliefs and perceptions of the world in relation to social responsibility and interdependence.

Despite its educational value, the authenticity of the recordings presents certain technical limitations. In some episodes, sound distortions, background noise, and reverberation can hinder listening comprehension, particularly in formal academic settings. These issues could be partially addressed during the editing stage without compromising the recordings' natural character. Additionally, extended passages in local languages are not always accompanied by translation. While these segments highlight the project's cultural and linguistic diversity, they may distract listeners or make it challenging to grasp key points. Therefore, future productions might consider incorporating simultaneous translation or providing English-language transcripts. Such measures would enhance accessibility, facilitate broader use of the materials in international educational contexts, and strengthen the dissemination potential of the ESDEUS project across various linguistic and cultural environments.

### **Podcasts in the ESDEUS Communication Strategy**

Within the communication strategy of the ESDEUS project, podcasts serve a distinctive role, bridging informational, reflective, and educational functions. Their significance extends beyond conventional dissemination tools by creating a dialogical space that connects the academic community with the broader public. The podcasts enable the communication of research-based knowledge in a comprehensible, engaging, and inclusive manner. In doing so, they act as a bridge between research and social practice, embodying the principles of participation and co-creation of knowledge that underpin Education for Sustainable Development.

The aim of the series is not merely to present the project's results but also to foster dialogue with audiences beyond academia, including representatives of non-governmental organizations, local and regional administrations, students, and citizens engaged in social and environmental action. This communicative approach reflects the project's openness to collaboration across diverse social and institutional groups and strengthens its practical and civic dimensions. By grounding discussions in concrete examples and lived experiences rather than abstract theoretical language, the podcasts promote the values of sustainable development in an accessible manner. In this sense, they function as tools of civic and environmental education that support the development of reflective, communicative, and cross-sectoral competencies.

The importance of the ESDEUS series can also be interpreted within the broader framework of European Union educational policies. The podcasts contribute to advancing the priorities of the green and digital transitions outlined in the *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027* and the *European Green Deal*. They combine a perspective of technological innovation with the principles of ecological and social responsibility, illustrating how education can serve as a key instrument for shaping a future based on cooperation, solidarity, and sustainability.

The series is equally aligned with the objectives of UNESCO's (2020) *Education for Sustainable Development for 2030* program, which emphasizes education as a collective means of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The ESDEUS podcasts demonstrate that education for sustainable development can transcend the boundaries of traditional institutions and pedagogical formats—it can inhabit public spaces, local communities, and everyday interactions between science, culture, and society. In this way, the project reveals that contemporary learning, in the spirit of ESD, is an open, relational, and practice-oriented process in which knowledge, experience, and community engagement converge to create a shared arena for building a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future.

## Evaluation and Recommendations

The *Voices of ESDEUS* series represents an interesting initiative that effectively translates the principles of the ESDEUS project into communicative and educational practice. It demonstrates a high degree of thematic coherence, a well-considered structure, and the authentic engagement of participants, all of which reflect the project's essence—its dialogical, community-oriented, and cross-sectoral nature. By combining reflection, practice, and social experience, the podcasts function not

only as tools for disseminating project outcomes but also as forms of civic and academic education, presenting concrete examples of how the principles of sustainable development can be implemented in everyday contexts.

From both substantive and pedagogical perspectives, the series deserves high recognition. It addresses themes central to the project's objectives, including inter-university and community collaboration, the co-creation of knowledge, social responsibility, and the role of education in ecological and digital transformations. The podcasts stimulate critical reflection on the social mission of higher education and have the potential to serve as valuable teaching resources in academic contexts—particularly in courses on Education for Sustainable Development, social pedagogy, citizenship studies, and cross-sectoral cooperation. Their conversational and dialogical format fosters communicative competence, critical thinking, and openness to diverse perspectives.

Despite its conceptual and substantive strengths, the series would benefit from certain technical improvements to enhance its usability and accessibility. These include improving sound quality in several episodes, shortening segments conducted in local languages without translation, and producing fully transcribed versions to facilitate use in teaching and research. Implementing such measures would increase the series' academic value and make it more accessible to international audiences.

In the longer term, it would be beneficial to expand the series to include examples from Poland and Sweden, thereby providing a more comprehensive representation of the project's European diversity and enhancing its comparative aspect. Integrating new episodes with educational resources such as e-learning modules, MOOCs, or professional development courses for academic teachers could further enhance the project's educational and dissemination potential. This approach would align with the principles of open education and lifelong learning, which are fundamental to contemporary higher education strategies for sustainable development.

## Conclusion

The podcast series *Voices of ESDEUS: Exploring the Frontiers of ESD* fulfills the main objectives of the ESDEUS project, which seeks to strengthen the role of universities in building relationships with local communities and advancing education for sustainable development. Through its dialogical format, authentic participant voices, and presentation of real-life examples, the series effectively demonstrates how the ideas of sustainability can be translated into tangible social, educational,

and institutional practices. In doing so, it creates a space for reflection on how academic knowledge can serve society and contribute to addressing contemporary global and local challenges.

Despite minor technical imperfections—such as occasional variations in sound quality or the absence of translations for certain excerpts—the podcasts remain a valuable and inspiring example of how digital media can be used to promote the principles of Education for Sustainable Development. Their strength lies in the simplicity of form, the authenticity of expression, and the ability to connect academic and social perspectives. The series shows that education for sustainable development can be practiced in an open and inclusive way, engaging diverse audiences, including students, educators, activists, and local community members.

*Voices of ESDEUS* serves as a crucial element of the project's communication strategy and exemplifies best practices in contemporary pedagogy and science communication. By merging reflection with lived experience, the project demonstrates how universities can function as civic institutions, sharing the responsibility for social, environmental, and cultural development. In this context, the podcast series not only advances the goals of the ESDEUS project but also fosters a broader European dialogue on the role of higher education in leading social transformation and partnering to create a more just and sustainable future.

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