SAM Experience
Alliances towards a Sustainable Future

Sustainable Alliance Manager: Learning Experience towards Collaborative Skills with Green Consciousness

D3.1. Methodological structure of the learning experience

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1.Introduction

The SAMExperience project aims to design, pilot, and consolidate a European learning model for developing the competencies of future Sustainable Alliance Managers, professionals capable of leading partnerships that integrate sustainability principles into strategic and operational decision-making. This methodological framework outlines the pedagogical architecture and learning experience that underpin the course designed within Work Package 3.

The course responds to a growing need identified across Europe and reflected in both academic research and professional practice: the ability to collaborate effectively across organisational, sectoral, and cultural boundaries to address complex sustainability challenges. Building upon the findings of WP2 (Alliance Manager Profile Definition), which established twelve key competencies aligned with the alliance life cycle, the learning experience described here translates those competencies into a coherent, online, and competency-based educational pathway.

The methodological structure integrates insights from multiple theoretical and pedagogical traditions. It draws upon the Partnering Toolbook (Tennyson, 2011), the Partnership Culture Navigator (Reid, 2016), and Catalyst 2030 (2021), as well as educational frameworks such as Bloom's Taxonomy and Problem-Based Learning (PBL). This combination ensures that learners not only acquire knowledge but also develop the ability to apply it critically and collaboratively within complex, real-world contexts.

Designed primarily for undergraduate students in Business Management and Engineering, the SAMExperience course is delivered fully online and asynchronously through an open-access Moodle platform. It offers an active, inclusive, and reflective learning environment, balancing individual autonomy with structured mentoring and intercultural collaboration.

By integrating theory, practice, and reflection, it enables learners to become catalysts of transformation capable of building and sustaining alliances for a more sustainable future.

2. Methodological Framework

2.1 Pedagogical Approach

The SAMExperience learning model is underpinned by a dual pedagogical approach that combines Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning with Problem-Based Learning (PBL), thus integrating cognitive progression with experiential engagement. This dual structure ensures both a solid theoretical foundation and a practical, competence-oriented learning process that mirrors the complexity of real-world sustainability challenges.

Bloom's Taxonomy provides the hierarchical scaffolding through which students progress from lower-order to higher-order thinking skills—remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating. This taxonomy has been adapted to the specific context of alliance management and sustainability education. In this framework, learners are first introduced to fundamental theories of each competence: systems thinking, strategic vision, circular project

management, alliance design, interpersonal skills, norms, regulations, policies and procedures of sustainability, conflict resolution, planning and organizational skills, circular interdisciplinary collaboration, adaptive management, capacity building and sustainability values, . They then move progressively towards applying these frameworks to complex, multi-actor environments. The final stages of learning (evaluation and creation) correspond to the design and presentation of innovative alliance solutions within the Global Challenge.

However, theoretical understanding alone is insufficient to develop the holistic capabilities required for managing sustainable alliances. Therefore, Bloom's taxonomy is operationalised through Problem-Based Learning, which positions the learner as an active problem solver confronted with authentic and ambiguous challenges. This approach is particularly suited to sustainability education, where solutions are rarely linear and often require negotiation, co-creation, and systems awareness.

The PBL framework encourages students to take ownership of their learning, formulate hypotheses, search for relevant information, and collaboratively develop strategies to address open-ended questions. The process fosters transversal competences such as adaptability, communication, and ethical decision-making, aligning with the EU's GreenComp Framework for sustainability competences. This brings in even more value to the project and the students' development.

In practical terms, each module integrates mini-challenges inspired by real organisational contexts (derived from the Partnering Toolbook, the Strategic Alliance Best Practice Guide and real cases studied within this project in WP2), which require students to apply theoretical models to concrete partnership dilemmas. This promotes transformative learning, as students not only acquire knowledge but also reframe their assumptions about leadership, collaboration, and sustainability.

The pedagogical model is therefore not confined to the acquisition of content but aspires to transform the learner's mindset, from a discipline-based, individual perspective to a systemic and collaborative one. In this sense, the course acts as both a learning experience and a laboratory for alliance culture, where equity, transparency, and mutual benefit are not merely discussed but actively practised through the learning design itself.

2.2 Learning Environment

The course is delivered fully online and asynchronously through Moodle, ensuring accessibility across all partner universities. The learning experience balances individual autonomy with guided tutoring, providing flexibility while maintaining pedagogical coherence across institutions.

Tutoring and feedback mechanisms are embedded through discussion forums, and self-assessment activities. Furthermore, as the students in this phase were part of a piloting experience, they have had ongoing support from the teachers/partners of the project. While the learning path is primarily individual, collaborative activities are incorporated.

2.3 Learning Path and Competency Structure

The SAMExperience course follows a competence-based architecture articulated through a progressive learning path of four sequential modules (FOCUS, CREATE, MANAGE, and SUSTAIN) culminating in the Global Challenge. Each module contributes to the development of three interrelated competencies, a total of 12, identified as critical for sustainable alliance management.

(a) FOCUS – Understanding the System

This initial phase builds the systemic awareness necessary for effective collaboration. Students learn to recognise the interdependencies between economic, environmental, and social dimensions and to map actors, resources, and feedback loops. Activities emphasise observation, contextual analysis, and diagnostic skills. Drawing on Tennyson's (2011) Partnering Toolbook, learners identify drivers, barriers, and leverage points within multi-actor systems, thus developing the foundation for systemic thinking.

(b) CREATE – Designing Strategic Pathways

The second module translates systemic insight into strategic foresight and design capability. Learners explore how shared visions and long-term goals are built through participatory processes that integrate diverse perspectives. Strategic vision is treated not as a static plan but as a dynamic process of negotiation, alignment, and adaptation. Building upon Reid's (2016) Partnership Culture Navigator, students analyse how organisational culture influences collaboration and how to create a "third culture" of shared purpose.

(c) MANAGE – Implementing Circular Projects

In this phase, learners apply their understanding to the practical management of collaborative projects. They design action plans that embody the principles of the circular economy: closing loops, minimising waste, and optimising resource flows. The focus is on operationalising sustainability through project management tools adapted to alliance contexts: stakeholder mapping, shared governance models, and value creation frameworks.

(d) SUSTAIN – Leading for Impact

The final module addresses the long-term sustainability and scaling of alliances. Students examine strategies for maintaining engagement, measuring impact, and embedding learning into organisational practices. Drawing on Catalyst 2030 (2021), this module introduces the concept of ecosystem thinking, encouraging learners to see partnerships as living systems that require continuous renewal, trust-building, and adaptive leadership.

(e) The Global Challenge – Integration and Application

The Global Challenge serves as the integrative capstone of the learning path. Students form international teams to address a real sustainability problem proposed by one of the partner institutions or local enterprises. The task requires them to combine the 12 core competencies in a coherent alliance proposal, demonstrating their capacity to think systemically, plan strategically, and manage circularly. This final challenge embodies the principle of PBL, encouraging learners to synthesise knowledge, skills, and values in a socially relevant outcome.

Across all modules, reflection plays a crucial role. Students are encouraged to maintain reflective journals and discussion entries to critically evaluate their learning trajectory and their evolving understanding of partnership dynamics. This continuous reflection ensures that competence development is both cognitive and experiential, reinforcing self-awareness and ethical responsibility.

3. The Learning Experience Design

The learning experience within SAMExperience is conceived as an active, inclusive, and transformative journey. Its design deliberately integrates cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning to mirror the complex reality of cross-sector partnerships. The pedagogical structure responds to the challenge identified in sustainability education: the need to move learners from knowledge acquisition towards value internalisation and behavioural change.

3.1 Structure and Flexibility

The learning process follows a structured yet flexible architecture that accommodates students' autonomy while maintaining a shared academic rhythm across partner institutions. Each of the four modules is divided into a set of standardised blocks: introduction (video), calendar of activities, the challenge, core content, application tasks and assessment, sharing in the forum, and answering the challenge.

This recurrent structure provides predictability and coherence, helping students to navigate independently while ensuring pedagogical consistency throughout the consortium.

Although students are required to complete all modules, flexible pacing is encouraged. Each learner may decide when to progress within defined deadlines, reflecting the project's emphasis on self-regulated learning, a key competence in professional environments characterised by complexity and uncertainty.

3.2 International and Intercultural Collaboration

Given that the programme involves five universities from different European contexts (Spain, Italy, Poland, Romania, and Lithuania), the learning design intentionally cultivates intercultural intelligence. Students interact through online discussion boards, international teamwork in the Global Challenge, and peer-review activities.

These interactions are not only technical exercises but carefully facilitated learning encounters where cultural assumptions, communication styles, and collaboration norms are explored and discussed. This experiential exposure to diversity prepares participants for the reality of cross-sector partnerships, where cultural awareness and empathy are as essential as analytical competence.

Each institution contributes local examples and case studies that illustrate how alliances operate within their socio-economic context. This approach enriches the collective learning experience and enables comparative understanding of partnership models across Europe.

3.3 Mentoring and Guidance

While autonomy is a central pedagogical principle, students receive structured tutoring and mentoring support. Each partner university designates mentors who provide academic guidance, encourage reflection, and mediate intercultural dialogue. Mentoring is delivered through asynchronous feedback on tasks, and optional synchronous sessions at key milestones.

This system ensures personal contact and continuity of learning support, counterbalancing the potential isolation of online study. Mentors also act as “partnership facilitators”, modelling the trust-building and communication skills that are fundamental to alliance leadership.

3.4. Learning for Transformation

Ultimately, the design of the learning experience aims to foster transformative learning, a process through which students critically examine their assumptions, experiment with new ways of thinking, and align their professional identity with principles of sustainability and cooperation. Through reflection, experimentation, and dialogue, learners evolve from passive recipients of knowledge to active change agents capable of facilitating partnerships that generate shared value for business and society.

4. Digital and Technological Framework

Digital technology is not conceived as a mere delivery mechanism but as an enabler of inclusive, interactive, and sustainable learning. The technological framework supports accessibility, collaboration, and long-term scalability of the SAMExperience model.

4.1 Learning Management System (LMS)

The course is hosted on Moodle, an open-source LMS selected for its flexibility, multilingual capacity, and proven reliability across higher education institutions. The system is maintained and technically supported by the University Politehnica of Timișoara (WUT), which ensures hosting, regular updates, and security compliance throughout the project’s duration. The platform is accessible free of charge and will remain linked to the project’s public website under the common identity SAMExperience.

The interface has been designed for intuitive navigation and it supports learners with diverse needs and devices, enabling participation through desktop, tablet, or smartphone.

4.2 Digital Pedagogical Tools

Moodle has been complemented by a suite of interactive and collaborative tools:

- Multimedia content (video lectures, infographics, audios) to support visual and auditory learning.
- Discussion forums and learning communities to encourage debate and peer reflection.
- Self-assessment quizzes to enhance motivation and immediate feedback.
- Collaborative workspaces (e.g., shared documents and whiteboards) for creating a sense of community.

These tools are designed to support different learning styles and to simulate the digital collaboration environments that alliance managers encounter in professional practice.

4.3 Data Management, Security, and Sustainability

All digital processes adhere to the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The platform ensures secure data storage, controlled access, and transparency in data usage.

4.4 Digital Inclusion and Eco-Responsibility

Consistent with the project's sustainability mission, digital choices aim to minimise environmental impact. The use of open-source software, cloud-based resources, and asynchronous learning reduces the carbon footprint associated with travel and printed materials. Furthermore, the course design promotes digital inclusion by ensuring that participation requires only low-bandwidth connectivity and standard hardware, thereby widening access for all students regardless of geographical or economic constraints.

5. Guiding Principles and Values

The SAMExperience learning methodology is shaped by the same principles underpinning effective partnerships:

- Equity – valuing every participant's contribution and perspective.
- Transparency – ensuring clarity in objectives, evaluation, and collaboration.
- Mutual Benefit – fostering shared learning and long-term engagement.

These values are not only taught but experienced through the course structure itself, transforming students into reflective practitioners capable of leading sustainable alliances.

Appendix

- The Methodological Model_literature revision (access here).
- Methodological model_decisions (access here).