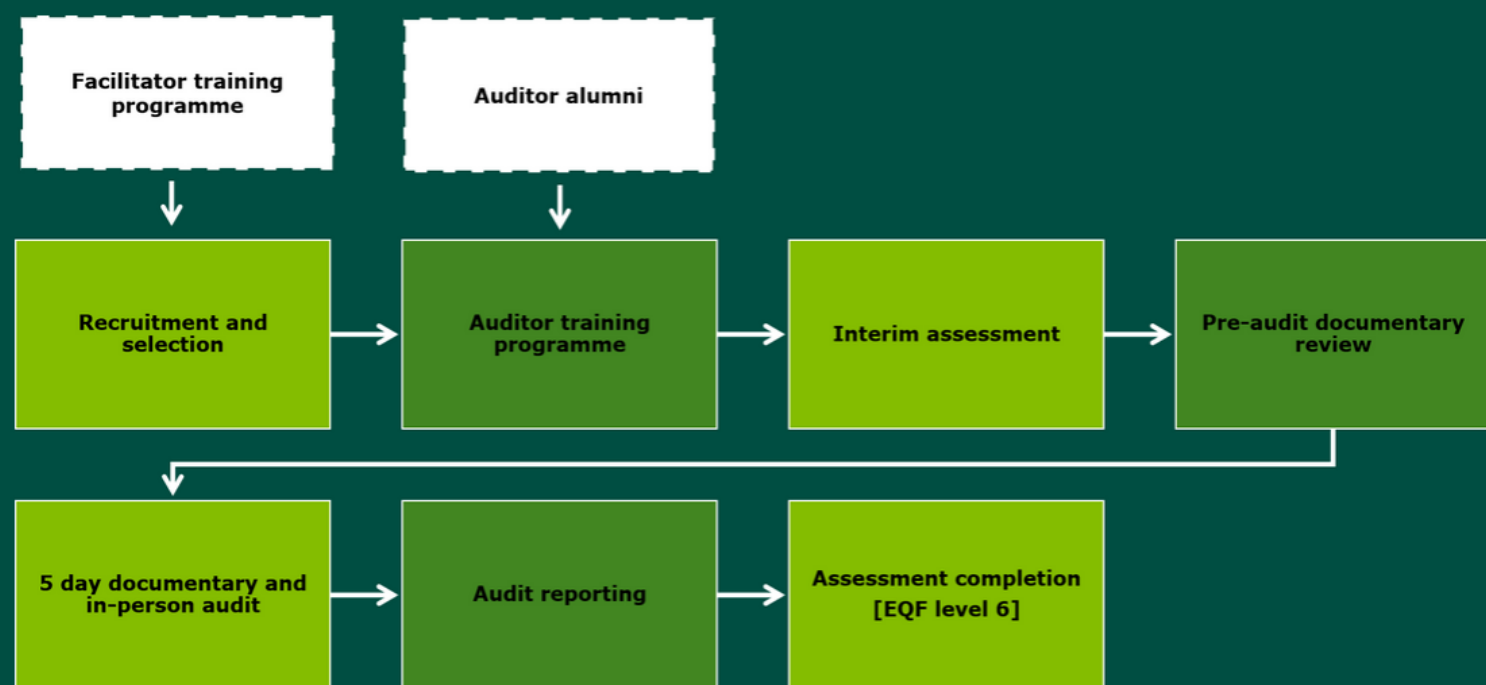


The ESSA Project was a three year Erasmus+ project aimed to understand more about social responsibility and sustainability in universities across Europe, in a way that enhances the student experience and graduate attributes. Students were trained to audit participating universities against the Benchmark Standards for University Social Responsibility across the European Higher Education Area and received a Certificate in Social Responsibility Auditing. The project, established in 2016 and completed in 2019, used university social responsibility as a focus for creating a more flexible approach to student learning, assessment and certification.

THE ESSA STUDENT JOURNEY

During the Erasmus+ funding, students were recruited into the project before completing a training programme in blended-mode at their home institution, delivered by trained facilitators. The training covered key concepts such as social responsibility in the university context, auditing methods and reporting. Following training, the auditors travelled to another partner university to deliver a 5 day audit, encompassing documentary review, interviews and focus groups. At the end of the week, auditors presented their findings to university stakeholders, developing these initial findings into a report following the audit week. Alongside the audit, students completed the interim and final assessment required to achieve the Certificate in Social Responsibility Auditing (5 ECTS Credits EQF Level 6).



BENCHMARK STANDARDS FOR UNIVERSITY SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The ESSA project is framed around the Benchmark Standards for University Social Responsibility, devised during a previous Erasmus+ funded project, which brought about the development of a sector-specific framework for social responsibility across the European Higher Education Area. The standards cover four core themes:

Research, teaching, support for learning and public procurement:

- ✓ The institution's core principles are underpinned by the values and principles of social responsibility.

Governance:

- ✓ The principles of social responsibility are respected throughout institutional policy, strategy, procedures and processes. They permeate all levels, as an integral element of management accountability and stakeholder engagement.

Environmental and societal sustainability:

- ✓ The institution is committed to environmental sustainability and biodiversity in all aspects of its operations, including in its use of goods services and works, and in its evaluation of decisions.

Fair practices:

- ✓ The institution ensures equality and fairness for its staff, students and others as appropriate and its policies and procedures.

The four themes are supported by a range of more detailed criteria. You can find full details of the criteria [here](#).

Hear why student auditors who've been part of the project think university social responsibility is important [here](#).

PROJECT PARTNERS

During the Erasmus+ funding, the project was delivered by the following partners:

- National Union of Students of the United Kingdom (project coordinator)
- The National Unions of Students in Europe
- University of Porto
- University of Edinburgh
- Kaunas University of Technology
- Edinburgh University Students' Association
- Kaunas University of Technology Students' Union
- Student Association from the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the project were to:

- Create an innovative approach to the recognition and validation of knowledge, skills (including soft skills) and competences
- Produce a significant Open Educational Resource (OER) for a ECTS 5 Credit Certificate in Social Responsibility Auditing (EQF Level 6)
- Contribute to the wider process of developing alternative models of curriculum development

The next sections of this infographic detail how these objectives have been achieved.

FACILITATOR TRAINING PROGRAMME

The University of Porto led the development of the FACILITATOR TRAINING PROGRAMME - designed to prepare participants for the development and delivery of the auditor training programme with students at their institution. The training programme was delivered in early 2017, in blended mode, with 20 participants from five of the partner organisations.

The training programme was delivered in the following format:

Phase 1 - online pre-course

This included a preparatory suite of activities including a personal presentation, identification of good practice, key readings and videos and an individual training journal.

Phase 2 - face to face training week

The week was divided into three main topics: the concept of university social responsibility and benchmarking.

Phase 3 - online post-course activities

After the end of the training week, participants were issued with an online training evaluation survey which provided a forum for discussion and sharing of materials between facilitators for the development of the auditor training programme. Participants were also issued with a series of tasks between the end of their training and the start of the auditor training programmes.

The pedagogical strategies focused on during the training mirror those adopted in the AUDITOR TRAINING PROGRAMME. These include promoting group work, debate, problem resolution and individual reflection, balanced with structured coverage of new content by those delivering the training.

The key output from this activity is the FACILITATOR TRAINING MANUAL which forms part of the Open Educational Resource produced by the project. This has been re-formulated as a self-directed course, though approach adopted during the Erasmus+ funding period could also be replicated. The manual can be accessed [here](#).



AUDITOR TRAINING PROGRAMME

During the Erasmus+ funding period, 73 students completed the AUDITOR TRAINING PROGRAMME, with 60 going on to complete an audit of a university partner against the Benchmark Standards for University Social Responsibility. The development of the training programme was led by Kaunas University of Technology. The programme was delivered in blended mode ahead of each of the four audits delivered during the funding programme by facilitators who had completed the FACILITATOR TRAINING PROGRAMME.

The training programme has been designed to be delivered over 40 hours, and to achieve the following outcomes for student participants:



- After the completion of the study programme, students will be able to identify problems and resources related to University Social Responsibility (USR)
- Students will have an understanding of social responsibility auditing and be able to complete the ESSA audit process at a Higher Education Institution, including completion of interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis

- Students will be able to analyse and reflect on the data collected
- Students will develop skills in writing and presenting a report, providing feedback to the university being audited
- Students will be able to self-reflect and self-assess personal learning.

The training programme has been designed as a series of units, which can be delivered according to a flexible timetable, covering the following aspects:

1. Introduction to the project
2. Audits and auditing
3. Benchmarking criteria
4. Methods in auditing and audits
5. Audit simulation
6. Reporting

The resources produced as part of the Open Education Resource associated with the project include an AUDITOR TRAINING MANUAL designed to support facilitators in the delivery of the training programme alongside student-facing training resources (presentation slides). You can access the manual and training resources here.

THE AUDITS

Key milestones for the project were the design and delivery of the four audits of Higher Education Institutions across Europe. Over the three year project, each institutional project partner has been audited by a team of trained students. In addition, a fourth audit was delivered as a means of testing the approach at a non-partner organisation.

King's College London fulfilled this role. According to the project design, university staff (along with support from students' associations and also teams of 'host' students) arranged intensive auditing schedules to enable the student auditors to fulfil their role.

Schedules included introductory sessions with relevant university leadership, opportunities to continue documentary review started back at their home institution, face-to-face interviews with university staff and community stakeholders and focus groups with university students and staff. The latter half of the audit week was focused on preparation of a presentation to be delivered on the final day of the audit, communicating initial findings and recommendations to an audience of university stakeholders.

A total of 60 students (20 from each of the three university partners) participated in the audits delivered throughout the funding period, with no student auditing their own university.

The student auditors came from a range of subject backgrounds including nursing, education, medicine and engineering, as well as subjects more traditionally related to social responsibility and environmental sustainability such as geography or environmental sciences.



To support the delivery of the audits, a range of resources have been developed, which form part of the OER.

The resources include:

- An audit manual for institutions, providing guidance and useful information for delivering an ESSA audit, including resources to support the recruitment of student auditors
- An evidence map, to support the collation of documentary and other evidence by university staff against the criteria within the Benchmark Standards for University Social Responsibility, and also aid student auditors in reviewing and analysing the evidence submitted
- A guide for 'visiting' student auditors, providing essential information on the audit week arrangements, as well as background information on the institution and its location. Key aspects of the auditor training programme are also revisited, for example advice and guidance on conducting interviews and focus groups
- A guide for 'host' students, outlining their role in supporting the social responsibility audit within their institution
- Templates for the audit presentation and final audit report submitted to the institution being audited by the student auditors

Development of the audit process and resources was led by the National Union of Students (UK). You can access the AUDIT MANUAL and resources here.

ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION

The development of the approach to assessment and certification of the students participating in the ESSA project, led by the University of Edinburgh, draws on principles of reflective and experiential learning. The assessment and certification process has been designed to tightly integrate with the ESSA student learning journey, outlined at the start of this report.



The assessment approach covers both the auditor training programme and the institutional audits. The ESSA students receive the training to develop their skills and knowledge in social responsibility auditing to then apply, refine and develop their competences through undertaking the audit of a higher education institution. On successful completion of the training, audit and assessment, the students are awarded 5 European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) credits at European Qualification Framework (EQF) Level 6.

Based on the reflective experiential learning approach, the assessment framework has been realised as a structured e-portfolio. During the funding period, this was built using PebblePad, but other systems can be used in future. The e-portfolio includes detailed instructions and guidance on demonstrating learning, knowledge and understanding. The detailed rubrics and criteria used in grading the portfolios were available to students making the assessment process fully transparent to participants. The e-portfolio has been designed to support the students' abilities in applying and critiquing knowledge as theories, models and practices of social responsibility auditing while also enabling students to validate and justify their claims for learning and competence. This approach to assessment helps students surface the sort of transferable graduate attributes than enhance their employability in a very tangible way.

During the funding period, 47 students successfully achieved the Certificate in Social Responsibility Auditing.

The ASSESSMENT AND CERTIFICATION MANUAL is available as an element of the OER available online here.

PROJECT IMPACT

Throughout the project, the impacts on the different groups participating in the project have been captured through monitoring and evaluation.

STUDENTS

Feedback from student participants on their experiences of the project has been overwhelmingly positive. At the end of their experiences with the project (post submission of their assessment) 90% said they were satisfied or very satisfied. For many, the source of this satisfaction was the real-world learning approach adopted by the project alongside the assessment process.

Key impacts students noted through the evaluation surveys conducted throughout the project include:

- The benefits of an intercultural experience, working with fellow students from different cultures and backgrounds
- The development of essential skills such as team working, communication and listening skills, negotiation and problem-solving skills and confidence
- The development of transferable skills such as interviewing, documentary analysis, making presentations and report writing
- An appreciation of social responsibility, which is seen as beneficial for future employers, with many students noting that they believed their participation in the project to have been influential in securing internships and employment opportunities

"This has been the best experience of my university education, the learning approach was practical and very beneficial!"

UNIVERSITIES

For the universities involved in the ESSA project, there have been multiple impacts across different areas of the institution, including:

- An opportunity to emphasise longstanding commitment to social responsibility and sustainability and raise the profile of the university in this area both internally and externally
- The chance for continued improvement in the sphere of social responsibility through learning from the other institutions involved and through the audit process which helped to identify where practice and policy could be improved
- An opportunity to further action related to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals
- Influencing student engagement, in particular within non-student facing professional services teams, developing a new focus on the student experience and student involvement in departmental plans and activities
- Encouraging the development of new links between different departments and teams within institutions, in particular between academic and professional services staff
- Providing a development opportunity for staff trained as facilitators, with those taking part during the funded project noting the novelty of the role and the huge learning experience they themselves had undergone

The project team's aspiration for the project is that the resources, model and Certificate in Social Responsibility Auditing are utilised by universities across the European Higher Education Area, and beyond, with institutions benefitting from the impacts seen by the partner organisations.