



Case Report

From Life-Skills Research and Training to Sustainability: A Case Study from a Spanish University

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Abstract: We are currently facing a potential 'polycrisis', a critical inflection point that requires a holistic response aimed at building collective foresight and preparedness for short-, medium-, and long-term risks. The role of higher education institutions and social stakeholders is decisive for sustainability goals. This paper presents a case study where academia, governance, and industry have aligned to challenge, inspire, and encourage universities to enhance student growth and bind macro-scale measures leading to a sustainable future. A teaching innovation project has served as a transforming lever, in combination with the private sector, to create a platform that reaches more than 50,000 undergraduate students and teaching staff. This structure, rooted in the 2031 Strategic Plan of the University of Granada, has also served to channel local and regional initiatives, establish effective partnerships with broad social members, raise awareness, and promote actions to advance in the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goals. A comprehensive overview is provided, which details its chronology, materials, results, challenges, impact, and descriptions of the various courses, programs, and actions. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research, policy and cooperation among stakeholders.

Keywords: curriculum innovation in higher education; sustainable development; university governance; LifeComp; GreenComp; employability; university–industry strategic partnerships



As highlighted in the most recent Global Risk Report of the World Economic Forum [1], we are currently facing a potential 'polycrisis', a critical inflection point that requires a holistic response aimed at building collective foresight and risk preparedness. Although the challenge ahead is complex, it is also true that risks are always accompanied by opportunities for growth that ensure prosperity and environmental sustainability [2]. In this context, strategic partnerships are essential to move from multidisciplinary settings to more inter- and transdisciplinary ways of thinking, designing, collaborating, and co-creating [3]. Moreover, shared responsibility between different stakeholders is crucial when the goal is to not only build resilient societies but also to change and transform what is no longer working in order to create a stronger and more prosperous shared future [4]. Resilience and transformation are not opposites but complement each other. Since maintaining resilience at one scale may require transformational changes at other scales, all stakeholders' contributions are necessary to respond effectively to challenges [5].



Citation: Posadas de Julián, P.; Verdejo Lucas, C.; de Rueda Villén, B.; Haro-Soler, M.d.M.; Gijón-Puerta, J.; Cámara Aguilera, E.; García de Quesada, M. From Life-Skills Research and Training to Sustainability: A Case Study from a Spanish University. Challenges 2024, 15, 35. https://doi.org/10.3390/ challe15030035

Academic Editors: Susan Prescott, Kristian Stålne, Christine Wamsler, Kristofer Vernmark, Jonathan Reams, Vivianna Rodriguez Carreon, Kira Cooper, Stefani Greca and Lene Søvold

Received: 14 March 2024 Revised: 10 June 2024 Accepted: 25 June 2024 Published: 8 July 2024



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Different types of skills have always been key to the successful navigation and management of academic, personal, and professional reality. In this uncertain and volatile scenario, even though the basic principles of a discipline are still the cornerstone of a profession, one cannot underestimate the importance of the progressive demand for other equally crucial skills [6]. This set of skills has received different names and definitions and differ from traditional academic ones in that they are not based primarily on content or job-specific knowledge. Instead, though dependent on culture and context [7], they are transversal and transferable to different jobs and occupations [8,9]. In this case report, they are referred to as life skills [10,11]. This term has been used by international institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and can be defined as malleable adaptive attitudes and behaviours to tackle life challenges [10,12,13]. They span personal, interpersonal, as well as cognitive, meta-cognitive, and reflective skills, and include the following: (i) personal skills such as self-awareness, agency, and self-regulation; (ii) interpersonal skills such as communication, teamwork, and empathy; and (iii) (meta)cognitive and reflective skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and responsible decision making.

Many frameworks, approaches, and applications of these skills are available in higher education studies, and some have a direct positive impact on performance [14] and wellbeing [15]. The cost-effectiveness of research and training in these non-specific skills is also evident in studies on employability [16], where new professional profiles are emerging and are (re)configured [17]. According to [18], 42% of all jobs are now at risk of automation. However, only 12% of those jobs that require both job-specific and more general skills are in danger of being eliminated by machines. Therefore, in this Fourth Industrial Revolution, the new metrics [19] are in the form of a skills genome based on a new professional categorisation [20], which requires an innovative curriculum in higher education [21]. This new curriculum should combine specific knowledge and life skills not only to meet the labour market needs [22] but also to promote and nurture personal, social, and physical wellbeing [7].

Public universities in Spain have long been aware of the need to incorporate this type of skill. However, holistically integrating the teaching, research, management, and transfer of these life skills is still a challenge in some university cultures [23], and their inclusion is still very limited and uneven, with little integration in the curriculum [24]. Even though the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) includes generic skills, such as flexibility or teamwork, as necessary for career development, they are not explicitly taught or researched in the vast majority of degree programmes where the focus has traditionally been on more cognitive and content-based knowledge [22].

The growing interest in life skills has been accompanied by a transformation in the mindset of higher education institutions (HEIs), essential for achieving a healthier, more equitable, and sustainable world. This is hardly new in academia, as reflected in the various initiatives that have been in place for decades, which call for organizational change [3]. HEIs are expected to reassess their education and research practices, encouraging their staff and students to collaborate with external stakeholders [25] (p. 119). Integrative or relational approaches have significantly contributed to the debate, as demonstrated in this case report by merging traditional technocratic sustainability science discourses (outer sustainability) with individual, human inner worlds (inner sustainability) [26].

As shown in Figure 1, the concept of 'care' is rooted in relational thinking as it activates and fosters human institution and nature relationships. It aligns with sustainability and transformation processes by integrating the inner dimensions of people's lives [27]. However, despite advances, successful cases and comprehensive frameworks for assessing the sustainability performance of HEIs [28], transformative structural change has not yet transpired [27]. Achieving excellence while caring for people and the planet [26] still remains a challenge. In Spanish universities, this change has prompted visible structural transformations, but a greater commitment is needed to create a holistic system [28].

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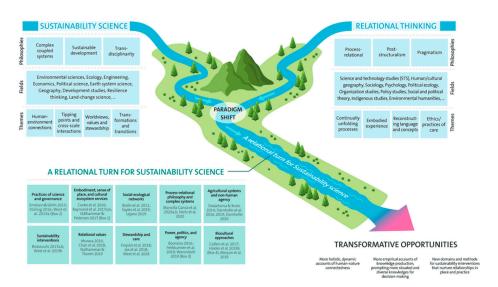


Figure 1. A relational turn for sustainability science [29] (p. 311).

The University of Granada (UGR) has embraced this context as an opportunity to equip graduates, the university community, and society in general with the tools needed to face the challenges of modern society. To this end, and in consonance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the University of Granada 2031 Strategic Plan includes, among its seven core lines of action, the development of highly committed and motivated individuals, as well as the pursuit of a socially responsible university committed to sustainable development [30]. Additionally, the UGR has recently established the Vice-Rectorate for Infrastructure and Sustainability, which is responsible for promoting awareness and initiatives to foster a sustainable future. These policy levers have served as building blocks for creating and nurturing different proactive responses that go beyond merely providing students with coping tools or designing courses tailored to meet the labour market needs [31].

Within the European context, the DECODE project has explored the role of deans as change leaders, who set the strategies, roadmaps, and tools for promoting sustainability in HEIs [25]. Within this framework, this case study depicts a multidisciplinary initiative. Initially conceived as a modest teaching innovation project, it initially emphasized life skills training and research. However, over time, it has expanded to influence all three HEI missions (i.e., education, research, engagement) and mission supports (i.e., operations and governance) [25]. The evolution of this initiative has not only reinforced the positive systemic change already underway within the UGR but has also injected it with fresh momentum.

The objective here is not to provide a rigid checklist of dos and don'ts but rather to identify potential contributions and trade-offs in actions geared towards promoting both inner and outer sustainability within the Spanish university context. Recognizing that there is more than one path to sustainability, this case study serves as a call to action. It advocates for raised awareness, well-informed and researched-backed approaches, resilience, and collaboration among all stakeholders. The overarching goal is to catalyze transformation towards the establishment of a compassionate, sustainable university, and society at large.

2. A Shift in Paradigm: From Training to Education

According to [32,33], in the opinion of many employers, policymakers, researchers, and educators, a degree is no longer sufficient. Twenty years ago, the main requirement for a job was a university diploma; however, the situation has evolved dramatically. In the world today, many companies are placing less importance on a degree and are now more focused on skills-based hiring [33,34]. This prioritization of non-academic skills in the labour market is reflected in job advertisements [35], as well as in the expectations and needs of employers [31]. The fact that emotional intelligence guides career success [36]

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is something that is widely acknowledged by recruiters [37] and highlights a skills gap between higher education learning and the needs of society [38,39].

UNESCO, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the European Commission are all institutions that have introduced international educational policies stressing the urgent need to prepare students for a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world [40]. These organizations emphasize the need for a more skills-based education that bridges the gap between current degree programmes and the needs of society [22]. National and international frameworks, agendas, and projects such as the OECD Competency Framework, UNESCO Intercultural Competences Framework, CASEL, or the Life Skills for Europe project have been launched [18,41], and though their application is not worldwide, there is a widespread consensus among policymakers that life skills should be researched and embedded in formal curricula to enable students to successfully navigate their lives, relations, and career paths, especially since these skills allow them to cope with societal changes, digital transformation, volatile global job markets, and rising radicalization [22] (p. 11).

Researchers from different fields such as engineering [42], sports [43], or business [44] are following this trend because students who master these life skills, along with more specific technical ones, will be in a more advantageous position in the labour market [5]. Likewise, they will generate greater social good, enjoy better health, and live longer. Their academic performance will also improve their productivity and engagement [45].

Furthermore, an increasing number of scholars argue that the sustainable transformation of society cannot occur without life skills and self-transformation. Sustainability and inner development are thus intrinsically connected [46,47]. In fact, UNESCO has recognized self-awareness as a key skill for sustainable development [48], and Inner Development Goals have emerged as a complement to the Sustainable Development Goals [49]. Various methods and practices have been proposed to support this inner work for sustainability, including psychological approaches [50], cognitive—behavioural techniques [51], coaching [52], meditation [53], journaling [54], and mindfulness [55]. While these tools can facilitate the desired change, however, scholars caution about flaws in life skills training and highlight the issue of poorly defined psycho-educational interventions that are purported to enhance individual performance and wellbeing. Commodity forms of these courses are one of the primary targets of criticism [56]. Life skills are not "pills" of competence, detached from specific disciplinary contexts and socio-cultural settings that can be easily acquired. Though they are malleable, they are context-dependent skills which require rigorous research and proper implementation [57].

Struggling to operationalize an educational vision on sustainability into practical strategic plans or curricula design, HEIs need to advance to deeper levels of research, teaching and outreach [3]. While traditional learning spaces have focused on what is already possible, *know what* and *know how*, the current proposal emphasizes what is necessary: *know why* (i.e., challenge the status quo) and *know how to be* or *how to become* (i.e., how to learn, unlearn, and relearn [3] (p. 16).

In this context and within the framework of this case study, we suggest transitioning from training to education [58]. Human capabilities and life-related skills are essential in a world where knowledge alone is insufficient without the capacity to navigate its complexities [59]. In the realm of sustainable development, we follow [60] in inviting researchers and practitioners to move from education about sustainability (know what) and education for sustainability (know how), towards education as sustainability (know how to be, how to become). This shift emphasizes capacity building, empowerment and action competence, fostering the ability to engage creatively; manage successfully in conditions of uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity; reflect critically; and learn iteratively over time from real-world experience [60] (Box 3, p. 98).

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3. The First Teaching Innovation Project: Turning Research into Tools

According to [61], the second largest daily newspaper in Spain, the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting (FTI) of the University of Granada (UGR) is one of the leading translation and interpreting faculties both in Spain and abroad. Not surprisingly, its students tend to be high achievers and thus more prone to maladaptive perfectionism which can lead to psychological distress [62]. Its teaching staff is thus familiar with issues of anxiety, stress and burnout among students. However, psychological distress is not something that only affects high-profile students. Various authors report greater stress levels among all undergraduate students when compared to the general population [63]. In fact, it is estimated that nearly 40% of all university students experience mild to severe depressive symptoms with over 50% predicted to experience some level of depressive symptomatology during their college years [64]. Though the ability to cope with cognitive and emotional challenges is a desirable goal for every student, the FTI teaching staff is particularly attuned to this due to the unique characteristics of their students.

There has been a shift towards incorporating meditative practices in higher education, integrating them into research and course curricula across various disciplines. Mindfulness, commonly defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" [65] (p. 145), is one such practice that has grown exponentially in recent years in fields such as education, engineering, and sports [66–68]. Some studies suggest that mindfulness is a tool whose usefulness extends beyond the instrumental goals of improved health and wellbeing, encompassing the development of life skills that lead to human flourishing where both personal and social transformation are possible [4].

It is within this framework that in 2018, CRAFT.UGR was born. CRAFT.UGR is a teaching innovation project, which was the result of the interaction between mindfulness experts, lecturers, researchers in translation and interpreting (T&I) and experimental psychology, students, administrative staff, and social stakeholders in higher education. The project was aimed at undergraduate students of the Bachelor's Degree in Translation and Interpreting at the University of Granada (Spain). The main objective of the project and parallel study was to test whether participation in a course on mindfulness-based techniques could improve specific aspects of cognition, emotional intelligence, creativity, and academic performance inter alia.

To this end, a study was conducted to compare the effects of two mindfulness-based programmes. With the collaboration of researchers from the Mind, Brain and Behaviour Research Centre (CIMCYC) of the UGR, psychological and academic performance measures were taken at different stages of training [69].

3.1. Chronology, Materials, and Methodology

The first year of the project was devoted to designing the study, adapting the programmes, and implementing the administrative procedures to include the new course in the Bachelor's Degree Programme. Approval for the parallel study was received from the UGR Ethics Committee on Human Research (CEIH) and the UGR Human Subjects Protection Review Board. The methodology used was registered in the United States National Library of Medicine (NLM) database at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), https://clinicaltrials.gov/study/NCT04392869 (accessed on 1 July 2024).

The Faculty of Translation and Interpreting facilitated lecture rooms, as well as administrative assistance. The University of Granada General Foundation was responsible for the payment of fees, insurance, and issuing the corresponding certificate for subsequent validation. Course fees were set slightly below the average price to encourage participation, and students with scholarships received an additional discount.

During the first term of the second academic year of the project, all undergraduate students were invited to participate both in the course and the study. They had the option of participating only in the study, only in the course, or in both the course and study. In compliance with Spanish and European legislation, all potential participants were asked

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to give their informed consent. Eligible participants were then randomly assigned to either the MBSR group or the CRAFT group. A sample of 62 students participated in the course and study. Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, which took approximately 60 min to complete, were administered to assess various outcome measures. These measures included dispositional mindfulness, emotion regulation, psychological distress, emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, mind-wandering, creativity, and motivation and learning strategies.

All measures were validated for the European Spanish sample and met reliability standards. They were uploaded to the UGR LimeSurvey platform, an open-source online survey tool specifically designed to develop, publish, and collect survey responses. This software is recommended by the UGR to present and collect online data for research purposes since it complies with current legislation and ensures that all data protection requirements are met. For additional security guarantees, an institutional email account was created for all communication related to the project. In the same line, all the documentation generated within the project was uploaded and shared on a virtual cloud owned by the UGR.

3.2. The Course and Programmes

Both mindfulness-based programmes lasted for 12 weeks and trained participants to increase their sustained attention and to acquire an accepting and open attitude. Nevertheless, both programmes differed in their methods, intention, and aims.

The MBSR programme is an evidence-based, secular programme originally developed for chronic pain but which has reported positive results in an array of clinical and non-clinical populations. This programme cultivates awareness of the present moment and non-judgmental attention while promoting stress reduction through a range of formal and informal practices [65].

The CRAFT programme [70,71] is a mindfulness-based programme which systematically combines practices of ancient philosophies, such as yoga and Buddhism, together with more recent disciplines such as mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and positive psychology. The contents are structured in five consecutive modules, whose aim is to cultivate and enhance consciousness, relaxation and regulation, attention, bliss, and transcendence [72,73].

Students from both groups received an adapted and extended version of the MBSR and CRAFT programmes which can be found on the USA Government clinical trials database, clinicaltrials.gov, under the NCT04392869 registry. Both programme instructors were fully qualified and accredited and had ample experience in this kind of psycho-educational intervention.

3.3. Results, Challenges, and Impact

Preliminary data indicated that T&I students that participated in a mindfulness-based course demonstrated improvement in skills such as dispositional mindfulness (i.e., the ability to attend to, be aware of, and accept present-moment experience), adaptive emotional regulation, emotional intelligence, and cultural intelligence. Additionally, both programmes resulted in a reduction in stress, in maladaptive emotional regulation, and in spontaneous mind-wandering [69]. These findings are particularly significant since the pre- and post-intervention measurements were taken before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which, according to the literature, levels of difficulties in emotion regulation and stress were expected to be higher than usual [74].

However, this initial teaching innovation project extends beyond a single psychoeducational intervention aimed at individual self-improvement. It encompasses the entire process from detecting learning needs, designing and implementing methodologies, certifying and validating life skills to curriculum design and policy development. It lays the foundation for inner sustainability and relational transformation while paving the way for strategic alliances with stakeholders outside academia.

In what follows, we present the results, challenges, and impact of this first teaching innovation project, organized according to the missions and mission supports outlined in the DECODE project [25]. As it can be seen in Table 1, our analysis reveals a significant

emphasis on the Education and Research missions, with comparatively less emphasis on outreach and campus operations. At this stage, governance considerations primarily involve challenges and impact assessment.

Table 1. First teaching innovation project's results, challenges, and impact. Template adapted from DECODE project [25].

HEIs Missions and Mission Supports	Results	Challenges	Impact		
Education	UGR funded teaching innovation project Psychoeducational intervention in T&I studies	COVID-19 emergency situation	Other teaching innovation projects of similar nature follow the same path		
(Courses, training projects, mindset development)	Report for the improvement of the degree's teaching guides	Limited funding	Life skills are formally integrated in a T&I curriculum		
-	Life skills certification and validation	Non-academic skills are seen as a threat to more specific, content-based skills			
Research (Research projects, methodology, funding)	Research papers describing the psychoeducational intervention [69] and the T&I employers' views on the need for life skills (learning needs detection) [31]	COVID-19 emergency situation	First study on Translation Studies to be registered as a clinical trial on the USA Government clinical trials clinicaltrials.gov (867/CEIH/2019; 992/CEIH/2019; 1140/CEIH/2020)		
	Clinical trial posted on the USA Government clinical trials https://clinicaltrials.gov/ study/NCT04392869 (accessed on 1 July 2024)	Small sample and low statistical power, though statistically significant and consistent across measures	First study to test the effects of mindfulness-based training on cultural intelligence		
	Psychological benefits through intentional training and call for empirically supported psychoeducational interventions in the context of translation studies (TS)	Difficulties in publishing the paper in a T&I journal due to its "strong psycho-educational nature" Bringing together unrelated research groups and projects. Moving form multi- to interdisciplinary research [75]	TV local media covers the project process and results.		
Engagement/Outreach (Collaboration, outreach, entrepreneurship, valorization)	Local company training requests	COVID-19 emergency situation	Growing awareness among T&I companies of the need for life-skills training		
	Closer contact with T&I companies. New partnerships	Broad scope of the notion life skills and heterogeneous nature of T&I companies	Growing awareness among T&I companies of the need for grounded and context-dependent life-skills research		
Campus operations and administration (Buildings, infrastructure and facilities, finance and travel)	Classrooms and lecture rooms are booked and prepared	COVID-19 emergency situation	Growing awareness among T&I faculty members of the need for open teaching spaces		
	Specific material is bought for the classes	Lack of space and appropriate facilities for a psychoeducational intervention of this kind. Timetabling	The faculty is equipped with new material for psychoeducational interventions of this kind		
Governance (Rules, practices and processes by which institutions and companies are directed and controlled; compliance and administration)		COVID-19 emergency situation Resistance of HEI governance and management models to transformation Reluctance of certain lecturers to formally integrate life skills in the T&I subjects' guide	Teaching innovation group members are invited to share the project results at the Asociación de Universidades del Estado Español con Estudios Oficiales de Traducción e Interpretación (AUnETI) annual meeting		

4. The Second Teaching Innovation Project: Scaling up the Experience

Different academic and professional profiles demand different knowledge, skills, and attitudes [76]. With a view to exploring how different disciplines codify these, a second innovation project was launched to scale up the results to degree programmes in humanities, engineering, bioscience, and physical education. These four programmes are given at the

UGR, in the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, School of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Medicine, and Faculty of Sport Sciences, respectively.

The objectives were the following: (1) to provide content for LifeComp, the European key competence framework, and design the structure and content of a three-ECTS programme to be taught in the second term of the following academic year in four degree programmes of the UGR; (2) to design and implement a parallel empirical study that measures the cognitive-emotional impact of such a programme in the short, medium, and long term; and (3) to issue, validate, and accredit this knowledge and these skills and attitudes, together with public and private institutions in the sector, in the official undergraduate curriculum.

4.1. Chronology, Materials and Methodology

Similar to the first innovation project, the first year was devoted to the design of the study as well as the administrative procedures to formally include the course in the Bachelor's Degree Programme and obtain approval from the UGR Ethics Committee on Human Research (CEIH) and the UGR Human Subjects Protection Review Board. This time, the programme proposal by the University of Granada, Más Presente, is designed following a base structure, UGRComp, which in turn follows the European framework for the Personal, Social and Learning to Learn key competence, LifeComp [10,11].

During the first year, in order to provide content for the base structure of the programme, a preliminary study was carried out by UGR experts in curricular design to explore the importance of the LifeComp competences in each of the four degrees. The research consisted in finding, typifying, and counting the transversal skills as listed in the ANECA recommendations for the contents of the degrees in translation and interpreting, engineering, sports and medicine, and then matching them to the corresponding LifeComp competences (see Table 2).

Table 2. Table extracted from [7]	77]	١.
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	Lifecomp Competences									
	Personal Area		Social Area		Learning to Learn Area		-			
Bachelor's Degree	P1. Self-Regulation	P2. Flexibility	P3. Wellbeing	S1. Empathy	S2. Communication	S3. Collaboration	L1. Growth Mindset	L2. Critical Thinking	L3. Managing Learning	Total
Translation and Interpreting	1	4	2	3	19	4	3	14	8	58
Medicine	0	6	1	8	13	7	12	16	4	67
Sport Sciences	1	6	9	13	6	6	6	7	5	59
Civil Engineering	0	1	2	2	2	0	2	9	3	21
Total	2	17	14	26	40	17	23	46	20	

According to this report, different academic profiles have different needs and expectations regarding the Personal, Social and Learning to Learn areas as outlined in the LifeComp European framework. Some room for programme adaptation depending on these four academic profiles was allowed.

The faculties and technical school participating in the study facilitated the use of lecture rooms and gave students three ECTS credits in exchange for their participation. The project was presented to the Vice-Rectorate for Equality, Inclusion, and Sustainability of the UGR and was included in the strategic plan of the University of Granada.

During the first term of the second academic year, all students gave their informed consent and were invited to participate in the course, as well as in the study. A sample of 168 students enrolled in the courses during the second term with the largest group comprising translation and interpreting students, alongside participants from the other three specializations. Participants were randomized and assigned to two groups: the MBSR group and the Más Presente group. All students completed tests before and after the intervention. As in the previous project, all necessary precautions were taken to comply with legislation ensuring confidentiality and data protection.

4.2. The Course and Programmes

To guarantee the use of a common language and logic for the further development and flexible implementation at the higher education level [13], the base structure of the new programme was based on the European LifeComp key competence framework [10,11]. In this framework, in line with the Recommendations on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning of the Council of the European Union, we adopt the term competence to define a blend of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Here, knowledge encompasses established facts, figures, concepts, ideas, and theories that underpin the comprehension of a certain area or subject. Skills refer to the ability and capacity to execute processes and use existing knowledge to attain outcomes. Attitudes encompass dispositions and mindsets governing actions or reactions to ideas, individuals, or situations [78].

LifeComp is composed of nine malleable, interdependent, and culturally shaped competences, structured in three intertwined areas: Personal, Social, and Learning to Learn. Each competence is the result of research by experts and stakeholders and is further divided into three levels of development: awareness, understanding, and action (see Supplementary Materials S1).

Experts in curricular design, psychologists, and pedagogues worked together to provide content for a structure based on LifeComp framework. As depicted in the Supplementary Materials S2, a base structure was created, on which to build the Más Presente programme so that it could be adapted to each academic and professional context. This base structure was called UGRComp. Its descriptors were extracted from LifeComp, and its contents followed the guidelines in [10] for developing the nine competences and three areas. Assessment criteria were provided, and various evidence-based references were suggested for further programme content development.

Didactic material was designed and compiled to provide and complement the teaching of the contents. The assessment material was also designed and compiled to give the students individual and group feedback on their progress in competence acquisition, as well as to provide the necessary qualifications for credit validation (See Supplementary Materials S2).

In consonance with LifeComp experts [11], the 3-ECTS-credit course covered the three core competences (i.e., Self-regulation, Empathy, and Growth Mindset). In other words, it cross-cut framework elements that are pre-requisites for developing other framework areas. Special attention was given to the scalability of concepts, procedures, and attitudes as well as to the connection between the different skills and areas. For pedagogical reasons, six independent but scalable items were foreseen as contents for each level of development, and the assessment criteria were designed accordingly.

4.3. Results, Challenges, and Impact

The objective of this second teaching innovation project is to explore the potential of psycho-educational research and intervention within the context of a European public university. In pursuit of this goal, the first UGR psycho-educational programme, Más Presente, is designed and implemented in accordance with the European LifeComp Framework [38]. This programme extends beyond mere individual self-improvement interventions.

Building upon the findings of the previous psycho-educational intervention where mindfulness-based training increased the ability to attend to, be aware of and accept Challenges 2024, 15, 35 10 of 21

present moment experience, in conjunction with improved adaptive emotional regulation and emotional intelligence [69], this programme transcends traditional cognitive and behavioural approaches. Its objective is not to directly modify thoughts and emotions, but rather to observe them in order to regulate them. The aim is to understand how thoughts and emotions arise and to direct efforts towards actions aligned with personal values. This entails equipping individuals with the internal tools necessary to respond thoughtfully rather than reacting impulsively. Consequently, the transformation of thoughts and emotions becomes an incidental outcome of the process, rather than an end in itself.

Similarly to the first teaching innovation project, this project encompasses the entire process from detecting learning needs, designing and implementing methodologies, certifying and validating competences to curriculum design and policy development. It establishes the groundwork for inner sustainability and relational transformation, while also facilitating strategic alliances with other stakeholders outside of academia.

Table 3 shows the project results, challenges, and impact, categorized according to the missions and mission support outlined in the DECODE project [25]. Notably, the education mission emerges as the most significant, with outreach gaining traction. Research, while still relevant, is not as prominent in this biennium compared to the previous project, and governance is beginning to gain importance. Additionally, dotted lines have been incorporated to illustrate the permeability of missions and mission supports, with related missions and mission supports in square brackets.

Table 3. Second teaching innovation project's results, challenges and impact. Template adapted from the DECODE project [25].

HEIs Missions and Mission Supports	Results	Challenges	Impact	
Education (Courses, training projects, mindset development)	UGR funded teaching innovation project UGR psychoeducational programme design and implementation aimed at humanities, biosciences, sports, and engineering students UGR psychoeducational programme design and implementation adapted for local companies [outreach and campus operations] Design and implementation of a training course for trainers Life skills certification and validation Report for the improvement of the degree teaching guides	Heterogeneity of fields, faculties, and companies involved Wide variety of available frameworks. Content design of the programme HEI lecturers and management teams' resistance to skills-based formal training, especially in psychology and biomedical-related fields Limited funding Non-academic skills are seen as a threat to more specific, content-based skills	The project scales up and reaches a broader audience, inside and outside academia [research, outreach, and campus operations] 1st skills-based programme designed and launched at the UGR [governance] Life skills are formally integrated in the degree curriculum. The course is also offered in employee training schemes [outreach and campus operations]	
Research (Research projects, methodology, funding)	Project presentation at International Conference on Social Emotional Learning in HEIs [education, research, outreach, and governance]; Pre-post qualitative measures are gathered in the trainers' training course. Data are recorded for a longitudinal study [education, research, outreach, and governance] Pre-post quantitative measures are gathered for the psycho-educational intervention. Data are recorded for longitudinal study [education, research, outreach, and governance]	Bringing together unrelated research groups and projects. Interdisciplinary research [76]. Though the sample size is bigger, still, low statistical power	Interdisciplinary and cross-faculty collaboration among psychologists, pedagogists, doctors, sports scientists, engineers, translators, and interpreters	
Engagement/Outreach (Collaboration, outreach, entrepreneurship, valorisation)	Partnerships with local business such as supermarket chains, tourism firms and companies from the wellness sector [education, research, and outreach]	Heavy administrative bureaucracy for the delivery of the course outside the university premises	Growing awareness among companies of the need for life-skills training. The university as lever for transformation [education, research campus operations, and governance];	
	Local companies request that the course be held on their premises for their employees [education and campus operations]	Broad scope of the notion life skills and heterogeneous nature of local companies	growing awareness among companies of the need for grounded and context-dependent life-skills research [education and research]	
Campus operations (Buildings, infrastructure and facilities, finance and travel)	Classrooms, lecture rooms and companies' spaces are booked and prepared [education and outreach]	Coordination with companies' spaces and timetabling;	Growing awareness at the UGR of the need for open teaching spaces [governance]	
	Specific material is bought for the classes	Lack of space and appropriate facilities for a psychoeducational intervention of this kind. Timetabling	Faculties and schools are equipped with new material for psychoeducational interventions of this kind [education]	

Table 3. Cont.

HEIs Missions and Mission Supports	Results	Challenges	Impact
Governance (Rules, practices and processes by which institutions and companies are directed and controlled; compliance and administration)	The Vice-Rectorate for Equality, Inclusion, and Sustainability includes Más Presente in the strategic plan of the UGR and grants additional funding [education and research] The course is offered by the Vice-Rectorate for Equality, Inclusion, and Sustainability and approved by the Vice-Rectorate for Teaching and Learning. Graduate students are the target population [education, Research and campus operations]	Some HEI governance leaders' reluctance to formally integrate life skills in the degree subject guide; changes in UGR regulations and legislation regarding accreditation and validation of complementary courses	Other schools and faculties show interest in the impact of such a psycho-educational intervention [education and research] Growing awareness among students and lecturers of the need and impact of this psychoeducational intervention [education and research] Teaching innovation group members are invited to share the project to the UGR governing team [education and research]

5. The Industry-Academia Partnership: A Strategic Alliance Based on Sustainability

Over the centuries, human beings have evolved by successfully adapting to and dealing with crises of all kinds. The transformation that society is now demanding involves a paradigm shift that integrates global welfare, sustainability, and development. In this balance, it is no longer sufficient to satisfy individual or group needs by modifying the environment. Since this means entering into conflict with competitors to secure the necessary resources, this pattern is no longer viable. By limiting competitive stimuli, progress not only becomes more inclusive but advances at a more humane pace. This would alleviate stress on the planet's resources and make growth sustainable. Uncontrolled progress is not a path to the future but rather to extinction. Living in harmony with the environment benefits the environment but also allows us to optimize our efforts to move forward without slipping backwards at an accelerated pace [79].

To achieve positive systemic change, it is essential to leverage inner transformations to meet sustainability challenges [80]. Some authors argue that progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot be attained without the inner capacity to manage increasingly complex challenges. This highlights the need for psychological interventions within a coordinated transdisciplinary approach to foster transformational change [81]. Research is increasingly focusing on the nature of these desirable inner transformations, their relationship to external sustainability, and how they can be translated from academic to socio-cultural, political and environmental contexts [81] (p. 2). Nonetheless, progress towards sustainable development goals has been largely disappointing.

For this reason, there is now an urgent need for transformational change focusing on skills for inner development with a view to laying stronger foundations for improving our capacity to manage increasingly complex societal challenges [81] (p. 2). We thus need to take a step further in this transformative setting and equip learners with knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to become agents of change who are able to shape sustainable futures for everyone. We need to help them acquire greater awareness of inner dimensions, such as mindsets, values, and worldviews that influence transformative pathways and conceptions of sustainability [80,82]. Such challenges cannot be addressed by government, business, or civil society alone. The state of the world can only be improved by a systemic approach and the pursuit of strategic alliances that unite all stakeholders and allow us to move forward together.

5.1. Chronology, Materials, and Methodology

The Cívitas Group (https://www.civitasgrupo.com/ (accessed on 20 May 2024)), a nationwide property developer with a strong commitment to sustainability and innovation, has joined with the University of Granada to promote a transformation involving all stakeholders. The Cívitas-UGR Chair is a strategic alliance stemming from interaction between business and academia in the areas of sustainability, innovation, and training.

For the 2022–2024 biennium, as part of the UGR 2031 Strategic Plan, the training and research of the Chair focus on two main areas. On the one hand, it plans to actively promote sustainable construction and structural wood products to reduce the carbon

footprint, and on the other hand, it targets psycho-educational interventions for sustainable human development. To this end, the Chair relies on a highly qualified multidisciplinary group of architects, building engineers, environmental engineers, lawyers, and educational psychologists, who work within the framework of various national and European research projects. The activities of the Chair include initiatives of visibility and awareness, training, registration of new patents and interventions in projection and urban planning. In the other area of focus, a psycho-educational intervention and a parallel study have been designed and launched to provide research and training inside and outside academia. The methodology used in this study has been registered as a clinical trial, i.e., behavioural intervention, in clinicaltrials.gov under ID NCT05598944 and NCT05775978. The activities of the Chair in this area include training courses in sustainable human development specifically tailored for undergraduate students and teaching staff, course accreditation, and assessment, and clinical research on transversal competences. The courses have been approved by the different vice-rectorates and the corresponding accreditation will be provided.

The Chair integrates its two main focuses, i.e., sustainable construction and psychoeducational research and training, to address the cognitive dissonance that arises from knowing about an issue but lacking the agency to act. Drawing on previous experience, the Chair emphasizes education *as* sustainability [3], namely, education that challenges the status quo and goes beyond traditional knowledge and skills. This approach aims to foster adaptation, flexibility and proactivity in complex environments [3] (p. 9), building a shared understanding that serves as a catalyst for transformative learning [83] (p. 6).

5.2. The Courses and Programmes

Two courses are designed and offered to undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Granada. The aim is not only to integrate the necessary technical and specific knowledge in the curriculum, but also to incorporate competences, attitudes and values that promote responsible agency for sustainable futures.

The Diploma on Wood Structures Calculation Applied to Projects is a postgraduate course that is launched in collaboration with the European project LifeWood for Future (LIFE20 CCM/ES/001656). It offers training to architects and engineers who are interested in innovative manufacturing processes and low ecological footprint construction of buildings (see Supplementary Materials S3). The objective of this course is twofold; first, to raise awareness among building professionals of the urgency to provide sustainable solutions to current challenges; and second, to provide these experts with the necessary knowledge and tools to achieve this goal.

The other course builds on the experience of previous projects and incorporates education as sustainability in line with the European GreenComp framework [82]. This framework, chosen for its status as an EU competence framework and its close ties with LifeComp, ensures a comprehensive approach to sustainability education. Although all competences are interwoven and interdependent, participants are specifically trained in the three core elements of LifeComp, *Self-Regulation*, *Empathy* and *Growth Mindset*, [11], while emphasizing key GreenComp competences(in boldface) such as Promoting Nature, Critical Thinking, Adaptability, and Individual Initiative, (See Table 4).

Table 4. GreenComp areas and competences [82] (p. 17, 18). Emphasis on the competences explicitly integrated and exploited in the course programme.

Area	Competence		
	1.1. Valuing sustainability		
1. Embodying sustainability values	1.2. Supporting fairness		
	1.3. Promoting nature		

Table 4. Cont.

Area	Competence		
	2.1. Systems thinking		
2. Embracing complexity in sustainability	2.2. Critical thinking		
_	2.3. Problem framing		
	3.1. Futures literacy		
3. Envisioning sustainable futures	3.2. Adaptability		
_	3.3. Exploratory thinking		
	4.1. Political agency		
4. Acting for sustainability	4.2. Collective action		
_	4.3. Individual initiative		

Didactic materials have been designed, compiled and adapted to this framework. The programme has been offered to other members of the university community such as academic and research staff. Businesses and firms have also shown interest and have joined in.

5.3. Results, Challenges, and Impact

The Chair currently collaborates with the governance structure of the UGR, primarily through two if its vice-rectorates. It partners with the Vice-Rectorate for Quality, Teaching Innovation and Undergraduate Studies in the Plan Academia UGR. This plan coordinates various courses and activities aimed at enhancing transversal, management, teaching and governance competences among UGR lecturers and research staff (PDI), targeting over 3700 PDI. Additionally, the Chair works closely with the Vice-Rectorate for Infrastructure and Sustainability to publish a series of monographs on trends and innovation in construction materials for a sustainable future.

For the 2024–2026 biennium, the Chair, in collaboration with other UGR chairs focused on sustainability, the Vice-Rectorate for Infrastructure and Sustainability and the Rector's Office for Health and Relations with the Health System, will further incorporate the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) to bridge inner and outer sustainability [84].

Table 5 shows the results, challenges, and impact of this Industry–Academia Partnership, following the categorization of DECODE project [25]. In general terms, the various actions and initiatives illustrate how these efforts permeate the HEI Missions and Mission Supports. Dividing lines have been removed to highlight the transdisciplinary nature of the actions and interventions. In square brackets, we identify the missions and mission supports most closely linked under Results and Impact.

Table 5. Industry–Academia Partnership's results, challenges, and impact. Template adapted from the DECODE project [25].

HEIs Missions and Mission Supports	Results	Challenges	Impact	
Education (Courses, training projects, mindset development)	Postgraduate course (Diploma on Wood Structures Calculation Applied to Projects) [education, research, outreach and campus operations] GreenComp-based psychoeducational programme design and implementation aimed at UGR governance leaders, PDI, administrative staff, and students [education, research, campus operations, and governance] Sustainability competences certification and validation [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance]	Heterogeneity of fields, faculties, schools and companies involved Wide variety of available frameworks and terminology Content design and adaptation of the programme to different contexts Difficulties in fitting in funding calls due to the transdisciplinary nature of the project	The project scales up and reaches a broader audience including local public institutions [education, research, outreach and campus operations] Wider coverage of the programme. Life skills are formally integrated in the graduate and postgraduate curricula, PDI and administrative staff training, and companies' skills training and employment schemes [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance]	

Table 5. Cont.

HEIs Missions and Mission Supports

Results

Challenges

Impact

Research (Research projects, methodology, funding) Project presentation at International
Conference on Social Emotional Learning in
HEIs [education, research, outreach,
and governance]
Pre-post qualitative and quantitative
measures are gathered. Data is recorded for
a longitudinal study [education, research,
outreach, and governance]
Clinical trial posted on the USA
Government clinical trials
clinicaltrials.gov [education, research,
outreach, and governance]

Partnerships with other Chairs and sustainability related companies [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance]

Local companies request that the course be held on their premises for their employees [education and campus operations] Awareness raising initiatives to call for education as sustainability [3] [education, research, outreach, and governance]

Publication of the first book of a series on trends in sustainable materials in the building industry aimed at the general public [85]

Classrooms, lecture rooms and companies' spaces are booked and prepared [education, campus operations, and outreach]
New agreements are signed for the use of spaces and premises [education, outreach, campus operations, and outreach]

Psycho-educational interventions are designed and launched at the Vice-Rectorate for Quality, Teaching Innovation and Undergraduate Studies for the teaching and research staff. Some of them are specifically designed for UGR governance leaders [education, outreach, campus operations, and governance] UGR current governing team participation and involvement in the publication of the book on trends in sustainable materials [84] [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance] The Vice-Rectorate for Infrastructure and Sustainability channels collaboration among chairs on sustainability related issues [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance]

Bringing together unrelated research groups and projects. Inter and transdisciplinary research [75]

Due to the variety of contexts, bigger sample size and adaptable outcome measures are needed

Doctoral programs have difficulty accepting thesis supervisors from outside their areas of expertise

Non-academic stakeholders'

Finding complementarity in the, sometimes conflicting, interests between the company and the academia

engagement as participants

in the research

Heavy administrative bureaucracy for the delivery of courses outside the university premises Heavy administrative bureaucracy for the financial management of the various initiatives

Heterogeneous nature and interests of all involved actors

Heavy administrative bureaucracy for the delivery of courses outside the university premises Lack of space and appropriate facilities for a psychoeducational intervention of this kind. Timetabling Limited funding and UGR strict administrative procedures regarding payment of expenses and costs.

Coordination among governing team of the UGR, institutions and companies Renewal of the UGR Rectorate. Restructuring of the governing team Creation of practical outcomes, materials, programmes and methodologies, to facilitate change (inter- and transdisciplinary research) [75] [education, research, outreach and governance]
Local media impact [education, research, outreach and governance]
Thesis plans are presented within the framework of the project [education, research and outreach]
Scientific dissemination of research and training results [education, research and outreach]
Medium- and long-term collaboration and

Medium- and long-term collaboration and synergies among academic and non-academic stakeholders with a solid commitment to sustainability [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance]

Turning collaborative projects into accessible and usable outcomes for policy-and decision-makers [Governance] Awareness and training initiatives reach a variety of target audiences [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance]

Local and national governments preface book on trends in building materials. Extensive media coverage [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance]

Growing awareness at the UGR and companies of the need for open teaching spaces [education, outreach, campus operations, and governance] Growing awareness at the UGR, companies and local and national governments of the need for agreements on sustainability and training [education, outreach, campus operations, and governance]

Closer collaboration with the UGR governing team. [education, campus operation and governance]
Psycho-educational interventions are planned at the Rector's Office for Health and Relations with the Health System aimed at the UGR undergraduate students with the aim to improve wellbeing and sustainability competences [education, research, outreach, campus operations, and governance]

The UGR considers close collaboration with the Inner Development Goals Foundation [49] [education, research, outreach and governance]

6. Discussion, Challenges and Limitations

There is a widespread conception that life skills are decontextualized bits of knowledge or non-cognitive traits that one is born with, making them seemingly easier to teach and learn than more academic or technical ones [57]. In reality, life skills are not only difficult to teach and learn, but their value also varies significantly, depending on the culture, profession and situation [57] (p. 31). They are complex and deeply embedded within specific social, cultural, situational, and political contexts, and are grounded in professional norms [86]. Furthermore, life skills are certainly not non-cognitive, as they have been sometimes called [44], because cognition is intimately related to feelings and emotions [86]. Understanding and effectively teaching these skills requires multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research and training [75]. Collaboration between industry and academia is essential for universities to adequately prepare individuals to contribute meaningfully to society.

Campus operations (Buildings, infrastructure and facilities, finance and travel)

Engagement/Outreach

(Collaboration, outreach,

entrepreneurship,

valorisation)

Governance
(Rules, practices and processes by which institutions and companies are directed and controlled, compliance and, administration)

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There is now a broad consensus that sustainability is no longer exclusively focused on the environment but has widened its scope to encompass both society and the balance between humans and the earth [87]. Likewise, universities have begun to play a key role in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through education, research, and cooperation with industries. In increasingly fragmented societies, the capacity of leaders to bridge gaps and generate broad coalitions is as difficult as it is necessary [2]. To develop effective initiatives and psycho-educational interventions that envisage these complexities, experts from a broad range of disciplines, practitioners, and industries will need to work together and listen carefully to one another.

Though universities may make valuable contributions towards SDG implementation, there is a paucity of studies depicting the methods deployed by HEIs to embed or include the SDGs in their activities [88]. Despite mounting evidence, few universities have opted to blend disciplinary specialisms, i.e., combining outer scientific empirical sustainability, with the inner potential of transformative change and personal development, known as inner sustainability [83]. In this case study, inner and outer sustainability have institutionally converged at the UGR due to its long-standing mission, vision and goals on sustainability as well as the evolution of a life-skills training and research initiative.

Among the most significant challenges, particularly in the early years, is the reluctance to perceive life skills as complementary and necessary components of post- and undergraduate curricula. Additionally, there is limited funding for proposals of this type. Indeed, one of the main challenges stems from the nature of the project itself. The problem is that it does not fit into any of the conventional slots (i.e., research, training outreach, and governance) of the traditional public university system.

This project is not confined to a single area; rather, it is a blend of multiple disciplines. As we have outlined for the following years, this interdisciplinary approach also presents challenges beyond funding, including issues related to organisation, coordination, and personnel, among others. To transform research into practical tools and develop proactive responses to the emerging new society, the system must accommodate such multi-faceted projects. This flexibility would enable the university to anticipate changes, incorporate findings, and respond swiftly based on existing evidence [89].

Finally, there is a danger in implementing isolated and decontextualized psychoeducational interventions. Well-meaning initiatives that target only one problem area often fail because they are either ineffective or lead to unintended consequences.

Various studies highlight the darker side of life skills training. Despite their evident desirability, when these skills are used dysfunctionally, they become detrimental. This has been observed with empathy [90,91], compassion [92], and resilience [93], to name only a few. Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach and embracing systemic leadership that fosters strategic networks and encourages organisations to work toward a shared goal [94].

Implementing inner and outer sustainability also means acknowledging its gaps, contradictions, and limitations, which are symptoms of the process and the different frames that gave birth to it. Engaging with these challenges involves participating in a broader conversation about the various initiatives being co-produced, whether intentionally or not [95]. This approach allows for the development of new proposals based not only on successes but also on failures and unresolved problems.

One of the main limitations of this case study is its generalizability across other countries and university systems. There is no one-size-fits-all solution as needs, engagement, and contributions may vary considerably from one context to another. What works in one sociocultural and professional context may not work as well in another. While sustainability is a global concept, its implementation can differ significantly across contexts, and the necessary life skills may vary across different disciplines and cultures.

Another limitation is the use of different frameworks for designing of programme methodology, content, and materials. From the beginning, the project sought to follow European or supranationally approved frameworks to build on existing research and practice

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within a similar sociocultural context. However, these have only recently become available. More specifically, the LifeComp and GreenComp frameworks were published in 2020 and 2022, respectively, and the Inner Development Goals initiative, which integrates inner and outer sustainable development, was open source in 2021. Although these frameworks share common skills and emphasize embedding them in the HEI missions, there is still a need for a unified framework to ensure comparability, consistency and reproducibility of processes and outcomes.

7. Conclusions: What Lies Ahead

Crises often reveal unexpected pathways. Traditionally, the public sector has been the primary investor in medium- and long-term proposals. However, private sector companies, committed to societal improvement, are now joining the cause, with local communities supporting these efforts. This is a unique opportunity to reconcile growth and sustainability through strategic and systemic alliances within academia. It is at the intersection of different systems that we can develop macroscale, system-oriented decisions in order to enact a sustainable future [96].

In this context, beyond a long-term focus and a commitment to effectively addressing forthcoming challenges, it is essential to reflect on the role of higher education institutions as key agents in this process. Universities must be able to fluidly communicate with society and remain attuned to social needs and demands that transcend the purely professional sphere. This is the only way to achieve a true transfer of knowledge and ensure that academic efforts effectively contribute to societal advancement.

The SDG agenda emphasizes the need for transformation, not only to engage with its specific goals, targets, and indicators, but also to spark new ideas and inspire further action. In addition to formally incorporating the SDG agenda, this case study advocates for a complementary bottom-up approach, where academia, local actors, companies and institutions collaborate to address specific needs and challenges. Moving beyond merely educating about sustainability towards educating as sustainability [3] is at the heart of this proposal.

Trade-offs encompass education, research, outreach, and governance outcomes, serving as leverage to foster scaling up, scaling out, and scaling deep. In this context, we advocate for collaboration at different levels, from training to research, outreach, and governance. Higher education institutions must "walk the talk", transcending mere information and embedding sustainability in their deeper structure. This requires a combined top-down and bottom-up approach to sustainability, where the institutional SDG agenda and projects mutually shape each other.

Future work could explore proposals in other socio-cultural environments, university systems or countries. While many key global sustainability challenges are interconnected, the approaches taken by each society may differ. Exploring inputs and feedback from industry and community partners, as well as delving deeper into the findings of [31], would be valuable research pursuits to address current labour market needs.

Other lines of work would involve gathering insights from instructors delivering the psycho-educational interventions, utilizing qualitative measures to assess course development or content appropriateness, among other aspects. Research could also address challenges such as lack of funding or administrative hurdles, emphasizing the importance of streamlined procedures for efficient transformation. Still, another suggestion for further work is to adapt and replicate this case study or some of its initiatives in the context of other Spanish (or European) universities. The goal would be to contribute to the 2030 Agenda through life skills research and training by fostering close collaboration and co-creation among academia and society stakeholders.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/challe15030035/s1. The LifeComp Framework is available under Supplementary Materials S1. Programme content, assessment criteria and evidence-based references for Self-regulation (Awareness–Understanding–Action) is available under Supplementary Materials S2. The programme content and description of the Diploma on Wood Structures Calculation Applied to

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Projects offered by the International School for Postgraduate Studies of the University of Granada (Spain) is available under Supplementary Materials S3.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, structure, writing—original draft preparation: M.G.d.Q.; Writing: B.d.R.V., C.V.L., E.C.A., J.G.-P., M.G.d.Q., M.d.M.H.-S. and P.P.d.J.; Review and editing: E.C.A., M.G.d.Q. and M.d.M.H.-S.; Programme content design and methodology: C.V.L., P.P.d.J., M.G.d.Q. and M.d.M.H.-S.; Programme alignment with curricular pedagogy: J.G.-P.; Resources: E.C.A. and M.G.d.Q. Supervision: E.C.A., M.G.d.Q. and M.d.M.H.-S.; Project administration: B.d.R.V. and M.G.d.Q.; Funding acquisition: M.G.d.Q. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was partially funded by the Plan for Teacher Training and Innovative Teaching Practice (FIDO), 2018–2020 and 2020–2022 (codes PID 43/2018–2020 and PID 20-106/2020–2022), Quality, Teaching Innovation and Planning Unit (UCIDP) of the University of Granada (Spain). From 2022–2024, it has been co-funded by the former Vice-Rectorate for Equality, Inclusion and Sustainability; the Vice-Rectorate for Quality, Teaching Innovation and Undergraduate Studies; and the Cívitas-UGR Chair: Sustainability, Innovation and Development (all of them from the University of Granada (Spain)).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study methodology was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee on Human Research (CEIH) of the University of Granada, Spain (protocol codes and dates: 867/CEIH72019, 2266/CEIH/2021 and 2972/CEIH/2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of the studies depicted in this paper will be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank all the students and teaching staff who have trusted in the project and have enrolled in the courses; they have encouraged us to move forward. The authors also would like to thank the researchers from the Mind, Brain and Behaviour Research Centre (CIMCYC) from the University of Granada (Spain), whose expert contribution is indispensable in a study of this nature. Thanks to Presentia and ConscienciArte centres for their support and training the courses teachers. Finally, the authors would like to thank Pamela Faber, from the Department of Translation and Interpreting of the University of Granada (Spain) for proofreading the final version of this paper.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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