

Stakeholder's Perspectives

Exploring Needs and Experiences of Students and Educators

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SHARINPEACE Report #2.1

Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding
(SHARINPEACE)



Co-funded by
the European Union

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Project SHARINPEACE, Project Result 2

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**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Cite as: Rekść, Magdalena and Zbigniew Głąb 2025. Stakeholder's Perspectives: Exploring Needs and Experiences of Students and Educators. SHARINPEACE Report #2.1

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Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding (SHARINPEACE)

Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships

2021-1-DE01-KA220-HED-000031133

Human rights and peace as key elements of Europe's shared values and as cornerstones of our democratic constitutions are fundamentally challenged by today's multi-faceted crises. SHARINPEACE addresses these encounters and aims at qualifying the decision-makers of tomorrow in conceiving and practising human rights as intrinsic part of peacebuilding. SHARINPEACE offers an innovative approach to deal with the challenges of social, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe and beyond. Through SHARINPEACE, students and educators increase their awareness on how to include human rights in the training of conflict management. The core objective is the implementation of an EU-wide organised two-part module. Students will first gain central competences in the interrelated domains of human rights and peacebuilding and, in the second part, put their gained competences in a network-wide Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS) into (simulated) practice.

Project Partners:

University of Marburg (DE) [coordinating institution]

Justus Liebig University Giessen (DE)

Singidunum University/ Faculty of Media and Communications (RS)

Södertörn University (SE)

University of Lodz (PL)

University of Southern Denmark (DK)

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Executive Summary

The Erasmus+ project “Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding (SHARINPEACE)” aims to address contemporary crises affecting human rights and peace, and to integrate human rights education into peacebuilding practices. The project highlights the importance of human rights as a fundamental element in building sustainable peace, and proposes an educational framework to instill these principles in future peace and policymakers. Through an interdisciplinary two-part university module, SHARINPEACE seeks to promote a deeper understanding of human rights as an integral part of peacebuilding and to encourage collaboration between educational and policy initiatives. The SHARINPEACE project outlines several objectives to achieve this educational integration. Key among these are embedding human rights in peacebuilding education, establishing a Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS) for hands-on learning, and engaging peace and policymakers in educational development.

This report presents the findings of focus group discussions conducted with students and educators. The University of Łódź carried out surveys and focus group discussions to collect data on effective online teaching practices and expectations for the upcoming simulation. A preliminary survey established a foundation for the focus group interviews, enabling the collection of richer and more detailed feedback.

The focus group discussions resulted in six key recommendations for implementing simulations in peace and conflict studies. First, preparatory courses should address the diverse academic backgrounds of students, providing a shared foundational knowledge base to ensure equitable participation. Second, simulations should incorporate real cases to enhance relevance and engagement, with careful selection of conflicts that minimise emotional sensitivities in international groups. Third, institutions should provide a variety of teaching materials, such as podcasts, maps, and literature, to enrich the learning experience and cater to diverse learning preferences.

Fourth, the importance of international and interdisciplinary collaboration should be emphasised, with clearly defined roles assigned to students to foster accountability and develop transferable skills. Fifth, innovative evaluation methods, including reflective journals, should replace traditional exams to capture students’ experiences, promote self-awareness, and encourage critical thinking. Lastly, practitioners and experts should be actively involved in

simulations to provide practical insights, bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world applications.

These recommendations offer actionable strategies for maximising the educational impact of simulations, ensuring that they effectively prepare students for the complexities of peace and conflict studies.

1. Introduction

Human rights and peace as key elements of Europe's shared values and as cornerstones of our democratic constitutions are fundamentally challenged by today's multifaceted crises. The Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership project "Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding (SHARINPEACE)" addresses these challenges and aims at qualifying the decision-makers of tomorrow in conceiving and practising human rights as an intrinsic part of peacebuilding. Through SHARINPEACE, students and educators increase their awareness on how to include human rights in the training of conflict management. Organisations in the domain of peacebuilding are invited to become partners in this education process within SHARINPEACE.

We are convinced that this topic deserves greater attention. It is of significant value to understand human rights as an inclusive part of peacebuilding processes and that it is correspondingly relevant to introduce this into teaching and learning. Hence, the core objective of the project is the EU-wide introduction and implementation of an interdisciplinary two-part university module on human rights and peacebuilding.

We aim to achieve this through the following four sub-items:

- 1) Introducing human rights in peacebuilding education
- 2) Implementing a network-wide Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS)
- 3) Involving policy and peacemakers
- 4) Planning joint MA modules

In this module, the participating students will first gain central skills in the interrelated areas of human rights and peacebuilding and, in the second part, put their newly acquired expertise into (simulated) practice.

To facilitate this learning experience, the SHARINPEACE project envisages six Project Results (PR1-6) which are tangible results of individual Work Packages. The first Work Package dedicates itself to mapping the

nexus of human rights education and peacebuilding. The results of PR1 form the basis for PR2, which explores needs and experiences by focusing on the stakeholder's perspectives; PR3 addresses the contents of the learning materials for teaching human rights in peacebuilding; technical tools for teaching and learning are subject of PR4; then, PR5 consists of the implementation of a pilot project of the module "Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding". Finally, PR6 is a policy brief on how to teach and learn human rights in peacebuilding within the EU.

The task of Lodz was to find out the opinions of students and teachers about the simulations: how they should be organised, run and evaluated. Such generative research was crucial to understanding the needs and expectations of both parties. From the very beginning, the project participants assumed that this was the only way to offer a well-designed course and to minimise the risk of dissatisfaction with the course.

The questions posed to students and educators focus on key aspects of implementing simulations as an educational method in peace and conflict studies. For students, the inquiries address their interest in participating in simulation-based classes, their willingness and ability to dedicate time to preparation, their preferences for working in international teams or within their own university, their inclination towards using fictional or real cases, and their views on the most appropriate forms of evaluation. These questions aim to understand student expectations, preferences, and practical considerations to enhance the learning experience.

For educators, the focus shifts to pedagogical and structural elements of simulations. Questions explore the competences students should possess before entering the project and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they should develop during their participation. Educators are also asked to reflect on effective teaching methodologies, the advantages and challenges of simulations as a teaching tool, and the involvement of practitioners and institutional representatives in enriching the educational process. Together, these themes aim to align educational objectives, methodologies, and stakeholder involvement to maximise the effectiveness of simulation-based learning.

2. The focus group interviews with students

Focus group interviews were conducted in January 2023 with students from the Faculty of International and Political Studies at the University of Lodz. The participants included students in the first year of MA studies in Political Science and International and Political Studies. All interviews took place during methodology exercises, specifically within the courses "Methodology of Political Studies" for Political Science students and "Methodology of Political Sciences" for International and Political Studies students.

This sampling strategy was adopted based on the SHARINPEACE consortium's agreement that pilot simulations would involve Master's students. The study added value to the methodology classes by offering students practical experience in focus group research, thereby enhancing the classes' appeal and providing hands-on learning opportunities.

The group of Political Science students consisted of 12 Polish students with diverse academic backgrounds, including History, Social Policy, Administration, Management, Environmental Protection, National Security, Military Science, Finance and Accounting, Computer Science, and International and Political Studies. Three students from this group were selected to join the Students' Advisory Board.

The International and Political Studies group comprised 31 students, divided into two focus groups of 10 and 21 participants. Focus group interviews were conducted with both groups. These students came from a variety of countries, including Azerbaijan, Georgia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Morocco, Nigeria, Poland, and Ukraine, reflecting a highly international cohort. Their previous academic fields included International Relations, Law, Economics, English Philology, Computer Science, and Management.

This diverse sampling enriched the study, providing a broad range of perspectives and experiences that informed the development of the SHARINPEACE project.

During the focus group interviews, students were first introduced to the *Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding* (SHARINPEACE) project. They were then asked the following questions:

1. Would they be interested in such a form of classes?
2. How much time would they be able to devote to preparing for the simulation?
3. Would they prefer to work in international teams or with colleagues from the same university?
4. Would they prefer to work on a fictional or real case?
5. What type of evaluation would they consider most suitable?

The focus group interviews revealed several key outcomes regarding student preferences and attitudes towards simulations. Students expressed strong enthusiasm for participating in simulations, emphasising their preference for modern teaching methods over traditional lectures. They found simulations more engaging despite the additional workload and viewed the opportunity to work in international teams as a particularly valuable aspect of the classes.

While the need to prepare for simulations did not elicit much enthusiasm, most students recognised that such activities demand additional effort. Some noted that scheduling simulations one month after the exam session would allow more time for exam preparation, which they saw as a practical benefit. Others expressed a willingness to dedicate extra time to prepare for engaging activities rather than focusing solely on rote learning of theory. Students reached a consensus that dedicating up to two hours per week to preparation would be optimal.

The SHARINPEACE consortium proposed pairing students from different universities to maximise the international dimension of the group. This arrangement was well received by International and Political Studies students, who were accustomed to working in international teams. However, some Political Science students, particularly those without prior international exchange experience, raised concerns about potential language barriers and expressed a preference for working in teams within their own university.

Students demonstrated a clear preference for working on real cases, valuing the opportunity to learn about real conflicts as a way to enhance their knowledge and practical understanding. They felt this approach aligned well with their academic motivations, such as gaining the ability to discuss international issues knowledgeably in both personal and professional contexts. One suggestion was to use real cases for classroom discussions while allowing students to design a fictional scenario for

evaluation purposes. This approach would blend practical learning with creative application.

Students did not express specific expectations for course evaluation but favoured alternatives to traditional exams or tests. They suggested awarding credit for the effort invested in preparing for the simulation or writing a paper related to their role within it. During brainstorming sessions, students supported innovative evaluation methods, such as the model implemented by the Faculty of International and Political Studies at the University of Łódź. This model granted credit for online courses taken at other universities in exchange for selected curriculum subjects, which students found particularly appealing.

These findings provide valuable guidance for designing the SHARINPEACE simulations. They highlight the importance of balancing academic requirements with innovative teaching approaches, tailoring methods to accommodate diverse student preferences and needs. This feedback ensures that the simulations will not only meet educational goals but also provide an engaging and meaningful learning experience for participants.

3. The focus group interviews with educators

The focus study was preceded by a questionnaire distributed to nine educators. The open-ended questions addressed the following topics:

1. The competences students should possess prior to entering the project.
2. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes students should acquire during the project.
3. Effective forms and methodologies of teaching.
4. The advantages and disadvantages of using simulations as a teaching method.
5. The involvement of practitioners and institutional representatives in the project and their role in the educational process.

The initial survey provided a foundation for preparing the focus group interviews, which were conducted online in two sessions.

The first focus group interview took place on 25 January 2023 and included participation from educators across various institutions, includ-

ing the University of Łódź, Mazovian Academy in Płock, Museum of Independence Traditions in Łódź, Vistula University of Finance and Business, and independent researchers. Facilitators were Dr Zbigniew Głąb and Professor Magdalena Rekść. Notably, two participants had substantial experience in employing simulation methods, and one participant had used simulations in workshops with children.

The second focus group interview occurred on 3 February 2023 and featured three educators from the University of Łódź. Dr Głąb and Professor Rekść also facilitated this session.

The focus group interviews revealed key outcomes concerning the use of simulations as a teaching method. Participants agreed that simulations are an engaging and interactive approach to education, effectively activating students and teaching practical skills such as decision-making. They also emphasised the importance of internationalising education, suggesting that virtual exchanges could complement existing Erasmus+ mobility programmes, thereby expanding opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration and learning.

Educators expressed a clear preference for using real cases in simulations, as they believed these would generate greater interest and encourage students to engage more deeply with the material. Real conflicts offer a level of seriousness that fictional scenarios often lack, making them more compelling for learners. However, some participants acknowledged that fictional cases have the advantage of avoiding emotional biases. To address this, they proposed selecting real conflicts with lower emotional stakes, mitigating the risk of heightened sensitivities. Additionally, participants noted that emotional engagement with real cases could be harnessed as a learning tool, fostering a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives. Over time, educators suggested that students could collaborate in developing their own simulation games, blending real and fictional elements to enrich the learning experience.

Managing emotional engagement emerged as a critical consideration. Participants expressed concerns about the potential emotional challenges posed by real cases, particularly in international settings where students from different cultural or national backgrounds might hold contrasting views. To address this, they suggested focusing on conflicts that are less likely to evoke extreme emotions. Nonetheless, they recognised that well-managed simulations involving emotionally charged issues could serve as an effective means of exposing students to diverse

perspectives and demonstrating the multifaceted nature of political conflicts.

The interdisciplinary and international composition of student groups presents challenges due to varying academic backgrounds. Educators highlighted the need for a preparatory course to provide all students with a foundational understanding of peace and conflict studies, regardless of their previous educational experience. This would ensure a more equitable baseline of knowledge and facilitate productive participation in simulations.

Participants underscored the importance of providing high-quality teaching materials to support simulation exercises. These materials could include basic information about the conflict under study, as well as more engaging resources such as podcasts, maps, and lecture recordings. They recommended creating a database of comprehensive and diverse literature to enhance student learning and suggested that this repository include multiple perspectives on the conflict. Involving diplomats or practitioners in class discussions was also proposed as a way to provide practical insights. For group work, participants recommended assigning specific tasks to each student to ensure accountability and to develop transferable skills for professional environments.

Evaluation methods were another area of focus, as grading teamwork often presents challenges. Participants proposed criteria that assess students' preparation, their role-specific knowledge, and consultations with supervisors. They also suggested that students maintain "reflection journals" to document their experiences, emotions, and learning progress. These journals would offer valuable insights into students' perspectives and provide additional context for evaluation.

These findings underscore the potential of simulations as a powerful pedagogical tool. They offer actionable recommendations for effective implementation in international and interdisciplinary educational contexts, balancing academic rigor with engaging and practical learning experiences.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The focus group discussions with students and educators highlighted key insights into the design and implementation of simulations in peace

and conflict studies. Students expressed strong enthusiasm for simulations, favouring modern teaching methods over traditional approaches. They emphasised the importance of engaging, practical activities, particularly when working in international teams. Educators similarly recognised simulations as a valuable pedagogical tool, stressing their potential to develop critical decision-making skills, encourage collaboration, and connect theoretical knowledge with real-world applications.

The discussions revealed challenges, including managing emotional engagement, addressing diverse academic backgrounds, and ensuring high-quality teaching materials and evaluation methods. These findings underscore the need for tailored strategies to maximise the effectiveness of simulation-based learning. From these insights, six key recommendations emerge:

1. **Foster Preparatory Courses for Students:** To address the diverse academic backgrounds of student participants, institutions should introduce preparatory courses. These courses would establish a baseline understanding of peace and conflict studies, ensuring all students, regardless of their prior education, are equipped to engage fully in simulations.
2. **Use Real Cases to Enhance Engagement:** Educators and students demonstrated a strong preference for real cases, which provide greater depth and relevance. Simulations should focus on real conflicts, enabling students to apply theoretical concepts to practical scenarios. However, care must be taken to select cases with lower emotional stakes to minimise potential sensitivities, particularly in international groups.
3. **Incorporate Diverse Teaching Materials:** High-quality teaching resources are essential for supporting simulations. Institutions should create a comprehensive database including podcasts, maps, lecture recordings, and literature that presents multiple perspectives on the conflicts under study. The inclusion of engaging and interactive materials will enrich the learning experience and cater to various learning styles.
4. **Promote International and Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Simulations should prioritise international and interdisciplinary

group work to reflect the complexity of real-world peacebuilding efforts. Assigning specific roles and tasks within teams will foster accountability and ensure equitable contributions, while also helping students develop skills transferable to professional environments.

5. **Develop Innovative Evaluation Methods:** Traditional exams may not adequately assess the learning outcomes of simulations. Institutions should adopt alternative evaluation methods, such as assessing preparation, role-specific knowledge, and reflective journals. Reflection journals, in particular, can capture students' experiences and emotions, offering valuable insights for educators while promoting self-awareness and critical thinking among students.
6. **Engage Practitioners and Experts:** The involvement of diplomats, practitioners, and institutional representatives in simulations can provide practical insights and enhance the realism of the exercises. Inviting these experts to participate in discussions or offer guidance during simulations will bridge the gap between academic learning and professional practice.

These recommendations aim to create a balanced and effective simulation framework that meets both academic and practical objectives. By addressing the identified challenges and building on the strengths highlighted in the focus group discussions, institutions can enhance the learning experience and better prepare students for real-world applications in peace and conflict studies.