

Bridging the Gap between Education and Practice in Peacebuilding and Human Rights

The SHARINPEACE Crisis Intervention Simulation

A Policy Brief for University Educators

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SHARINPEACE Report #5

Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding
(SHARINPEACE)



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Bridging the Gap between Education and Practice in Peacebuilding and Human Rights:
the SHARINPEACE Crisis Intervention Simulation - A Policy Brief for University Educators
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Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding (SHARINPEACE)

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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.

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Executive Summary

This policy brief offers an overview of the Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS) that the Erasmus+ funded SHARINPEACE project developed as an educational tool. Addressed to university educators, we summarise the benefits CRIS offers to bridge the gap between classrooms and policy-making on human rights and peacebuilding.

The SHARINPEACE project (2021-2024) focused on equipping future European decision-makers with the skills necessary to integrate human rights into peacebuilding efforts. This educational initiative addressed the gap between academic training and the practical skills required in real-world crisis situations. The project developed a two-part online module consisting of preparation through lectures on the one hand, and applied simulation sessions on the other hand, using the Cyprus conflict as a case to teach students essential competencies and practical skills in human rights and peacebuilding.

The SHARINPEACE online module had three key objectives:

1. **Interactive Educational Approach:** The module included interactive sessions with practitioners, innovative use of online platforms, and a Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS) to give students insights into the complex nexus of peacebuilding and human rights.
2. **Practical Skills Development:** The module focused on negotiation, cultural sensitivity, contextuality, and the ability to work across disciplines. Substantive knowledge on peacebuilding and human rights and the difficulties encountered on the ground when integrating the two are at the centre of this effort.
3. **Reflective Learning:** The module emphasizes reflection through debriefing sessions to enhance learning outcomes.

Based on the experiences of SHARINPEACE, we make three key recommendations for university educators:

1. Integrate interaction with practitioners in simulation-based learning.
1. Choose real-life cases for simulations.
2. Embed simulations like the CRIS in purpose-built modules.

1. Human Rights, peacebuilding, and the European decisionmakers of tomorrow

Peacebuilding and human rights can be really complementary – if the practitioners that are coming from both fields are well-aware of each other and what each other's agendas are (Sharinpeace practitioner respondent 1).¹

At a time of increasing conflict and tension in Europe and neighbouring regions, integrating human rights into peacebuilding processes for sustainable peaceful conflict and crisis resolution is as paramount as ever. However, there is a persistent gap between the competencies that future decisionmakers acquire in universities and the skills required in real-world crisis situations. Further, from a substantive perspective, integrating human rights and peacebuilding is an important task to achieve sustainable and just peace. But this task is mired by tensions between human rights and peacebuilding practitioners arising out different sets of priorities between the two fields in a post-conflict context. Human rights practitioners may stress justice and accountability for rights violations whereas conflict resolution specialists may prefer to concentrate on resolving conflict parties' diverging interests, demands, and concerns. Such tensions make addressing human rights in peacebuilding highly contextual and culturally specific, requiring policy- and peacemakers to work across disciplines.

The Erasmus+ funded “Simulating Human Rights in Peacebuilding and Human Rights” (SHARINPEACE) project aimed at equipping future European decision-makers with the skills necessary to integrate human rights into peacebuilding efforts. This goal has been pursued by designing, organising, and piloting a two-part module held entirely online, developed in iterative consultation with practitioners. The module and simulation are grounded in a real case, the Cyprus dispute, in-keeping with practitioner input on the contextuality and cultural specificity at the heart of human rights and peacebuilding. In this way, the SHARINPEACE project and the CRIS it developed offer an impactful way for future European policy- and peacemakers to acquire practical

¹ Demirel, Cagla and Johanna Mannergren 2025. 'Connecting the Dots' – Human Rights in Peacebuilding: Exploring Needs and Experiences of Policymakers and Practitioners. SHARINPEACE Report #2.2

competencies in analysis, transformation, negotiation, and mediation of conflicts.

In the following, we first summarise the contents and contours of the SHARINPEACE CRIS, and then offer detailed practical lessons and recommendations for university educators based on the SHARINPEACE project. We summarize such lessons in the conclusion.

2. The Crisis Intervention Simulation (CRIS)

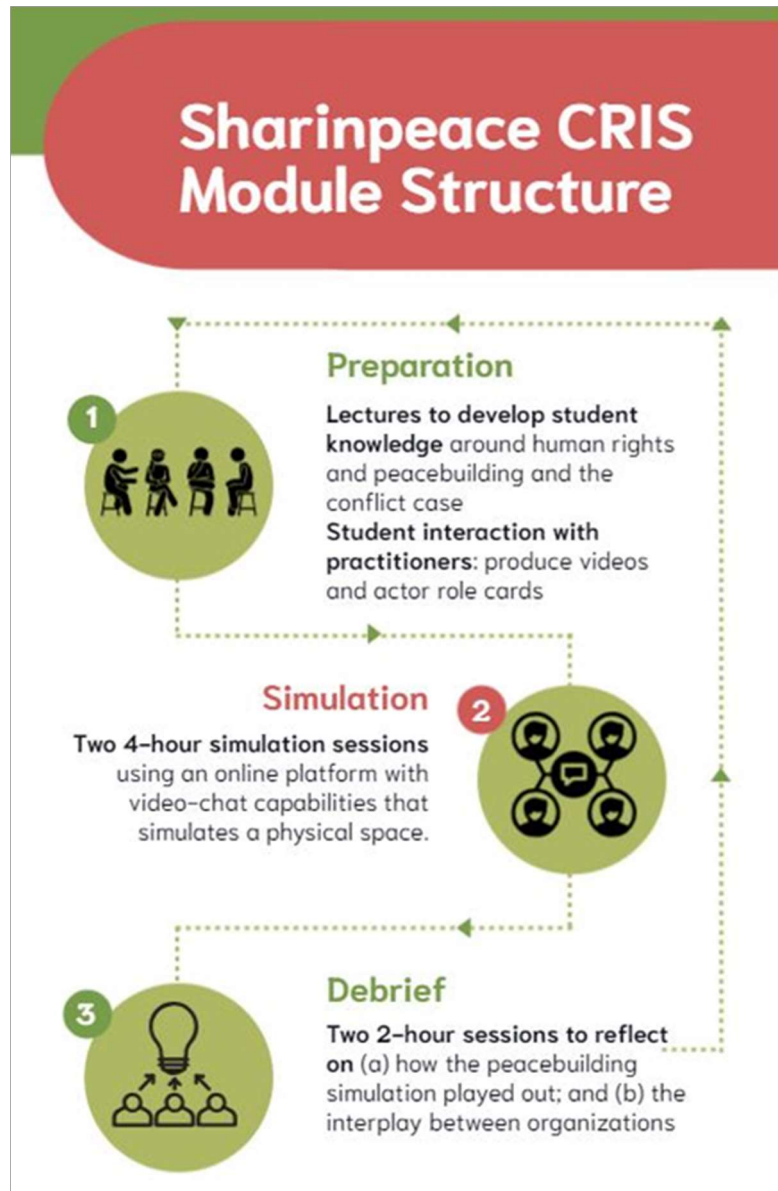
Innovative simulation design and contextual awareness curricula are central to the SHARINPEACE CRIS. Incorporating practitioner dialogue, the SHARINPEACE CRIS prioritises contextual awareness by focusing on a specific, current European dispute. Students design their own role profiles of the actors they are assigned, such as relevant states, the European External Action Service (EEAS), inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and media. The students develop these role profiles through interacting with practitioners and SHARINPEACE educators. The simulation itself is negotiation-focused, centred around two sessions (each 4 hours) consisting of meetings where all actors are present, informal talks, and press conferences.

In short, participating students were expected to:

- a) Discover the professional field of peacebuilding and human rights, and the practical work within it; and
- b) Build substantive knowledge around the difficulties encountered in integrating human rights into a peacebuilding process and peacebuilding perspectives into human rights discourses.

The SHARINPEACE CRIS teaches the negotiation skills and cultural sensitivity that are key for future peacebuilders, decisionmakers, and human rights advocates. Practitioners highlight competencies such as negotiation skills, cultural sensitivity, conscientization, and ability to work across fields as being central to their work in peacebuilding. The CRIS presents an opportunity for students to learn and train these skills, where traditional higher education pedagogical approaches fall short. Through its two intense four-hour sessions conducted online, utilising live video calls and an immersive virtual platform, students experience how their actions and statements affect negotiations in real-time

(see figure 1). By emphasising reflection both before, during, and after the CRIS itself, students not only get to learn and engage with the competencies valued by practitioners, but also to intellectually reflect on and critically incorporate them.



By emphasising reflection and conducting the module entirely online, the SHARINPEACE CRIS facilitates the participation of geographically and academically diverse cohorts, allowing them to potentially exceed pre-defined learning goals. Two extensive debriefing sessions after the simulation ensure that students gain not only hands-on experience but also engage in reflective analysis of that experience

with SHARINPEACE educators. This diversity of backgrounds, nationalities, and academic programs enriches the reflective analysis, enabling students to learn from varied perspectives and deepen their understanding of the intersection of peacebuilding and human rights.

3. Practical lessons and recommendations derived from the SHARINPEACE CRIS

Designed as an online simulation for International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies programs, the SHARINPEACE CRIS is adaptable for use by universities and higher education institutions across Europe. We highlight three key lessons with practical recommendations for educators aiming to implement similar simulations: (1) the value of practitioner engagement; (2) the benefits of using real-world conflicts as simulation contexts; and (3) the effectiveness of purpose-built modules in enhancing simulation quality and providing opportunities for reflective assessment. These insights from SHARINPEACE offer educators a framework for designing simulations that bridge the gap between peacebuilding and human rights as both academic fields and practical pursuits.

3.1 Practitioner involvement in simulation games

Engaging practitioners in simulation games is crucial for bridging the gap between academic theory and professional practice. In the SHARINPEACE CRIS, practitioners from EU bodies and human rights NGOs played a vital role, not only during the CRIS design stage but also in guiding students as they developed their roles. This involvement significantly enriched the experiences of both educators and students. During initial interviews conducted by educators as part of the SHARINPEACE project, practitioners from organizations such as the European External Action Service and Frontline Defenders emphasized a number of critical themes.² These included the interconnectedness of human rights and peacebuilding, the importance of timing in conflict intervention, the necessity of coordination among various actors, and the dynamics between local and international stakeholders. These in-

² Demirel, Cagla and Johanna Mannergren 2025. Ibid.

sights directly informed the development of the CRIS, shaping its structure and guiding the selection of the real-world case used in the simulation. Similarly, professionals from Cypriot organizations provided students with firsthand insights into the ongoing Cyprus conflict, illustrating the complexities of peacebuilding and human rights advocacy in a real-world context.

For university educators, the inclusion of practitioners in simulations fosters a more dynamic and interactive learning environment. In the SHARINPEACE CRIS, practitioners were instrumental in helping students develop their actor profiles, ensuring these roles reflected the nuanced realities of the organizations they represented. Through workshops and remote interviews, practitioners guided students in understanding the strategic priorities, ethical dilemmas, and operational constraints that shape decision-making in governmental and non-governmental organizations. This practitioner dialogue provided essential insights into the organization's operations and offered feedback on the students' initial understanding of their assigned roles. This hands-on input was vital not only for maintaining the authenticity of the simulation but also for allowing students to refine their strategies with expert guidance, deepening their understanding of the complex realities of peacebuilding. It also enhanced students' practical skills beyond strategic negotiation, including ethical reasoning and stakeholder analysis.

Involving practitioners into the design and execution of a simulation is not only a promising strategy to enhance learning outcomes; but it is also a method to align education with the evolving needs of the workforce. Practitioners contribute cutting-edge perspectives on the latest developments in the field, such as emerging challenges at the intersection of human rights protection and cultural heritage preservation, both in Cyprus and beyond. By presenting real-world dilemmas, such as the legal and ethical challenges faced by governmental and non-governmental organizations operating in the contested area of human rights, practitioners help students navigate these complexities, thereby fostering analytical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability. These are precisely the skills that employers from governmental and non-governmental organizations are increasingly seeking in graduates entering the job market.

Recommendation: University educators should prioritize the integration of practitioner dialogue in simulation-based learning. This can be achieved through strategic partnerships with relevant organizations, inviting practitioners as guest speakers or advisors, and involving them in both the design and evaluation phases of simulations. By doing so, educators can significantly enhance the practical relevance and impact of their teaching, better preparing students for the challenges of professional life.

3.2 The Advantage of Choosing Real-Life Cases in Simulations

Selecting real-life cases for simulations offers substantial pedagogical advantages, particularly when teaching complex and evolving subjects like human rights and peacebuilding. The SHARINPEACE CRIS vividly illustrates how the use of real-life cases can enhance the educational experience by making learning more relevant and impactful. The use of the Cyprus conflict in the SHARINPEACE CRIS added layers of context and urgency to the learning process. Students had to navigate the delicate balance between peacebuilding and human rights, considering the political, legal, social, and ethical dimensions of their decisions. This real-world application increased their motivation and investment in the subject matter, but also made their decisions more cautious, thoughtful and “realistic” than we have experienced in simulations using fictional cases.

University educators should recognize that when students engage with real-world scenarios, they not only learn abstract concepts but also confront complex dilemmas that foster a sense of responsibility and engagement with global issues. For instance, in the SHARINPEACE CRIS, students were required to develop strategies for handling the sensitive issue of balancing the rights of displaced persons, refugees, and immigrants in Cyprus with internal Greek- and Turkish Cypriot policy goals, EU priorities regarding immigration and security policy, and more, through the development of a concrete and realistic action plan. This experience pushed students to consider not only the immediate tactical outcomes of their decisions but also their broader humanitarian impact, thereby cultivating a deeper understanding of the responsibilities inherent in diplomacy and human rights work.

However, the use of real-life cases also demands careful consideration of the ethical and emotional dimensions involved. **University educators must be prepared to guide students through the challenges posed by sensitive or controversial issues, ensuring that the learning environment remains respectful and supportive.** During the SHARINPEACE CRIS educators played a critical role in facilitating discussions that respected diverse perspectives while maintaining a focus on constructive learning.

Recommendation: University educators should prioritize the selection of real-life cases for simulations, especially in disciplines where practical application is crucial. The use of real-world scenarios not only enhances the learning experience but also equips students with the skills and knowledge necessary to tackle real-world challenges effectively. Institutions should provide the necessary support and resources to educators, such as training in managing sensitive discussions and access to current case study materials, to help them handle the complexities and sensitivities associated with teaching real-life cases. By doing so, universities can ensure that their simulation-based learning initiatives are both impactful and ethically sound.

3.3 Problem-focused learning through simulation requires modules built for purpose and extensive reflection

The SHARINPEACE CRIS is constructed around bottom-up, student-led, problem-based forms of learning to foster transferable skills and knowledge that are otherwise not easily acquired in classroom settings. As summarized above, this philosophy translates into both substantive and transferable knowledge about the landscape of actors, their positions and interaction dynamics at the intersection of peace-building and human rights, and how these may result in potential tensions and limited openings for dialogue. Such an approach to learning requires going beyond traditional forms of measurable assessment and evaluation indicators. This applies both to the assignments used to assess student learning and to assessing the overall performance/success of the SHARINPEACE CRIS as an educational tool.

The SHARINPEACE CRIS relied on extensive student reflection and reflective assessment. On the assignment side, the SHARINPEACE CRIS ended with two comprehensive debriefing sessions after the simulation.

Stepping out of their role profiles, this offered students the opportunity to jointly reflect on the critical dynamics and interactions that unfolded during the exercise. Educators structured this reflection through an actor mapping activity, thereby providing a visual overview of the roles and their interactions. This joint, reflective process is crucial as it transforms the simulated role-play into a meaningful learning experience, equipping students with valuable insights and skills for their future careers. After the session, students were also asked to put their reflections in writing. In addition, student representatives were also invited to share their feedback as part of a joined student – practitioner – educator workshop, thereby ensuring channels of communication across all three core groups involved in the SHARINPEACE CRIS. Reflective forms of assessment allowed students to develop a critical, self-reflective attitude towards their own learning and to recognize their own agency in this process.

As such, the SHARINPEACE CRIS is a purpose-built focused effort to engage students in the practical and contextual challenges that lie at the nexus of human rights and peace. To meaningfully attend to the multi-layered political and cultural complexity that characterizes human rights and peacebuilding nexus in practice requires significant preparation of participating students. This is achieved through specific lectures and practitioner interaction as described. To move beyond reifying already learned theory and problems in practice, extensive reflection is necessary and needs to be accommodated as part of the module. This way, the SHARINPEACE CRIS leans into the strengths of simulations, but for this to be possible it needs to be a separate, built-for-purpose module, rather than integrated ad hoc in larger courses.

Recommendations: University educators should utilize simulations like the CRIS in purpose-built modules to translate specific substantive and theoretical knowledge into concrete practical learning experiences through extensive preparation and reflection, as well as reflective forms of assessment. In this way, university educators can ensure that students reap the most benefits from innovative simulations designed to foster transferable skills, thus leaning into the strengths of simulations while allowing for critical reflection rather than merely reifying existing theory and reproducing challenges found in practice.

4. Conclusion

The SHARINPEACE CRIS module demonstrates an innovative approach to bridging theoretical and practical knowledge in peacebuilding and human rights education. By integrating practitioner dialogue, real-life case studies, and reflective learning, the module equips students with essential skills such as negotiation, cultural sensitivity, and critical analysis. Using the Cyprus conflict as a case study provides a culturally specific framework that enhances the relevance and impact of the simulation, enabling students to engage intellectually while gaining a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in bridging human rights and peacebuilding.

In conclusion, we encourage university educators to adopt similar simulation-based learning methods. Specifically, we recommend the following:

1. **Prioritize** the integration of practitioner dialogue in simulation-based learning through strategic partnerships with relevant organizations. This approach significantly enhances the practical relevance and impact of teaching.
2. **Select** real-life cases for simulations to foster critical thinking and practical skills. Institutions should provide the necessary support and resources to ensure that real-life case-based simulations are both impactful and ethically sound.
3. **Utilize** purpose-built modules like CRIS to translate theoretical knowledge into concrete practical learning experiences. By allowing more time for reflective assessment, university educators can ensure that students gain maximum benefits from simulations designed to build transferable skills.