



# Real World Learning Quality Criteria

## Guidance and recommendations for use of the criteria

### Introduction

Real World Learning means learning outdoors or at least outside the classroom. It can take place in natural surroundings like national parks but also in urban areas, cultural institutions or companies. The Real World Learning Network wants to bring together outdoor educators and teachers from all over Europe to exchange best practice of outdoor education and learning to face the challenges of a sustainable future.

Concerning quality the main question is, how can providers of Real World Learning (RWL) deliver 'good' education and be sure they have done their best to get their students to act sustainably in their everyday life and – later - in their working life. The RWL quality criteria were developed to support providers of outdoor education in assessing and improving the quality of the Real World Learning that they offer. They also want to show that RWL can realize learning that is not or not as easy to realize within the classroom.

The six RWL quality criteria correspond with the six key questions of the RWL-Hand Model. Each of the six quality criteria is described in more detail within its sub-criteria. A sub-criterion is an explanation to the criteria. The criteria and more explicitly the sub-criteria are more recommendations for reflection whereas the indicators deal with more quantifiable issues. The whole set of criteria, sub-criteria and indicators should help the providers to check, improve or modify existing educational programs or activities or to create new RWL programs or activities.

The quality criteria have been used as an assessment tool with six of the 24 RWL project case studies ("Eco Challenge activity at the Field Studies Council in the UK", "Hedgehog Camp (HU)", "Investigation of disaster in Jizera Mountains (CZ)", "School trip to the organic school farm "Hutzelberghof (DE)", "Nature's Classroom is the educational polygon for permaculture and ecoremediation (SI)", "The school in the Wood/Forest (IT)"). The quality criteria were further refined in workshops and reflection sessions with the providers from all over Europe at the final RWL conference in Castlehead/UK in November 2014.

The quality criteria and the hand model are at the beginning of a process that needs some time to develop. The application of the hand model for modifying existing educational programs and developing new ones will need pilot projects to examine how the criteria and indicators work in practice. By that a fruitful evaluation process can be developed as a reflection tool for the model to support providers in delivering and assessing their teaching.



## RWL-Quality Criteria and Sub-Criteria

### 1. The learning programme has a “frame” - one main underlying message, related to sustainability.

The concept of a frame in this context is most usefully understood as an underlying theme that is reflected in the topics explored, the methods used and the setting.

Examples might include “there can be no taking without giving” applied to a programme looking at cycles; “all life is important” looking at biodiversity and why it matters; “small events can have big consequences” looking at how seemingly insignificant actions or events can cause a chain reaction resulting in major effects.

For a more in-depth explanation of frames as a conceptual tool, please see <http://www.rwlnetwork.org/rwl-model/frames.aspx>

- a) All topics express, implicitly or explicitly, the main underlying message.
- b) All methods (activities, games etc.) express, implicitly or explicitly, the main underlying message.
- c) All physical settings reflect, implicitly or explicitly, the main underlying message.

These three criteria concern how the planned topics, methods and settings can reinforce the underlying theme of the educational experience. This need not be explicitly expressed to the participants; indeed it can sometimes be the case that leaving participants ignorant of the intended outcomes of an activity can facilitate greater learning.

- d) The learning programme reflects a good energy return on energy investment. The positive impact of the project is greater than the harm caused by it in terms of sustainability.

The provider should ensure that the cost in resources of the planned programme is kept as low as possible, whilst still allowing for a potentially transformative educational experience.

For example, when planning an experience, it is preferable to use as close a location as possible, whilst still fulfilling the aims of the programme, to minimize the environmental impact of the methods of travel used. Similarly, providers should endeavor to ensure that programmes taking place in natural settings do not cause unnecessary damage to the local ecosystem.

#### RWL Criteria 1 indicators

The main underlying message supports the sustainability agenda.

The learning programme curriculum or agenda explicitly states the underlying theme.

All topics and methods used are outlined and explicitly linked to the underlying theme.

### 2. The learning programme promotes self-transcending values.

“Values represent our guiding principles; our broadest motivations, influencing the attitudes we hold and how we act” (Holmes et al 2011). In the context of education for sustainable development, educational programmes need to work to promote the development of values that support sustainability.

These values are those that fall into the category of self-transcendence – universalism and



benevolence. Self-direction is also an important value in determining behaviour change for sustainability, and that is tackled in the next set of criteria.

For more information on values and their importance in education for sustainable development please see: <http://www.rwlnetwork.org/rwl-model/values.aspx>

a) The learning programme promotes awareness that all people have the right to their own perspectives, beliefs and values.

It is crucial that participants develop an understanding that everyone has their own point of view, and if this doesn't agree with their own it isn't necessarily wrong. Differing points of view should be tolerated and respected within the programme.

This can be facilitated by encouraging respectful debate amongst participants where opportunities arise. A step further could be to ask participants to debate topics, arguing from an assigned point of view which doesn't necessarily reflect their own.

b) The learning programme helps learners to understand and accept the need for *all* people to be regarded at an equal level.

As a step on from criterion 'a' above, the programme can foster an understanding that all participants are equally entitled to participate and be respected. Where appropriate, this can be developed further by applying the same principle to the wider world.

A good way to facilitate this is through role play, getting participants to put themselves in the position of someone with a very different way of life to their own, and to reflect on how they would feel and act if their circumstances were to change.

c) The learning programme helps young people to understand the different opportunities of different people and communities.

Where appropriate, dictated by the age of the participants, the programme should enable a comparison of participants' lives and their opportunities with those of other young people.

This could encompass looking at societal differences locally or nationally, or globally, using a range of different countries as examples.

d) The learning programme promotes respect for nature and care for the state of our planet.

All aspects of the programme should aim to underline the idea that the natural world is worthy of our respect and protection.

e) The learning programme promotes respect for future generations.

Where appropriate, dictated by the age of the participants, the programme should aim to encourage the participants to consider future generations' rights and our responsibilities to them in how our actions impact upon the environment, global resources and the local and global ecosystem.

For very young children, simple activities designed around the concept that resources are finite or that actions can have unpredictable consequences are good first steps on the road to understanding this idea.

For older participants, a good example is that outlined in the Czech case study "Investigation of disaster in Jizera Mountains". As part of this programme participants are encouraged to understand how the actions and decisions taken by people in the latter third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century directly impact on the environment they are experiencing in the mountains. This can be used as a springboard to



<p>further discussions on how the actions and decisions of the current generation will impact on the environment in 30 or 40 years' time.</p>
<p>f) The learning programme emphasises values that promote self-direction and benevolence.</p>
<p>The provider should aim to consistently encourage participants to be concerned with the welfare of their colleagues, and to behave kindly and respectfully.</p> <p>At the same time, participants should be fully aware that they are responsible for their own behaviour and learning.</p>
<p><b>RWL Criteria 2 indicators</b></p> <p>The learning programme curriculum provides space and opportunity for respectful debate.</p> <p>The provider actively works with the young people to ensure that there is an environment of mutual respect.</p> <p>The learning programme curriculum encourages all participants to contribute their own opinion or perspective.</p> <p>The provider actively tries to ensure that he or she approaches all participants equally.</p>
<p><b>3. The learning programme actively and holistically involves young people to empower them to develop sustainability.</b></p>
<p>In order for young people to believe that their actions can make a difference they must have first-hand experience of making their own decisions, acting under their own agency, and having their contribution and opinions valued. In addition, to truly understand a subject or topic we all need to pursue it according to our own abilities and curiosity.</p>
<p>a) The learning programme encourages young people to think critically and make their own judgements independently.</p>
<p>Young people need to develop their own critical thinking abilities in order to challenge the situation around them. The learning programme should positively encourage participants to raise questions at any point, and to challenge anything they don't agree with. An atmosphere of support for each participant's point of view is important, as is the opportunity to examine the evidence and come to their own conclusions.</p> <p>Exploring the difference between subjective opinion and objective fact is very useful here, helping to distinguish between evidence and interpretation.</p> <p>Depending on opportunity within the planned programme, it is also very helpful to encourage participants to explore the basis of their own attitudes and opinions towards the topic at hand.</p> <p>Examples of activities that promote this criterion can be very simple, for example with very young children an activity requiring them to solve a simple problem such as how to move a heavy branch or transport a delicate object without damaging it. Equally, according to the age and aptitude of the participants, any number of complex scenarios can incorporate this criterion. The provider could ask the participants to come up with a theory about how the theme of the session is expressed in their local surroundings, and then ask them to test that theory.</p>
<p>b) The learning programme promotes a positive attitude to risk and uncertainty.</p>
<p>Encouraging and supporting participants to learn to manage risk is vital. It is impossible to connect to the natural world without encountering risk, and if young people are never exposed to risk they will</p>



never learn to manage it. The aim should be to encourage young people to become aware of risk without being afraid of it, and to make informed decisions based on their own judgement.

A good way to achieve this is to practice child-centered risk assessment. This involves allowing participants to explore the setting independently with a view to identifying potential risks, then leading a group discussion on what the risks are and how the participants can best keep themselves safe.

Similarly, the programme should encourage an understanding that it isn't always possible to predict the outcome of an action or situation, and that is ok. It can be helpful to discuss the various possible outcomes of an activity in advance, emphasising that we cannot know in advance which outcome we will get. The aim should be to encourage participants to pursue lines of enquiry or actions when they aren't assured of a positive outcome, without being afraid of what they will discover or reveal.

c) The learning programme allows young people to “sink into” (personally experience) outdoor settings and make them aware that they are part of nature.

As noted elsewhere, first-hand experience of nature is vital in fostering an understanding of and love for the environment. As part of the programme participants should have the opportunity to just ‘be’ in nature, without an activity or instruction to distract them.

Similarly, participants should be encouraged to see that they themselves are part of this natural world.

d) The learning programme facilitates self-efficacy and young people's ownership of their own learning.

Providers should consider allowing the participants to direct their own learning as much as possible, perhaps by offering a variety of activities or sub-topics that they can choose from. They can then pursue the topic in a way that interests them, which will consolidate their learning and promote positive feelings around the experience.

Also, participants should be a key part of evaluating the success of the experience. Simply by asking “what have you learned today” and “do you think this was a successful learning experience” (or similar) will encourage them to reflect on their experience in a way that will help them to gain an understanding of how they learn, and to feel responsible for their own learning.

#### **RWL Criteria 3 indicators**

The learning programme includes all young people in active participation and offers opportunities to direct their own learning (including the option to say ‘no’).

The learning programme includes opportunities for the young people to carry out their own risk analysis for the activities involved.

The learning programme promotes awareness that it is not always possible to predict the outcome of a situation.

The learning programme provides the opportunity for young people to reflect on their experience and learning.

#### **4. The learning programme encourages first-hand experiences, using different methods within a broad variety of natural and cultural learning sites from different areas of life.**

First-hand experience is an important part of education for sustainability for a variety of reasons.

Whilst we can learn theory in a classroom, to really understand a subject and its significance we must



have direct experience of how it works in the real world. Similarly, we cannot expect young people to develop a love and respect for the environment if they have no experience of spending time in nature – providing the opportunity to enjoy the natural world directly.

In addition, the opportunity to spend time outdoors is enormously beneficial for participant’s health and well-being. The freedom experienced during an outdoor day is something that a lot of modern children no longer have access to, and ensuring that significant time outdoors is a regular part of their education is a positive step towards remedying that situation.

a) The learning programme encourages direct contact using all five senses in the out of classroom sites and settings.

The classroom is a very static environment, and providers should make the most of outdoor opportunities for participants to use all of their senses outdoors. As well as seeing what is there, encourage them to listen to the sounds made by the wind and local wildlife; find out how different natural textures feel; explore different smells, find out what particular plants taste like (under careful supervision and instruction!)

b) The learning programme uses activities that address different learning styles.

We all learn in different ways, and education based solely on listening, reading and writing can leave a lot of young people struggling.

The provider needs to be aware of different teaching and learning styles, and ensure that the programme addresses them. Focusing on visual and kinaesthetic learning will ensure that those participants who are particularly disadvantaged by the traditional classroom setting have more opportunity of engaging with the programme.

c) The learning programme allows space to adapt to the personal learning processes of the young people.

The provider should be open and flexible enough to adapt aspects of the programme in response to the reactions and interests of the participants.

Unexpected events can lead the session in a different direction that can add immeasurably to the value of the participants’ experience.

For example, if a woodland session is interrupted by the participants’ joy at seeing a deer in the distance, not to pursue the theme would be a waste of their enthusiasm.

d) The learning programme allows space for positive and joyful personal experience in the environment and ‘real world’.

When considering the importance of experience in the natural world, it is important to also consider that a negative experience can have the opposite effect of that intended, and could even put a participant off for life.

The personal experiences and preferences of participants must be taken into account on the day, and every opportunity taken to give each participant a positive experience.

For example, if a young person has a fear of getting dirty then encouraging them to participate in an activity where they will get muddy will only cause them to get upset. Instead, a much gentler approach should be taken, finding something they are happy to do and gradually building them up to the point where that can see that getting dirty isn’t so bad.



#### **RWL Criteria 4 indicators**

The learning programme contains education methods which focus directly on personal experience in the environment and 'real world' (e.g. case studies simulations or role games).

The planning of the learning programme ensures that all five senses and all learning styles are engaged.

The provider aims to ensure that questions and interests arising are explored as part of the learning programme.

The evaluation of the learning programme gathers feedback from the young people on whether they have any questions or concerns that were not explored.

The evaluation of the learning programme gathers feedback from the young people on what they have learned or gained from the experience.

#### **5. The learning programme helps young people to understand the connections and interdependence between the targeted ecological topics and the related economic, social and cultural areas as well as community and personal life.**

In order to understand our dependence on the natural world, and part in it, we need to see that the ecological topics we study are linked to other areas of our lives. If young people can see that everything is connected, and that 'the environment' isn't some far-off concept, but rather intricately linked to everything they do, they are more likely to see their part in protecting the natural world.

Providers should aim to make explicit links between the ecological topics covered in the programme and the everyday lives of the participants, as well as incorporating economic and social issues as appropriate.

When looking at these criteria, it is important to consider the age and prior experience of participants when deciding how much issues of global justice or the potential impacts of climate change should be incorporated into the programme.

a) Parts of the learning programme target community/local/national level socio-cultural, economic and ecological issues relating to the global issues assessed.

Where appropriate, dictated by the age of the participants, the concepts and themes explored in the programme should be related to the local society, culture and economy.

Linking the programme to the participants' lives in this way makes it much more likely that they will remember the learning from the sessions, and that this learning will then impact on their behaviour around sustainability.

One way to approach this is to map the changes in the local environment and economy over time, which have arisen as a result of the global issues being discussed in the programme.

b) The learning programme encourages the learner to make links between their everyday lives and issues of global justice.

Where appropriate, dictated by the age of the participants and the themes under investigation, the provider should endeavor to include a consideration of global justice and how the everyday lives and actions of participants link to it.

A good way to approach this is to ask participants to examine the origin of everyday objects that they might take for granted. Where did the metals and minerals making up the components of my computer come from, and who made it? How much of the cost of a computer is paid to the people



who mined the metals and minerals, or built the computer? What impact does the mining of metals and minerals needed to build a computer have on the environment, and the people living locally?

Similarly, looking at the food they eat and where it comes from is a simple way of illustrating the same concept. Why is the food we eat so cheap? How do farming methods impact on the environment and the lives of the people who produce the food? How far have the ingredients of last night's dinner travelled, and what are the environmental implications of this?

c) The learning programme helps the young people to understand the systemic dependencies, connections and patterns at global level from economic, social and ecological points of view.

Where appropriate, dictated by the age of the participants the programme should include reference to the global cycles and interdependencies that are both affected by and impact upon their local communities.

Using one of the examples above, one idea is to examine food prices, looking at how weather in one part of the world can affect how much a particular product costs in another part of the world. Similarly, how changing food preferences in one part of the world might affect the environment and the local economy in another.

**RWL Criteria 5 indicators**

Community, local or national issues are included in the topics discussed.

At least two of the social, ecological, economic or cultural perspectives of the topics should be highlighted.

The methods used aim to ensure that the young people understand the connections and interdependencies between social, ecological, economic or cultural issues.

The provider should ensure that an explicit link is made between global issues and the everyday life of the young people, and that there is time in the learning programme for reflection on this.

**6. The learning programme integrates scientific concepts of life relating to sustainability.**

A sound understanding of the basic scientific concepts relating to sustainability is crucial in developing young people's capacity to develop their own thinking and actions around sustainability.

Science education should be central to the programme, exploring a particular scientific concept (or concepts) in a variety of ways tailored to the age and prior learning of the participants.

a) The learning programme promotes awareness that scientific concepts of life are universal. Examples to use: cycles; self-regulation; energy flow etc.

The programme should demonstrate that the specific concept in question applies in a variety of different situations, and where appropriate can be applied to social constructs as well as the natural world.

An example is when looking at cycles, it is important to include several different examples.

Beginning with a study of the nitrogen cycle, you could compare this with the food chain in the local ecosystem, and the water cycle to demonstrate how these systems are interdependent and that interlocking systems intersect from small-scale local systems into the wider global systems such as the water cycle.

You could then examine cycles of interdependence on a social scale in the local community, looking at how the local economy operates, or how a community co-operates to ensure a safe and pleasant



environment for everyone.

- b) The learning programme tailors the complexity of scientific concepts to the age, abilities and prior knowledge of the young people.

Delivering a programme of science that isn't pitched at the right level for the participants will lead to either confusion or boredom, both of which can lead to frustration and to a conclusion that science isn't for them.

It is vital to consider the age, ability and prior learning of the participants **before** the programme is finalised, liaising with the teachers and if appropriate with the participants themselves to ensure that the level of complexity employed is appropriate.

- c) The learning programme's use of scientific concepts is designed to take account of the young people's local surroundings.

The programme should aim to consider how scientific concepts can be applied to the participants' local surroundings. Rooting the concepts in the familiar will help participants to understand and remember the concepts, and potentially make the concepts more accessible for them.

Think about the local industry and landscape when designing the programme, trying to make links between the concepts to be studied and the participants' home area. For example, participants from a highly urban area can be given the tools to investigate the ecosystem in their neighbourhood as a post-programme activity. This allows them to see that nature isn't something separate from where they live, and that there is abundant life on their doorstep, strengthening the idea that we are all part of nature.

#### **RWL Criteria 6 indicators**

Where a scientific concept is used as part of the learning programme, more than one example of it in action is used.

Scientific concepts are expressed in a number of different ways (visual, verbal, demonstrations etc.).

The provider gathers sufficient information about the needs of participants and their local surroundings to ensure that the learning programme is properly tailored.

The methods used reflect the age, abilities and prior knowledge of the young people.



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SYSTÉM CERTIFIKACE ORGANIZACÍ PŮSOBÍCÍCH V OBLASTI ENVIRONMENTÁLNÍHO VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ V ČESKÉ REPUBLICE (System of Certification of Organizations Operating in the Field of Environmental Education in the Czech Republic),  
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