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## CHARM will get you everywhere: Student Reflections on the Inaugural EU Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability

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## STUDENT SECTION

# CHARM will get you everywhere: Student Reflections on the Inaugural EU Master's in Global Challenges for Sustainability

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### Abstract

CHARM-EU is an innovative alliance to create a European campus comprising the University of Barcelona, Trinity College Dublin, Utrecht University, the University of Montpellier, and Eötvös Loránd University. Each semester, students are registered in one of the five partner universities and connect to the remainder of the campuses to complete a range of learning activities for the duration of CHARM-EU's 18-month pilot master's programme, MSc in Global Challenges for Sustainability; the programme is aligned with the European Green Deal and the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It offers students a unique international learning opportunity and the skills to address the pressing need for sustainability in a transdisciplinary and challenge-based environment. The programme consists of three phases: preparatory, flexible, and the capstone phase. In the flexible phase, students choose to focus on the thematic area of either Food, Water, or Life and Health. Two students, Megan O'Brien and Pien Barnas, who are pursuing the Food stream recount their experience so far with CHARM-EU. They reflect upon why they chose to pursue the Food stream, the highlights and challenges they have encountered, and how this master's programme is preparing them for the future.

### What is CHARM-EU?

We are two students, Megan O'Brien from Ireland and Pien Barnas from the Netherlands, who are completing the MSc in Global Challenges for Sustainability, an 18-month pilot master's programme offered by CHARM-EU.

CHARM-EU is an innovative European alliance of universities that offers Challenge-Driven, Accessible, Research-based, Mobile learning. It is aligned with European values, the United Nation's 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), the European Green Deal and is funded by the Erasmus+ Programme.

CHARM-EU was established as a response to the decision of the European Council in 2017 to stimulate new networks of European universities with the aim of

strengthening European membership and improving the international competitiveness of the participating higher education institutions (CHARM-EU, n.d.).

The alliance is coordinated by the University of Barcelona and includes four other universities: Trinity College Dublin; Utrecht University; the University of Montpellier, and Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. Each semester students are registered in one of the five universities and attend lectures in a purpose-built hybrid classroom.

We work in hybrid teams and engage with academic staff from across the five locations and the broader community to address the pressing need for sustainability in a transdisciplinary and challenge-based environment. Short-term and long-term mobilities are provided for us to learn and benefit from the unique international environment of the degree course. The first cohort of students, which we are a part of, enrolled in September 2021 and will conclude in February 2023 upon our graduation.

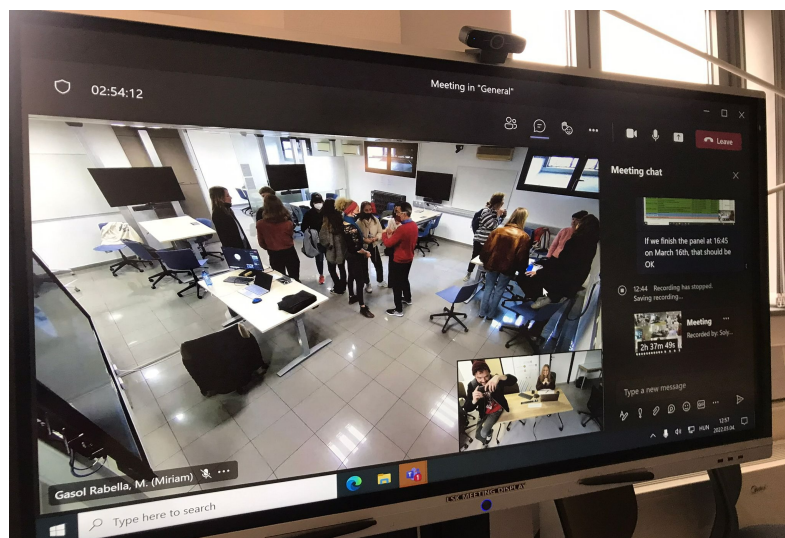


Figure 1: University of Barcelona's hybrid classroom as seen by students in Eötvös Loránd University (Figure shared with permission).

The MSc in Global Challenges for Sustainability consists of three phases. Phase 1 equips students with key skills and concepts in sustainability. Phase 2 is flexible and allows students to choose one of three thematic areas [Water, Life and Health, and Food] based on personal interests and career goals. During Phase 3, the Capstone Phase, students apply their knowledge and competencies on a final challenge-driven project. They do this in partnership with an extra-academic stakeholder while simultaneously refining skills essential for successful entry into the workforce. During this pilot phase 65 students enrolled in CHARM, of which 32 chose the Food stream as their specialisation for the flexible phase.

## Why study Food?

For the Food stream, students are allocated across four of the five partner universities, the University of Barcelona, Utrecht University, the University of Montpellier, and Eötvös Loránd University. Across three modules, the Food stream explores the social, economic, and environmental drivers and consequences for food systems, the policies and actions required to achieve their sustainable transformation and the tools to explain and evaluate them.

The Food stream focuses on the problems facing our current food system and the solutions required to transition to a more sustainable and just system. We were guided in this process through three different modules. The first module, The-Food-Health-Environment Nexus focused on food and its interdependencies and the connection between food and health both for humans and the ecosystem. Lectures and seminars included topics such as food waste, diets and the importance of culture, and nutrition and health. The second module, Socially Just and Sustainable Food Systems, focused on the tools to explain and evaluate food systems; it was in this module that we really adopted a food systems perspective, identifying and evaluating the health, environmental, and social consequences of food production and consumption in a transdisciplinary fashion. We also had lectures on the topic of food processing, the roles of different stakeholders in the value chain, and food and conflict. The third module, Food Systems and their Transformations, focused on policies and actions that are required to transform to socially just and sustainable food systems. Here we learned about regulatory frameworks and national and international policies relating to food such as nutrition and food safety, and their varying implications. We also evaluated different solutions to the issues surrounding just and sustainable food systems, from government-based interventions to social movements.

The majority of students have a background in business or social sciences; those with degrees relating to food were in the minority. To illustrate, Megan graduated with a B.A. in Single Honours Economics from University College Dublin and Pien graduated with a B.A. in Liberal Arts & Science from Utrecht University. However, we chose the Food stream as we are passionate about creating a more just, accessible global food system. In 2019, close to 750 million people – or nearly one in ten people globally – were exposed to severe levels of food insecurity (FAO, 2020). Global hunger has increased in the past three years due to the impact of Covid-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the rising costs associated with high inflation, and the effects of climate change. In addition, food systems account for over one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions (UN, 2021). Our food system is clearly failing. We chose this programme to address the inequities of production and distribution within the system and to support a transition to sustainable, healthy, low-emission diets that will help mitigate the worst effects of the climate crisis and assure food security.

## **Our expectations**

Given that we were the first intake of students in an inaugural master's, it was difficult to know what our expectations should be; our point of reference was limited to the CHARM-EU webpage, our engagement with academic staff and the CHARM-EU administrative team. Still, our expectations were clear, we expected an innovative, international environment, passionate lecturers and facilitators, a student-led programme, and the capacity to make an impact. Given that this is a pioneering programme, we were also aware that some challenges and obstacles may arise. This indicates the character of CHARM-EU students as we enrolled with the belief that this master's was the best platform to create meaningful change and were prepared to deal with any difficulties or uncertainties that arose in the process.

## **Teaching and learning approaches**

Thus far the reality hasn't differed too much from our expectations. CHARM-EU's learning experience is explicit and unique. A key component is collaboration. The majority of our assignments must be completed within hybrid teams of students across the five partner universities. This is a very particular learning opportunity to work cross-culturally and to develop teamwork and communication skills. It was initially a steep learning curve as there are differences in knowledge, lexicon, and culture between students. However, experience and time proved essential and at the end of phase 2, differences that were originally perceived as obstacles became assets as multiple perspectives have increased the quality of our work.

As this master's is student-led, we had autonomy in choosing and designing the main research project that we focused on in the Food stream. This resulted in research projects that encompassed broad-ranging topics ranging from seaweed as a food source, to regenerative agriculture, and gender inequalities within our food system. All projects were analysed from a variety of perspectives, ranging from environmental, health, economic, governance, and the social dimension. Such transdisciplinary research aims to create a nexus between the disciplines and to identify tensions and common ground in order to understand and solve complex problems.

Within our project group, in which we worked with three other students, we tackled the problem of overfishing in the Mediterranean Sea under the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP); the Mediterranean is the most overfished sea internationally (STECF, 2021). We chose this topic as the EU and its Member States are required under the CFP to demonstrate leadership and take urgent action in order to secure this vital source of protein for EU and global citizens. As the CFP is the EU's governing framework for fisheries management, we evaluated the impact it has had on overfishing and made recommendations on possible reforms based on our findings. The structure of the Food modules was aligned with writing a research article. Throughout the three

modules, our focus was on the governance, and economic, environmental and social dimension of the CFP. In the context of the required research article our aim was to address and answer the research question: “To what extent has the CFP been effective in the sustainable management of Mediterranean fish stocks since its 2013 reform?”.

As part of this project, we engaged with stakeholders to gain insights from their expertise. Our project group had the opportunity to talk to Dr. Miquel Ortega, a distinguished marine scientist located in Barcelona. He helped us to understand the complexity of overfishing in the Mediterranean Sea by clarifying international relations, policies, and the need for societal pressure to tackle such an important and complex issue.

### **Our highlights: Mobility weeks and field trips**

One of the key highlights of this semester has been the short-term mobilities. All Food stream students travelled to Budapest and Montpellier to spend a week in each location visiting public, private and grassroots organisations that were working to achieve a more sustainable food system; some related to food safety, others to the environmental impact of food, and others to the food system transformation. The diverse interests of all students were specifically targeted. For example, in Budapest, we visited the Hungarian Food Chain Safety Authority, where they introduced us to the process of food contamination analyses, while in Montpellier we went to ‘La Table des Poètes’, a sustainable restaurant with a mission to inform people about their eating habits and to be a pioneer in food system transformation.



Figure 2: Talk by Hungarian Food Chain Safety Authority representative (Figure shared with permission).



Figure 3: Inside La Table des Poètes, Montpellier (Figure shared with permission).



Figure 4: Students outside La Table des Poètes, Montpellier (Figure shared with permission).

These trips were meaningful on many different levels. They offered an opportunity to network with our classmates and meet academic staff and stakeholders, which strengthened the sense of community within the Food stream. Additionally, we found it inspiring to hear from people who were having a real impact and had established social enterprises such as the initiative 'La Cagette' in Montpellier, a cooperative supermarket that enables its members to buy local and organic food at an affordable price in the area.



Figure 5: Students at the Cereal Research Institute, Budapest (Figure shared with permission).

In addition to the mobility weeks in Budapest and Montpellier, Food stream students in each location participate in four locally organised field trips in and around our university cities. There are four weekly changing themes related to the field trips: food governance, food policy, the role of civil society, and the role of the private sector. The outcomes and highlights of the field trips are then disseminated to all students in weekly presentations. By sharing the main findings from our field trips with students in other locations we can create a comparative analysis of different policies and initiatives in European countries. For us, a surprising outcome of the field trips is a realisation that there are significant differences in sustainable practices between the four countries, despite following the same European regulations and guidelines. For example, to prevent food waste, France is the only country in the alliance with a law in place forbidding supermarkets from throwing out unsold food (Chrisafis, 2016). Similarly, to encourage healthy eating, France has adopted [Nutri-Score](#), a front-of-pack label that informs consumers about the nutritional quality of the product in a



simple way based on a five-colour nutritional scale: from dark green to dark orange, ranked from A to E (Santé Publique, 2022). The Nutri-Score has recently been adopted in both the Netherlands and Spain, yet it remains unavailable in Hungary (WHO, 2021).

## Challenges

We have had many enlightening and gratifying experiences during our studies on the Food stream. However, being a part of a pilot programme has also involved certain challenges. For example, we have had to occasionally work in conditions of uncertainty as the assessments and module descriptors change based on student feedback and unforeseen circumstances. The timetable is also subject to change quite regularly: There were many guest speakers with obligations outside of CHARM-EU which often caused them to reschedule at the last minute. COVID-19 was a contributing factor to rescheduling issues. We found these obstacles to be quite frustrating, yet they have forced us to become more adaptable and flexible which will be of benefit to us in our careers. Additionally, we have found it challenging to adapt to a student-led approach to learning. During our undergraduate degrees, our curriculum was set in stone with little to no autonomy in what we chose to study. Having freedom outside of the required content to choose what we study has forced us to take initiatives that we otherwise may have failed to do, while additionally learning to trust in ourselves, our skills, and our knowledge.

## What impact will CHARM have on our futures?

The Food stream has helped prepare us for the capstone phase of the master's by equipping us with the right skills and knowledge to successfully partner with our chosen stakeholder and project of choice. After completing Phase 2 and the Food stream, students then progress to the third and final phase of this master's to complete their Capstone Challenge.

For the capstone phase, Megan, supported by the Agropolis Foundation and [AWARD](#) (African Women in Agricultural Research) is participating in the [One Planet Fellowship Programme](#) (OPFP) as a mentee. The One Planet Fellowship Programme aims at promoting research and innovation in Africa's agricultural sector to help feed a growing African population in the face of climate change. As part of the mentoring programme, Megan will be paired with an OPFP laureate, an African researcher working on the climate change and agriculture nexus to increase food security. The mentoring programme includes a one-week networking and leadership training placement in Kenya and a 2-4-week internship with the OPFP laureate in their home country to support their research, while Megan simultaneously completes her own research in her CHARM-EU assigned challenge team. Megan believes that the content

of the Food stream has equipped her with the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully complete this specific Challenge. For example, in the Food stream, we systematically analysed the connection between food and different impacts such as poverty and climate change, the history of food and nutrition insecurity including hunger and famine, and sustainable agriculture practices from around the world.

Similarly, for the capstone phase Pien is partnering with the stakeholder [Ecotree](#) on a seaweed recovery project. Ecotree is a company specialising in the ecological and economic valuation of ecosystems and their biodiversity. This project is linked to the water theme, specifically oceans and coasts, as it aims to valorise marine elements for their transformation. Pien's background in the Food stream will prove extremely valuable to this challenge with the skills she attained in it, such as systems thinking and understanding the causes and consequences of wicked problems. She is looking forward to collaborating with Ecotree and discovering the potential of seaweed as a sustainable and nutritious food source.

The Food stream has also helped us to narrow down what we might do after CHARM-EU. Guest speakers and field trips have highlighted possible career pathways for students. There were talks from private sector food representatives including Danone on their sustainability practices, from researchers and academics, policy institutes such as Cereal Research Institute in Budapest, and social enterprises like [La Cagette](#), who are all working to create a more sustainable food system. The broad range of content included in the Food stream has also helped us focus on our interests. For example, from learning about the inequalities within our food system and the vulnerabilities that poorer countries face, Megan is now interested in working on the issue of food security from a policy perspective while the different lectures on food policies on national and international levels have inspired Pien and she potentially sees herself working in the field of food governance.

## Conclusion

Despite some challenges encountered related to CHARM-EU being a pilot programme, its benefits and the skills we have developed far outweigh any negatives. We believe that CHARM-EU has given us a platform to create meaningful change and impact the transition towards a sustainable food system. As the flexible phase draws to a close and we prepare for our capstone phase, we are looking forward to all the opportunities that CHARM-EU has presented to us.

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