

For youth, by youth:  
**Using the Earth Charter to raise  
 awareness among university  
 students**

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**Introduction**

**Dr. Shafía Súcar Súccar, Coordinator of the Institutional Programme on the Environment (Pimaug Programme) at the University of Guanajuato in Mexico, uses and promotes the Earth Charter as a pedagogical tool. She is convinced that “...our present-day situation has emerged as a result of the type of relationship that we, as human beings, have had with nature, with other human beings and with the broader web of life.”**

**According to Dr. Súccar, the Earth Charter, in addition to being a compendium of values and principles that can be integrated into our everyday lives, appeals to both our rational and emotional faculties. The document thereby offers a more holistic and balanced means of understanding the environmental problems that we face today. She and Professor Magdalena Sandoval, also involved in the Pimaug Programme, are committed to encouraging university students across all disciplines to assume a sense of responsibility towards realizing sustainability principles.**

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The starting point for this case study came when the University of Guanajuato decided to incorporate its values and principles into administrative activities and academic content. Faculty members of the Pimaug Programme called upon Bachelor's degree students across all disciplines to undergo the necessary training to become Youth Promoters of the Earth Charter at the University.

In 2005, three Environmental Engineering students expressed an interest in completing the University Social Service component of their programme as Youth Promoters of the Earth Charter. These students underwent a training process specifically designed for this purpose, and acquired the skills required to independently facilitate Earth Charter workshops, for youth and by youth.

Between the second semester of 2005 and July 2007, a total of 27 workshops were facilitated by Youth Promoters of the Earth Charter, for youth and by youth. Approximately six hundred students, as well as numerous professors and administrative staff, have participated in these workshops. The total number of people having benefited from the training is undoubtedly higher, estimated at 3,000 people.

**The following are the short and medium-term objectives of the University of Guanajuato:**

- To increase the number of students promoting the Earth Charter;
- To maximize the dissemination of the Charter inside and outside of the University;
- To promote the Charter among the university's staff and faculty; and,
- To generate spaces for debate and discussion, among other activities.

Significant progress has already been made in achieving the objectives set out for disseminating and training with the Earth Charter. Two additional objectives that have already been realized include: the University of Guanajuato's official endorsement of the Earth Charter; as well as the design and printing of the Earth Charter for the State of Guanajuato, and the distribution of these

pamphlets at workshops. It is important to mention that the printing of the first 2,000 copies of the Charter was made possible thanks to the support of the University of Guanajuato and the Ecological Institute of Guanajuato.

Additionally, in March 2007, the First National Training Workshop for Youth Promoters of the Earth Charter was held and hosted by the University of Guanajuato. Approximately 44 students from higher education institutions from across the country were in attendance and, as a result, the National Network of Youth Promoters of the Earth Charter was formed.

### **Future objectives and current perspectives**

The objectives set out for the short-, medium- and long-term are designed to assist us in expanding the knowledge and internalization of the Earth Charter principles within the university sphere. In our opinion, this is a crucial factor in ensuring that environmental issues are taken into consideration in all the activities and decision-making processes of the university.

Within this context, it should be mentioned that the University of Guanajuato, along with eleven other Mexican universities, joined together to create the Mexican Consortium of University Environmental Programmes for Sustainable Development (Complejus). This university network aims to incorporate an environmental perspective into all of its academic programmes through a cross-disciplinary



Activities at the Earth Charter Workshop - University of Guanajuato.

approach, and to provide ongoing training to teaching faculty on environment and sustainability-related topics.

Complexus has also drafted a range of related documents, including a declaration of support within the framework of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which was signed in January 2006, by each of the universities' twelve Rectors. This document is a significant indication from higher education institutions in Mexico and in Latin America of the necessity to make important changes towards building a more sustainable world.

What has also emerged is a series of ambitious objectives relating to the implementation of the Earth Charter as an essential tool for education for sustainable development; as a key element in community service, research and extension projects; as a support to educational materials and publications; and, above all else, as a reference point to the everyday pedagogy of teaching staff. This document is thereby perceived as bearing a significant impact on the learning processes of students and the overall performance of the university.

## Methodological Aspects

The University's training workshops for Earth Charter promoters are designed for young people between the ages of 16-25 years, and have relied, in large part, on the invaluable assistance of Mateo Castillo Ceja, an Earth Charter International Council Member, and other members of the National Earth Charter Secretariat in Mexico. Over the years, youth participants have acquired the skills necessary to modify and improve the design of the workshops. Their input has also enhanced the originality of the sessions, and has made them more accessible to, and attractive for, young people, particularly those based in the State of Guanajuato.

### Earth Charter workshops

At the time of writing this case study, there are three different versions of the Earth Charter workshop: each one lasting 4 hours, 8 hours, or 14 hours. The main mission of all the workshops, regardless of duration, is

to encourage young people to reflect on Earth Charter principles, to internalize them, and to become committed to putting into practice those values selected by each participant. Some minimum criteria and conditions have been defined for the effective implementation of Earth Charter workshops, and these include the following:

- Indoors space: a hall with suitable ventilation; natural light and the possibility of making the room dark in order to use the projector; comfortable chairs and movable tables, placed in a horseshoe shape
- Outdoor space: close to the hall, with vegetation and the possibility of carrying out group activities
- Materials used: digital projector, screen, flip chart, different coloured markers and recyclable paper
- Food and drinks during breaks: natural and healthy; set of re-usable dishes
- Clothing worn by the participants: comfortable and appropriate for outdoor conditions

The following table details the programme for an eight-hour workshop. The phases remain the same across all three versions of the workshop, though the exercises vary and the length of time devoted to them is adjusted according to the target group.



One of the activities at the Earth Charter workshop- University of Guanajuato.

## Programme for an 8-hour Earth Charter Workshop

| Phase  | Duration | Exercise   | Objective   |
|--|----------|--|---|
| Introduction and integration                   | 20 min.  | Introduction.<br>Mending the world.<br>Earth Charter video.                              | Sensitize participants about the themes to be covered in the workshop   |
| Need for an Earth Charter                      | 20 min.  | Presentation by the facilitator.   |   |
| Reflection                                     | 20 min.  | Reflection.<br>Discussion.   |   |
| Antecedents                                    | 30 min.  | Memorama.  | Provide a brief historical overview of the Earth Charter  |
| Earth Charter Initiative                       | 30 min.  | Presentation by the facilitator.   |   |
| <b>Break</b>                                   |          |  |   |
| Preamble of the Earth Charter                  | 30 min.  | Presentation by the facilitator.<br>Dissemination of the Earth Charter.                  | Directly engage with each participant by personally handing out the Earth Charter   |
| Getting to know and internalizing your Charter | 180 min. | Teamwork:<br>Find the Values and Prioritize Them.<br><br>Feel the Earth;<br>Stereotypes. | Invite the participants, through group work, to internalize, define and put into practice the values and principles of the Earth Charter                                    |
| <b>Break</b>                                   |          |  |   |
| Uses of the Earth Charter                      | 30 min.  | Inflated globe;<br>Round table.  | Invite the participants, through group work, to internalize, define and put into practice the values and principles of the Earth Charter                                    |
| Tapping into Our Creativity                    | 60 min.  | The Human Box;<br>Feeling the Beat.  |   |
| Signature of Personal Endorsement              | 30 min.  | Commitments.   | Ask each participant to make one or several individualized commitments, and encourage them to incorporate the Earth Charter values and principles into their everyday lives |

### Detailed descriptions of the activities outlined in the 8-hour workshop

#### ***Mending the world***

*Material:* sheets of paper, pens or markers, computer and projector

*Procedure:* Project an image of the Earth onto the wall. Ask the participants to identify what they consider to be the greatest problem that exists on our planet, and then to draw it or to write it down. Once completed, all participants should post their visual or written response on the projected Earth. Invite the

participants to study the problems listed and to propose a few solutions for each. The purpose of this exercise is to reflect on the role of human beings in causing and solving global problems.

#### ***Memorama***

*Material:* a stack of cards on which the antecedents and history of the Earth Charter are written, computer and projector

*Procedure:* After the Earth Charter has been distributed to participants, and overviews of its antecedents and history have been provided, divide

the group into two teams and give each a stack of cards upon which the antecedents are written, but not in the correct order. Each team has to re-configure the cards into the right chronological order, and the first to finish becomes the winner. This exercise reiterates the importance of teamwork, and enables participants to familiarize themselves with the history of the Earth Charter.

### **Find the Values and Prioritize Them**

*Material:* Copies of the Earth Charter, paper and markers

*Procedure:* Distribute copies of the Earth Charter and divide the group into four teams. Each team is assigned to one section of the document, to identify the values contained within it, and to write them down. Once this has been completed, each team should select two values that it considers are lacking in modern-day society, and to describe these values in their own words. At the end of the activity, teams share the values they have chosen and their own definitions with the rest of the group.

### **Stereotypes**

*Material:* adhesive labels with qualitative adjectives such as: fat, envious, beautiful, avaricious, bad, idiotic, ugly, etc.

*Procedure:* Post a qualitative adjective on the back of a few participants without telling them what the label is. The remaining group members must treat these participants according to the label on their back until the 'stereotyped ones' guess the correct adjective. At the end of the activity it is useful to reflect upon stereotypes and discuss why human beings tend to judge others by their appearance. This exercise teaches the values of social equity, respect and non-discrimination.

### **Feel the Earth**

*Process:* In an open space (preferably a garden), invite the participants to relax, to close their eyes and to begin to feel with their remaining senses, by touching, smelling and listening to their surroundings. The objective is to have participants directly connect with the Earth, to get back in touch with those sensations that are often overlooked or neglected in the fast-paced rhythm of our lives.

### **Inflated Globe**

*Material:* a globe

*Procedure:* All of the participants are asked to remain silent. Without warning, one of the workshop facilitators begins to walk around the entire hall while slowly inflating the globe with his/her breath. A sense of frustration arises in the classroom as the participants do not know what is going on and as the globe continues to expand. The facilitator continues to inflate it until it reaches the bursting point. After the commotion subsides, invite the participants to describe the emotions that they experienced, as the globe was about to burst. An analogy can be drawn with the planet Earth and the feelings of helplessness that arise amidst the environmental crisis. Encourage the participants to assume an active role in proposing a solution that could improve the relationship between human beings and nature.

### **Human Box**

*Material:* plastic crates (refreshment containers) one for every ten participants

*Procedure:* Divide the group into teams of ten, and tell them that all team members must climb on top of the crate and stay there for at least a minute without touching the floor. At the end of the activity, the winning team must explain the factors behind its success. These are likely to include effective coordination, teamwork and utilizing individual abilities.

### **Feeling the Beat**

*Procedure:* Ask the participants to run to the beat of the selected music or to undertake any other intense physical exercise (dancing, jumping, etc.) for three minutes or until their heartbeats rise. Invite the participants to place their hand to their heart, to reflect on what they have learned over the course of the workshop, and to identify a commitment that they would like to make towards the planet Earth, our home. At the end of the activity, the participants can share their thoughts and commitments with the group, or keep them quietly to themselves. The intention is for every participant to set out and implement goals geared towards realizing sustainability principles.

## Lessons learned

For the University of Guanajuato, the Earth Charter is an educational tool undergoing constant growth and evolution. For this reason, we look forward to designing and launching new initiatives that – in addition to feeding into this current project – will motivate and attract a growing number of young Earth Charter promoters. These activities will include a campaign to raise awareness about the Earth Charter across campus through informative posters; and a series of conferences and debates to be held on a wide range of issues, including those values that have been identified as lacking or absent in modern-day society.

An analysis of the University of Guanajuato's experiences using the Earth Charter over the past two years has enabled us to identify several areas of success, such as the ongoing recruitment of youth promoters. Another successful venture has been the ongoing evaluation of the workshops' content and facilitator roles, in order to continuously improve the training programmes. Overall, the initiative has benefited greatly from the insights of promoters involved since the beginning of the project, from the ideas shared by new participants, and from experts in the field.

The Earth Charter project has increased in scale and in scope, both at the University of Guanajuato and in Mexico. It has become one of the key action areas of the University's Institutional Programme on the Environment to promote the training of community members, in general, and university students and staff, in particular.

In addition to our successes, we have also made our share of mistakes – from which we have learned to improve our workshop methodologies and evaluations. Those teams containing many youth promoters have generally not functioned as effectively as those in smaller groups. This is due to the fact that the more participants involved, the more difficult it is to coordinate group meetings, during and after the workshop. Therefore, we have tried to limit the size of the promotional teams to six participants, in order to minimize geographical disparity and to facilitate group organization and performance.

Students can sign up to become a promoter of the Earth Charter as part of the University Social Service component of their programme. However, since the dissemination activities require more time and dedication than other projects, there has been a lack of interest and commitment on the part of some students. In reality, the main problem is that the Service is often viewed – by both professors and students – as a mere formality, and thereby it loses its true meaning as a channel for community service. Fortunately, however, many students are committed to dedicating the necessary time and effort to their service. These are the students who are needed for ambitious projects such as the Earth Charter, which might require a little bit more dedication but which ultimately reap great rewards.

An important but underdeveloped area relates to the design and application of indicators to measure the qualitative and quantitative impacts of the Earth Charter project, both inside and outside the University of Guanajuato. The evaluations that are currently carried out at the end of each workshop (as previously mentioned) have been very useful to improve and adapt the content of training sessions, including modifying exercises, support materials and the ongoing professional development of workshop facilitators.

In our opinion, a crucial starting point would be to evaluate the extent to which our university's students have benefited from participating in the Earth Charter workshops. This would enable us to assess the added-value potential that the knowledge, internalization and implementation of Earth Charter principles have had on young people and on their area of influence.

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