

---

# "IT'S UPTO YOU": A PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT TO PROMOTE ACADEMIC ADAPTATION AND EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sandra Fernandes<sup>1</sup> [<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4712-4249>]  
Alexandra M. Araújo<sup>2</sup> [<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4345-0856>]  
Elizabeth Real<sup>3</sup> [<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4153-491X>]

<sup>1</sup>Dept. of Psychology and Education, Portucalense University, Portugal, [sandraf@upt.pt](mailto:sandraf@upt.pt)

<sup>2</sup> Dept. of Psychology and Education, Portucalense University, Portugal, [amaraujo@upt.pt](mailto:amaraujo@upt.pt)

<sup>3</sup> Dept. of Economics and Management, Portucalense University, Portugal, [elizabeth.real@upt.pt](mailto:elizabeth.real@upt.pt)

**Abstract.** *This paper presents the pedagogical project "It's UPTo You" implemented at Portucalense University (UPT) to promote the academic integration of first-year students while encouraging education for sustainable development. The initiative is part of a broader project called +Sucesso@UPortucalense, funded by the General Directorate for Higher Education (DGES) and the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR). The project "It's UPTo You" aims to promote the integration of 1st year students at UPT through the implementation of a practical and collaborative activity/challenge by teams of 1st year students, during the first week of the 1st semester. In addition to contributing to the motivation of 1st year students, the project aims to encourage reflection, innovation and the application of knowledge related to the course in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This paper describes the project objectives, activities, participants' roles, resources and evaluation process that supported the implementation of the project. The project's results and academic implications are also discussed.*

*Key words: Student success, academic integration, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), collaborative learning, Project-based learning (PBL)*

## INTRODUCTION

The adaptation of first-year students in higher education is critical, influencing retention and academic success (Almeida et al., 2016; Araújo, 2017; Cage et al., 2021; Li & Lee, 2024; Thompson et al., 2021). To address these challenges at Universidade Portucalense (UPT), the project "It's UPTo You" was designed as part of the institutional Welcome Week Program for first year students, in the academic year 2024/2025. This project aimed to fulfill the objectives of one of the topics of the + Sucesso@UPortucalense project, aimed at promoting the academic integration of first-year students. The + Sucesso@UPortucalense Project is part of the sub-measure of the "Program for Promoting Success and Reducing Dropout in Higher Education", funded by the General Directorate for Higher Education (DGES) and the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR), with a duration of two years (2024-2026). The main objective of this program is to develop initiatives to promote academic success and prevent retention and dropout, including the development of mentoring mechanisms and monitoring of students by teachers and peers, the development of innovative teaching and learning practices and the strengthening of self-learning and teamwork practices. Specifically, the pedagogical project "It's UPTo You" aims to promote the integration of 1st year students at UPT through the implementation of a practical and collaborative activity/challenge by teams

---

of 1st year students, during the first week of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester. The project is based on research findings that suggest that collaborative projects may promote students' social, emotional, and academic skills, foster student social integration, and promote well-being (Boud et al., 2014; Cage et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2007; Le et al., 2017; Sneyers & De Witte, 2017). In addition to contributing to the motivation of 1st year students (Bächtold et al., 2022; Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002), the project aims to encourage reflection, innovation and the application of knowledge related to the course program in promoting sustainability and achieving the goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## 2. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

### 2.1. Project objectives

The objective of the project is for students to create a video (maximum 90 seconds) presenting a proposal for a measure or action that contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on the UPT campus, aligned with the students' academic and professional career. The learning objectives defined for the students to be able to demonstrate by the end of the first week of classes were the following:

- Understand the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to the academic and professional area of his/her study program;
- Develop teamwork and self-learning skills;
- Use digital and technological resources, including generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, in the learning process;
- Develop effective collaboration and communication skills in multidisciplinary teams;
- Apply theoretical concepts from the course in the analysis and solution of practical problems related to the SDGs;
- Implement sustainable practices in everyday university and community life that facilitate the achievement of SDG targets.

### 2.2. Activities and Tasks

*Day 1 – Monday, September 9, 2024*

- Presentation session of the project by the course coordinators at the Department presentation session (morning or afternoon).
- Access to the project supporting materials to carry out the project on the Moodle page (including the PPT presentation of the project “ It's UPTo You ”).

*Day 2 – Tuesday, September 10, 2024*

- Formation of student teams (4-6 members), with the support of teachers.
- Search information about the SDGs, with the support of AI Gen, with the aim of deepening knowledge about each one.
- Identification of the most relevant SDGs for the course and discussion about the articulation with his/her academic and professional area.
- **Task 1:** Submission, in Moodle, of information about the composition of the team (course, names and team *selfie* ).

*Day 3 – Wednesday, September 11, 2024*

- Choose 3 SDGs that the group considers to be most significant in the context of the course they are starting, and explain: i) the reason for this choice and ii) how these 3 SDGs should influence the performance of professionals in the field of which the course will give access.
- Discussion and suggestion of concrete measures to be implemented at UPT to contribute to the SDGs.
- **Task 2:** Submission, in Moodle, of information about the SDGs selected by the team.

*Day 4 – Thursday, September 12, 2024*

- Exploration of video creation tools (Powtoon is recommended).
- Creation of a 90-second video presenting the results of the group work. (the *storyboard format* can be inspired by the “PechaKucha” method).
- **Task 3:** Submission, in Moodle, of the video created in MP4 format.

*Day 5 – Friday, September 13, 2024*

- Evaluation of projects developed by student teams by the evaluation panel.
- Announcement of project winners and award ceremony (afternoon).
- Celebration of results with students and teachers from the UPT community.

### **2.3. Roles and responsibilities**

The roles and responsibilities of the various participants (students, teachers, 1<sup>st</sup> year representative teacher, course coordinators) involved in the project are outlined below, highlighting the collaborative efforts required to ensure its success.

- *Students:* actively participate in activities and discussions; Conduct research on the SDGs and their relevance to the course; Define concrete actions to implement the SDGs at the UPT campus; Create a presentation video with the team’s proposal.
- *Teachers:* Support the creation of student teams and project tasks; Support students’ research activities on the SDGs; Facilitate brainstorming and discussion sessions with students; Guide and provide feedback to students during the development of project ideas/proposals.
- *1st year representative teacher:* Support teachers in creating student teams; Coordinate the management of information on the project page in Moodle; Share information with course coordinators.
- *Course Coordinators:* Coordinate the participation of 1st year teachers in the project; Facilitate the logistics and organization of activities related to the project; Be part of the project evaluation panel and participate in the evaluation of proposals; Share information with the +Sucesso@UPortucalense Project team.

## 2.4. Resources and Materials

To support students throughout the project, several resources and materials were provided to enhance their understanding and creativity. These included: i) introductory motivational videos on the importance of the SDG theme; ii) supporting documents and websites containing detailed information about the 17 SDGs; iii) educational resources aimed at implementing actions related to the SDGs; iv) videos created with the Powtoon tool, showcasing innovative measures to achieve the 17 SDGs.

## 2.5. Evaluation of the Projects

The evaluation of the projects was based on a set of key criteria designed to ensure alignment with the objectives of the initiative. The evaluation committee of the project was composed of representatives of students, teachers and course coordinators from UPT, as well as members of the + Sucesso@UPortucalense Project team. A rubric was provided to support the evaluation process of the projects by all the members of the evaluation committee. This rubric ensured consistency and transparency in grading based on the following key criteria: alignment with SDGs; creativity and originality; video quality; clarity and communication effectiveness; collaboration and teamwork; and impact and feasibility.

## 3. PROJECT RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The "It's UPTo You" project was considered a valuable educational strategy for promoting academic integration among first-year students, while simultaneously fostering awareness and practical application of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The project combined academic knowledge with creative, real-world solutions that directly benefited the UPT campus community. One of the key issues of the project success was the collaborative learning environment which it cultivated among the student teams (Le et al., 2017; Stefanou & Salisbury-Glennon, 2002). Students worked together in teams to research, analyze, and develop proposals related to sustainability. This collaborative approach not only enhanced the learning experience but also helped students to apply their academic knowledge to tangible, real-world challenges (cf. Abrami et al., 2004; Bächtold et al., 2002; Boud et al, 2014). The integration of digital tools, such as Powtoon and other video applications, was also an important outcome. These tools empowered students to express their ideas in innovative ways, encouraging creativity and engagement in the project. The video presentations submitted by the student teams proved this, with many showcasing interesting proposals that aligned with the SDGs. The creative use of technology also allowed students to further develop their digital literacy skills, which are essential in today's academic and professional environments. The diversity of the ideas presented in the videos reflected the students' commitment to sustainability. Several proposals focused on initiatives to improve waste management, energy efficiency, and environmental awareness on the UPT campus, aligning with key SDGs such as Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12) and Climate Action (SDG 13). The practical nature of these proposals indicated an important understanding of how academic knowledge can be applied to make meaningful contributions to achieving global sustainability goals.

Despite the success of the project, some challenges were encountered. In the first days, students expressed feelings of uncertainty, struggling with the initial task of choosing and researching the most relevant SDGs for their course. This initial confusion highlighted the importance of providing adequate guidance and support during the early phases of the project. Teachers played a critical role in helping students overcome these challenges by offering clear instructions, facilitating brainstorming sessions, and providing feedback throughout the project. The relationship between teachers and students emerged as a key factor in the project's success, with teachers acting as mentors, guiding students through the learning process. Furthermore, the project emphasized the importance of innovation in teaching methodologies. Active learning strategies, which encouraged student involvement and problem-solving, were fundamental to the success of the initiative. Teachers who embraced these strategies were able to create a dynamic and engaging learning environment, which enhanced the overall student experience. In the future, pedagogical training for teachers can also focus on the roles teachers play in facilitating collaborative work in students and their adaptation to higher education (Abrami et al., 2004; Fernandes et al., 2023).

In conclusion, "It's UPTo You" successfully achieved its goal of integrating first-year students into university life while promoting sustainable development practices. The positive outcomes of the project suggest that similar initiatives could be scaled and replicated across other universities, with the potential to inspire a wider movement for sustainability in higher education. Future work will focus on refining the project's structure, improving teacher-student collaboration, and expanding its scope to reach more students and academic disciplines.

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK**

"It's UPTo You" proved effective in integrating and raising awareness among students. The project demonstrated significant engagement from both students and teachers throughout its implementation. Students faced initial challenges, such as feeling "lost" during the early stages of the project. This underscores the essential role of teachers in providing guidance, fostering collaboration, and supporting students in overcoming obstacles. The close relationship between teachers and students emerged as a key advantage, ensuring that participants felt supported and motivated. The project also highlighted the importance of innovation and teacher training in active learning methodologies, which played a crucial role in the project's success. These methods empowered teachers to facilitate a dynamic and engaging learning environment, bridging gaps and enhancing student understanding. Future work aims to expand the project, including other academic years, and further refine the evaluation process. Additionally, fostering even stronger teacher-student collaboration and providing ongoing training in innovative teaching practices will be crucial to sustaining and scaling the initiative's impact.

#### **References**

Abrami, P. C., Poulsen, C., & Chambers, B. (2004). Teacher motivation to implement an educational innovation: Factors differentiating users and non-users of cooperative

- learning. *Educational Psychology*, 24(2), 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144341032000160146>
- Almeida, L. S., Araújo, A. M., & Martins, C. (2016). Transição e adaptação dos alunos do 1º ano: Cariáveis intervenientes e medidas de atuação. In L. S. Almeida & R. V. Castro (Eds.), *Ser estudante no Ensino Superior: O caso dos estudantes do 1º ano* (pp. 146-164). Centro de Investigação em Educação (CIEEd), Instituto de Educação, Universidade do Minho.
- Araújo, A. M. (2017). Sucesso no Ensino Superior: Uma revisão e conceptualização. *Revista de Estudios e Investigación en Psicología y Educación*, 4, 132-141. <https://doi.org/10.17979/reipe.2017.4.2.3207>.
- Bächtold, M., Roca, P., & De Checchi, K. (2022). Students' beliefs and attitudes towards cooperative learning, and their relationship to motivation and approach to learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(1), 100–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2112028>
- Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (2014). *Peer learning in Higher Education: Learning from and with each other*. Routledge.
- Cage, E., Jones, E., Ryan, G., Hughes, G., & Spanner, L. (2021). Student mental health and transitions into, through, and out of university: Student and staff perspectives. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(8), 1076–1089. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1875203>
- Fernandes, S., Araújo, A. M., Miguel, I., & Abelha, M. (2023). Teacher professional development in higher education: The impact of pedagogical training perceived by teachers. *Education Sciences*, 13(3), 309. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13030309>
- Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. (2007). The state of cooperative learning in postsecondary and professional settings. *Educational Psychology Review*, 19, 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-006-9038-8>
- Le, H., Janssen, J., & Wubbels, T. (2017). Collaborative learning practices: Teacher and student perceived obstacles to effective student collaboration. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 48(1), 103–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2016.1259389>
- Li, J., & Lee, V. W. Y. (2024). Thriving through transitioning: Unravelling the interplay of transitional challenges and adjustments into university. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2401016>
- Sneyers, E., & De Witte, K. (2017). Interventions in higher education and their effect on student success: A meta-analysis. *Educational Review*, 70(2), 208–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1300874>
- Stefanou, C. R., & Salisbury-Glennon, J. D. (2002). Developing motivation and cognitive learning strategies through an undergraduate learning community. *Learning Environments Research*, 5, 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015610606945>
- Thompson, M., Pawson, C., & Evans, B. (2021). Navigating entry into higher education: The transition to independent learning and living. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(10), 1398–1410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400>