

# University Entrepreneurship at the Service of Rural Society. The RuralYU Project as an Action Learning Process

Begoña Sáiz<sup>a\*</sup>, Irene Badía<sup>a</sup>, Rita Gorriz<sup>a</sup>, Inés Mondragón<sup>a</sup>, Victoria Olcina<sup>a</sup>, Pedro Sáez<sup>b</sup>, Pablo Tortosa<sup>a</sup>, Guillem García<sup>a</sup> y María Cos<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Universitat Politècnica de València, Camino de Vera s/n, 46022 Valencia, Spain

<sup>b</sup>Monnou Studio. Valencia, Spain.

\* Correspondence: bsaizma@ega.upv.es

Received: 14 January 2023; Accepted: 14 February 2023; Published: April 2023

---

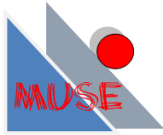
## Abstract

The article presents the RuralYU university entrepreneurship project, developed by the Youth University Design (YUDesign) *Spontaneous Generation* (GE) group of the *School of Design Engineering* (ETSID), at the *Polytechnic University of Valencia* (UPV). RuralYU aspires to reduce rural depopulation in collaboration with university students, who, by carrying out academic work, cover specific needs with the aim of strengthening rural development. The idea of an inter-university collaboration programme with the rural world arose after having won the Vodafone Foundation's Project Lab 2021 national contest within the framework of GLOBAL CHANGE with the proposal "RuralLife4Good. Accommodation grant programme for the empowerment of rural environments". The winning proposal, which was implemented as a pilot project in Ràfol de Salem during the 2021-2022 academic year, values the importance of the university at the service of society, in this case as an axis of urgent and necessary activation to avoid rural abandonment.

**Keywords:** University Entrepreneurship; Project-Based Learning; Social Innovation; Rural Development; YUDesign.

---

**To cite this article:** Sáiz, B., Badía, I., Gorriz, R., Mondragón, I., Olcina, V., Sáez, P., Tortosa, P., García, G., Cos, M. (2023). University Entrepreneurship at the Service of Rural Society. The RuralYU Project as an Action Learning Process. *Multidisciplinary Journal for Education, Social and Technological Sciences*, 10(1), 36-50. <https://doi.org/10.4995/muse.2023.19113>



## 1. Introduction

The academic framework comprises many options on offer to students to motivate them to learn, arouse concerns and push them to become empathetic and socially responsible future professionals. A commitment acquired in the mentoring of the GE YUDesign group is the fostering, among the student body, of a dynamic and collaborative attitude in relation to participation in workshops, conferences, congresses, contests and challenges, among others. Getting involved in this dynamic implies the acceptance of a series of responsibilities and commitments that range from the organisational itself to the definition of a social and sustainable design approach, defining a methodology that involves knowledge and detailed analysis of the problem to be solved, consultation with researchers and professionals in the sector, the study of all possible variables for its resolution and the proposal of sustainable alternatives that, from a real and up-to-date approach, represent a quality proposal with a differentiating value.

During the 2020-2021 academic year, a team made up of six university students from the First and Second years, a Masters and a mentor teacher from YUDesign of the ETSID-UPV, took part in ProjectLab 2021, organised by the Vodafone Foundation, through #GLOBALCHANGE, a sensibilisation, education and action project, in which the participants were asked to propose developmental challenges and action proposals as part of an action learning process.

The project presented by YUDesign “RuralLife4Good. Accommodation grant programme for the empowerment of rural environments” was selected by the jury to receive one of the two top awards, with a project that aspires to reduce the loss of rural environments and their depopulation, (Canal Pedro Sáez Martínez, 2021). The focus is on collaborative work, carried out by young people who want to transform the world by social action and that has social innovation at its core.

The experience, that has become a student intrapreneurship project of social innovation within the framework of Higher Education, reinforces the theory that intrapreneurship is directly related to innovation (Huang et al., 2021), and gives visibility to a teaching model and dynamic learning, in which the agents of change or educational improvement are the students themselves, guided by a mentor, as has been the case.

## 2. Objectives

The objectives, therefore, are proposed from two perspectives. The first, within an academic framework, and the second, the one that refers to this award-winning project implemented as a pilot project.

### 2.1. Main objectives

- Show a bottom-up teaching model.
- Give visibility to the benefits of student intrapreneurship within university education.
- Present the dynamics of a Social Innovation project that attracts people to the rural environment with a sustainable proposal, using SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) 8, 10, 11 and 17 as a base.
- Highlight the potential of the Spontaneous Generation (GE) YUDesign group, from the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), boosting the value of the mentor-teacher figure.

### 2.2. Specific objectives

- Involve the students in the resolution of current problems in the rural environment that could be sustainably implemented.
- Focus their work from a technical, social, human, and sustainable perspective from the perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) part of the 2030 Agenda.
- Develop and implement a proposal to generate employment and growth (economic, sustained, and sustainable (SDG 8)), that establishes new residents in rural environments.
- Assess, with all the agents involved, the short-, medium- and long-term impact of the project, both within the framework of higher education and that of the rural environment.
- Integrate YUDesign into the contact network of the different rural agents that are working against rural depopulation to publicise and scale the project to other rural environments with similar problems (SDG 17).

### 3. Development and method

The YUDesign group (Figure 1), part of Spontaneous Generation, has as its starting point as project-based learning with a spirit of actual implementation. In this case, the "RuralLife4Good" proposal (Figure 2) was worked on and developed over the six weeks of the Project Lab contest, focusing on solving complex challenges that favour social change and that are linked to the United Nations`17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (Canal Fundación Vodafone España, Project Lab: El videoclip, 2021). Once the decision was made to try to solve the challenge of depopulation, the project methodology taught by the *Youth4Good* community had to be followed: a mentored online itinerary in which a deliverable was uploaded to the competition platform every week, using *Design* and *Visual Thinking* dynamics, so that the mentors and the rest of the participants could offer feedback on progress. This generated a process of growth and constant improvement.

Moreover, the possibility of communication and interaction with other teams, through group forums (*slack* channel, *youth4good* community platform, discord), allowed them to learn new collaborative tools. All the groups were able to access the forums and see the work of the rest of the teams.

Deliverables were evaluated based on a rubric and points were awarded for each section. The teams that reached the final were those that had scored the most points during the six weeks of deliverables.

The work dynamic proposed by the competition organisers offered a tightly scheduled weekly planning that, among other things, required each member of the team to rotate their assigned responsibilities, so everybody was able to play and learn all the necessary roles to carry out a project. This type of exercise within the team led to the foundation of firm relationships between the members (dialogue, honesty, and empathy) maintaining, to date, this same work dynamic whose principles rely on horizontality among all members: an equitable distribution of functions, the same weight in decision-making, common objectives, and knowledge of how each task works. Under this premise, more than a year of exhaustive work was carried out, with more than satisfactory results and good forecasts for the future. On March 24, 2021, the Final Awards Gala was held, and we won one of the first two prizes awarded to universities (Canal Fundación Vodafone España, Gran Final Project Lab, 2021, 1:05:56s).

*Sáiz et al. (2023)*

Mult. J. Edu. Soc & Tec. Sci. (2023), 10(1), 36-50. <https://doi.org/10.4995/muse.2023.19113>



**Figure 1.** Left. G. E. YUDESIGN group, from the ETSID-UPV. **Figure 2.** Up Right. RuralLife4Good. National winning project of Project Lab 2021, from F. Vodafone, GLOBAL CHANGE. **Figure 3.** Down Right. Meeting between the members of YUDESIGN, the AVANT Chair, the Mayor of Ráfol de Salem and the owner of the crisp company Anel. October 16, 2021

As part of the prize, we received 3 months of mentoring sessions from different members of the Vodafone Foundation organisation with a profile, in this case, of business *coaching* focused on entrepreneurship. As the possibilities of implementation were real we were able to see the progress we were making and the problems which arose during this time. The mentors presented different points of view and indications to follow, to help us implement the pilot project. There were winners from other areas of the competition taking part in these sessions which resulted in collective learning, multidisciplinary and knowledge exchange.

### 3.1 RuralYU. Implementation of the pilot project

To implement the project in a real community and to find a way to make the pilot viable, we started a 9-month process, without any mentoring from the Foundation, which allowed us to

examine the issues which surround rural life in depth. We looked for contacts related to the environment, interviewed mayors and rural entrepreneurs, and started to collaborate with social agents working to stop depopulation, such as the *Valencia Agenda against depopulation* (Cátedra AVANT in Valencian), the Valencian Institute of Agri-environmental Training and Research (IVIFA in Spanish) and Local Development Agents, among others, (Figure 3).

As a result of all these interviews, we reached a turning point where the initial idea of creating an application that worked as a gateway between young people and the rural world became a real possibility of an immersion project in a population at risk of depopulation. This would allow us, later, to define and better define this "gateway of union" from a real and pragmatic experience, also counting on the experience and collaboration of rural agents. In this way, RuralYU was born, a new line of interest within YUDesign, based on the empowerment of rural environments.

This is how the project evolved to become the creation of a rural development scholarship programme where, with the collaboration of the IVIFA Foundation and as a pilot project, two scholarships were offered to students with the aim of making a local contribution to previously defined needs, broadly focused on the generation of work (SDG 8, target 8.9) to strengthen regional development (SDG 11, target 11(a)) and increase population.

This action is considered a starting point with the idea of continuing it in the university environment, in line with SDG 17, specifically target 17.17. Using the university's resources, the idea is to communicate with students and rural populations at risk of depopulation, export the experience to other schools and areas of knowledge, and use the results and conclusions from the first edition as a guarantee of project viability.

The pilot project was carried out in Ràfol de Salem, a small town located in the south of the province of Valencia, in the Vall d'Albaida. This municipality has less than 500 inhabitants, a high dependency ratio, a low migration rate and characteristics that increase the risk of depopulation. It has areas for sports activities, a very friendly atmosphere, and a new residential area, built with the aim of not succumbing to extreme depopulation. The two scholarships, of four months duration, began in April 2022 and were given to students from the Industrial Design and Product Development Engineering degree, (GIDIDP in Spanish), from the School of Design Engineering (ETSID in Spanish) at the UPV.



The scholarship programme was open to the fourth year of the GIDIDP of the ETSID-UPV. The information was also available on the GE and YUDesign social networks. Portfolios and Curriculum Vitae were required so that the RuralYU team could decide, based on a rubric, who the ideal people for the pilot project would be. The scholarships were also publicised on the social networks of GE and YUDesign.

The first of the scholarships aimed to boost the visual image of the local crisp company, Anel, which is strongly committed to using local ingredients and employees from the area (SDG 8, target 8.3). During the four months that the internship lasted, the student was to:

- Redesign the corporate identity of the company Papas Anel.
- Propose a new packaging line for crisps and for the rest of the appetisers that the company sells.
- Assess the possibility of a new line in more sustainable packaging (materials other than disposable plastic, new forms of distribution, etc).

Guillem García Martín was the student selected for this scholarship.

The second scholarship was to create a brand for the area together with the Ràfol de Salem council, to promote local tourism and the heritage, traditions and customs of the Vall d'Albaida region (SDG 8, target 8.9). During the four months that the internship lasted, the student was tasked with:

- Devising a representative brand or image of the area.
- Redesigning the corporate identity of the Ràfol de Salem Town Hall.
- Proposing an advertising campaign promoting the area: cycling routes, popular festivals and other events, bars and restaurants, museums.

María Cos Aznar was the student selected for this scholarship.

From March to August 2022, Guillem and María moved to Ràfol de Salem and worked and socialised in the village, meaning they could see the problem with their own eyes. They had the opportunity to become aware, first-hand, of rural depopulation, and how the inhabitants work without the services they were accustomed to. This contextualisation was of great value for the

generation of new ideas from a young and forward-thinking perspective, whilst using the technologies of the time and place.

#### 4. Results

Guillem García's experience in the Anel crisps and snacks company was challenging from the start, Figure 4, as the company was immersed in a change in the format, but not the image, of the crisp packaging at that time. However, thanks to Guillem's incorporation, a complete change of the packaging that included format and graphic design was proposed. This entire process was carried out within a very tight time frame, due to circumstances imposed by the potato packaging process, so the student quickly experienced the real work times that are imposed by a business reality. Figure 5 shows all the proposals made based on the requirements of the company, placed as a panel on the wall of his office and shared with the company staff. This way of visualising the proposals was very useful for the owner, since it allowed him to slowly observe all the proposals, discarding those which were less in tune with the philosophy of the company.



**Figure 4.** Left. Iván Martínez, owner of the Anel Crisps and Snacks company with Guillermo García, a scholarship student in the pilot project. **Figure 5.** Right. Proposal panel for the new potato chip wrapper in the company's office



The proposals were presented in a mock-up format so they could be all be seen, which greatly facilitated the perception of the final result and the decision-making process for the company personnel (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Images of proposed mock-ups for the new packaging

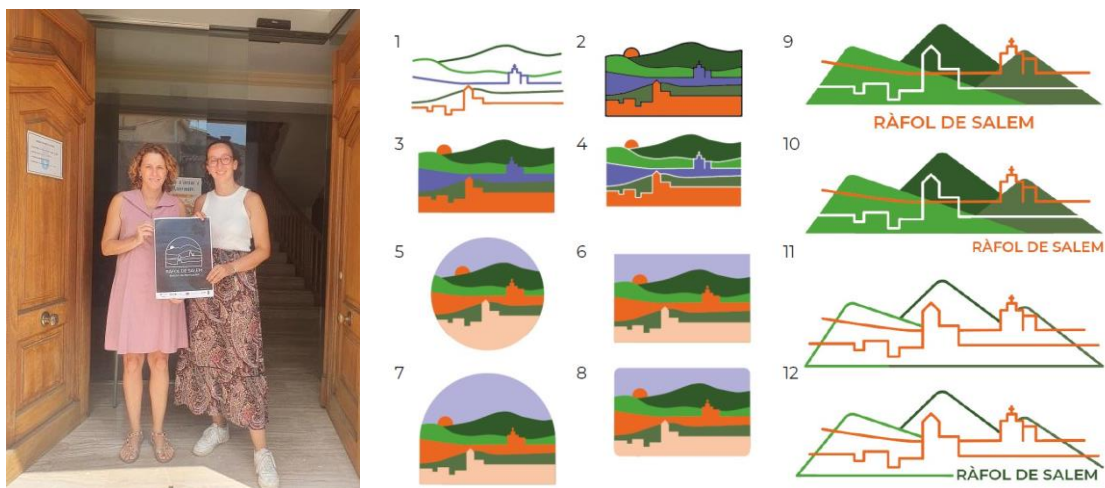
After getting to know the company, analyse its needs, product and market, proposals, prototyping and testing, Figure 7 shows the new packaging in comparison to the previous packaging (Figure 8) that it replaced.



**Figure 7.** Left. Front and back of the selected packaging prototype . **Figure 8.** Up and down right, wrappers replaced by those of figure 7

The second project was carried out by María Cos (Figure 9), who worked in the Ràfol de Salem Town Council to improve the town's brand and promote local tourism. She started by getting to know the history of the town, its traditions, customs, festivities, gastronomy, places of worship and everything that could be of interest to be able to transmit the feeling of the town and everything it has to offer to tourists. With this approach, she worked side by side with the mayor, Carolina Mengual, the town hall staff and with the valuable and useful information from the residents of the town to define a brand that the town could identify with at the same time as a way of drawing in tourists.

Their general proposals started from a representative view of the town that was visible from the Chapel (Figure 10).



**Figure 9.** Left. Carolina Mengual, Mayor of Ràfol de Salem with María Cos, the second scholarship student for the town brand redesign project. **Figure 10.** Right. Initial proposals for a representative brand of Ràfol de Salem.

These views were then narrowed down to what could be seen from the Chapel Arch itself (Figure 11), generating a series of images (Figure 12) before selecting Figure 13 as the definitive image, to show what is intended to be recognised as "The balcony of Benicadell".



**Figure 11.** Left. View from the Chapel Arch in Ràfol de Salem . **Figure 12.** Centre. Image proposals starting from the view from the Chapel Arch. **Figure 13.** Right. Proposal selected as the town brand

Likewise, other secondary logos were worked on to reinforce each of the activities that tourists can do when visiting the town. One of the proposals can be seen in **Figure 14.**



**Figure 14.** Proposal for secondary logos of activities in Ràfol de Salem.

Finally, work was also done on stationery and merchandising proposals, with the aim of unifying the brand visible to tourists and in communications from the town hall (Figure 15).



**Figure 15.** Mock-ups of stationery material and towels belonging to part of the projected merchandising.

RuralYU, a project which aims to promote rural life, has managed and reviewed the proper functioning of the project with an eye on rolling out this idea in other towns in the future. The



project is also being publicised on social networks and at talks to give depopulation the voice it needs.

The team has disseminated the evolution of the project on social networks such as the YUDesign Instagram account, <https://instagram.com/yudesignupv>, and the new Instagram profile created for the project, generated as a result of the new line of work, [https://www.instagram.com/ruralyu\\_upv](https://www.instagram.com/ruralyu_upv), recounting the story from its beginnings to the present and going through all the intermediate steps in which they have been involved. In addition, the progress of the project has been detailed month by month, on the RuralYU post that the members of the team have organised. The team has uploaded an explanatory video for each month that shows the phases of the projects and is accompanied by other short videos containing a compilation of images or videos made when they visited the project, (Figure 16).



**Figure 16.** Left. Work day at Ráfol in Salem between members of YUDesign, the Town Council and the company Anel. **Figure 17.** Centre. Poster of the Conference “Education and Depopulation. Proposals and experiences” to which YUDesign was invited to present RuralYU. **Figure 18.** Right. Representatives of the team in the conference “Education and Depopulation. Proposals and experiences”.

Thanks to all this diffusion, the RuralYU team was invited to the Conference "Education and Depopulation. Proposals and experiences", (Figures 17 y 18), held in Beniarres on April 28 and organized by the General Directorate of the Valencian Anti-Depopulation Agency and the Cátedra AVANT. During the day, the project and the expectations for the future were explained, generating

a positive impact among the attendees and inspiring other towns at risk of depopulation to join the initiative. It has also been observed that the number of students who are interested in rural development and social innovation is increasing within YUDesign, extrapolating this interest to other schools such as the E.T.S of Agronomic and Rural Engineering, and weaving an increasingly large web of students and teachers eager to get involved in these types of real actions to offer tangible development alternatives, thus aligning with SDG 17.

## 5. Conclusions

The project was extremely well received by the town and not only by the people we were directly involved with, such as the company and the town hall, but also by the townspeople who felt they participated in the dynamic; they felt motivated, involved and enthusiastic and did everything they could to help when they saw that these young people were committed to looking for a way to maintain rural life and using their professional expertise for the benefit of the population. This experience can be replicated either through private enterprise or by the Town Councils as substantial improvements have been made in the image of both entities.

For this experience carried out *in situ* to be extrapolated to other projects there must be a professional and economic synergy between all the collaborating parties. This will enable the analysis of the needs to be resolved, the means available and the specification of the work requirements. These projects have an associated economic commitment, which in this case, must be assumed by the local councils so that the project would only be viable with this commitment. Likewise, it is essential to work with the actors who work directly against depopulation, such as the Anti-Population Agencies and the Local Development Agents (ADL), who are the ones who know the location and can assess the viability of new projects, as our case.

The limitations encountered in the development of the work, and which can be considered for future experiences, have been those typical of a rural environment at risk of depopulation: total dependence on vehicles associated with a scarce public transport service; slower internet than we are used to, although functional for the daily development of the work; scarcity of food shops, having to travel to nearby towns to do the shopping; absence of young people, and although we tried to reduce the impact by sending two students together, they noticed a lot the coexistence with



an ageing population; reduced possibility of printing professional work, and when it was possible it was too expensive, which meant that on two occasions we had to use the school's infrastructure and take it or send it; leisure activities limited to nature, which although of great interest, at times made them lengthy for leisure spaces related to the cultural and recreational framework and the absence of bank ATMs, a fact that they made up for with good financial foresight.

This *bottom up* experience of social and educational innovation empowers students, placing them, during their time at university, in a position of value before a transforming society (Llopis-Albert et al., 2022). From a teaching perspective, this real learning- action approach outside the classroom, carried out with most second-year students, generates many possibilities for training and academic collaboration. And this is the truly innovative thing, since students and mentor teachers are acting as directors of a real project, directing other students to carry out the project, involving partners and the prospect of university engagement (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2020). This role they have taken on has dramatically increased their motivation to learn, improved their academic results and generated a sociable feeling among peers, in addition to the evidence that a spirit of intrapreneurship benefits not only the student environment itself but the group of members that make up the institution (Deprez et al., 2018), in this case the UPV.

As the project has developed, students have discovered the importance of general, specific and transversal skills, which are the ones which have been especially enhanced and which will be so necessary in their future professions. Among them we highlight analytical, critical, creative, practical and deliberative thinking; entrepreneurship; the ability to innovate; continuous learning; problem solving; decision-making; time management; the planning and management of a project; teamwork; self-motivation and creativity, (Llopis-Albert et al., 2021).

Finally, three key aspects in the development of the project are worth highlighting. First, leadership. All members have assumed roles with responsibilities, acting as natural leaders at decisive moments. Secondly, the figure of the mentor, as an academic guide, mediator between the different participating agents and generator of a healthy, entrepreneurial, and productive environment (Latvia et al., 2012). And thirdly, and lastly, the spirit of work and sacrifice, which has been subsequently rewarded by assuming responsibility in the planning, development, monitoring and achievement of the project, by becoming tutors of their own colleagues.

**Acknowledgements:** Cátedra AVANT, Fundación IVIFA, CCD-UPV, ETSID, Papas Anel y Ayuntamiento del Ràfol de Salem.

**Author Contributions:** Challenge participation, Project ideation, Conceptualization, Project definition, Methodology, Winners of the challenge, Rural contacts, Evaluation, Communication: I.B., R.G., I.M., V.O., P.S., P.T. and B.S.; Social media: I.B., R.G., I.M., V.O., P.T.; Implementation in the village: G.G. and M.C.; Director, scholarship tutor and supervisor of the project: B.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This project was funded by the Prize of the Project Lab 2021, of the Fundación Vodafone, within the framework of the GLOBAL CHANGE, IVIFA Foundation and the Town hall of Ràfol del Salem.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Canal Fundación Vodafone España. (24 de marzo de 2021). Gran Final Project Lab 2021. [Archivo de Vídeo]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6LuCGe6emo&t=4026s>
- Canal Fundación Vodafone España. (12 de abril de 2021). Project Lab: El videoclip. [Archivo de Vídeo]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yun9xAJy98E&t=2s>
- Canal Pedro Sáez Martínez. (19 de marzo de 2021). RuralLife4Good. Programa de becas alojamiento para la potenciación de los medios rurales. [Archivo de Vídeo]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6fek--HpFo>
- Deprez, J., Leroy, H., & Euwema, M. (2018). Three chronological steps toward encouraging intrapreneurship: Lessons from the Wehkamp case. *Business Horizons*, 61(1), 135–145. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2017.09.013>
- Huang L-Y., Yang Lin S-M. and Hsieh Y-J. (2021). Cultivation of Intrapreneurship: A Framework and Challenges. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12 (731990), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.731990>
- Llopis-Albert, C., Rubio, F., Zeng, S., Grima-Olmedo, J, Grima-Olmedo, C. (2022). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) applied to Mechanical Engineering. *Multidisciplinary Journal for Education, Social and Technological Sciences*, 9(1), 59-70. <https://doi.org/10.4995/muse.2022.17269>
- Llopis-Albert, C., Rubio, F.(2021). Methodology to evaluate transversal competences in the master's degree in industrial engineering based on a system of rubrics and indicators, 8(1), 30-44. <https://doi.org/10.4995/muse.2021.15244>
- Maslo I., Fernández González M. J. (2012). The central role of educational leadership for developing students' intrapreneurship attitudes in Higher education settings: a case study from Latvia. *International Conference Entrepreneurship Education - A Priority for the Higher Education Institutions* (pp.169-172). Editors: C. Martin, E. Druica. ISBN 978-88-7587-656-2 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236333005\\_The\\_central\\_role\\_of\\_educational\\_leadership\\_f\\_or\\_developing\\_students\\_intrapreneurship\\_attitudes\\_in\\_Higher\\_education\\_settings](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236333005_The_central_role_of_educational_leadership_f_or_developing_students_intrapreneurship_attitudes_in_Higher_education_settings)
- Pérez-Sánchez, M., Díaz-Madroñero, M., Mula, J., Sanchis, R. (2020). The sustainable development goals (SDGs) applied to higher education. a project-based learning proposal integrated with the SDGs in bachelor degrees at the campus Alcoy (UPV). *EDULEARN20 Proceedings, 12th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies Online Conference, IATED*, 6-7 July, 2020. ISBN: 978-84-09-17979-4, pages 3995-4005. <https://doi.org/10.21125/edulearn.2020>

*Sáiz et al. (2023)*

Mult. J. Edu. Soc & Tec. Sci. (2023), 10(1), 36-50. <https://doi.org/10.4995/muse.2023.19113>