

# MERLIN



## Deliverable D5.3 – MERLIN Academy (final version)

[www.project-merlin.eu](http://www.project-merlin.eu)

# MEDISIN



## Imprint

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## MERLIN Key messages

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- 1. The MERLIN Academy offers a unique, practice-oriented online learning platform focused on freshwater and wetland restoration, combining scientific knowledge with real-world experience.**
- 2. Its four key components – Learning Modules, Knowledge Centre, Webinars and Podcasts – provide modular, flexible and accessible training tailored to diverse stakeholder groups across Europe and beyond.**
- 3. Developed under EU funding, the Academy is grounded in expert-led content and includes contributions from researchers, practitioners, and policy specialists involved in the MERLIN project.**
- 4. Three Learning Modules have been fully launched, with more in development. Each module includes expert videos, quizzes, and further reading, leading to a MERLIN certificate upon completion.**
- 5. The Knowledge Centre hosts over 220 resources, offering curated access to tools, publications and guidelines relevant to Nature-based Solutions and freshwater restoration practices.**
- 6. Webinars and podcasts enrich the learning experience with insights from practitioners and scientists, while also ensuring outreach and visibility across broader audiences.**
- 7. The Academy was designed to outlive the MERLIN project, with minimal maintenance needs, a scalable platform (Thinkific) and openness to future content from new projects or partners.**
- 8. A sustainability plan has been developed, offering strategic and financial pathways for continuation, including monetisation via course fees and institutional partnerships.**

## MERLIN Executive Summary

The MERLIN Academy is a key outcome of the EU-funded MERLIN project, created to support the mainstreaming and upscaling of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) for freshwater and wetland restoration across Europe. More than just a project deliverable, the Academy has been designed as a long-term, flexible, and scalable online learning environment – one that equips a wide range of stakeholders with the knowledge, tools, and confidence needed to implement restoration practices aligned with major policy goals, including the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the Green Deal, and the Nature Restoration Regulation.

### **Purpose and Structure**

The MERLIN Academy offers four integrated components:

- **Learning Modules** – Self-paced, expert-led courses combining short video lectures, readings, and quizzes to support structured and practical learning.
- **Knowledge Centre** – A searchable repository of over 220 curated resources, including scientific papers, guidance documents, policy briefs, and tools.
- **Webinars** – Live-recorded, moderated sessions with leading researchers and practitioners, available on-demand to support asynchronous learning.
- **Podcasts** – Engaging audio interviews that share diverse restoration stories and lessons learned from across Europe.

The Academy's central aim is to **build capacity in freshwater ecosystem restoration** by providing training that is:

- **scientifically rigorous** yet practical and accessible
- **modular and flexible**, allowing learners to engage at their own pace
- **relevant to real-world challenges**, drawing on the knowledge generated within MERLIN's extensive network of scientists and practitioners

### **Learning Modules**

To date, three comprehensive Learning Modules have been developed:

- **Module 1:** Implementing and evidencing freshwater and wetland restoration.
- **Module 2:** Stakeholder engagement and governance in freshwater and wetland restoration.

- **Module 3:** Economics and Financing of Restoration of freshwater and wetland restoration.

Each module includes multiple subtopics. Upon completion, learners receive a **MERLIN Academy Certificate**, which reflects the depth of expert involvement and quality assurance embedded in the course design.

### **Target Audience and Accessibility**

The MERLIN Academy was built for a diverse target audience, including:

- restoration practitioners and project managers
- professionals from water agencies, NGOs, and consultancies
- early-career scientists and students
- policy makers and planners
- interested members of civil society

Its **self-paced and free-to-access structure** lowers the barrier for participation and responds to the time constraints and varying expertise levels of these different groups. Subtitles in multiple languages are planned to improve accessibility across regions.

### **Platform and Technical Approach**

The Academy is hosted on Thinkific, a widely-used online learning platform offering a user-friendly interface, progress tracking, certificate generation, and integrated quizzes. The platform's low operational cost ensures that the Academy can remain online and accessible even after the MERLIN project ends. This infrastructure supports not only the current modules but allows for easy integration of new courses and content from future projects.

The Knowledge Centre was developed using Oppla's data portal technology, enabling resource filtering by type, scale, keywords, and target audience. This ensures structured, user-friendly access to restoration knowledge and supports long-term knowledge sharing within and beyond the MERLIN consortium.

### **Community and Dissemination**

The Academy has already reached **over 330 registered users**, and each new module release has been accompanied by **visual campaigns** on social media and partner networks. Webinars and podcasts extend its reach, while postcards and other promotional materials help maintain visibility in academic, policy, and practitioner circles.

### ***Designed for Continuity***

Unlike many project-based outputs, the MERLIN Academy has been deliberately designed to outlive the MERLIN project. The Learning Modules will remain publicly accessible on Thinkific, requiring only modest maintenance costs. The platform is open for use by **other EU and national projects**, allowing new content to be co-branded and added over time.

To support long-term sustainability, a dedicated **business plan** has been developed (see part B). This outlines two main paths for continuation:

- integration into future EU-funded projects, supported by institutions such as BOKU and UDE
- monetisation through course fees, certification services, or targeted partnerships

### ***Conclusion***

The MERLIN Academy is a **model for high-impact, science-based online education** on freshwater and wetland restoration. It reflects the collaborative strength of the MERLIN project, the dedication of its expert contributors, and the growing demand for capacity building in support of Europe's restoration goals.

Its modular structure, strong foundation, and open-access ethos position it as a **lasting legacy of the MERLIN project** and a key enabler for nature-based restoration far into the future.

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## Introduction

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The MERLIN project seeks to catalyse the upscaling of freshwater restoration across Europe through science-based, practice-oriented approaches. Workpackage 5 focuses on capacity building, training, and outreach. As part of WP5, the MERLIN Academy was developed to transfer knowledge and equip stakeholders with the tools and inspiration needed to implement restoration based on Nature-based Solutions (NbS).

The MERLIN Academy is designed as an online learning platform helping to make freshwater and wetland restoration knowledge widely accessible. The Academy provides targeted, self-paced training that combines scientific evidence with practical experience (i.e. the Learning Modules) as well as extensive background information tailored to the needs of diverse stakeholder groups (i.e. the Knowledge Centre, the webinars and podcasts).

The Academy was developed in recognition of several key challenges in the restoration field:

- A growing demand for Nature-based Solutions that is not always matched by practitioner knowledge.
- The need for accessible and flexible training formats that suit busy professionals.
- The importance of stakeholder engagement and governance in achieving lasting restoration outcomes.
- The value of peer learning, real-world examples, and storytelling in building trust and confidence in NbS.

Within the MERLIN project, the Academy serves as a channel for dissemination – helping MERLIN scientists and project partners to share their knowledge, tools, and key findings of the project with a broader, practice-oriented audience.

The MERLIN Academy does not aim to replace formal education or technical training, but to complement it by offering practice-oriented content, modular learning pathways, and inspiration from across Europe. In this way, it contributes to MERLIN's overarching goal to support the mainstreaming of NbS and empower people to take action for freshwater ecosystem recovery.

This Deliverable is divided into two parts: part A describes the structure, design and content of the Academy, part B covers the sustainability plan.

## Part A: structure, design and content of the MERLIN Academy

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### 1 Objectives and target audience

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#### 1.1 Learning objectives of the Academy

The MERLIN Academy is designed to build the capacity of restoration practitioners, policy makers, students, and civil society actors to plan, implement, and scale up effective freshwater and wetland restoration.

The Academy's Learning Modules guide participants through the key dimensions of restoration practice – from planning and governance to financing and monitoring. Together, they aim to:

- Understand the policy landscape that guides freshwater restoration in Europe, including key instruments such as the EU Green Deal or the Nature Restoration Law. Learners gain insight into how these frameworks shape restoration priorities and create enabling conditions for action.
- Develop practical skills to plan and implement restoration projects at various scales with a focus on upscaling efforts and integrating restoration into landscape-level strategies.
- Design and apply robust monitoring approaches, using a variety of tools to assess ecological, hydrological, and socio-economic outcomes. This includes understanding how to track progress, benchmark success, and adaptively manage restoration interventions.
- Assess the broader impacts of restoration, particularly how it contributes to environmental and socio-economic objectives such as biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, water quality improvement, and community resilience.
- Engage with stakeholders effectively, recognising the importance of inclusive governance in ensuring long-term restoration success. Learners are introduced to stakeholder identification, mapping, and engagement tools such as Value Chain Analysis and the ladder of participation and are encouraged to reflect on real-world examples.

- Apply key concepts such as mainstreaming, upscaling, and co-benefits in the context of restoration planning, governance and communication, all central to ensuring that NbS become embedded in policy and practice.
- Navigate institutional settings and policy frameworks to build or adapt cross-sectoral partnerships, address implementation barriers, and identify opportunities for collaboration.
- Explore innovative financing options, with a particular focus on identifying and accessing private-sector funding. Learners are guided in developing tailored financing strategies that reflect the needs and contexts of their restoration projects.

Overall, the MERLIN Academy offers an integrated learning journey that supports the practical implementation of NbS and empowers participants to become active agents of ecological and societal transformation.

In addition to the Learning Modules, the MERLIN Academy includes three complementary elements that broaden its reach and allow to deepen the knowledge:

- The Knowledge Centre is a curated, open-access library of reports, tools, guidance documents, and scientific publications relevant to freshwater restoration and NbS.
- A series of expert webinars, featuring practitioners and researchers from across Europe, offering insights into emerging challenges, successful case studies, and lessons learned.
- The MERLIN Podcast, which brings restoration stories to life through personal conversations with stakeholders, innovators, and project partners.

These components create a multi-format learning environment that supports not only the transfer of knowledge, but also the exchange of ideas and inspiration across Europe's restoration community. By integrating academic expertise, on-the-ground practice, and stakeholder voices, the MERLIN Academy contributes to the broader mission of the MERLIN project.

## 1.2 Who the Academy is for

The MERLIN Academy was designed with a diverse set of stakeholders in mind, all of whom play a role in shaping, supporting, or implementing freshwater and wetland restoration across Europe:

- **Restoration practitioners, project managers and planning consultancies:** These groups are directly involved in planning and implementing restoration projects in rivers, wetlands, and floodplains. The Academy supports them with tools, case studies, and strategic approaches that can be applied to real-world contexts and scaled across landscapes.
- **Water management agencies:** Working at the interface of policy and implementation, these stakeholders need to integrate Nature-based Solutions (NbS) into broader land and water management plans. The Academy provides them with a policy-informed foundation, governance strategies, and monitoring guidance to support their decision-making.
- **Non-governmental organisations (NGOs):** NGOs often serve as advocates, facilitators or project partners in restoration. The Academy offers them accessible content to deepen their technical understanding, strengthen stakeholder engagement skills, and build their capacity to influence restoration agendas.
- **Students and early-career scientists:** To foster the next generation of restoration professionals, the Academy provides students and young researchers with a structured entry point into the world of NbS, policy frameworks, and applied restoration, bridging academic knowledge and field-based practice.
- **Community-based initiatives and the public:** Recognising the importance of local ownership and public engagement, the Academy is also open to community members, volunteers, and activists who are interested in learning more about how to support restoration in their regions. Through short, accessible videos and real-life examples, the Academy encourages broader societal involvement.

The MERLIN Academy recognises that learners come with different levels of expertise, time availability, and professional goals. To address this, it offers flexible, self-paced learning through short, modular video units, practical tools, and real-world examples. Users are encouraged to engage with the content that is most relevant to their interests or current work, without pressure to complete every module in full. For those who wish to demonstrate their learning progress, a certificate of completion is available at the end of each module. This flexibility ensures that the Academy can serve as both an in-depth training resource and a just-in-time knowledge hub for a wide range of users.

### 1.3 How needs were assessed (e.g. through stakeholder engagement or internal planning).

The development of the MERLIN Academy was guided by a strong emphasis on stakeholder needs and user relevance. To ensure that the Academy would respond to the expectations and challenges of those working in freshwater and wetland restoration, two targeted needs assessments were carried out at different stages of the project.

#### Stakeholder questionnaire during proposal development

During the proposal writing phase, a structured stakeholder questionnaire was distributed across the networks of the MERLIN consortium. The aim was to identify knowledge gaps, training priorities, and preferred learning formats among key actors in restoration, including practitioners, policy makers, consultants, NGOs, and academics. The feedback highlighted a strong demand for practical, applied content on Nature-based Solutions, financing strategies, and stakeholder engagement.

#### MERLIN Academy survey during early implementation

A second questionnaire was conducted shortly after the Nature Restoration Law was adopted in July 2023 by the European Parliament, aiming at refining the Academy's design and content based on more detailed user expectations. This survey confirmed the need for modular content and emphasised the importance of integrating case studies, showcasing real-world applications, and providing links to useful tools and resources. It also reinforced the importance of stakeholder engagement, institutional context, and policy alignment as core learning themes.

The results of both surveys were directly translated into the Academy's structure and content strategy. The modular design, flexible access and self-paced learning reflect the feedback gathered from stakeholders.

The second questionnaire responses highlighted a clear interest in further developing tailored e-learning resources specifically addressing the Nature Restoration Law (NRL). Respondents expressed a preference for courses that combine pre-recorded content with live sessions, allowing for more interactive and engaging learning experiences. Additionally, there was a strong demand for national language subtitles to improve accessibility and comprehension across different European countries. Most respondents also indicated a willingness to pay for such courses, with many suggesting that a price not exceeding €200 per course would be acceptable.

## 2 Academy structure and components

The MERLIN Academy was developed as a modular, multi-format learning environment to support a wide range of users involved in freshwater and wetland restoration. All parts are freely available and accessible online at: <https://project-merlin.eu/academy.html>

The Academy consists of four main components:

- **Learning Modules:** Structured, self-paced online courses that address core themes of restoration practice, such as implementing Nature-based Solutions (NbS), stakeholder engagement, financing, and real-world case studies. Each module is divided into focused sub-modules, often consisting of short videos, accompanied by quizzes, optional readings, and additional resources.
- **Knowledge Centre:** A curated and regularly updated repository of key resources, including tools, guidance documents, reports, and publications related to freshwater restoration and NbS implementation.
- **Webinars:** Recorded sessions of the MERLIN webinar series, featuring practitioners, researchers, and policy makers sharing insights, challenges, and lessons learned from restoration projects across Europe.
- **Podcasts:** Audio conversations that provide informal, real-world perspectives from the field, highlighting practical experiences and personal stories from those engaged in ecological restoration.

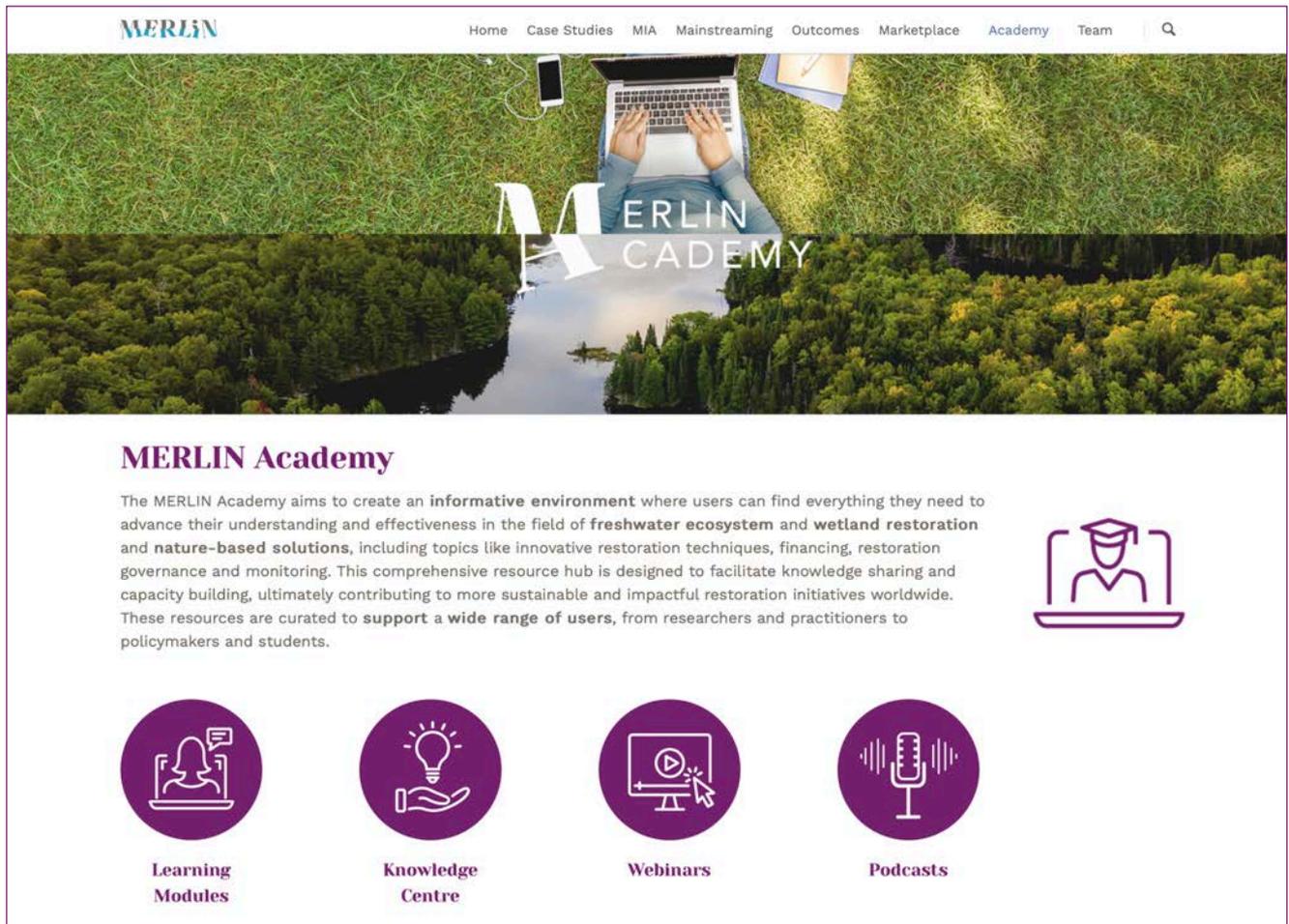


Figure 1: MERLIN Academy website and structure.

### 3 Development process

The development of the MERLIN Academy started with the beginning of the project and is still ongoing. The process was collaborative and iterative involving all project partners.

#### 3.1 Phases of development and responsibilities

The development followed a structured timeline with overlapping phases:

- **Initial design and stakeholder consultation** (2021): Based on stakeholder input from project proposal development as well as the consultation of the Steering Committee (consisting of the Workpackage leads and co-leads), the core structure (including the Learning Modules, the Knowledge Centre, the webinars and podcasts) and thematic focus of the Academy were defined based on the expected outcomes of WPs 1 to 4.
- **Webinar and podcast production** (2021 – ongoing): The first webinar was recorded in December 2021 and continued on a monthly base. The first podcast was recorded in July 2022.
- **Learning Modules content planning** (2022 – 2025): Initially four modules were planned, each reflecting one specific core component of MERLIN outcomes. With each WP an overview of the content was generated and module managers were nominated. These module managers were then responsible for elaborating on the learning objectives, scripts, and video content together with the involved MERLIN partners (see below).
- **Video production and editing** (2022 – ongoing): To optimise the video production and help partners with the recording, detailed guidelines were produced to streamline the work and outcomes. Video editing was carried out in parallel.
- **Learning platform configuration** (2022 – ongoing): Configuration of the Learning Platform (Thinkific) was carried out in parallel to the content development and production.

- **Pilot testing and adjustments** (beginning of 2024): The first module (Module 3) was first tested internally within the MERLIN consortium to provide feedback on structure, clarity, and usability. Additionally, an external didactic expert was consulted to evaluate this first module of the Academy. Revisions were implemented accordingly.
- **Launch and dissemination** (mid 2024 – ongoing): Module 3 of the Academy was published in July 2024, followed by Module 1 in December 2024 and Module 2 in September 2025. Each launch was integrated into MERLIN’s communication and outreach activities with specific features on social media.
- **Ongoing development:** Additional modules (Modules 4 and 5), podcasts, and webinars are continuously added.

### Content creation of the Learning Modules

For each module a coordination team was assigned, who designed the overall concept and defined the learning outcomes. The coordinators got in contact with MERLIN researchers and Case Study leaders asking them for specific contributions. These contributors and thematic experts developed scripts for their videos, created questions for the accompanying quizzes and collected further reading information. Videos were either recorded with the help of public relation departments of the individual institutions or by the contributors themselves following the extensive instructions.

Videos were then quality controlled by the WP Academy leaders and the technical editor. Editing, subtitling, and formatting of all visual content was handled by the technical editor.

Implementation was carried out by platform administrator who managed course setup, user experience, and updates in Thinkific.

Table 1: Responsible persons of the MERLIN Academy.

Tasks	Responsible persons
<b>Overall Academy coordination</b>	Astrid Schmidt-Kloiber (BOKU), Sebastian Birk (UDE)
<b>Learning Platform</b>	
Technical coordination and editing	Joselyn Arreaga Espin (BOKU)
Platform administration & implementation	Astrid Schmidt-Kloiber (BOKU)
Module 1 coordination	Laurence Carvalho (NIVA), Erica Zaja (UK CEH)
Module 2 coordination	Kirsty Blackstock (JHI), Kerry Waylen (JHI), Jianyu Chen (JHI)
Module 3 coordination	Josselin Rouillard (Ecologic Institute), Gerardo Anzaldua (Ecologic Institute)
Module 4 coordination	Annette Battrup-Pedersen (AU)
Module 5 coordination	Astrid Schmidt-Kloiber (BOKU), Joselyn Arreaga Espin (BOKU)
<b>Knowledge Centre</b>	
Knowledge Centre coordination & content	Astrid Schmidt-Kloiber (BOKU), Joselyn Arreaga Espin (BOKU)
Knowledge administration & implementation	Paul Mahony (Oppla), Jonathan Porter (Oppla), Mike Shaw (Oppla)
<b>Webinars</b>	
Webinar coordination	Astrid Schmidt-Kloiber (BOKU)
Webinar recording and implementation	Jörg Strackbein (UDE)
<b>Podcasts</b>	
Podcast coordination and production	Rob St. John
Podcast implementation	Jörg Strackbein (UDE)

## 3.2 Implementation and platforms used

The main access point of the MERLIN Academy is the MERLIN website at <https://project-merlin.eu/academy.html>

The Learning Modules are developed and implemented on Thinkific (<https://www.thinkific.com>), a dedicated online learning platform that provides a cost-effective, scalable, and user-friendly solution for course delivery. Thinkific supports a wide range of content formats, including videos, quizzes, and downloadable materials,

allowing for a structured and engaging learning experience. The platform also enables easy sign-up, progress tracking, learner analytics, and certificate issuance, which are essential for both learners and administrators. Its flexibility makes it suitable for both self-paced learning and instructor-led modules, and it requires minimal technical expertise for maintenance and content updates, making it an ideal choice for the MERLIN Academy.

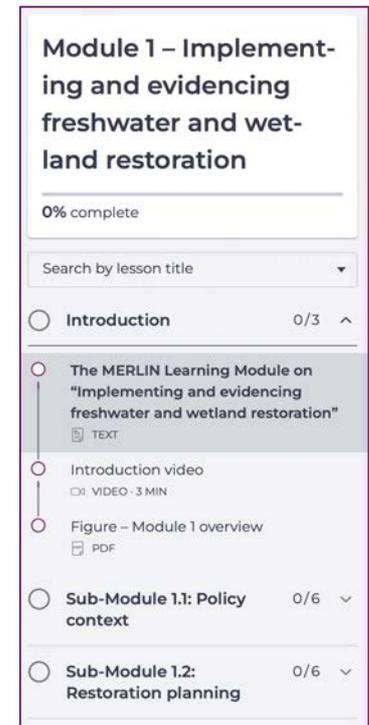


Figure 2: Progress tracking in the Thinkific Learning Platform.

The Knowledge Centre is built on the data portal technology developed by Oppla (<https://oppla.eu>), a well-established European platform for nature-based solutions. It is implemented directly on the Oppla website and tailored to meet the specific needs of the MERLIN project. The interface allows users to filter and search resources using adapted metadata categories such as resource type, resource scale, keywords, and target audience, ensuring efficient access to relevant information. The underlying Oppla infrastructure ensures long-term sustainability, interoperability, and integration with other knowledge-sharing initiatives across Europe.

The Webinars are implemented on the MERLIN website and are also available on the MERLIN YouTube channel ([https://www.youtube.com/@merlin\\_project](https://www.youtube.com/@merlin_project)). Additionally, relevant webinars are included into the Learning Modules.

The Podcasts are implemented on the MERLIN website and are also available on Apple podcasts, RSS.com or Spotify.

## 4 Learning Modules

This section of the MERLIN Academy provides an online learning platform that can be accessed by registered users any time and that enables interactive learning while tracking progress throughout the course. It is generally open to any interested person and is organised in different modules.

The MERLIN Academy includes three fully developed Learning Modules that cover key aspects of freshwater and wetland restoration. Each module is built around clear learning objectives and real-world relevance, and offers a combination of short videos, quizzes, and additional resources. Upon completing all courses within a module, participants receive a completion certificate issued by MERLIN.

Below is an overview of each module's structure and contributors.

All modules include:

- Introductory and thematic videos (of different total length)
- “Test your knowledge” quizzes in each sub-module
- Further reading resources for those who want depth
- Links to related MERLIN webinars and podcasts

MERLIN ACADEMY

HOME MERLIN WEBSITE ALL MODULES SIGN IN

## Welcome to the Learning Modules of the MERLIN Academy!

All you need to know about restoration and Nature-based Solutions in freshwaters and wetlands.

This part of the MERLIN Academy is an **online learning place** that can be accessed by **registered users** any time. It offers four different **interactive learning modules** and allows **keeping track of the learning progress** during their completion. While the MERLIN Academy is open to any interested person, it has been designed to address

- administration and managers
- restoration practitioners
- the scientific community with focus on students

MERLIN ACADEMY

HOME MERLIN WEBSITE ALL MODULES SIGN IN

## MERLIN Academy Learning Modules

**Module 1 – Implementing and evidencing freshwater and wetland restoration**

Course - 62 lessons

★ 5.0 (1 review)

In this Module you will learn about the philosophy of nature-based solutions, holistic restoration planning and holistic...

**Module 2 – Stakeholder engagement and governance in freshwater and wetland...**

Course - 57 lessons

★ 5.0 (1 review)

In this Module you will learn about stakeholder engagement, partnership working and governance to support...

**Module 3 – The economics and financing of freshwater and wetland restoration**

Course - 41 lessons

★ 5.0 (3 reviews)

In this Module you will learn everything about financing of nature-based solutions, from grant application to...

**Module 4 – Catchment-scale modelling of freshwater and wetland ecosystem services &...**

Course - 0 lessons

In this Module you will learn about catchment-scale modelling using different tools, how to find suitable data...

Figure 3: Entry page to the Learning Modules.

## 4.1 Module 1 – Implementing and evidencing freshwater and wetland restoration

### Learning outcomes

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After completing Module 1, learners will:

- be able to understand the latest policies, such as the EU Green Deal and the Nature Restoration Law, that guide freshwater restoration efforts.
- be able to develop skills to plan and scale up freshwater and wetland restoration projects at the basin-wide level.
- be equipped to design and implement effective monitoring programs using various tools to benchmark and track progress.
- gain the ability to assess the impacts of restoration on environmental and socio-economic goals.

### Structure

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The module is divided into the following sub-modules (including a quiz and a further reading list for each sub-module):

- Introduction: overview, intro video, module overview figure
- Sub-Module 1.1 – Policy context: concept of NbS, EU Green Deal, Nature Restoration Law
- Sub-Module 1.2 – Restoration planning: River Basin Management planning, national implementation, Regional Scalability Plans
- Sub-Module 1.3 – Monitoring restoration: theory of change, SMART targets, monitoring implementation, IUCN Self-Assessment Tool
- Sub-Module 1.4 – Monitoring impact: BACI design, monitoring context, benchmarking impact, EU Green Deal criteria
- Sub-Module 1.5 – Environmental criteria: biodiversity (quantity and condition), WFD ecological status, free-flowing rivers, climate regulation, climate resilience, zero pollution
- Sub-Module 1.6 – Social criteria: inclusive participation, health and wellbeing
- Sub-Module 1.7 – Economic sector criteria: farm to fork, sustainable energy, sustainable transport, circular economy, green growth
- Sub-Module 1.8 – Interested in more?: additional resources, relevant webinars and podcasts

In total the module contains 62 lessons with 1.5 hours of video content.

### Contributing experts

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- Laurence Carvalho, Norwegian Institute for Water Research: Module 1 manager
- Erica Zaja, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology: Module 1 manager
- Anna Bérczi-Siket, WWF Hungary
- Will Brownlie, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology
- Miriam Colls, University of the Basque Country
- Nina Drejerska, Warsaw University of Life Sciences
- Nadine Gerner, Emschergenossenschaft/Lippeverband Germany
- Mateusz Grygoruk, Warsaw University of Life Sciences
- Alhassan Ibrahim, James Hutton Institute Scotland
- Joanna Lynn Kemp, Norwegian Institute for Water Research
- Keith Matthews, James Hutton Institute Scotland
- Maria Ojanen, Finnish Environment Institute
- Ellis Penning, Deltares
- Laura Pott, University of Duisburg-Essen
- Axel Schwerk, Warsaw University of Life Sciences
- Daria Sikorska, Warsaw University of Life Sciences
- Pawel Trandziuk, Warsaw University of Life Sciences
- Jenny Williamson, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology



Figure 4: Overview of the different sub-modules in Module 1 of the MERLIN Academy.

Table 2: Videos of Module 1

Presenter	Video title
Erica Zaja	Introduction video
Joanna Lynn Kemp	Nature-based Solutions – concept and criteria
Anna Bérczi-Siket	EU Green Deal
Anna Bérczi-Siket	Nature Restoration Law
Ellis Penning	River Basin Management planning
Nadine Gerner	National implementation
Maria Ojanen	Regional Scalability Plans
Laura Pott	Theory of change
Laura Pott	SMART targets
Daria Sikorska	Monitoring implementation
Pawel Trandziuk	IUCN Self-Assessment Tool
Joanna Lynn Kemp	Monitoring design – BACI
Joanna Lynn Kemp	Monitoring context
Joanna Lynn Kemp	Benchmarking impact
Laura Pott	EU Green Deal criteria
Laurence Carvalho	Biodiversity – quantity and condition
Joanna Lynn Kemp	Biodiversity – WFD ecological status
Miriam Colls / Laurence Carvalho	Free-flowing rivers
Jennifer Williamson	Climate regulation – greenhouse gas emissions
Mateuez Grygoruk	Climate resilience – flood and drought
Will Brownlie	Zero pollution
Alhassan Ibrahim	Inclusive participation
Laurence Carvalho	Health and wellbeing

Presenter	Video title
Keith Matthews / Laurence Carvalho	Farm to fork
Axel Schwerk	Sustainable energy
Axel Schwerk	Sustainable transport
Nina Drejerska	Circular economy
Will Brownlie	Green growth

## 4.2 Module 2 – Stakeholder engagement and governance in freshwater and wetland restoration

### Learning outcomes

After completing Module 2, learners will:

- understand the importance of engaging diverse societal actors in planning and implementing nature restoration, including the rationale for such engagement.
- be able to apply key concepts such as Nature-based Solutions, mainstreaming, and upscaling in the context of stakeholder engagement and restoration planning.
- be able to identify, prioritise, and map stakeholders using tools such as stakeholder analysis, Value Chain Analysis, and the ladder of participation.
- be able to design inclusive engagement strategies that align stakeholder interests with restoration goals and are informed by real-world case studies.
- be able to navigate policy frameworks and institutional settings to build or adapt partnerships, addressing potential barriers and identifying opportunities to enable restoration.

### Structure

The module is divided into the following sub-modules (including a quiz and a further reading list for each sub-module):

- Introduction: overview, intro video, terminology, module figure
- Sub-Module 2.1 – Introducing key concepts and why they matter: mainstreaming & upscaling, IUCN Global Standard for NbS, types of NbS interventions, business as usual vs. broader thinking, role of restoration managers
- Sub-Module 2.2 – Thinking about who to engage: mix of stakeholders, people & resources, engaging non-environmentalist groups, Stakeholder Analysis Tool, Value Chain Analysis
- Sub-Module 2.3 – Considering how to engage: ladder of participation, value adding procedure for business, examples of business engagement, catchment examples (Tzipori, Forth)
- Sub-Module 2.4 – Connecting with the wider governance context: Nature Restoration Law, multiple policies, protected species and temporary nature, involvement of non-environmental policies, Tisza case study, partnership working, Forth case study
- Sub-Module 2.5 – Interested in more?: summary, additional resources, relevant webinars and podcasts

In total the module contains 57 lessons with 2 hours of video content.

### Contributing experts

- Kirsty Blackstock, James Hutton Institute Scotland: Module 2 manager
- Kerry Waylen, James Hutton Institute Scotland: Module 2 manager
- Jianyu Chen, James Hutton Institute Scotland: Module 2 manager
- Anna Bérczi-Siket, WWF Hungary
- Miriam Colls, University of the Basque Country
- Eva Hernandez Herrero, WWF Europe
- Lea Ilgeroth-Hiadzi, Naturland Germany
- Péter Kajner, WWF Hungary
- Svenja Karnatz, Emschergenossenschaft/Lippeverband Germany
- Tom Mitschi, Naturland Germany
- Charlotte Neary, Forth Rivers Trust
- Tomasz Okruszko, Warsaw University of Life Sciences
- Tal Ratner, Kishon River and Drainage Authority
- Andrea Samu, WWF Hungary
- Leonie Schulz, James Hutton Institute Scotland

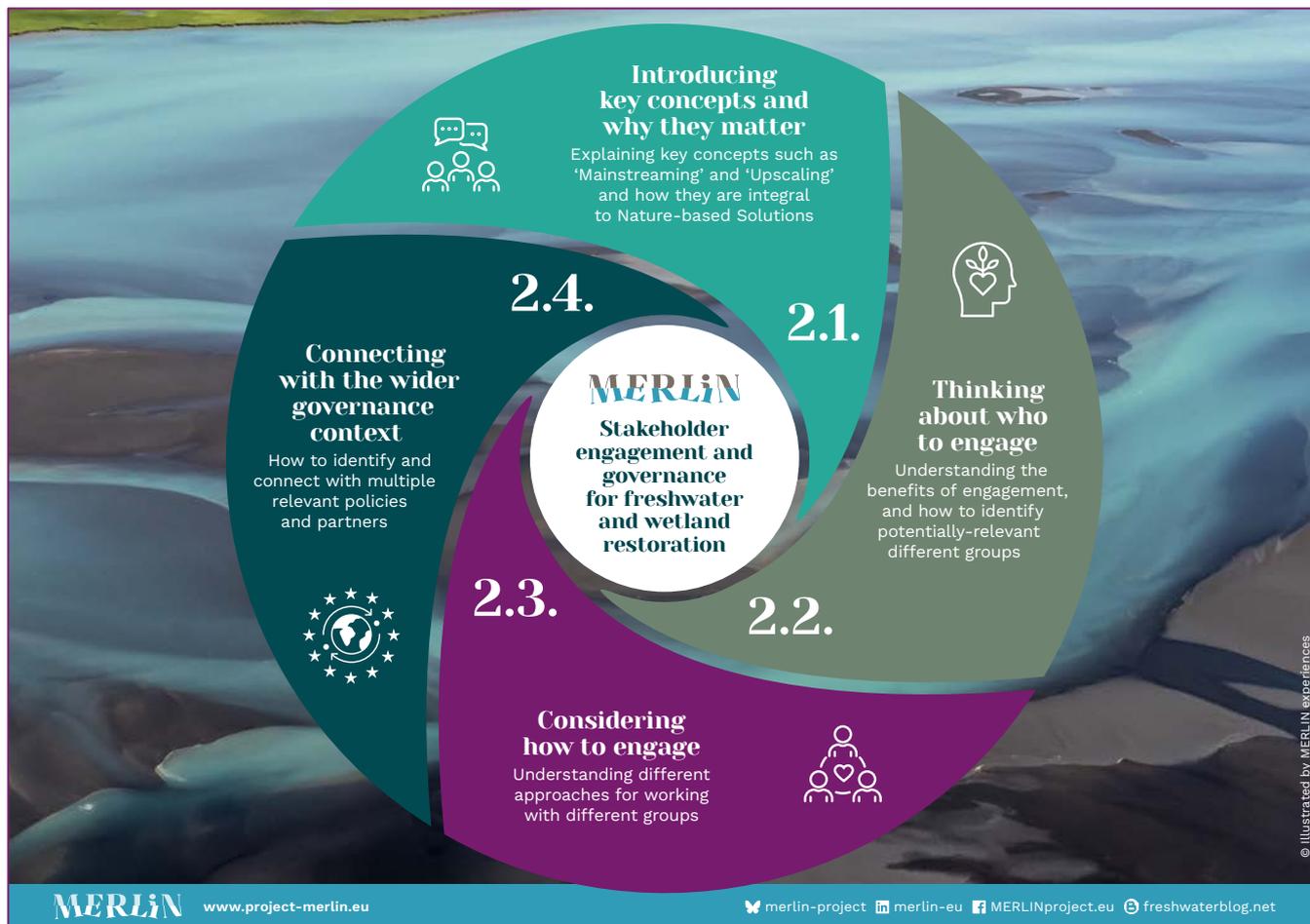


Figure 5: Overview of the different sub-modules in Module 2 of the MERLIN Academy.

Table 3: Videos of Module 2

Presenter	Video title
Kirsty Blackstock	Introduction video
Kerry Waylen	What do mainstreaming and upscaling mean?
Kerry Waylen	IUCN Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions
Kerry Waylen	Types of Nature-based Solutions interventions – example: MERLIN
Eva Hernández Herrero / Leonie Schulz	Business as usual vs. broader thinking
Eva Hernández Herrero / Leonie Schulz	Importance of NbS in broader stakeholder engagement
Eva Hernández Herrero / Leonie Schulz	Role of restoration managers
Andrea Samu	Look at the broader mix of stakeholders – Example: MERLIN Case Study 7b
Kerry Waylen	People and resources, expect the unexpected
Miriám Colls	The necessity of engaging non-environmentalist groups: MERLIN Case Study 02
Leonie Schulz	Introduction to the Stakeholder Analysis Tool
Jianyu Chen	Value Chain Analysis I & II
Tomasz Okruszko	Ladder of participation
Jianyu Chen	Value Chain Analysis – how restoration helps the value adding procedure for business
Tom Mitschi	Examples of business engagement using Value Chain Analysis
Tal Ratner	Tzipori catchment – MERLIN Case Study 15
Charlotte Neary	Forth catchment – MERLIN Case Study 17
Anna Bérczi-Siket	The EU Nature Restoration Law
Kirsty Blackstock	Why think about multiple policies?
Svenja Karnatz	Protected species and temporary nature
Kirsty Blackstock	Why involve non-environmental policies

Presenter	Video title
Péter Kajner	MERLIN Case Study 09: Tisza
Kerry Waylen	Introduction to partnership working
Charlotte Neary	Example Forth Rivers Trust and MERLIN Case Study 17

### 4.3 Module 3 – The economics and financing of freshwater and wetland restoration

#### Learning outcomes

After completing Module 3, learners will know:

- how to assess the suitability of different funding sources, in particular those arising from the private sector.
- how to develop financing solution for your restoration project.

#### Structure

The module is divided into the following sub-modules (including a quiz and a further reading list for each sub-module):

- Sub-Module 3.1 – General introduction: intro video, basic economics and financing terms
- Sub-Module 3.2 – The MERLIN Financial Planning Workflow: Pillar A (project plan & strategy), Pillar B (cost-benefit assessment), Pillar C (funding & revenue streams), Pillar D (developing a financial strategy)
- Sub-Module 3.3 – Off-the-Shelf Instruments: grants, crowdfunding, corporate donations, tourism/agriculture activities, guidance documents
- Sub-Module 3.4 – Interested in more?: additional resources, relevant webinars and podcasts

In total the module contains 41 lessons with 1 hour of video content.

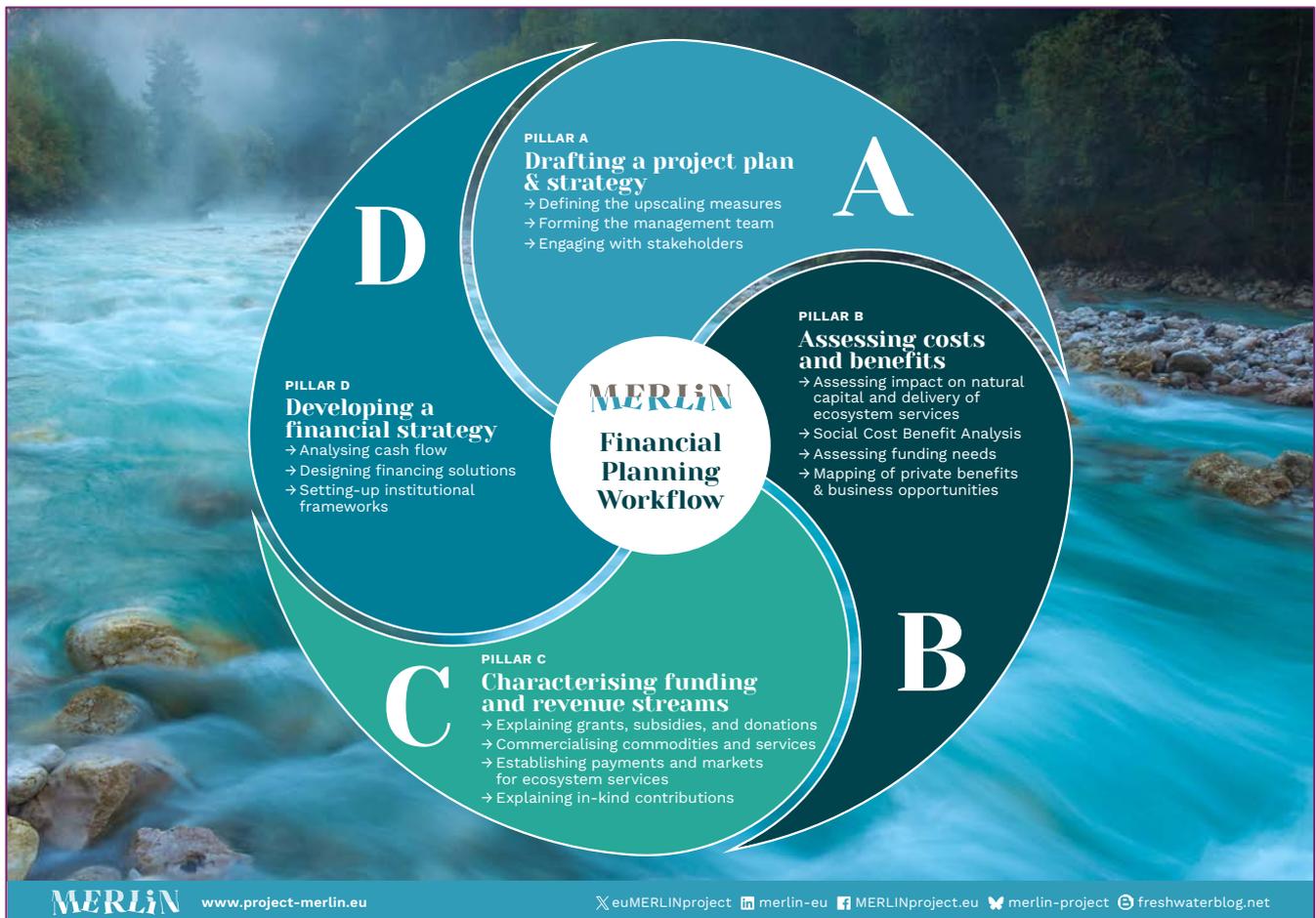


Figure 6: Overview of the different sub-modules in Module 3 of the MERLIN Academy.

## Contributing experts

- Josselin Rouillard, Ecologic Institute: Module 3 manager
- Gerardo Anzaldua, Ecologic Institute
- Esther Carmen, James Hutton Institute Scotland
- Yulia Demus, Connectology
- Sien Kok, Deltares
- Viviane Malveira Cavalcanti, Deltares
- Vladyslav Saviak, Connectology
- Levin Scholl, Ecologic Institute

Table 4: Videos of Module 3.

Presenter	Video title
Gerardo Anzaldua	Introduction video
Esther Carmen	Pillar A – Drafting a project plan & strategy – part 1 & 2
Sien Kok	Pillar B – Assessing costs and benefits
Viviane Cavalcanti	Pillar C – Characterising funding & revenue streams
Levin Scholl	Pillar D – Developing a financial strategy
Vladyslav Saviak	Introduction to the Off-the-Shelf Instruments
Connectology	Grants (animation video)
Connectology	Donation-based and reward-based crowdfunding campaigns (animation video)
Connectology	Corporate donations (animation video)
Connectology	Tourism and agriculture activities (animation video)

## 4.4 Module 4 – Catchment-scale modelling of freshwater and wetland ecosystem services & cost-benefits

Module 4 is currently under development, led by Annette Battrup-Pedersen (AU). It will focus on catchment-scale modelling of freshwater and wetland ecosystem services and Cost-Benefit Analyses, providing learners with tools and insights to support evidence-based planning and prioritisation.

This will be done by giving insights into the MERLIN web app, that is integrated into the WaterWebTools platform, providing European-wide maps illustrating the status, restoration needs, and potential of freshwater-related ecosystems. It also features a planning tool for conducting Cost-Benefit Analyses of restoration scenarios.

It is planned to release the module end of 2025 or early in 2026.

## 4.5 Module 5 – Case Study stories

Module 5 is currently under development. It will highlight case study stories from MERLIN pilot sites across Europe, using narrative-driven formats to share practical experiences, lessons learned, and local perspectives.

It is planned to release the module end of 2025 or early in 2026.

## 4.6 Certification

Upon successful completion of each Learning Module, participants receive a MERLIN Academy Certificate. While the certificate is issued under the name of the MERLIN Academy rather than a formal accrediting body, it carries considerable weight due to the high level of scientific expertise involved in the course development. Each module was created and reviewed by leading researchers and practitioners in freshwater and wetland restoration, with quizzes and assessments carefully designed to test applied knowledge. As such, the certificate serves as a credible recognition of specialised training and is well regarded within the environmental restoration community.

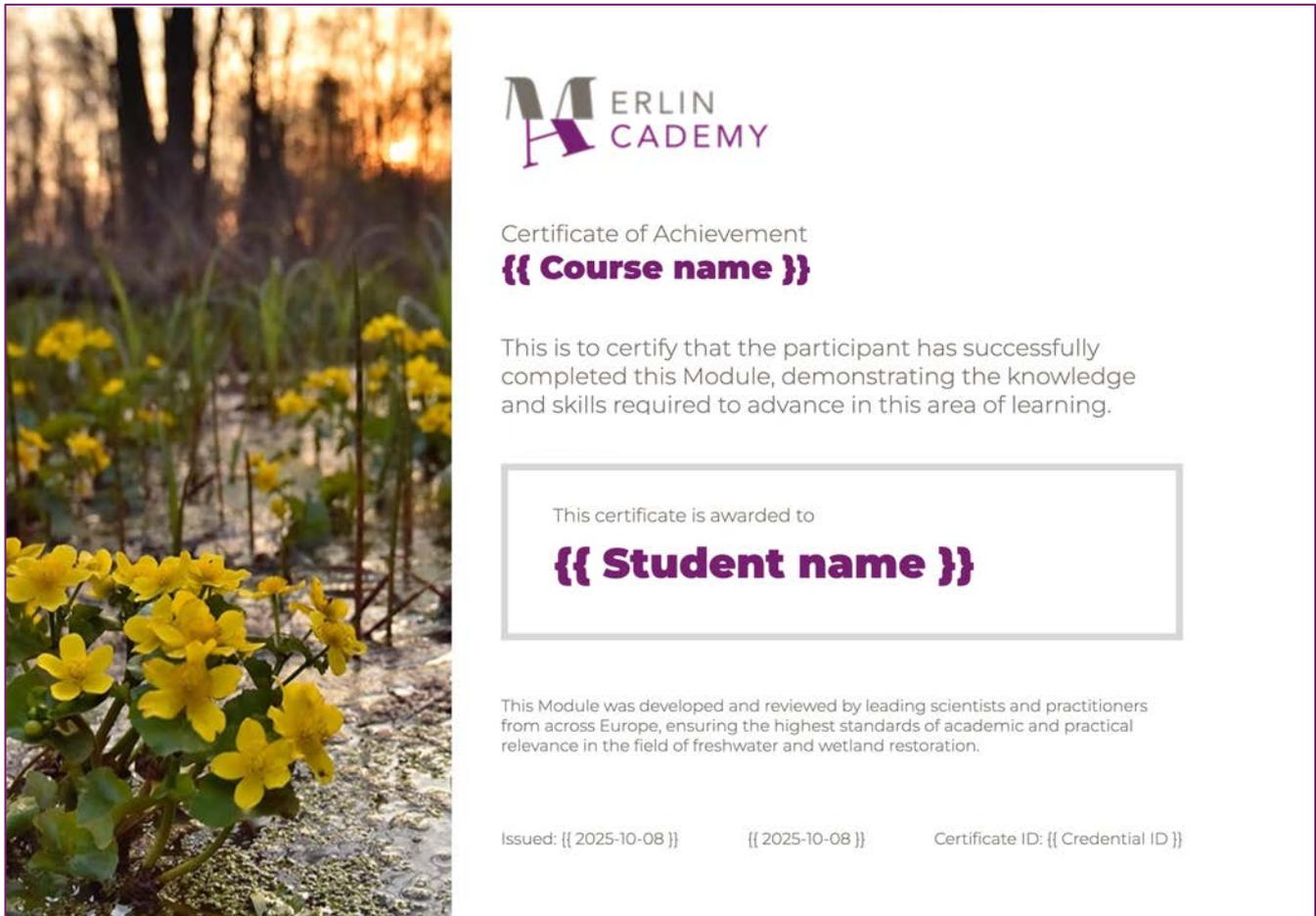


Figure 7: MERLIN Academy certificate.

## 4.7 User Statistics and engagement

As of now, the MERLIN Academy has attracted 346 registered users. These learners are distributed across the three main Learning Modules with 196 participants in Module 1, 28 in Module 2, and 94 in Module 3, while 39 users have registered but have not yet enrolled in any course. This indicates a solid level of initial interest and outreach. A first analysis to assess course completion rates and user progression across the modules reveals that approximately only 10 to 15% percent of registered users per module have completed the entire module.

To gain insight into learner behaviour and drop-out rates, a survey was conducted among registered users. Although the response rate was rather low, the most frequently cited reason for not completing a course was “lack of time”, followed by “having forgotten to return to the platform”. When asked how the Academy could better support their learning journey, users expressed strong interest in reminder emails and progress nudges to help them stay on track.

In terms of content, there was demand for more applied examples and case studies to complement the theoretical content and support real-world application of knowledge. Asked for new modules, the respondents indicated temporary Mediterranean rivers or application of citizen science in monitoring.

## 5 Knowledge Centre

This section of the MERLIN Academy hosts a collection of valuable resources, including scientific publications, manuals and state-of-the-art guidance documents. It also provides links to datasets, tools, websites and trainings courses, all related to the planning, implementation and financing of freshwater and wetland restoration and Nature-based Solutions.

The Knowledge Centre currently holds 220 resources that can be filtered according to 13 resource type categories (e.g. dataset, podcast, video, scientific publication etc.), resource scale (global, continental, national, local, regional), keywords (e.g. biodiversity, conservation, management, policy, etc.), target audience (e.g. administration, NGOs, interested public etc.) and language.

The Knowledge Centre remains open to contributions from MERLIN partners and the wider restoration community, supporting its continued growth as a shared and evolving resource.



Figure 8: The MERLIN Academy's Knowledge Centre.

## 6 Webinars

The webinars of the MERLIN Academy have been organised by WP5 coordinators from the very beginning of MERLIN with internal and external speakers featuring insights from researchers, policy makers, financial sector experts, and leaders of collaborative restoration projects. They covered various topics related to freshwater ecosystem restoration, including practical insights on carbon credits, Nature-based Solutions, landscape-level ecosystem restoration, and innovative restoration financing. Specific themes highlight restoration across sectors, such as agriculture's impact on rivers, the role of corporate funding, and legal frameworks like the EU Nature Restoration Law. These webinars also explore strategic monitoring, peatland restoration, and specific case studies (e.g. the Eddleston Water project).

The MERLIN webinars were always freely accessible to the public. They were moderated by Jan Sendzimir (BOKU), Sebastian Birk (UDE), Daniel Hering (UDE), or Astrid Schmidt-Kloiber (BOKU), and were attended by up to 120 participants each. All sessions were recorded and are now available not only through the MERLIN Academy, but also via the MERLIN website and YouTube channel, allowing for asynchronous viewing and broader distribution.

There will be a few more webinars until the end of the project dealing with related EU projects, the MERLIN Academy as well as MERLIN results.

Table 5: MERLIN webinar presenters and their topics.

No	Presenter(s)	Title
1	Sien Kok (Deltares) & Sanja Prokrajac (WWF)	Why freshwater ecosystem restoration makes (economic) sense
2	Josef Settele (UFZ)	Biodiversity and ecosystem services: insights from IPBES and IPCC intergovernmental processes
3	Frauke Ecke (SLU)	Wetland restoration – Holy Grail or opening Pandora’s box of vector-borne and zoonotic disease risk?
4	Peter Torkel (Rewilding Oder Delta - Team Leader Poland)	Rewilding rivers in the Odra catchment – What is rewilding and why is it important?
5	Kerry Waylen (James Hutton Institute)	Monitoring and Evaluation of Nature-Based Solutions – thinking outside the box!
6	Joshua L. Royte (The Nature Conservancy)	Freeing rivers – restoration strategies in the state of Maine & implications for expanding the movement in Europe
7	Louis Costa (MAVA Foundation)	Corporate and private funding - its value for conservation
8	Charles B. van Rees (University of Georgia)	Strategic monitoring to learn from Nature-based Solutions and natural infrastructure projects
9	Claire Baffert (WWF European Policy Office) & Eva Mayerhofer (European Investment Bank)	The EU Nature Restoration Law: an opportunity for scaling-up the restoration of freshwater ecosystems
10	Paul Jepson (creditnature Ltd)	Nature Impact Tokens as a means unlock "nature positive" investment
11	Hamish Moir (cbec)	Practical applications of Nature-based Solutions in river restoration and management
12	Tom Buijse (Deltares)	Upscaling freshwater ecosystem restoration: the MERLIN approach (part 1)
13	Thomas Hlatky (GRAWE)	HORA 3D risk assessment tool
14	Paulo Branco (Forest Research Centre)	State of European freshwaters - restoration needs and potentials
15	Dominik Henrik Zak (Institute of Ecoscience, Aarhus University)	Give me five peatland restoration strategies
16	Kirsty Blackstock (James Hutton Institute)	Transforming freshwater restoration through Nature-based Solutions - working with six economic sectors
17	Stephen Hart (European Investment Bank)	Investing in Nature-based Solutions? – Finance for nature in Europe
18	Chris J. Spray (Tweed Forum/UNESCO Centre of Water Law, Policy & Science, University of Dundee)	The Eddleston Water project – what has worked, and what have we learned about Natural Flood management and how to deliver it?
19	Wouter van de Bund (European Commission – Joint Research Centre)	Barrier removal for river restoration: on the EU ambition of 25.000 km of free-flowing rivers
20	Christian Schürings (University of Duisburg-Essen)	How does agriculture affect river ecology?
21	Shane Mc Guinness (University College Dublin)	WaterLANDS: Upscaling co-created wetland restoration across Europe
	Speakers from all EU Green Deal ecosystem restoration cluster projects	Ecosystem Restoration on a landscape level: how can it work in practice? - Forest Restoration Talk
22	Leonard Sandin (Norwegian Institute for Nature Research, Oslo)	Working with Nature-based Solutions in the Nordics – going from words to actions
23	José Fernando Figueiredo (Founding President of Global Network of Guarantee Institutions)	Mutual guarantee & environmental sustainability: collaborative efforts for a green future
24	Malte Schneider (Co-Founder and Managing Director AECO)	Unlocking the potential of Carbon Credits in freshwater and nature restoration: practical insights
25	Phyllis Posy (Posy Global) & Ildikó Arany (Hungarian Research Network, Centre for Ecological Research)	Advancing freshwater ecosystem restoration in Europe – an EcoAdvance perspective

No	Presenter(s)	Title
26	Mike Vice & Rob Cunningham (Nature for Water Facility & Resilient Watershed Programme, The Nature Conservancy)	Upscaling Nature-based Solutions: TNC's Nature for Water program and how it can support your project
27	Linda Udsklit (Naturstyrelsen/The Danish Nature Agency)	The Danish way of rewetting lowlands
28	Tom Buijse (Deltares)	Upscaling freshwater ecosystem restoration for people and nature with Nature-based Solutions (part 2)
29	Pedro M. das Neves (Founder and CEO of Global Solutions 4U)	How Public-Private Partnerships can enhance Value for Planet and Value for People
30	Aniela Stachnik Iberian Centre for River Restoration (CIREF)	Translating knowledge into solutions: SpongeBoost for a water-resilient future
31	Ben Delbaere (Delbaere Consulting)	Removing barriers: how to engage policymakers in ecological restoration
32	Sien Kok (WUR, Deltares), Isabell Lenz (BfG), Nicolas Grondard (WUR)	Integrating ecosystem services in Cost-Benefit Analysis for freshwater restoration
	ESP, EcoAdvance and MERLIN	Freshwater restoration: alive and well in Europe – Lessons learned from Europe's freshwater champions   Darwin conference highlights   Entry guide to ESP 2026 in Prague
33	Daniel Thorell (Swedish Forest Agency), Zane Libiete (Latvia State Forest Research Institute)	Blue targeting – a forestry planning tool along small streams

The screenshot shows the MERLIN website's Academy page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links: Home, Case Studies, MIA, Mainstreaming, Outcomes, Marketplace, Academy, Team, and a search icon. Below the navigation bar, there are six webinar cards arranged in a 2x3 grid. Each card features a background image related to the webinar topic, a title, a speaker's name and photo, and a brief description of the content.

- Webinar #22 Leonard Sandin:** Working with Nature-based solutions in the Nordics – going from words to actions. Speaker: Leonard Sandin (Norwegian Institute for Nature Research, Oslo).
- External webinar:** Ecosystem Restoration on a landscape level: how can it work in practice? – Forest Restoration Talk. Speakers from all EU Green Deal ecosystem restoration cluster projects.
- Webinar #21 Shane Mc Guinness:** WaterLANDS: Upscaling co-created wetland restoration across Europe. Speaker: Dr Shane Mc Guinness (University College Dublin).
- Webinar #20 Christian Schürings:** How does agriculture affect river ecology? Speaker: Christian Schürings (University of Duisburg-Essen).
- Webinar #19 Wouter van de Bund:** Barrier removal for river restoration: on the EU ambition of 25.000 km of free-flowing rivers. Speaker: Wouter van de Bund (European Commission – Joint Research Centre).
- Webinar #18 Chris J. Spray:** The Eddleston Water project – what has worked, and what have we learned about Natural Flood management and how to deliver it? Speaker: Chris J. Spray (Tweed Forum / UNESCO Centre of Water Law, Policy & Science, University of Dundee).

Figure 9: The Academy's webinars on the MERLIN website.

## 7 Podcasts

The MERLIN podcast series serves as an engaging and accessible platform for disseminating project insights, with episodes that delve into the challenges, innovations, and successes of freshwater ecosystem restoration. Podcasts are a highly effective tool for dissemination, as they allow listeners to engage with content in a convenient and flexible way – whether at home, commuting, or in the field.

Each episode features interviews with experts, stakeholders, and project partners, making complex topics approachable and relatable for a broad audience. Through storytelling and expert commentary, the MERLIN podcasts connect listeners to the project’s goals and impact, while broadening outreach beyond traditional formats.

The production of the MERLIN podcast series – including scriptwriting, recording, and editing – was entirely managed by Rob St. John. His creative and technical expertise ensured consistent quality and coherence across all episodes, which last from 20 to 60 minutes each. The podcast features are distributed across multiple platforms, including the project website and popular streaming services (Apple, RSS, Spotify), maximising accessibility and engagement.

Four more episodes will be produced during MERLIN’s lifetime, dealing with the Academy as well as reporting from the final MERLIN event in March 2026.

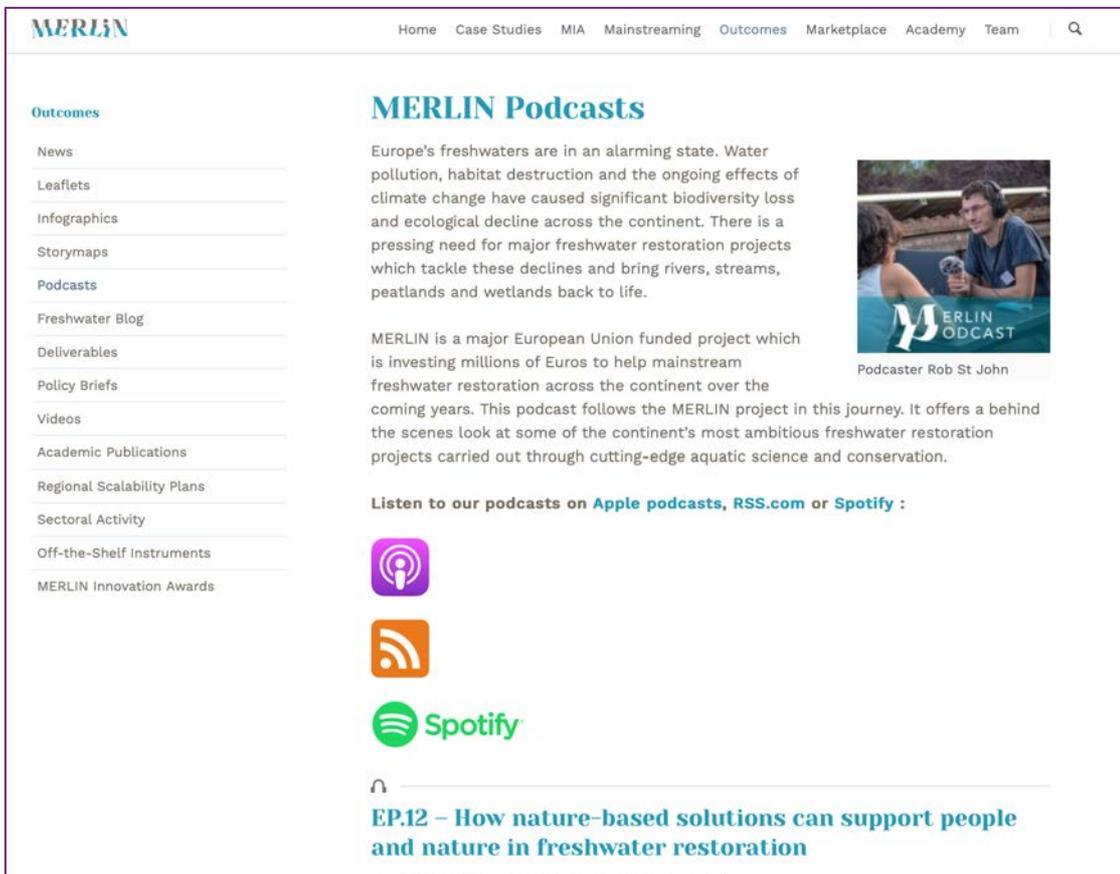


Figure 10: The Academy’s podcast episodes on the MERLIN website.

Table 6: MERLIN podcast topics.

No	Title
1	Introducing MERLIN // Large river and floodplain restoration on the Rhine Delta
2	Freshwater Restoration in Europe: Transformation, Disruption and Inspiration
3	Restoring Europe’s peatlands and wetlands
4	Mainstreaming freshwater Nature-based Solutions across economic sectors
5	How economic thinking can help us restore Europe’s freshwaters
6	Water, climate and farming: making space for stream restoration in Portugal
7	Learning from the river: restoring the Danube
8	Stories from the water’s edge: getting freshwater restoration done in Europe

No	Title
9	Why community matters to freshwater restoration
10	Restoring Europe's landscapes through the Green Deal and Nature Restoration Law
11	Communicating why freshwater restoration is vital
12	How Nature-based Solutions can support people and nature in freshwater restoration

## 8 Integration of MERLIN project results

The MERLIN Academy has been developed in close alignment with the broader scientific and practical outputs of the MERLIN project. Key project findings, tools, and case studies were actively integrated into the Academy's content to ensure relevance and coherence. For example, the Self-Assessment Tool (SAT), the Stakeholder Analysis Tool or the Value Chain Analysis are introduced and applied in the Learning Modules to demonstrate how MERLIN-developed tools can support planning, monitoring, and stakeholder engagement. The Learning Modules of the Academy also incorporate policy insights, including interpretations of the EU Nature Restoration Law and the Green Deal, helping learners connect restoration practice with high-level policy objectives. In addition, videos and examples from MERLIN Case Studies serve to ground theoretical content in real-world experience.

Additionally, MERLIN partners had the opportunity to present their research findings, tools, and on-the-ground experiences through the project's webinar and podcast series. These formats allowed for deeper dives into specific topics – such as policy integration, stakeholder engagement, innovative financing, and insights into case study experiences – and gave visibility to the diverse expertise within the consortium. The recordings are now integrated into the MERLIN Academy, providing learners with direct access to expert discussions, real-world examples, and cross-disciplinary insights that complement the structured module content.

The MERLIN Knowledge Centre was established as a centralised repository to collate and share key resources related to freshwater and wetland restoration, including tools, guidance documents, reports, and publications. While partners were invited to contribute materials, input was limited, and the Knowledge Centre was largely developed through a centralised effort to curate and organise relevant information from across the MERLIN project and the broader restoration community. It now serves as an open-access reference point for learners and practitioners seeking practical knowledge and inspiration beyond the structured modules.

The MERLIN Academy functions as both a learning platform and a dissemination tool, helping to translate MERLIN's innovation into accessible, practice-oriented knowledge.

## 9 Dissemination and promotion

The MERLIN Academy has been actively promoted through a multi-channel dissemination strategy to reach a wide audience across sectors. After the release of each module, tailored visual campaigns were launched across MERLIN's social media channels (Bluesky, LinkedIn, Facebook), using quotes and video teasers to generate interest and drive traffic to the platform. A dedicated MERLIN Academy postcard was produced to provide a compact overview of the Academy's offer, accompanied by a slogan and QR code. The postcard has been distributed at events, conferences, and stakeholder meetings. Additional communication materials, including branded slides, graphics, and flyers, were made available to consortium partners to support decentralised promotion.

Targeted outreach efforts were also undertaken to engage key user groups, including universities, NGOs, water and environmental agencies, and policy platforms. Academy content was presented at international conferences, project workshops, and bilateral meetings with stakeholders, ensuring visibility within both scientific and practitioner communities. These efforts are closely coordinated with the project's communication and impact work packages to ensure consistent messaging and strategic alignment.



**Join the MERLIN Academy!**

The MERLIN Academy offers free, self-paced online training on freshwater and wetland restoration. Whether you're a practitioner, policymaker, student or researcher, our learning modules help you:

- Understand the science and practice of Nature-based Solutions
- Engage stakeholders and navigate governance for lasting impact
- Unlock financing and investment for restoration
- Learn from successful restoration cases across Europe

**Start learning today**  
[project-merlin.eu/academy](https://project-merlin.eu/academy)  
**It's free and open to everyone!**

**MERLIN** Mainstreaming Ecological Restoration of freshwater-related ecosystems in a Landscape context.

The MERLIN project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101036337.

Figure 11: The MERLIN Academy postcard.

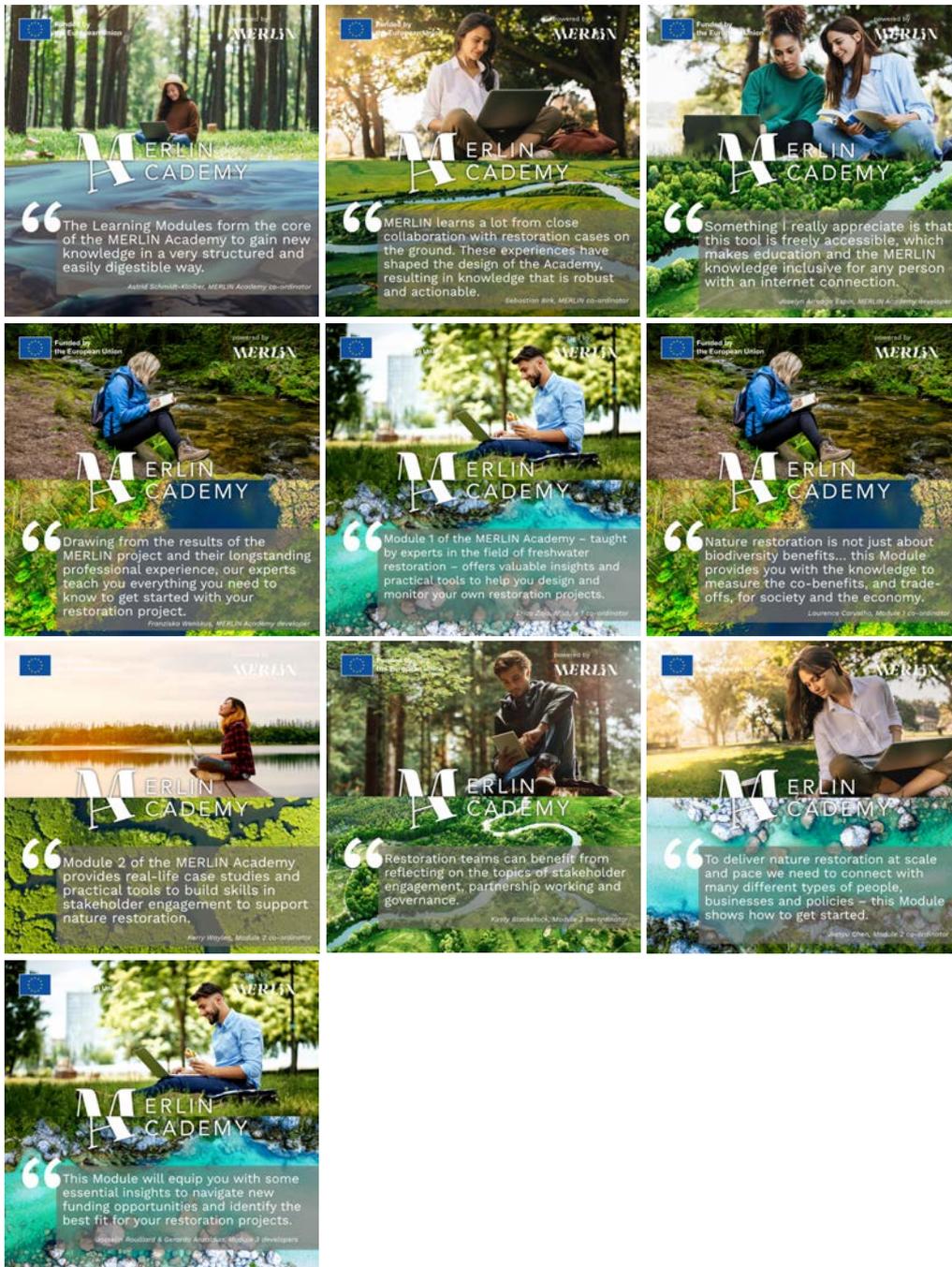


Figure 12: Social media visuals for the promotion of the MERLIN Academy's Learning Modules

## 10 Next steps and sustainability

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The MERLIN Academy was conceived from the outset not merely as a project deliverable, but as a durable, long-term capacity-building platform for the freshwater and wetland restoration community. Its structure and infrastructure were deliberately designed to outlive the MERLIN project and to serve as a shared educational hub for current and future initiatives. Built on the Thinkific platform, the Academy's Learning Modules benefit from a cost-effective and scalable hosting environment, ensuring that all published modules remain accessible and functional, even in the absence of immediate project-based funding.

Importantly, the Academy is open for integration with other projects, which can contribute new content, co-brand Learning Modules, or make use of the existing infrastructure for their own training needs. Even if no new EU-funded projects are secured in the short term, the platform will remain online and accessible, requiring only minimal maintenance costs thanks to its low-threshold technology.

To secure the Academy's financial and operational future, a sustainability plan has been developed by Connectology (see part B below). This plan outlines strategies for monetising the Academy, diversifying revenue streams, and engaging partners to ensure continued growth and relevance in the field of Nature-based Solutions and ecosystem restoration.

## Part B Sustainability Plan

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### 1 General framework

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The MERLIN Academy equips individuals and organisations with the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and implement ecological restoration strategies. It offers a range of courses and resources covering innovative restoration techniques, governance frameworks, fundraising strategies, and monitoring methodologies. The courses are tailored to meet the needs of various audiences: practitioners, students, NGOs, nature restoration teams, community leaders and policy makers, ensuring that the knowledge gained is both practical and actionable.

Moreover, MERLIN Academy acknowledges that restoration goals are better achieved with public awareness and involvement in the long run, also including webinars to talk to people from all parts of life about the value of preserving and restoring ecosystems, thereby creating broader public awareness. The Academy's materials are grounded in real-world case studies, ensuring that learners gain insights directly applicable to their restoration projects.

The webinars and podcasts of the Academy will remain on the general MERLIN website (as well as on YouTube and on podcast platforms) but no additional content will be added. The Knowledge Centre will be further hosted by Oppla.

The MERLIN Academy's Learning Modules can continue to operate on the Thinkific platform with minimal maintenance, provided that the annual platform subscription fee is covered. The structure allows for ongoing access to all existing content without requiring significant technical intervention. Importantly, the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) has confirmed its willingness to cover this annual fee, ensuring the continued availability of the Academy's current modules beyond the project's lifetime.

However, the Academy's Learning Modules were envisioned as a growing and evolving resource, with the ambition to develop new or updated modules in collaboration with other initiatives. Discussions are already underway with the Biodiversa+ project DNAqualMG as well as with Dam Removal Europe to explore future content partnerships.

As the creation of high-quality modules requires dedicated funding, a sustainability plan was developed to outline two complementary pathways: (1) continuation through project-based funding (such as the recently submitted FLOODTRAIN proposal, which is currently on a waiting list for funding through Biodiversa+) and (2) continuation through a business model, involving certification fees to make the Academy financially sustainable.

This sustainability plan focuses on the second pathway with focus on monetising the Academy's Learning Modules.

While the MERLIN Academy was initially developed under the leadership of BOKU University, the institution is not able to commercially operate the Academy after the project's end. As a public university, BOKU is structurally and legally limited in its ability to offer fee-based training services or administer income from such courses. Additionally, the scientists involved in building the Academy are employed on externally funded soft-money positions, and therefore cannot make binding institutional commitments regarding long-term hosting or business models. To ensure the continued operation and development of the Academy, the MERLIN coordination identified LimnoSolve GmbH as a suitable partner. LimnoSolve was founded specifically to deliver flexible, science-based services that public institutions like BOKU cannot offer within their frameworks. It is led by the same scientific team who developed the MERLIN Academy, ensuring continuity of expertise and academic quality. LimnoSolve's lean structure allows it to manage income, contract lecturers, and develop new content independently and efficiently, making it well-positioned to carry the Academy forward.

Through this sustainability plan, the strengths and challenges of MERLIN Academy are evaluated to identify growth opportunities and chart a course for the future that can be followed by LimnoSolve.

Since its inception, the Academy was designed to have the foundations to be financially viable. It is not just a great idea for conservation and restoration purposes, it can also be a good business. Here are four strong arguments that show why the MERLIN Academy has solid potential for financial success:

### 1. Policy-driven demand: EU laws are creating a long-term training market

The EU Water Framework Directive, the Biodiversity Strategy 2030, and the recently approved Nature Restoration Regulation require Member States to restore at least 25,000 km of rivers to a free-flowing state and restore degraded ecosystems at a large scale by 2030. These laws are not just aspirational, they are legally binding, creating significant and ongoing demand for trained professionals in restoration. The MERLIN Academy is uniquely positioned to provide the specialised skills and certifications needed to meet this challenge.

### 2. Expanding market: a multi-billion Euro opportunity in Nature-based Solutions

According to the European Commission, the investment gap in nature restoration across the EU is estimated at €20 billion annually through 2030<sup>1</sup>. The market for ecosystem restoration services, including planning, implementation, monitoring, and reporting, is expected to grow significantly, with freshwater ecosystems representing a crucial and underserved niche. Even with a conservative estimate that training and certification make up just 1% of this market, it still represents a €200 million annual opportunity, clearly showing there is room for multiple successful players, including specialised providers like the MERLIN Academy.

### 3. Dual revenue model: scalable online platform + potential premium offline training

The MERLIN Academy combines the scale and accessibility of online learning (with global reach and low delivery cost) with potential in the future to offer premium in-person training. Revenue streams may include:

- Individual and institutional subscriptions
- Corporate and public sector training packages
- In-person workshops and certifications
- Customised courses for EU projects
- Advisory and consulting services linked to training

This model ensures diversified, scalable, and resilient income.

### 4. Global scalability: exporting European expertise worldwide

European methodologies for freshwater ecosystem restoration, particularly those developed under Horizon Europe, LIFE, and Natura 2000, are considered to be general global best practices. The MERLIN Academy can easily adapt and translate its content for international markets in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, where freshwater restoration is urgent. Interest can be seen already signed up users from Asia and Africa. By building on EU-backed credibility and offering localised versions of its courses, the Academy has the potential to scale globally and tap into international development budgets and NGO networks.

## 2 SWOT analysis

In order to evaluate the future of the MERLIN Academy, we conducted a SWOT analysis to identify the Academy's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. A clear understanding of these four aspects is essential for developing effective plans for the Academy's growth.

### 2.1 Strengths

#### Comprehensive and flexible content

The Academy provides structured Learning Modules covering key aspects of freshwater and wetland restoration, including economics, governance, monitoring and stakeholder engagement. Each module includes short, pre-recorded expert videos, reading materials and quizzes to support an engaging and complete learning experience. The modular format allows for easy integration of adjacent topics in the future (e.g. catchment-scale planning). Complementing this, the Academy's Knowledge Centre acts as a curated resource hub, featuring scientific publications, manuals, and guidance documents that enhance both theoretical understanding and practical implementation.

<sup>1</sup> [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/biodiversity/eu-action-biodiversity-financing\\_en?](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/biodiversity/eu-action-biodiversity-financing_en?)

### Enriched learning through expert voices

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Complementing the structured modules, live-recorded webinars and podcasts bring expert perspectives and real-world case examples to the Academy. These formats add depth, convey current developments, and strengthen the practical relevance of the Academy's content.

### Strong EU support and expert network

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The MERLIN Academy was launched with substantial support from the European Union as part of a large, interdisciplinary project consortium. This provided not only the financial stability, but also ensured credibility and access to a wide network of experts, who contributed diverse knowledge and practical experience. The initial investment has already covered the development of the platform and core content, which can now remain accessible without requiring further funding. However, any future expansion into new thematic areas or the development of additional modules will naturally require targeted investment.

### Established visibility and user base

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The Academy already has visibility within its core target audience, reducing the need for extensive marketing and allowing for cost-effective outreach.

## 2.2 Weaknesses

### Limited interactivity

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While the content of the Learning Modules is high-quality and self-paced, the Academy currently lacks interactive features, such as discussion forums, live Q&A sessions with experts or group-based learning options. These could further enhance learner engagement. However, the current format was also purposefully designed to allow learners to focus on concise, expert-led materials without distraction.

### Niche focus and awareness gaps

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While the MERLIN Academy offers high-quality content tailored to freshwater and wetland ecosystem restoration, its specialised focus may limit visibility among broader environmental or policy audiences who have not yet engaged with aquatic restoration topics.

### Language barriers

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All modules are currently available only in English, which may limit accessibility in regions like Asia or Latin America. However, subtitles in German, Spanish, and French are still planned within the lifetime of MERLIN, which will significantly expand reach and inclusivity.

### Lack of secured funding for future development

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While the platform and core content are in place, there is currently no dedicated funding stream for expanding the Academy or developing new modules.

## 2.3 Opportunities

### Strategic collaborations and outreach

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Partnering with universities, NGOs and international organisations can expand the Academy's reach and create new opportunities for content co-development. While BOKU and UDE will continue to support the integration of the MERLIN Academy into future EU-funded projects, LimnoSolve will be well positioned to bring the Academy to new audiences by establishing partnerships with other universities and institutions through its monetisation model.

### Positioning within global agendas

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The MERLIN Academy being an online platform opens its nature to learners all across the globe, hence the possibility of building a global community of practice and learning. By aligning content more explicitly with broader issues such as climate adaptation, biodiversity targets, sustainable development, and water security, the Academy can reach new stakeholder groups and policy circles.

## Emerging Trends

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Nature restoration is one of the top political priorities of the European Commission, creating a strong demand for high-quality training materials, practical guidance, and accessible knowledge – all of which are provided by the MERLIN Academy.

Regular updates on restoration trends and Nature-based Solutions will set the content apart and appeal to those seeking the most up-to-date knowledge, ensuring the MERLIN Academy remains relevant and valuable for practitioners in the field.

### Academy as a training and certification hub

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With its structured content and expert-led delivery, the Academy could evolve into a recognised training platform for professional certification in freshwater restoration – adding value for both learners and institutions.

## 2.4 Threats

### Increasing competition

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Other online training platforms (e.g. the River Academy) may compete for similar audiences. Continuous improvement and differentiation through high-quality content, expert involvement, and real-world case studies will be key.

### Nature-based Solutions not yet mainstream

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Despite policy support, Nature-based Solutions are still not widely understood or adopted by many practitioners and policymakers. More educational outreach and awareness-building is needed to overcome this knowledge gap.

### Changing landscape

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As policies, scientific understanding, and restoration practices evolve, some content may become outdated. Regular reviews and targeted updates will be needed to maintain relevance and credibility.

### Technological limitations

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Although the MERLIN Academy is designed to be accessible and user-friendly, technological limitations can still pose barriers for some users – particularly those with limited internet connectivity, outdated devices, or institutional firewalls. These challenges are more pronounced in certain regions or among users in field-based roles with restricted access to stable online infrastructure. While Thinkific offers a reliable and intuitive learning environment, the lack of offline access can hinder broader reach. Addressing these barriers – for example, by offering downloadable materials, lighter video formats, or integrating the content into hybrid learning settings – will be important for ensuring equitable access and expanding the Academy's international impact.

### Limited administrative capacity within academic institutions

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Public institutions such as BOKU and UDE face structural constraints in operating training platforms commercially. Without alternative arrangements (e.g. through LimnoSolve), sustainability of the Academy could be threatened.



Figure 1: Overview of the SWOT analysis.

The SWOT analysis highlights the MERLIN Academy’s strong foundation, built on EU funding, expert involvement, and high-quality, structured content covering key aspects of freshwater and wetland restoration. Its modular design, Knowledge Centre, and established visibility among target audiences position it well for continued use and future expansion. However, current limitations include the lack of interactive elements, availability only in English, and the absence of secured funding for future content development. At the same time, growing policy interest in nature restoration, the potential for new partnerships, and the global shift towards online learning present valuable opportunities. To remain relevant and competitive, the Academy must address potential threats such as content obsolescence, limited accessibility in some regions, and emerging competitors, while leveraging its flexibility and credibility to scale impact.

### 3 Competition

This chapter analyses the competitive landscape of the MERLIN Academy by identifying both direct and indirect competitors in the field of online environmental education, with a particular focus on freshwater and wetland restoration. While few platforms offer structured learning exclusively within this niche, the analysis was expanded to include training providers with strong relevance to ecosystem restoration, Nature-based Solutions, and sustainability. Direct competitors were selected based on their thematic alignment, the structure and accessibility of their online courses, and their relevance to MERLIN’s target audiences (e.g. restoration practitioners, NGOs, public authorities). These include platforms such as the River Academy, the River Restoration Centre, and the Rewilding Academy, which offer content directly related to river or freshwater systems. Additional platforms like The Nature Conservancy’s Conservation Training, the FAO eLearning Academy, and the Landscape Academy were included due to their significant contributions to nature conservation and water-related training. Indirect competitors – such as Coursera, edX, and LinkedIn Learning – were considered based on their reach, popularity, and inclusion of adjacent topics such as water management, ecosystem services, and environmental policy.

### 3.1 Direct competitors

#### River Academy

##### Focus and depth of content

The River Academy offers an interactive learning platform aimed at professionals seeking to expand their expertise and gain recognition in river-related fields. While its content covers a range of topics relevant to river management and conservation, the platform places a strong emphasis on professional development, global expert contributions, and digital credentialing. The following courses are offered: Clean Rivers, Science Communications, Leadership for River Practitioners, River Resilience, River Restoration – Form and Function.

Learners engage in an inclusive online community, and upon completion of courses, receive verifiable digital badges that can be shared across social and professional networks. The focus is more on career visibility and recognition than on deep, technical training within a single ecological niche.

##### Target audience

The River Academy primarily targets professionals and early-career practitioners who want to deepen their knowledge of river-related topics and gain recognition for it.

##### Educational approach and delivery

The River Academy offers five different courses, each created, owned and managed by the instructor(s) with 28 to 75 lessons. The foundation of each course are its lessons, which can include videos, slides, text and additional resources as well as quizzes to enhance the learning experience of students.

##### Course prices and certification

The price per course is 79 \$. Courses are completed with a digital badge.

##### Access

<https://www.riveracade.me>

#### River Restoration Certification

##### Focus and depth of content

The River Restoration Centre (RRC) offers a Level 1 Certificate in River Restoration, designed to equip participants with foundational knowledge and practical skills for contributing to effective river restoration projects. The course focuses on key competencies such as understanding river morphology, strategic restoration planning, desktop data assessment, and the promotion of habitat connectivity. With a strong emphasis on real-world application, the certificate is tailored for practitioners seeking to build confidence in restoration planning and implementation. The training supports a structured learning path into the field, positioning itself as an entry point for a career in river restoration.

##### Target audience

The Certificate in River Restoration is aimed at early-career professionals, practitioners, and aspiring restoration specialists looking to build a solid foundation in river restoration. The programme is designed to enhance professional standing, improve job prospects, and serve as a stepping stone toward more advanced qualifications or roles in the growing field of river restoration.

##### Educational approach and delivery

The River Restoration Centre adopts a flexible, practice-oriented learning approach designed to accommodate the diverse schedules and learning preferences of professionals. Learners can choose from various delivery formats, including a 4-week online course delivered via a digital learning platform (~8 hours total), a 1-day live online course conducted through Zoom or a blended option combining a 2-week online component with a 1-day in-person fieldwork session.

This multi-format structure allows participants to balance professional commitments while engaging with both theoretical and practical content.

### Course prices and certification

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Full costs for the certification are around £ 1,200. The certificate will be assessed by multiple choice questions at the end of each course. Upon successful completion of the courses and fieldwork the certificate will be awarded.

### Access

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<https://www.therrc.co.uk/certification-river-restoration>

## Rewilding Academy

### Focus and depth of content

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The Rewilding Academy is an educational initiative that supports rewilding efforts through training, research, and knowledge exchange. Its content focuses on landscape-scale ecological restoration, with an emphasis on rewilding principles, including trophic rewilding, natural process restoration, and community engagement. The Academy provides access to 45 online courses, expert talks, and practical tools aimed at empowering conservation professionals, students, and community leaders to implement rewilding strategies across Europe and beyond. Its approach blends scientific insights with applied field experience, reflecting a strong commitment to both ecological and social dimensions of nature recovery.

The course section contains several freshwater related courses, hosted on different platforms, e.g. the Danube Floodplain Online Course.

### Target audience

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The Rewilding Academy is designed for a broad and international audience interested in ecological restoration through rewilding. Its primary target groups include conservation professionals and practitioners seeking to deepen their understanding of rewilding principles and practices, early-career ecologists, students, and researchers interested in innovative, landscape-scale restoration approaches, NGO staff and community leaders engaged in local or regional conservation projects, landowners and natural area managers exploring rewilding as a tool for land stewardship and biodiversity enhancement as well as policy makers and planners who want to integrate Nature-based Solutions into sustainable land-use strategies.

### Educational approach and delivery

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The Academy supports both formal and informal learners who want to apply rewilding in practice, often in interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral settings and positions itself as a hub for both education and action in the global rewilding movement.

The Academy's learning formats are designed to foster understanding of complex ecological systems and promote practical skills for implementing rewilding on the ground, ranging from online courses and webinars, field trainings and immersive experiences that allow learners to engage directly with rewilding landscapes and practitioners, to knowledge-sharing platforms that connect learners with international experts, case studies, and current rewilding projects.

### Course prices and certification

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The Rewilding Academy offers a variety of online and in-person courses with flexible pricing models, reflecting the diversity of topics, formats, and learner needs. Some courses are available free of charge, particularly those aimed at raising general awareness or sharing introductory knowledge. Others, especially those that offer deeper, practice-oriented training or include field components, are fee-based. Prices vary depending on course length, content depth, and delivery mode. Most courses offer a certification upon completion.

### Access

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<https://rewilding.academy/courses/>

## The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Training platform

### Focus and depth of content

Conservation Training, offered by The Nature Conservancy, provides a broad educational portfolio with over 400 hours of online courses on general conservation principles, many of which are available in multiple languages. It includes a few specialised courses on freshwater ecosystems.

### Target audience

Conservation Training is meant for the global conservation community interested in a broader range of conservation issues.

### Educational approach and delivery

While the MERLIN Academy emphasises hands-on learning with a focus on European ecosystems, Conservation Training offers a more general approach, suitable for a global audience, with courses designed to be accessible to anyone interested in conservation topics.

### Course prices and certification

Courses on the Conservation Training platform are free of charge. Several of them include a certification upon completion.

### Access

<https://www.conservationtraining.org>

## Landscape Academy

### Focus and depth of content

The Landscape Academy provides online learning opportunities at the intersection of sustainable land use, climate action, biodiversity, and livelihoods. Its primary focus is on promoting integrated landscape approaches, which recognise the interconnectedness of ecosystems, communities, and economic systems across geographical and administrative boundaries. Courses address topics such as climate-smart agriculture and forestry, landscape restoration and ecosystem services, indigenous and community land rights, finance and governance for sustainability as well as Nature-based Solutions and circular economies.

The Academy offers self-paced online courses, often developed in collaboration with international institutions, NGOs, and research organisations.

### Target audience

The Landscape Academy is designed for a diverse, global audience engaged in sustainability, land use, and restoration. Its primary target groups include professionals and practitioners in the fields of agriculture, forestry, land management, and conservation, policy makers and development planners, researchers and academics, students and early-career professionals seeking foundational knowledge and career-relevant training in landscape-related disciplines as well as civil society actors and indigenous leaders interested in inclusive, community-based approaches to land stewardship.

The Academy supports both technical learning and strategic thinking, making it particularly relevant for those operating at the interface of science, policy, and practice in sustainable landscape transformation.

### Educational approach and delivery

The Landscape Academy adopts an inclusive, interdisciplinary, and practice-oriented learning model tailored to the complex realities of sustainable land management. Its courses are delivered primarily through self-paced online formats, combining video lectures, readings, case studies, interactive exercises, and quizzes. Many offerings are developed in partnership with international organisations, universities, and NGOs, ensuring both scientific rigour and practical relevance.

### Course Accessibility and Certification

The Landscape Academy works like other big education platforms and offers free and paid courses. While most courses do not involve any fee, the paid ones reach up to \$ 8,000. Most courses are certified upon completion.

## Access

<https://academy.globallandscapesforum.org>

## FAO Academy

### Focus and depth of content

The FAO e-learning Academy offers a wide variety of free multilingual and certified courses organized into 25 thematic areas to support sustainable development and capacity building in agriculture, natural resources, and food systems. Within the broader platform, a specific group of courses is focused on water quality, freshwater resources, and ecosystem management.

These courses aim to strengthen understanding of water governance, quality monitoring, and pollution control, promote sustainable water use in agriculture, aquaculture, and land management, enhance technical and policy-level knowledge related to integrated water resource management and support implementation of global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

### Target audience

The FAO eLearning Academy is designed for a wide international audience working in or around agriculture, food systems, and natural resource management. Its water-related courses specifically target government officials and policy makers, technical experts and practitioners in water quality, irrigation, watershed management, and rural infrastructure, NGO staff and development workers, researchers, students, and educators as well as multilateral and donor agency professionals who need to align their programs with global sustainability frameworks like the SDGs.

### Educational approach and delivery

The FAO online learning Academy follows an inclusive, globally accessible educational approach designed to support learners in a wide range of professional and geographic contexts. With a strong emphasis on equity and capacity building, the platform is particularly valuable for stakeholders in developing countries and low-resource settings who may lack access to traditional training opportunities. Courses are developed in collaboration with international experts and enriched with real-world case studies, ensuring both academic rigour and practical relevance. The learning materials are offered in self-paced formats, allowing flexible engagement, and are typically available at introductory to intermediate levels. Many courses are multilingual and can be downloaded for offline use, further improving accessibility.

### Course prices and certification

All courses are free of charge. Certification is available upon the completion of a quiz.

## Access

<https://elearning.fao.org>

## We Value Nature

### Focus and depth of content

We Value Nature offers a set of training resources aimed at helping businesses integrate natural capital thinking into their decision-making processes. The core focus is on supporting companies in identifying, measuring, valuing, and prioritising their impacts and dependencies on nature – recognising that environmental degradation represents a material risk for businesses.

### Target audience

The training resources provided by We Value Nature are primarily aimed at business professionals, sustainability managers, and decision-makers working across industries who are seeking to better understand and manage their impacts and dependencies on natural and social capital. The initiative also targets finance sector actors, corporate strategists, and ESG professionals who are looking to integrate natural capital thinking into risk management and long-term value creation. In addition, the materials are relevant for consultants, academics, and trainers involved in environmental economics, corporate sustainability, and stakeholder engagement.

### Educational approach and delivery

Their core training modules on integrating natural capital into business decision-making are provided as downloadable resources, including PowerPoint presentations, facilitator guides, and Word documents. These materials are designed to be flexibly adapted by organisations, trainers, and educators, and can be delivered in various formats – from short sessions to full-day workshops – depending on the audience’s needs and level of expertise. This makes them highly suitable for customised training across sectors and professional levels.

In parallel, We Value Nature also supports more structured online learning, exemplified by the course “Valuing nature and people to inform business decision-making”, delivered via the Coursera platform. This course follows a more conventional e-learning model, combining video lectures, interactive exercises, quizzes, and expert insights from global business leaders.

### Course prices and certification

The course materials provided by We Value Nature are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License. The Coursera course is also freely accessible, with an optional paid certificate available upon completion.

### Access

<https://wevaluenature.eu>

## University of Oxford's Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment

### Focus and depth of content

The University of Oxford's Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment provides a broad curriculum on sustainable business practices, finance, and law tailored to equip professionals with the strategic tools necessary for integrating sustainability into their sectors. The Smith School also offers a few online courses (e.g. on Nature-based Solutions), but has not specific freshwater focus.

### Target audience

The Smith School at Oxford targets a broad suite of business, finance, and legal professionals who are incorporating sustainability into their practices.

### Educational approach and delivery

While the MERLIN Academy is practically oriented with hands-on training for direct application in environmental projects, most online courses of the Smith School is more theoretical and strategic, better applied to high-level policy and decision-making across diverse industries. Online classes include self-paced learning as well as live lectures, depending on the selected course.

### Course prices and certification

Prices for online courses range from free to several thousand Euro. The Nature-based Solutions course for example costs £3,200. All courses include a Smith School certificate.

### Access

<https://www.smithschool.ox.ac.uk>

## 3.2 Indirect competitors

Indirect competitors are those whose offerings might not directly overlap with the MERLIN Academy but still cater to a similar audience or fulfil similar needs in adjacent fields.

### Coursera

Within Coursera, it is possible to find the most diverse courses related to environmental science and sustainability. The fact that some quite prestigious universities (e.g. Stanford University, Bocconi, Yale University, etc.) use this platform to deliver their courses including also ecosystem services, water resources management, and ecological sustainability means that there is indirect competition.

## edX

Like Coursera, edX also hosts courses from top universities and institutions on water management, sustainability, and environmental policy. The platform provides an opportunity for the global audience to take up the courses and often comes up with certifications and professional degrees.

## FutureLearn

FutureLearn provides courses from many top universities and institutions about subjects as varied as those above, such as water management, sustainability, and environmental policy. These courses are also open to a global audience and often include certifications and professional degrees.

## OpenLearning

OpenLearning provides courses on environmental sustainability through collaborations with universities and professional organisations that may be interested in their offerings. They appeal to a community-centric approach focusing on interactive learning.

## LinkedIn Learning

LinkedIn Learning offers general environmental science and sustainability courses, as well as professional development learning. Although their courses are not as specialised as those of the MERLIN Academy, they still tend to capture a lot of interest from people looking to upskill themselves in the environmental field. Their emphasis on professional development makes them an indirect competitor.

### 3.3 Competitor analysis

The MERLIN Academy operates in an increasingly competitive landscape of online environmental education, where both direct and indirect competitors offer a wide array of learning opportunities. Direct competitors include platforms such as the River Academy, River Restoration Centre, Rewilding Academy, The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Training, FAO eLearning Academy, Landscape Academy, and We Value Nature. These platforms often focus on conservation, ecological restoration, water management, and Nature-based Solutions. While some offer structured certification pathways and deep content on freshwater and wetland topics (e.g. River Restoration Centre, River Academy), others – like the Rewilding Academy or the Landscape Academy – adopt broader ecological or land-use themes but still overlap in their target groups and restoration-related learning goals.

These platforms typically benefit from strong institutional backing, established reputations, and a broad international reach. Their educational offerings often include community-based elements, professional development incentives (e.g. badges, certifications), or strategic partnerships with global conservation organisations. However, few of them offer the same specific combination of freshwater and wetland restoration, policy context, economic instruments, and stakeholder engagement as the MERLIN Academy.

Indirect competitors include large-scale online learning platforms like Coursera, edX, FutureLearn, OpenLearning or LinkedIn Learning. These platforms appeal to broad audiences through diverse course catalogues that cover topics such as ecosystem services, environmental policy, and climate change, sometimes touching on themes relevant to MERLIN. Their strength lies in their reach, flexibility, and ability to attract learners at different stages of expertise. Some (like Coursera and FutureLearn) also partner with top-tier universities to offer certificates or degrees, further enhancing their credibility.

To maintain and grow its relevance, the MERLIN Academy can leverage its niche positioning as one of the very few platforms dedicated specifically to freshwater and wetland restoration, while emphasising practice-oriented content, free access, and connections to real-world EU-funded projects. Its unique mix of Learning Modules, Knowledge Centre, Podcasts, and Webinars, as well as direct input from interdisciplinary experts and MERLIN partners, sets it apart. Still, the Academy could benefit from increased interactivity, greater language accessibility, and targeted outreach to ensure it continues to stand out.

## 4 Future marketing strategy for the MERLIN Academy

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### 4.1 Brand strategy and name

The name MERLIN Academy currently offers strong advantages: high visibility through search engines due to the EU-funded MERLIN project, strong brand recognition among stakeholders, and perceived credibility due to its link with European Commission support. Retaining this name would allow the Academy to capitalise on existing momentum and reduces the need for major marketing investment.

While retaining the MERLIN Academy name offers clear advantages in terms of search engine optimisation, brand recognition, and credibility linked to the European Commission's support, it may prove challenging to maintain this branding if the Academy continues beyond the MERLIN project or becomes integrated into other initiatives/projects. A potential solution would be to rebrand the platform under a broader, more enduring name such as "Freshwater Academy", which would reflect its long-term focus and make it easier to host new content developed under different projects. Individual Learning Modules could then carry project-specific tags or co-branding (e.g. "Developed within the MERLIN project") to ensure proper recognition of their origins while allowing the overall platform to grow and evolve under a unified, future-proof brand identity.

### 4.2 Target audience

The future strategy builds on the same target groups initially identified for the MERLIN Academy: restoration practitioners, water managers, NGOs, academics, and civil society. No major expansion to new audience segments is foreseen at this stage. Instead, the marketing strategy focuses on deepening engagement, increasing retention and reach within these groups, and ensuring that the Academy continues to serve their evolving professional needs.

Key audiences of the MERLIN Academy include:

- Restoration practitioners and project managers
- Professionals from water management agencies and environmental consultancies
- Staff of NGOs and conservation organisations
- Early-career scientists, students, and educators
- Policy makers and administrators in environment-related sectors
- Civil society actors involved in land and water stewardship

### 4.3 Communication channels and outreach

The Academy's promotion to date has focused on:

- Social media outreach, including visuals and updates for each module launch
- Partner networks across the MERLIN consortium
- Events, webinars, and podcasts that showcased Academy content and contributors
- Printed and digital materials, such as a postcard and flyer to support in-person promotion
- Targeted outreach to universities, policy platforms, and NGOs

Moving forward, the Academy should continue using its LinkedIn presence, newsletters, and partner organisations for dissemination, while expanding collaboration with new networks.

### 4.4 Engaging with stakeholders and learners

The MERLIN Academy has already built a strong community through its consortium. Key stakeholder groups include:

- Project partners who serve as ambassadors
- External collaborators from NGOs, academia, and industry
- End users who provide feedback and act as multipliers in their own institutions

Additional stakeholder engagement strategies could include (see below):

- Encouraging alumni to share digital certificates on LinkedIn
- Inviting feedback and testimonials from learners
- Launching short expert-led video campaigns (e.g. "1 idea, 1 minute") to generate interest

## 4.5 Scalable and innovative marketing ideas

To reach new learners and remain competitive, the Academy could adopt the following creative strategies.

### Expert-led microlearning campaigns ("1 idea, 1 minute")

Concept: Launch a campaign featuring short, high-impact videos or posts shared weekly on LinkedIn, YouTube Shorts, and Bluesky. Each features a well-known restoration expert or MERLIN Academy trainer sharing one tip, insight, or case study related to freshwater restoration.

Why it works:

- Establishes a thought leadership role around the MERLIN Academy
- Encourages sharing within expert networks
- Positions trainers as influencers and ambassadors
- Drives traffic to the full training programs

### Annual "Restoration Masterclass Week" (hybrid event)

Concept: Offer a free or low-cost week-long event once a year featuring daily masterclasses, live Q&As, and panels with restoration experts. Combine online access with local meet-ups or field visits across Europe, organised with local partners.

Why it works:

- Attracts both new learners and experienced practitioners
- Creates buzz and a sense of momentum around the Academy
- Collects leads for future course marketing
- Offers a "try before you buy" experience for more expensive certifications

### MERLIN affiliate program

Concept: Implement an affiliate program in which partner organisations, portals, or influencers promote the Academy through banners or links on their platforms. When users click and enrol in a course, the referring partner receives a small commission (e.g. 3–5%).

Why it works:

- Low-cost marketing: no upfront costs – partners are only paid when they deliver results
- Incentivises promotion: affiliates are motivated to actively promote the Academy to earn commissions
- Expands reach: taps into existing networks and audiences in the restoration and conservation fields
- Win-win model: provides value to both the Academy and its promotional partners

### MERLIN Innovation Awards (MIA)

Concept: Host the annual MIA, in a similar way how it was done during the MERLIN project highlighting excellence in restoration practice and linking back to the Academy.

Why it works:

- Attracts new learners and experienced practitioners
- Attracts new stakeholders entering the market
- Attracts students interested in innovation
- Positions the MERLIN Academy as a leader in nature restoration intelligence in Europe

## 4.6 Monitoring and evaluation

To ensure the continued effectiveness and adaptability of the MERLIN Academy's marketing and outreach efforts, a robust monitoring and evaluation framework is essential. Regular quarterly review meetings with key stakeholders should be held to assess progress, review performance data, and adjust strategies as needed.

A set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) will help track the impact of communication and engagement activities. These should include:

- Website traffic and course enrolment rates
- Social media engagement and sharing of certificates/badges
- Webinar attendance and participation metrics
- Email open rates and newsletter engagement

- Feedback from surveys and course evaluations

In addition to monitoring outcomes, gathering qualitative insights through structured feedback forms and surveys will support continuous improvement of course offerings, communication formats, and user experience.

To strengthen stakeholder engagement and outreach, the creation and maintenance of a targeted stakeholder database is strongly recommended. This would include professionals, organisations, and institutions involved in freshwater ecosystem restoration and could be used to identify audience gaps, improve targeting, and inform future marketing campaigns.

By implementing this monitoring framework and ensuring adequate allocation of resources (personnel, budget, and technology), the MERLIN Academy can improve its visibility, optimise marketing strategies, and effectively grow a global learning community dedicated to freshwater restoration.

## 5 Strategic partnerships with EU projects and NGOs

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One of the most promising and cost-effective strategies for promoting the MERLIN Academy is to establish formal and informal partnerships with ongoing and upcoming EU-funded projects (e.g. Horizon Europe, LIFE, Biodiversa+, INTERREG) as well as with relevant non-governmental organisations and conservation networks.

These collaborations can offer mutual benefits: the MERLIN Academy serves as an educational platform to strengthen capacity building within partner projects, while the Academy itself gains visibility, trust, and access to new learner groups.

Key elements of the partnership strategy include:

- Offering exclusive or co-branded training modules to EU project teams and NGO staff working on ecosystem restoration, climate resilience, and Nature-based Solutions.
- Providing discounted or free access to selected MERLIN Academy courses in exchange for visibility in project newsletters, reports, events, or websites.
- Positioning the Academy as the educational arm of high-impact initiatives, enhancing both credibility and relevance.
- Utilising project-level dissemination channels to expand reach without additional advertising costs.

This approach aligns closely with the sustainability pathway focused on continuation through externally funded projects and allows the Academy to build a strong network of recurring users and institutional supporters.

Furthermore, partnerships with EU-funded projects also support the knowledge integration goals of the MERLIN Academy by embedding real-world case studies, tools, and policy insights from current fieldwork into future course content.

## 6 Financial projections (5 years)

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Taking into consideration the competitive landscape analysis conducted earlier, it appears that some competitors tend to offer a wide array of free courses, similar to the MERLIN Academy. However, it can also be observed that some players offer paid courses within the same thematic area – for example the Rewilding Academy – demonstrating a sustainable model for generating resources and expanding educational offerings.

As part of the sustainability planning for the MERLIN Academy, this section explores how the Academy's existing and future content can be monetised. While the Academy initially benefited from EU funding and offered all modules for free, the future strategy now considers introducing a paid course model for new modules. This approach would allow the Academy to generate independent revenue, while still offering selected content for free to ensure broad accessibility.

To increase the perceived value of the courses, the Academy could offer certificates of attendance or achievement in collaboration with recognised academic institutions such as BOKU University, Warsaw University of Life Sciences or the University of Duisburg-Essen. These certificates would enhance the credibility of the training and appeal to professionals seeking certified qualifications in freshwater restoration and related fields.

In future EU-funded projects, BOKU University or the University of Duisburg-Essen would remain the primary institutional hosts for the MERLIN Academy. However, in the absence of such funding, LimnoSolve could step in

to monetise the Academy by offering new content as paid courses, thereby ensuring its continued operation and long-term sustainability.

The following financial projection is based on this updated strategy and outlines potential revenue scenarios from paid courses over the next five years, following standard financial assumptions and current market data. Calculations were conducted by Connectology.

## 6.1 Revenue assumptions

### E-learning market trends

The market size for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), some of which cover topics involving the environment, is on track to reach robust figures by the end of the decade, reflecting a high growth rate and vast demand for accessible education (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). The driving forces behind this trend are increasing internet penetration rates and an international acceleration of e-learning platforms; therefore, there may be a broad, enlarging market interested in the courses of the MERLIN Academy. While exact numbers for those specifically interested in sustainability courses were not in the reports, the numbers in table 1 are an interpolation to suggest the potential number is large and plausible. If the Academy captures even 0.01% of the e-learning audience worldwide interested in sustainability, it could mean about 1,000 students, again, going by millions of global e-learners. In order to be very cautious, we considered a minimum of only 400 courses sold in 2026 and growing by 200 courses per year. This represents around 33 courses per month on average as a start, which seems to be achievable.

### Enrolment assumptions

The cautious estimate would be to plan for the growth in student enrolment to be constant. An optimistic outlook is supported by the fast growth of the global e-learning market, varying from about 8% to 14% annually (IMARC Group, 2023; Global Market Insights, 2023) and the opportunities for expanding educational offerings.

### Course pricing strategy

Considering other platforms, where average courses are priced around €1,500, this provides a reasonable benchmark for setting the MERLIN Academy's course fees. Since the MERLIN Academy is newly launching its commercial courses, pricing should reflect a competitive edge. An introductory rate between €500 and €1,000 would allow for market entry at an accessible price point, establishing a mid-level course offering that balances quality with affordability. This approach will likely attract learners (sometimes paid by their institutions) seeking high-quality education on environmental restoration and Nature-based Solutions at a more approachable cost.

For the purpose of financial projections, we considered that the average cost per course will be 750 €+VAT. This means that some courses may be sold for €500+VAT, others for €1000+VAT. The course prices are updated according to the inflation rate which is estimated to be 2% per year (source: ECB mandate).

### Additional revenue streams

Apart from tuition, it might be exciting to consider introducing multiple revenue streams such as fees for certification, specialised course offerings, corporate training packages, bootcamps and maybe grants-in-aid from the government or private sectors. We estimated very conservatively other revenues per year.

## 6.2 Cost Structure

### Fixed costs

#### Staff roles and costs

Despite significant potential for cost-sharing with LimnoSolve (e.g. Learning Management System or content production), a cautious approach assumes a full-time managing director and an assistant for the MERLIN Academy. The sole synergy accounted for is a 50/50 sharing of a marketing manager with LimnoSolve, as a full-time role is not deemed necessary for the MERLIN Academy. If this shared arrangement does not materialise, the allocated budget for that 50% position could be redirected to outsource marketing services to a specialised third-party e-commerce provider.

The managing director is envisioned as a senior scientist who not only leads the Academy strategically and operationally but also oversees the scientific quality and development of all content. Should future revenues

exceed projections or additional EU-funded projects support the MERLIN Academy, there would be potential to expand the team – either by adding another senior scientist to support content development or by increasing staff capacity in other strategic areas.

Based on salary data from Glassdoor, here's an overview of estimated salaries for various roles that could be part of the staff at the MERLIN Academy, providing a foundation for budget planning:

- Administrative and management staff: Administrative roles in Europe can vary, with lower administrative support roles averaging €25,000 to €40,000 annually. In contrast, higher management roles in educational technology sectors can range from €50,000 to €100,000 annually, depending on the level of responsibility and the organisation's size.
- Marketing manager: Salaries for marketing professionals in the European education sector can range from €35,000 to €70,000 annually. These figures can vary widely based on the country, experience, and the scope of responsibilities, with potential for higher earnings based on performance and the strategic importance of the roles.
- Senior scientist: Despite it would be advantageous to have a specific Senior Scientist role in the current setup of MERLIN Academy to oversee all the content of the Academy, the reality is that there is little room for this kind of budget, unless there are new revenue streams guaranteed or European project funding. A senior scientist gross salary can range from €75,000 to €150,000 depending on the experience.

This European-centric salary overview provides a foundational understanding of budget planning, ensuring the estimates reflect the local economic conditions and the specific demands of the European educational technology market.

Accordingly with the above, we estimated staff annual costs (paid by MERLIN Academy including social security and corporate taxes) for the managing director position of €75,000 Euros plus bonus. For the assistant we considered an amount of €40,000 plus bonus and for the marketing manager we considered €50,000 plus bonus, shared with LimoSolve. The annual bonus distribution should align with individual responsibilities and salaries.

The current profitability analysis for the MERLIN Academy does not account for the potential use of unpaid interns. Should either of these occur, MERLIN Academy's profitability would increase.

### Course development

The development of high-quality, practice-oriented online courses requires multiple components, including content creation, instructional design, multimedia production, and assessment development. Based on current market estimates and experience from existing e-learning initiatives, the cost for producing a complete MERLIN Academy course is conservatively set at €15,000.

- Content creation and instructional design: Developing modules for the MERLIN Academy is not comparable to generic e-learning products. Courses are created by subject-matter experts and practitioners in freshwater and wetland restoration, requiring fair compensation for their expertise. This includes conceptualisation, preparation of scientifically sound materials, and integration of real-world case studies. While external data suggest basic course development may cost between €2,000 and €5,000, such estimates typically exclude expert engagement and applied scientific content, which are central to MERLIN Academy modules.
- Multimedia production: Professional multimedia elements – such as recorded lectures, animations, and interactive features – are integral to ensuring a high-quality learning experience. While AI tools may reduce costs for basic content, expert review and editorial oversight remain necessary to maintain scientific credibility and user engagement. Market benchmarks suggest that multimedia-rich courses can range from €6,000 to €15,000 per hour of finished content.

Considering these components, a base estimate of €15,000 per course is retained for financial projections. However, it should be noted that if external experts must be contracted for content creation – especially when working beyond the current MERLIN partner network – total development costs could rise significantly, potentially reaching €30,000 to €50,000 per module, depending on the topic complexity and level of multimedia integration.

To maintain consistency with the overall financial modelling, the Academy assumes the development of three new modules per year, resulting in an estimated annual investment of €45,000. This approach reflects a balanced budgetary assumption while ensuring that content quality and scientific rigour remain core strengths of the MERLIN Academy.

## Other costs

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In addition to personnel and course development, the MERLIN Academy will incur essential operational costs such as legal and accounting services, website hosting, domain registration, security updates, and general maintenance of the platform. While these costs are relatively modest compared to staffing and content development, they are critical for ensuring compliance, smooth operation, and a professional user experience. A flat annual estimate has been included in the budget to cover these recurring administrative and technical expenses.

## Variable costs

### Platform maintenance and LMS costs

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Considering all the potential expenses for platform maintenance and LMS costs for the MERLIN Academy, enterprises, on average, pay about €65,500 annually for LMS (Educate-Me, 2023), with a notable range that could be lower or significantly higher based on the size and scope of the operation.

To simplify the projections, given that LMS providers often have complex pricing structures, this business plan models MERLIN Academy paying an average annual per-student fee. For conservatism, we assume each course enrolls a new student who uses the platform for a full year. Many LMS providers charge US\$ 5 per user per month ( $\approx$  US\$ 60 per year). One provider considered is Bonzai AI LMS. Taking a conservative approach, we treat USD  $\approx$  EUR, assigning a €60 cost per course sold. Although Thinkific is the platform currently used by the MERLIN Academy, we base the plan on market benchmarks rather than a single vendor's price list, so the Academy is not exposed to risks, if Thinkific changes its pricing.

### Online payment commissions

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Online payment commissions refer to the fees charged by payment service providers (such as Stripe, PayPal, or credit card companies) for processing transactions made by learners when purchasing courses through the MERLIN Academy platform. These fees typically consist of a small percentage of the transaction value, often combined with a fixed amount per transaction. Given the variety of payment methods and providers used across Europe and internationally, a standard estimate of 3% of the total course revenue has been applied in this business plan. This conservative estimate accounts for differences in provider rates, currency conversions, and the inclusion of both domestic and international payments.

### Marketing expenses

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A budget of 10% of revenue may be allocated to targeted digital advertising campaigns, as this aligns with typical spending for pure e-commerce businesses. Conservatively, this projection assumes all revenue is generated from e-commerce, excluding potential income from EU projects or other sources.

The projection for the five-year cost assumes a level investment in marketing for each of the years. This will ensure that the MERLIN Academy maintains competitiveness in the market even after building its reputation.

## Financial projection overview

The summary table below presents a consolidated view of projected income and expenditures over the next five years for the MERLIN Academy. While based on conservative and well-researched assumptions, it is important to understand that many cost components – particularly those related to course development, platform maintenance, and marketing – can vary depending on multiple external and internal factors. These include the number and complexity of new courses developed each year, the degree of platform expansion, evolving learner needs, technological advancements, and fluctuations in operational demand. As such, the actual figures may shift over time. This financial projection should therefore be viewed as a dynamic tool, to be regularly revisited and refined as the Academy grows and the market context evolves.

Table 1: Financial projection for the next 5 years.

Year	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
<b>Revenues</b>					
Price per course (avgerage)	750	765	780	796	812
Number of courses sold	400	600	800	1000	1200
Total revenues of courses sold	300000	459000	624240	795906	974189
Other revenues (bootcamps...)	50000	75000	100000	150000	200000
<b>Total revenues</b>	<b>350000</b>	<b>534000</b>	<b>724240</b>	<b>945906</b>	<b>1174189</b>
<b>Variable costs</b>					
LMS costs	24000	36000	48000	60000	72000
Online payment commission	10500	16020	21727	28377	35226
Marketing costs	35000	53400	72424	94591	117419
<b>Total variable costs</b>	<b>69500</b>	<b>105420</b>	<b>142151</b>	<b>182968</b>	<b>224645</b>
<b>Gross margin</b>	<b>280500</b>	<b>428580</b>	<b>582089</b>	<b>762938</b>	<b>949544</b>
<b>Fixed costs</b>					
Managing director	75000	76500	78030	79591	81182
Assistant	40000	40800	41616	42448	43297
Marketing responsible (50%)	25000	25500	26010	26530	27061
Annual bonus	42075	64287	87313	114441	142432
Courses production		45000	45900	46818	47754
Other costs	40000	40800	41616	42448	43297
<b>Total fixed costs</b>	<b>222075</b>	<b>292887</b>	<b>320485</b>	<b>352276</b>	<b>385024</b>
<b>EBITDA</b>	<b>58425</b>	<b>135693</b>	<b>261603</b>	<b>410662</b>	<b>564521</b>

## 7 Conclusions

The MERLIN Academy is well positioned to become a long-term platform for high-quality education on freshwater and wetland restoration. It plays a crucial role in equipping professionals with the skills and knowledge needed to implement Nature-based Solutions and contribute meaningfully to environmental restoration across Europe and beyond.

Since the initial investment in infrastructure and course development has already been made, the Academy can be maintained with relatively low effort. With continued support from BOKU or UDE and strategic leadership from LimnoSolve, the Academy can evolve into a central hub for freshwater restoration training, including new topics such standing water body or large river restoration.

The MERLIN Academy’s strength lies in its expert-driven, EU-funded content, which lends it scientific credibility and policy relevance. However, current limitations – such as a narrow thematic focus and limited interactivity – highlight opportunities for future growth. Expanding the number and scope of courses, updating content regularly, and integrating community and peer-to-peer learning features will be important to remain competitive in the dynamic e-learning landscape.

To stay ahead, the Academy must continue refining its unique value proposition: deep expertise in freshwater and wetland restoration. It should engage more actively with potential learners and institutional partners to align course offerings with emerging training needs. In this context, interviewing target audiences and understanding market demand will be critical for future development.

Profitability and sustainability were evaluated by different monetisation strategies. This has helped identify the most effective pricing strategies and methods for learner engagement as it is highlighted in this section. Additionally, a break-even analysis was conducted to determine the precise point at which the Academy will start generating profits. The break-even point of the MERLIN Academy is reached once 284 courses are sold, which is clearly below the 400 estimated courses, and gives a good margin for manoeuvre.