REPLICATION PLAYBOOK

NATURE RESTORATION ACADEMY

SUB-MARINER NETWORK
eit Water
Funded by the European Union
GRUNDFOS FOUNDATION
POUL DUE JENSENS FOND

INTRODUCTION

About this playbook

This playbook explains how to build an academy, stage by stage, from the first idea to keeping the knowledge in use after the event.

It is written for anyone who builds an academy or teaches and trains, whether a university lecturer or programme coordinator, a trainer in a company or public body, an NGO or network that runs capacity building, or an EU project team with education and training activities.

Chapter 1 introduces our academy, the Nature Restoration Academy, as an example. Chapter 2 shows the model of the academy. Chapter 3, the core of the playbook, sets out ten steps in the order in which the work happens, from choosing the theme to reporting on impact. Chapter 4 turns the steps into a timeline and a checklist, and chapter 5 sets out the lessons we learned.

Our academy was funded by EIT Water and the Poul Due Jensen Foundation (Grundfos Foundation) through the 2026 Pilot EIT Water and PDJF Skills Booster Call.

CHAPTER 1

About our academy

The Nature Restoration Academy was a free training programme in marine and freshwater restoration for students and early-career professionals. SUBMARINER Network for Blue Growth EEIG organised it between July and November 2026. It began with an online session on 6 October and centered on two days at SUBMARINER's office in Berlin on 29 and 30 October. The lectures recorded in Berlin were then added to a free online course, so anyone can follow them.

The academy at a glance

Organiser	SUBMARINER Network for Blue Growth EEIG
Funding	EIT Water and the Poul Due Jensen Foundation (Grundfos Foundation), through the 2026 Pilot EIT Water and PDJF Skills Booster Call
Project period	15 July to 30 November 2026
Call for participants	30 July to 15 September 2026
Online session	6 October 2026, 15:00 to 17:15 (Berlin time), on Microsoft Teams
Event in Berlin	29 and 30 October 2026, at SUBMARINER's office
Participants	40, selected from 601 applicants in 98 countries
Online course	Integrated Ocean Planning: Marine Protected Areas, Multi-Use and Business Pathways, Course 4 of the Blue Bio Techpreneurs MOOC on FutureLearn
Call and programme	Call for participants on the SUBMARINER website
Event page	Nature Restoration Academy on BlueActionMatch

Europe needs people who can restore nature

The EU's Nature Restoration Regulation entered into force in August 2024 [1]. It requires restoration measures on at least 20 per cent of the EU's land areas and 20 per cent of its sea areas by 2030. By 2050, measures must cover all ecosystems that need restoration. Member States had to submit their draft national restoration plans by 1 September 2026 [2]. Delivering these plans takes people who can plan, carry out and finance restoration projects.

The capacity to deliver these plans is limited. BirdLife Europe, ClientEarth, the European Environmental Bureau and WWF reviewed the national plans at mid-term. They named a lack of political empowerment and capacity as the biggest weaknesses [3]. NetworkNature, an EU-funded platform, lists missing technical and operational skills among the main barriers to nature-based solutions [4]. In the Commission's blue economy skills survey, practical knowledge was the most sought-after skill in every sector [5]. More than half of the respondents, 58 per cent, found it hard to attract and retain talent.

The Commission's 2025 blue skills study found hands-on training and interdisciplinary courses scarce, while restoration skills are gaining importance [6]. We built the academy so that students and early-career professionals could practice restoration with the people who do it.

We built on an existing online course

The academy builds on Integrated Ocean Planning: Marine Protected Areas, Multi-Use and Business Pathways, a free four-week course on FutureLearn. It is Course 4 of the Blue Bio Techpreneurs MOOC, a series of free courses from an EU-funded project that SUBMARINER coordinated. Its four weeks run from maritime spatial planning and multi-use of the sea to marine protected areas and how to finance them.

The course is about the sea, while the Regulation also covers rivers and land. The academy therefore added a session on modelling nature-based solutions across river catchments. It also brought in hands-on restoration cases at sea, from seagrass meadows to oyster reefs and offshore wind parks.

More than 600 people applied for 40 places

The call for participants ran from 30 July to 15 September 2026 on SUBMARINER's website and on BlueActionMatch, its community platform. It offered free places and a contribution to travel costs for participants from outside Germany. Applicants filled in a short online form with a motivation statement. We promoted the call through our newsletter and social media, partner projects and the ambassadors of Blue Bio Techpreneurs. We also emailed 36 contacts at 16 universities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

The call drew 601 applications from 98 countries. We scored their motivation statements for relevance to restoration, specificity and evidence of impact, and we then selected the top 40 applicants. We invited everyone else to the online session and the free course.

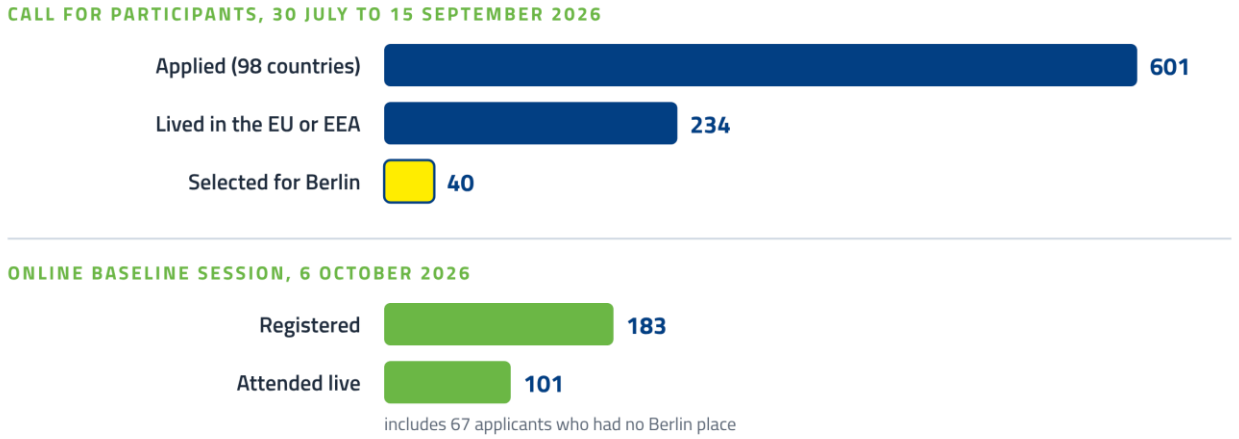


Figure 1. From applications to participants in our academy

The online session reached people beyond the cohort

The online session opened with the Nature Restoration Regulation and its links to other EU marine and water policy. The course educators then presented the four weeks of Course 4, each in a short talk with a live quiz and questions. Of 183 people who registered, 101 joined live from 39 countries.

Two days in Berlin focused on practice

Speakers from nine organisations led the two days in Berlin. We asked every speaker to split their slot between a short lecture and an interactive part. As a result, more than six of the 13 programme hours were hands-on.

The first day focused on marine habitats. The University of Tartu showed how nature-based solutions can restore them, and SUBMON explained how it restores seagrass meadows with local communities. The Centre of Competence for Nature-based Climate Action then presented Germany's Federal Action Plan on Nature-based Solutions for Climate and Biodiversity. The plan funds nature-based solutions on land, in water and at

sea. The day ended with the MPA Game, run by the MPA Community Network. Participants played sea users and authorities negotiating a marine protected area.

The second day turned to careers, rivers, offshore wind and business. The European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA) opened with a session on gender in blue careers. Ghent University presented native oyster reef restoration in the Belgian North Sea. Warsaw University of Life Sciences showed how models assess nature-based solutions across a river catchment, and FuE-Zentrum FH Kiel discussed restoration in offshore wind parks. BRYCK Startup Alliance closed the programme with a session on founding a venture. In its final workshop, teams turned a restoration idea into a business model and pitched it.

Attendance was high. Of the 40 selected participants, 38 attended the first day and 36 the second. Those who missed a day were ill or could not attend the second day, and had told us before the event.

Participants who attended both days received a certificate of participation at the end of the second day. The certificate gives them proof of the training, and many posed with it in photos they shared on LinkedIn, which gave the academy extra visibility.

After the academy, we sent participants the slides of the presentations, a folder of event photos and a feedback survey. Participants eligible for travel support also received the reimbursement form.

The participants rated the academy 4.4 out of 5 overall and the speakers and sessions 4.2. They valued the hands-on parts most, from case studies and exercises to group work and the MPA Game, along with the range of speakers and the chance to meet peers and people from industry. They asked for more workshops and practical cases, shorter lectures and more time to get to know each other and the speakers, for example through a networking evening before the event.

The lectures stay available online

We recorded eight of the Berlin lectures and added them to Course 4 as new video steps. Each comes with a short introduction and a question for learners. They went online on 6 November 2026, a week after the event, and anyone who joins the free course can follow them. The course itself grew from 464 learners in June 2026 to 657 in mid-October.

CHAPTER 2

The model at a glance

Based on our Academy, we suggest that an Academy could have three parts: the first session gives everyone the same starting level using existing knowledge. An event in person turns that knowledge into practice. The content then goes into a lasting outlet, such as a course module, a website or a toolkit, where people can find and use it in the long term.

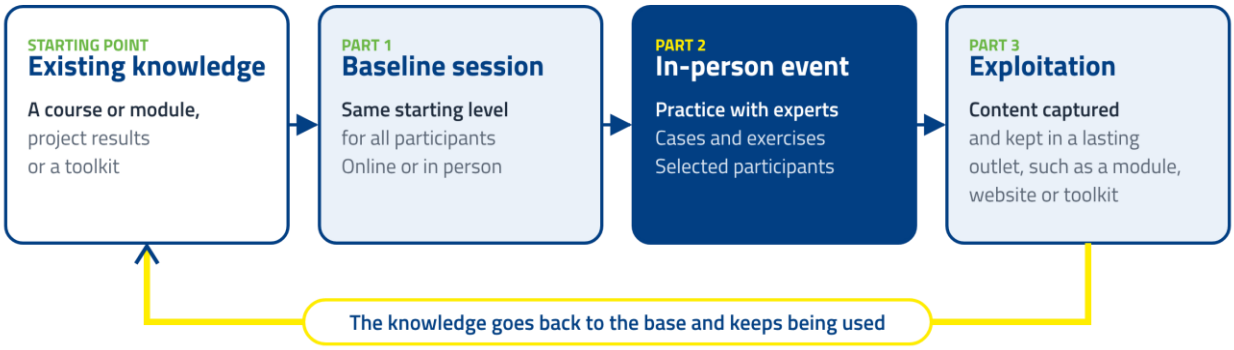


Figure 2. The academy model

The first session is the baseline session. It can be a webinar, a lecture or a workshop, held online or in person. Its format matters less than its result, which is that every participant reaches the event with the same grounding in the existing knowledge. Online has one extra benefit, because you can open the session to every applicant at little cost. Because participants share that grounding, the event can skip the introductions. Every lecture comes with an exercise, a simulation or a discussion, and participants work on real cases with the people who do the work. The third part, exploitation, puts the content into a lasting outlet. Recordings, slides and case material go where people can find them after the event, usually into the material the academy started from. That material then grows with every edition, and people who could not attend can still learn from the event. Choose the outlet when you plan the programme, because it decides what you record and how.

Example of our academy

Part of the model	In the Nature Restoration Academy
Existing knowledge	Course 4 of the Blue Bio Techpreneurs MOOC on FutureLearn, Integrated Ocean Planning: Marine Protected Areas, Multi-Use and Business Pathways
Baseline session	Online on Microsoft Teams, 6 October 2026, 15:00 to 17:15, open to every applicant
In-person event	29 and 30 October 2026 at SUBMARINER's office in Berlin, 40 participants
Exploitation	Eight recorded lectures added to Weeks 2, 3 and 4 of Course 4, free for anyone who joins

CHAPTER 3

Ten steps to build your own academy

The ten steps follow the order in which the work happens, from the first idea to the reporting. Plan backwards from the date of the event, as chapter 4 shows.

Step	What you will have at the end
1. Start from a real need and knowledge you already have	A theme based on the skills that studies show students and employers need, and existing knowledge to build on
2. Define audience, outcomes and skills	A target group, a cohort size and learning outcomes
3. Build the programme	Confirmed speakers and an agenda
4. Plan budget, venue and travel support, if needed	A budget, a venue and, if needed, travel rules
5. Recruit participants	Applications from the people you want to reach
6. Select and prepare the cohort	A confirmed cohort and a waiting list
7. Run the baseline session	A shared starting level and, if online, a wider reach
8. Run the in-person event	Practice, captured content and feedback
9. Keep the knowledge in use	A new module, or another lasting outlet such as a website or toolkit
10. Measure, report and share	An impact report and lessons others can use

Step 1. Start from a real need and knowledge you already have

Start from the need, not from the material you happen to have. Find out which skills are missing and who lacks them, using evidence such as skills studies, employer surveys and the obligations that new policy creates. Then look for knowledge that already exists on the topic, for example an online course, a university module or the results of an EU project.

Existing knowledge makes a good starting point because it becomes the baseline of the academy. Participants start from the same grounding, and the academy continues where the material ends, with practice and expert input. Comparing the material with the need also shows what is missing. Our online course was about the sea, so we added a session on river catchments and hands-on restoration cases at sea.

What to do

1. Describe the skills gap in a few sentences, with the evidence behind it and the people who have it.
2. List the knowledge that you and your partners already have on the topic, such as courses, project results, toolkits or webinar series.
3. Check that you can use this material and add to it later, including the rights to the content and access to the platform.
4. Check the quality of the material and plan time for corrections. Our course needed fixes, from outdated policy text to broken links.
5. Compare the material with the need and write down what the academy has to add.

Step 2. Define your audience, learning outcomes and skills

Decide who the academy is for before you design the programme, because the audience shapes the content, the recruitment channels and the selection rules.

Learning outcomes say what participants will be able to do after the academy. Derive them from the skills gap in step 1 and from the outcomes of the material you build on. Refine them once your speakers are confirmed in step 3. Then check them against reference frameworks. The EU has competence frameworks for sustainability (GreenComp), entrepreneurship (EntreComp), digital skills (DigComp) and the blue economy (BlueComp) [7, 8, 9, 10]. The ESCO classification describes the skills that each occupation needs [11]. If participants should earn formal credit, for example from a partner university, match the outcomes to the right level of the European Qualifications Framework [12].

What to do

1. Define the target group by career stage and sector, and decide whether you need separate tracks, for example for students and professionals.
2. Set the size of the cohort. Interactive sessions need groups small enough for everyone to take part, and each extra place adds costs.
3. Fix eligibility rules, such as country of residence or career stage, and state them in the call.
4. Decide how you will check learning, for example through polls, exercises, a pitch or a short assignment.

Step 3. Build the programme

The programme is only as good as the people who deliver it. Look for speakers who do the work in practice, and agree a common session format with all of them early.

What to do

1. Invite speakers from projects, universities, companies and public bodies who work on the theme, and aim for a gender balance.
2. Agree one session format for all speakers, for example an hour that combines a short lecture with an exercise or a discussion.
3. Order the sessions so that each builds on the one before, for example from policy to practice to business.
4. Include at least one longer simulation or challenge in which participants solve a realistic problem together.
5. Collect speaker details and consent to recording through a short intake form.
6. Send speakers a brief with the agenda and two deadlines, one for session details and one for slides and materials.

Step 4. Plan the budget

An academy needs money for speakers, for recording and editing the content and for catering. The venue, equipment and promotion can often come in kind, for example if you host the event at your own office or a partner university. Fix the budget before you open the call. It decides how many people you can invite and from how far away they can come.

What to do

1. List the costs, typically speaker time, programme development, recording and editing, platform costs, catering and materials.
2. Ask partners what they can give in kind, such as a venue, equipment, staff time or promotion.
3. If you offer travel support, write the rules before the call opens, including who can claim, how much and by when.
4. Book recording and editing early.

Step 5. Recruit participants

Start with the people you can reach directly, then widen the circle. Direct invitations bring applicants who fit your profile, while broad promotion brings volume and many applicants you cannot select. Whatever the channel, state the eligibility rules in the first lines of every message.

What to do

1. Write one master text with the description, dates, eligibility rules, deadline and funding line, and adapt it for each channel.
2. Publish an event page with a short application form and one deadline.
3. Invite people directly, such as alumni of your courses, former participants of your events and contacts in university departments.
4. Send partners and ambassadors a text they can forward without editing.
5. Post about each speaker as they confirm, to keep the call visible.
6. Ask applicants how they heard about the call, so you learn which channels work.

Direct invitations worked best in our academy

Direct invitations brought the best match. In our academy, 35 per cent of the selected participants heard about it through their university, against 13 per cent of all applications. Personal emails to university departments, course alumni and former participants of our events took time, but they reached the people we wanted.

Partners and ambassadors took the call into networks we could not reach ourselves. We sent each of them a ready-to-forward text with the dates and the link. On our own channels, a short post for each confirmed speaker gave people a fresh reason to look at the call.

Social media and opportunity platforms brought volume rather than fit. Social media was named in 68 per cent of applications, most of them from people outside the eligible area. From late August, international platforms that list training opportunities also relisted the call and spread it worldwide.

Step 6. Select and prepare the cohort

Selection decides who takes part, so base it on criteria you publish and apply them to every application. Keep a waiting list, because some people will decline their place. Applicants you cannot select are still an audience. Invite them to the baseline session if it runs online, and to the course or community you build on.

What to do

1. Score motivation statements against the published criteria, and add balance criteria such as background, country and gender.
2. Send offers with a deadline to confirm, and refill declined places from the waiting list.
3. Ask for consent to recording, photography and sharing contact details as three separate opt-ins. Saying no must not stop anyone from attending.

Step 7. Run the baseline session

The baseline session gives every participant the same grounding before the event. Ask the people behind the existing knowledge, such as the course educators, to lead it, so that it matches the material. About two hours is enough when the talks are short and broken up by quizzes and questions. Held online, the session can also reach people who will not attend the event.

What to do

1. Choose the format, online or in person, and a date about three weeks before the event.
2. Ask the people behind the existing knowledge to present it in short blocks.

3. Use live polls or quizzes to find out what participants already know.
4. If the session is online, invite every applicant and anyone else who is interested.
5. Record the session for the lasting outlet.
6. End with a short feedback form and a link to the course or material, so people can keep learning.

Step 8. Run the in-person event

Build the event days around practice. Keep lectures short, give each session an interactive part and leave time for participants to talk to each other and to the speakers. Plan the recording at the same time, so that the content can go into the lasting outlet afterwards.

What to do

1. Pair every lecture with an exercise, a case discussion or a simulation.
2. Capture the content of each session, from recordings to slides, exercises and case material.
3. Agree beforehand how people who did not consent to recording will be kept out of shot.
4. Close with a feedback survey and certificates of attendance.

Step 9. Keep the knowledge in use

The content you capture takes the academy beyond the people who attended. Choose its outlet when you plan the agenda, because the outlet decides what you record and how you edit it. The best outlet is often the material the academy started from. In our academy, each recorded lecture became a new step in the week of the online course it relates to.

What to do

1. Choose the outlet, for example new lessons in an existing course, a website, a video series or a toolkit.
2. Decide where each session fits in the outlet.
3. Write a short introduction and a discussion question for each video, so that it links to the rest of the material.
4. Tell participants, unsuccessful applicants, alumni and partners when the content is online.
5. Keep the outlet up to date and link to it from later events and projects.

Step 10. Measure, report and share

Decide what you will measure before the call opens. Most of the data can come from the application form, the attendance lists and one feedback survey. Collecting it as you go is far easier than reconstructing it later. Our funder asked who took part, how many finished, how satisfied participants were and which knowledge gaps the programme addressed.

What to do

1. Put the questions for the participant profile into the application form, including how people heard about the call.
2. Use polls at the start and a survey at the end to capture prior knowledge, satisfaction and intended use of the skills.
3. Share what you learned, so that others can build on it.

CHAPTER 4

Planning backwards from your event

In our academy, the in-person event took place 15 weeks after the project started. The timeline shows the key dates, and the checklist turns them into lead times you can apply to your own event.

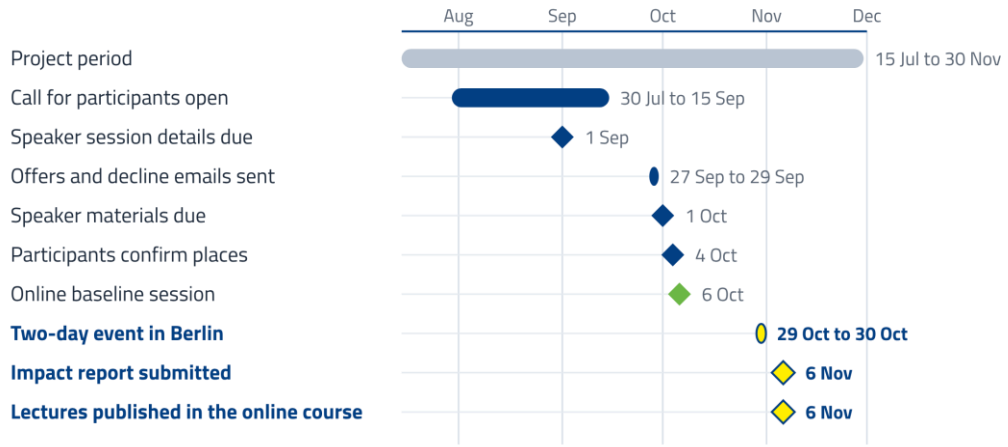


Figure 3. Key dates of our academy

Four months or more before the event

- ☐ Choose the theme and the existing knowledge you will build on
- ☐ Confirm speakers, session topics and the session format
- ☐ Write the master text
- ☐ Build the application form with separate consents
- ☐ Write the travel rules, if you offer travel support
- ☐ Book the venue, recording and catering

Three months to six weeks before

- ☐ Open the call, publish the event page and send direct invitations
- ☐ Send the newsletter, partner and ambassador texts
- ☐ Post about speakers as they confirm
- ☐ Collect full session details from speakers (eight weeks before)
- ☐ Close applications (six weeks before)

Six to three weeks before

- ☐ Score applications, select the cohort and keep a waiting list
- ☐ Send offers and decline emails, and ask for confirmation within a week
- ☐ Collect all speaker materials (four weeks before)
- ☐ Run the baseline session (about three weeks before)

The event and the week after

- ☐ Run the event, capture the content, run the feedback survey and hand out certificates
- ☐ Publish the content in your lasting outlet within a week of the event
- ☐ Share what you learned

CHAPTER 5

Lessons learned

Nine lessons stand out from the preparation, the online session, the two days in Berlin and the first feedback from participants.

1. Plan the programme before you open the call for participants

Confirm the partners and develop the sessions before the call opens. Our call could then name partners, sessions and real cases from the first day, so applicants knew what they were applying for.

2. Targeted outreach finds the right people

Social media brought the most applications, mostly from outside the eligible area. Applicants who heard about the call through their university made up a far larger share of the people we selected. Direct emails to university departments are worth the effort.

3. Turn excess demand into reach

We invited every applicant to the online session, the free course and our community platform. It cost almost nothing, and many applicants without a place in Berlin joined the session live.

4. Keep the baseline session short, interactive and based on cases

Participants in our online session valued the polls, quizzes and short talks most. They asked for more case studies and practical examples, and less text on the slides. Only nine people answered the survey, so treat this as a signal rather than a finding.

5. Write consent and travel rules in detail

Recording, photography and sharing contact details each need a separate opt-in, and saying no must not block attendance. If you offer travel support, send a short FAQ with the offer. It should cover questions such as shared invoices, night trains and journeys that do not start from home.

6. Make time for participants to meet

Participants came to meet peers as much as to learn. More time to network was the most frequent request in our feedback survey after more hands-on work. Open with an ice breaker or a name round, and plan informal time with peers and speakers.

7. Keep interactive parts interactive

Questions to the room and links across groups worked well in Berlin. Participants rated the hands-on parts highest, from the MPA Game to case work and exercises, and asked for more of them.

8. Two days are dense

Our two days held 13 programme hours. Participants valued how much they learned, but the days were long, and some would have welcomed a longer academy. Plan a third day, or fewer sessions in two days, to leave room for practice, networking and perhaps a field visit.

9. Hold pre-calls with speakers and participants

Short calls before the event set the tone, so speakers knew the format and the audience, and participants knew what to expect. One participant missed a clear thread between the talks, so use the speaker calls to show how each session links to the others.

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Figures on applications, attendance and participants come from SUBMARINER's registration and attendance records. Learner numbers for Course 4 come from FutureLearn.

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