GreenCert for VET: Development of criteria for the Certification of Green Education Centers in Europe

Erasmus+ Programme

Project no. 2023-1-AT01-KA210-VET-000153976

Compendium

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Document Identification:

Activity	***Compendium***
Type:	*Document*
Version:	*Final version*
Delivery date:	*28/2/2025*
Abstract:	*This document summarizes the results of the interviews conducted and will serve as the basis for the next steps*
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Contents

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1. Introduction

This compendium presents a comparative synthesis of the qualitative interviews conducted with Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions in Greece and Austria, as part of Activity 1 of the GreenCert Project. The purpose is to gather insights, evaluate the current state of play, and identify needs and opportunities related to the certification of green skills within educational institutions. The findings aim to inform the development of a common European framework for certifying "Green Education Centers."

As a first step, it is necessary, desk research was carried out to understand the status-quo of green certification processes, legal parameters and possibilities in the field. It is aimed at gathering data of already existing certification-schemes, in order for the project to draw from a broad knowledge on the theoretical side of things.

The first step was accompanied by field research: this consisted of collecting data on best practise examples. In this step, structured interviews were conducted with institutions, partners, and other organisations, who have already successfully implemented green certification processes at their institution. By this means, the already existing knowledge and insights will be exchanged, so the certification scheme to be created can count on a valid foundation.

2. Project Overview

The project aims to achieve the following objectives:

- **Increase the attractiveness of the VET sector:** By promoting sustainability and environmental awareness within the VET sector, the certification process could make vocational education and training more appealing to students who are interested in these issues and help to create a more sustainable workforce.
- **Achieving Sustainability in Education:** The certification process could contribute to achieving sustainability in education by encouraging vocational education and training centers to incorporate sustainability principles into their curriculum and operations, and by providing a framework for monitoring and evaluating their progress towards sustainability goals.
- **Standardize the procedure of "greening" of a VET provider:** By developing a standardized procedure, the certification process could help to ensure that all VET providers seeking certification meet a consistent set of criteria and follow a consistent process. This could make the certification process fairer and more transparent, and could help to build trust among stakeholders such as students, employers, and policymakers. Additionally, a standardized procedure could help to streamline the certification process, making it more efficient and cost-effective for VET providers.
- **Supporting the implementation of EU VET policy:** The European Commission has manifested the importance of VET in achieving the goals of the Green Deal through various decisions and recommendations. Following the Recommendation for VET and the Osnabruck Declaration, the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research in Austria

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has defined the establishment of national Green Skills Competence Centres in the National Implementation Plan. This measure provides for the certification of VET schools as Green Skills Competence Centres if certain criteria are met. Other EU member states are also pursuing the same or similar goals. The development of a catalogue of criteria for this certification can therefore form the basis for this measure.

Target Groups:

- VET centers/schools (in initial, tertiary, and continuous level EQF 3-6):
- VET trainers and admin staff:
- VET students:
- Other stakeholders

Outcomes:

- One compendium of best practices in EU level
- One set of criteria for the Certification of Green Education Centers in Europe.
- One report with the findings of focus groups regarding the formulation of the UNESCO-UNEVOC criteria
- One online workshop
- Two pilot implementations of the criteria in Greece and Austria

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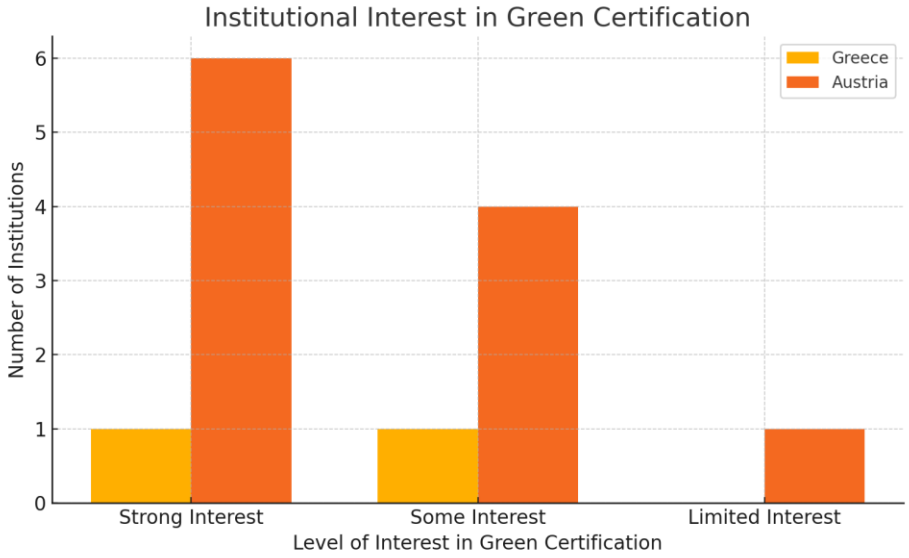
3. Results

Motivation for Certification

Greece:
Strong interest, especially among private institutions (e.g., Metropolitan College).
Seen as a competitive advantage and alignment with sustainability goals.
Austria:
Widespread support across institutions.
Considered a distinguishing factor for attracting students and building credibility with partners and parents.
Institutions already active in green initiatives (e.g., HTL Graz BULME) showed highest enthusiasm.



Understanding of Green Skills Certification

Both countries emphasized:
Certification should reflect institutional practices, not individual student skills (yet).
Certification systems known include ISO 14001, national initiatives, and ad hoc internal assessments.
Formal documentation is often seen as too time-consuming unless supported or required.

Relevant Assessment Areas

Common Themes:
Pedagogical: Curriculum integration, teaching methods, student projects, teacher training.
Administrative: Energy use, waste management, infrastructure, policy implementation.
Greece:
Public institutions face limitations due to ministry control.
Private institutions more autonomous in curriculum and policy shifts.
Austria:

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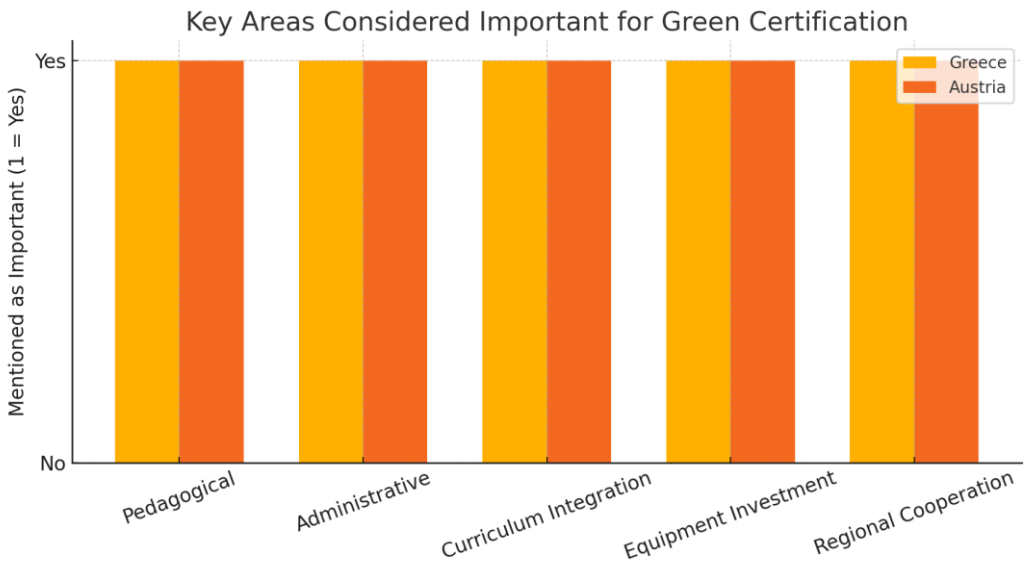
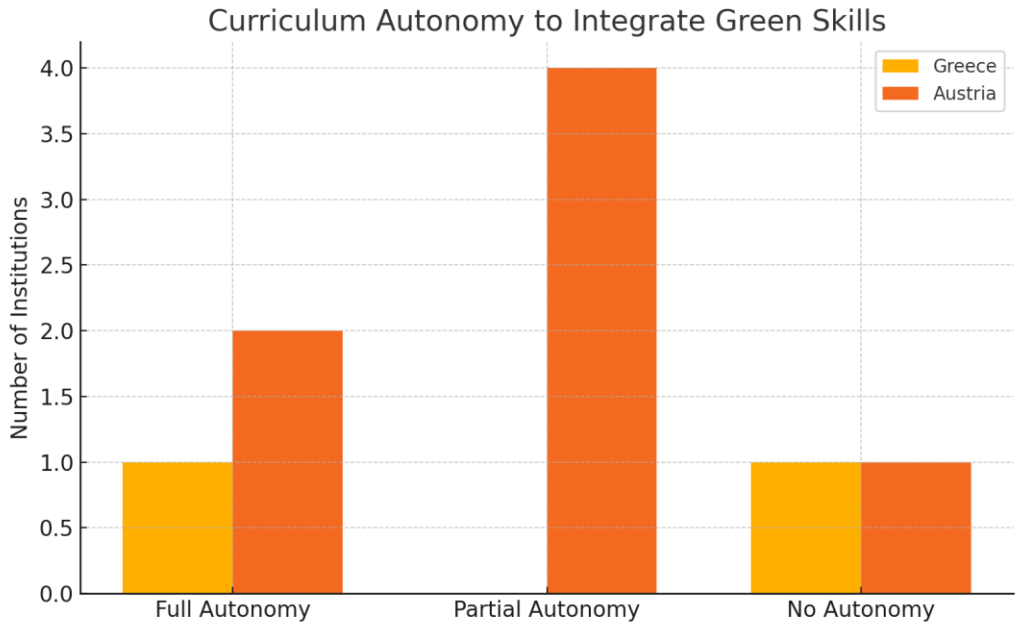
Autonomy exists to some extent; some have implemented curriculum changes already. Importance of school-wide involvement, not just directors—teams and informal units play a vital role.



Curriculum Integration & Autonomy

Austria: Some institutions are already adapting curricula (e.g., HTL Klagenfurt, HTL Graz). Highlighted the challenge of fast-changing green technologies making curricula quickly outdated.

Greece: Private institutions are adapting; public ones lack autonomy. Students show varying levels of interest in green content.



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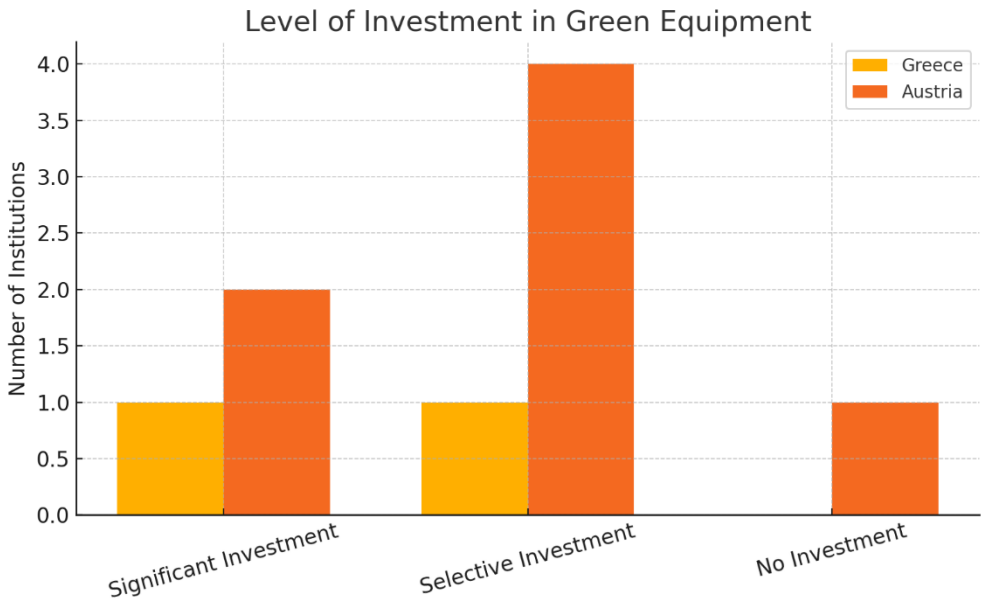
Personnel Development & Equipment Investment

Austria:
Selective investments in lab equipment (hydrogen, photovoltaics).
Use of national and EU funding.
Difficulty integrating sustainability among non-teaching administrative staff.
Greece:
Investments in energy-efficient and eco-friendly equipment.
Varying levels of commitment depending on institutional type.
No mention of external funding use.



Institutional Responsibility & Staff Units

Both countries agree:
Responsibility lies with school leadership but cannot rest solely with directors.
No formal staff units exist; informal working groups or passionate individuals drive the effort.
Dedicated units could provide structure and sustainability to green efforts.

Regional Cooperation & Competence Centers

Common Understanding:
Competence centers could enhance collaboration with local industries and communities.
Useful for sharing expertise, training, innovation, and workforce development.
Austria:
Some already function as regional hubs in technological areas.
Staff capacity is a limiting factor.
Greece:
Private institutions collaborate with local businesses.
Public institutions have less interaction.

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4. Suggestions for Certification Criteria

Throughout the interviews, participants from both Austria and Greece provided rich suggestions that could inform the certification framework for Green Education Centers. A strong emphasis was placed on the holistic nature of sustainability — it cannot be confined to a single department or curriculum unit. Instead, it must permeate the institution's ethos, operations, and teaching practices.

Among the most frequently mentioned indicators were student-led projects and diploma theses focused on environmental themes, seen as evidence of practical application and student engagement. Similarly, training programs for educators were considered crucial, especially in equipping staff to integrate sustainability meaningfully into their teaching.

Institutions also proposed environmental audits and eco-conscious operational policies as measurable criteria — for instance, the use of renewable energy, waste management practices, and sustainable procurement. Finally, collaboration stood out: many institutions highlighted their partnerships with green-sector businesses and NGOs as vital touchpoints for maintaining relevance and driving innovation.

The suggested criteria from both countries are summarized as follows:

- Projects and diploma theses
- Teacher training and seminars
- Student involvement
- School-wide green policies
- Infrastructure and equipment
- External partnerships and collaborations

In short, institutions are not just looking for a certificate — they are seeking a roadmap that supports them in becoming catalysts for sustainable transformation.

5. Challenges Identified

While enthusiasm for GreenCert is high, several recurring challenges were identified. One of the most significant barriers — particularly for public institutions in Greece — is the limited autonomy to reform curricula or implement cross-institutional sustainability strategies. In contrast, private institutions, with more flexibility, are already adapting their programs, though they too face resource and training limitations.

Another commonly mentioned concern was the administrative burden. Certification processes are often perceived as bureaucratic and time-consuming. There’s a clear desire for any certification scheme to be streamlined, accessible, and well-supported, ideally with templates, guidance documents, and digital tools.

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Institutions also stressed the importance of involving more than just school leadership. Whole-institution buy-in — from janitorial staff to senior administrators — is essential. However, formal roles and responsibilities around sustainability are often lacking, especially in schools with no staff units dedicated to green goals.

Lastly, access to funding was uneven. While some Austrian institutions had successfully leveraged European and national programs, others — particularly in Greece — reported that financial constraints hindered investments in green infrastructure and training.

These challenges highlight the importance of designing a certification system that is both aspirational and realistic, balancing ambition with institutional realities.

6. Conclusions

The interviews carried out in Austria and Greece have provided compelling evidence of both the readiness and the need for a structured, meaningful, and practical certification scheme for Green Education Centers in Europe. Institutions see green certification not just as a badge of honor, but as a framework that can help them evolve and respond to the societal, environmental, and economic challenges of our time.
As the GreenCert project moves toward the development and piloting of criteria, several key recommendations emerge from the field:

- Ensure inclusivity: The certification model must accommodate diverse contexts — from highly autonomous private colleges to more regulated public training centers.
- Support implementation: Tools, templates, and advisory support will be crucial in lowering entry barriers and encouraging uptake.
- Promote adaptability: With sustainability technologies and practices evolving rapidly, the criteria must be flexible enough to remain relevant over time.
- Foster cultural change: Beyond policies and curricula, certification should reward institutions that embed sustainability in their organizational DNA — in values, leadership, and community engagement.
- Strengthen networks: Cross-border collaboration, peer learning, and digital exchange platforms should be actively promoted to amplify reach and impact.

Ultimately, the GreenCert initiative has the potential to become a cornerstone of Europe's green transition in education. It offers not only a mechanism for institutional development but also a symbol of commitment to a shared, sustainable future.

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