Make it sustainable
VIA University College

VIA Summer School

Nature Connectedness and Systems Thinking

VIA SUMMER SCHOOL
NATURE CONNECTEDNESS AND SYSTEMS THINKING

Dates 2nd-27th August 2027 + one online element before the physical part starts
Language English
Credits 10 Credits
Academic level BA Level
Prerequisites Students must have completed 1 year of studies at bachelor level
Maximum enrollment Maximum 35 participants. Students are accepted on a first come, first served basis
Application deadline 1 April
Location VIA University College, Campus Aarhus C, Ceresbyen 24, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

We are surrounded by complex challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, stress, declining well-being, growing social inequality, and the need for strengthened efforts in health promotion and disease prevention. These challenges cannot be understood or addressed in isolation, as they are closely interconnected and mutually influence one another. We need new ways of thinking, learning, doing and being.
This Summer School offers you the opportunity to explore how nature and nature connectedness can be applied as tools within your own professional practice and discipline. For example, nature connectedness can support initiatives related to health, well-being, learning, and innovation in an interprofessional context, while also strengthening awareness of the value and importance of nature for both individuals and society.
Through interdisciplinary and intercultural collaboration, you will identify and work with real-world challenges where the relationships between people, nature, and society are central. The course is based on problem-based learning, field studies, and practice-oriented projects, providing opportunities to translate knowledge into action.
Systems thinking forms a central theoretical framework of the course. Through systems perspectives and tools, you will learn to view issues holistically rather than focusing on isolated components, and to understand the relationships and dynamics that create complex challenges. Nature connectedness inherently supports systems thinking, as attention is directed toward relationships between individuals and nature, between communities and nature, and between nature's own systems and processes.
Nature serves as a learning environment, collaborative partner, and source of inspiration throughout the course. Together with students from different educational backgrounds and cultures, you will explore how a stronger connection between people and nature can foster innovative solutions and contribute to positive change.
By the end of the course, you will have developed competencies in nature connectedness, systems thinking, interprofessional collaboration, and nature-based approaches to health promotion, prevention, well-being and innovation. You will be better equipped to understand and respond to complex challenges in a world where nature, people, and society are inseparably connected.

DIDACTICS

The Summer School is based on an experiential and participatory approach to learning, combining outdoor learning, field visits, embodied exercises, reflection, dialogue, and scenario-based activities. Students engage with real-world challenges through interdisciplinary and intercultural collaboration, using nature as a learning

environment and source of insight. Through discussions, reflective exercises, and practice-oriented project work, students are encouraged to connect theory and practice, explore multiple perspectives, and develop innovative responses to complex health, social, and environmental challenges

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Knowledge
You will gain a theoretical foundation as well as practical tools related to nature connectedness, systems thinking, health promotion and prevention, and innovation. You will be introduced to concepts and methods within systems thinking that can be used to understand complex challenges related to human health and well-being, nature, and society. You will work with local and global challenges from multiple perspectives and explore how different systems, relationships, power structures, cultural understandings, and patterns of action influence opportunities for creating sustainable and health-promoting change.

Skills
You will learn to apply holistic and systemic approaches within nature connectedness and systems thinking to analyse and understand complex challenges. You will gain experience in identifying interconnections, patterns, causes, and potential unintended consequences when developing initiatives related to health promotion, prevention, well-being, and rehabilitation. In addition, you will work with practice-based cases, field studies, and project work, applying systems thinking tools to deconstruct challenges, investigate root causes, and develop more nuanced and effective solutions.

Competencies
You will develop the competencies needed to translate theoretical knowledge of nature connectedness and systems thinking into concrete ideas, interventions, and solution proposals within a practice-oriented project. You will be able to collaborate in interprofessional and intercultural groups to analyse complex challenges and formulate courses of action that contribute to health promotion, prevention and positive change. You will strengthen your ability to think across traditional boundaries, argue in a nuanced manner, communicate with different target groups, and apply systemic perspectives in your own professional practice as well as in future collaborations.

Target Group
The Summer School is aimed primarily at students within the health sciences and health professions. Nature-based approaches are increasingly being integrated into health promotion and preventive interventions. However, the Summer School is also relevant for students from other professional backgrounds, such as education, pedagogy, architecture and construction management, and related fields, where there is an interest in integrating nature into professional practice.

Examination
Written group assignment and oral group examination. Each student is assessed individually.

VIA SUMMER SCHOOL
NATURE CONNECTEDNESS AND SYSTEMS THINKING

DRAFT COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1 Understanding Yourself and the Context

Theme

Understanding yourself as a practitioner within interconnected social, ecological and health systems.

Activities

- Welcome, team building and group agreements
- Nature connection activities and reflection - Adventure therapy and risky play
- Field visit / Practice visit
- Introduction to systems thinking through lived experiences
- Formation of project groups and selection of challenge area

Theory

- Nature Connectedness
- Health Promotion and Prevention
- Rehabilitation and Occupational Justice
- Systems Thinking Foundations - Iceberg Model - Habits of a Systems Thinker - Behavior Over Time Graphs - Connected Circles

Week 2 Reading the System

Theme

Exploring root causes, relationships, patterns and leverage points.

Activities

- Field visit to an organisation addressing sustainability, health or social innovation
- Field visit / Practice visit
- Visit from practitioners working with systems thinking
- Project work and supervision sessions
- Peer feedback workshops

Theory

- Atom Innovation Model, Causal Loop Diagrams, Feedback Loops, Systems Mapping,
- Leverage Points, Stakeholder Analysis

VIA SUMMER SCHOOL
NATURE CONNECTEDNESS AND SYSTEMS THINKING

Week 3: Designing Systems Change

Theme
Developing interventions, prototypes and future oriented solutions.

Activities

- Project work - Daily coaching and supervision sessions
- Testing ideas with stakeholders - Feedback from external partners
- Prototype development workshop
- Midterm project presentations

Theory

- Futures Thinking, Regenerative Development, Theory of Change, Systems Innovation

Prototyping and Experimentation, Impact Pathways

Week 4: Communicating Change and Impact

Theme

Transforming systems insights into convincing and actionable proposals.

Activities

- Final report submission - Pitch and storytelling workshop, presentation training
- Final showcase with external partners - Networking and reflection event
- Examination
- Celebration and course evaluation

Theory

- Storytelling for Change, Systems Leadership, Communication and Facilitation,
- Impact Evaluation