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Deliverable 4.2

Report on the Virtual Spring School for ECRs

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Definition
CI	Corporate Identity
DCoE	Digital Center of Excellence
ECRs	Early Career Researcher
EU	European Union
FAQ	Frequently Asked Questions
HEI	Higher Education Institution
LS	Life Sciences
SER	Socially Engaged Research

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The BETTER Life Virtual Spring School, held on April 9th and 10th, 2024, focused on introducing Early Career Researchers (ECRs) to life sciences and the significance of socially engaged research. The event aimed to provide insights into the tools and outputs developed by the BETTER Life project, emphasizing the integration of scientific inquiry with societal needs.

Workshops and interactive sessions offered practical training on engaging with diverse stakeholders, emphasizing collaboration and ethical considerations to ensure research is both scientifically robust and socially relevant. The Spring School aimed to build a community of scholars dedicated to socially engaged research, fostering interdisciplinary connections and equipping ECRs with the skills and networks needed to address complex social and scientific challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Reasoning, Objective and Goals of the Virtual Spring School

This report provides an overview of the objectives, proceedings and outcomes of the BETTER Life Virtual Spring School that took place on April 9th and 10th 2024. The Virtual Spring School was specifically tailored towards Early Career Researchers and aimed at introducing the topic of life sciences and socially engaged research, as well as informing ECRs on the various tools and outputs that the BETTER Life project has so far produced.

Life sciences is an ever-evolving field of sciences that needs to adapt to the socio-ecological and cultural changes that so heavily influence our societies today. As such, the role of science and the role of researchers extends far beyond the scope of traditional, somewhat isolated practices of science. Today, the impacts of scientific inquire ought to be strongly connected with societal needs, considering ethical issues and allowing for public engagement. Our Virtual Spring School thus attempts to inform and empower a new generation of scientists to adequately navigate the complexity that life sciences and social challenges present today. With this Spring School, we furthermore attempt to build and nurture a community of scholars who are not only skilled in their respective scientific disciplines but are also eager to shape their research according to societal needs and willing to work with a broad spectrum of stakeholders in an integrated manner. It was our goal to inform the participants of the Virtual Spring School about the importance of socially engaged research and which tools and methodologies exist to align one's research with this concept.

As a reminder, socially engaged research in life sciences seeks to bridge the gap between scientific practices and societal benefit. It thus involves a commitment from academia to better understand and address societal challenges through a collaborative approach that values the perspectives and expertise of diverse stakeholders. This includes but is not limited to enhanced engagement with communities, policymakers, and other relevant groups to ensure that research is not only scientifically sound but also socially relevant and ethically responsible.

Throughout this virtual spring school, participants received theoretical lectures and interactively explored key themes that define socially engaged research. These included:

- An overview of the **concept of Socially Engaged Research (SER)** and an introduction to the **BETTER Life project**.
- **Expectations** regarding SER and various **challenges** when attempting to adapt one's research to better align with societal interests and needs.
- Information on how to create good space **for science communication** at universities.
- A hand-on experiences on a **number of tools and methodologies developed by the BETTER Life project** with the intent of providing participants a better understanding of their use and potential application.
- **Ethical Foundations and Social Responsibility**: Addressing and discussing ethical dimensions of socially engaged research and how to responsibly conduct their work in a manner that considers the welfare of society and the environment.
- **Community Engagement and Participation:** Understanding the importance of involving communities in the research process, from conception through to implementation and dissemination. This includes learning strategies for effective communication and collaboration with non-scientific audiences.
- **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Recognizing that complex societal challenges require insights from multiple disciplines and how to integrate knowledge from various scientific disciplines (e.g. social sciences, humanities, natural sciences) to enhance the impact of socially engaged research.
- **Policy and Advocacy:** Providing insights into how research can inform and influence public policy making, and how scientists can advocate for evidence-based decision-making.
- **Innovation and Equity:** Investigating how innovative research can address issues of social justice and equity, ensuring that scientific advancements benefit all segments of society, particularly the underserved and marginalized.

Through a series of expert lectures followed by various interactive workshops, participants received information on the above topics and were also invited to interactively participate in workshop sessions on the second day of the Virtual Spring School. It is the intent that after participation, the ECRs are now better equipped at shaping their research according to societal needs through use of the concepts and tools developed by the BETTER Life project.

1.2 Organisation and Call for Participation

The organisation of the Virtual Spring School was led by MLU and supported by all partners of the consortium. First consortium meetings for discussing the content and proceedings of the Spring School were held in November and December 2023 and then again in February and March 2024. During these meetings and workshops, it was agreed upon to use the Online Meeting Platform ZOOM to conduct the meeting. MLU owns a license for ZOOM and has access to personnel with extensive experience in using the software. As such, one person affiliated with MLU was present during the entirety of the Spring School to assist with technical procedures and to help in case of technical issues.

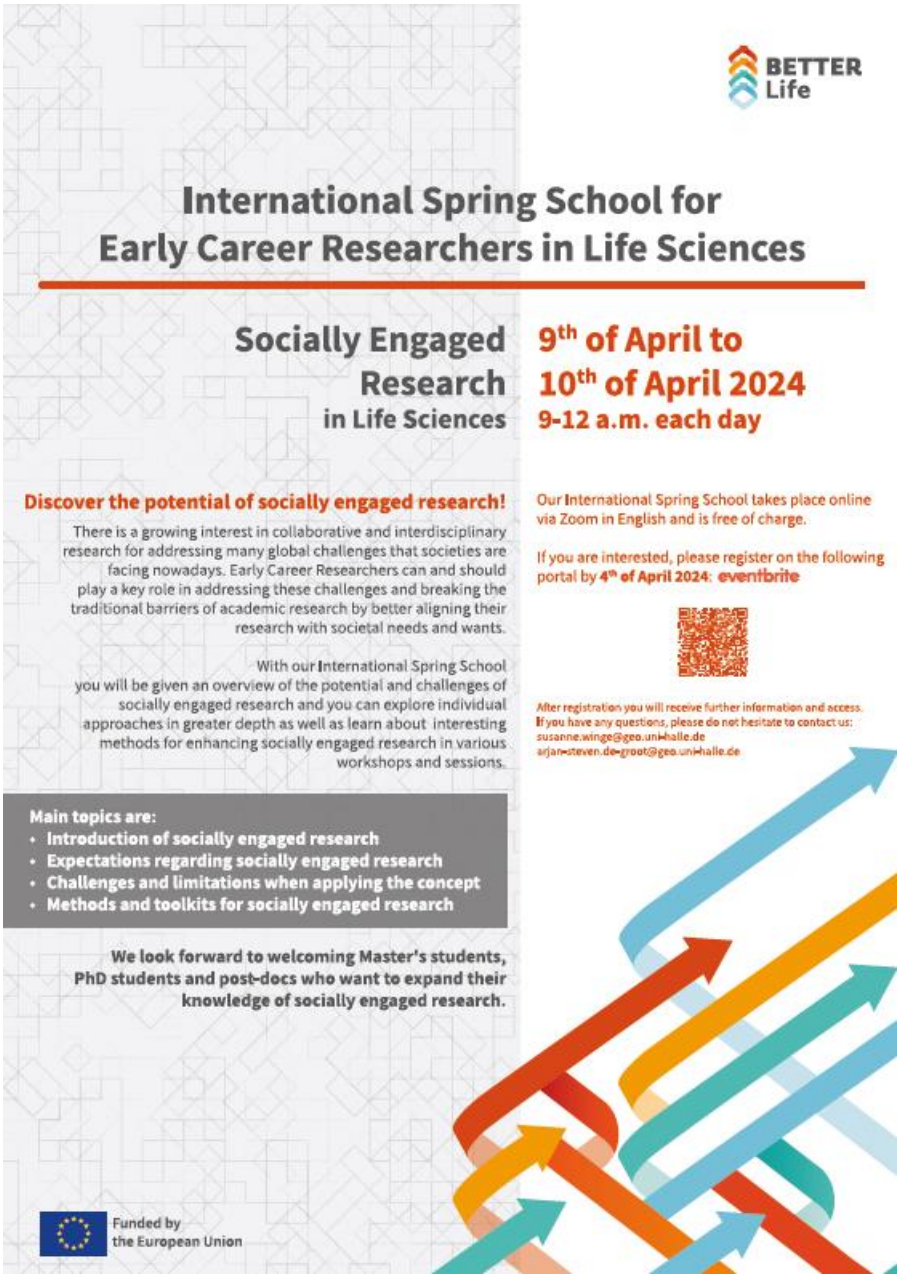
In February, all consortium partners agreed to disseminate information about the Spring School in various channels and networks to reach as many ECRs as possible. In accordance with this endeavor, MLU developed an information flyer which was circulated to all partners on March 5th (***Fig. 1***). This information flyer and more informal means were then used to approach ECRs in all partner countries. The networks, organisations and channels that the consortium reached out to included but were not limited to universities, graduate schools, previous alumni of universities, large networks such as Young Ecosystem Services Specialists (YESS) and university newsletter and information websites.

Registration of students took place with the help of the website Eventbrite. Students could register, free of charge, on a special page created on Eventbrite for the Virtual Spring school, after which they received more information and an invitation link to the ZOOM meeting for the event. Altogether, 88 participants from all partner countries and some from outside the EU/consortium registered for the Virtual Spring School on Eventbrite.

On the days of the Virtual Spring School, the ZOOM rooms were made available one hour in advance of the commencement of the daily proceedings and MLU arranged the creation of breakout rooms and monitored chat activity. The participants were provided with the opportunity to ask questions at any time and were swiftly assisted in the case of technical problems.

One week before the Virtual Spring School, MLU met with consortium partners from CZU, EMU, EDUCONS, ACEEU and UNICAM to discuss the proceedings and divide responsibilities regarding introductions, welcome, session leads etc.

Figure 1. Invitation to the Virtual Spring School



Lastly, all active presenters of the Virtual Spring School uploaded their respective presentations onto the BETTER Life Online SharePoint and were checked by MLU in advance in case of slight adjustments that might be necessary. It was also ensured that all presenters used the same format in their slides and that logos and disclaimers were in place.

1.3 Agenda

Below are the agendas for the two days of the Virtual Spring Schools. After careful consideration, it was decided to hold the Spring School over two subsequent days rather than three or more. The reason being, that based on previous experiences of online workshops and conferences that the project consortium has made, participation in the event often dwindled the more days it involved.

Day 1 of the Virtual Spring School took place on April 9th, 2024, and focused on providing participants with the necessary theoretical background and thus consisted of a number of expert lectures. The goal of the first day was to, above all, ensure that all participants received an extensive and holistic overview of the concept of socially engaged research. As such, a series of expert lectures provided all participants with a good frame of reference for understanding the intent of the BETTER Life project and how the concepts developed by the project could be applied in practice and in their own research.

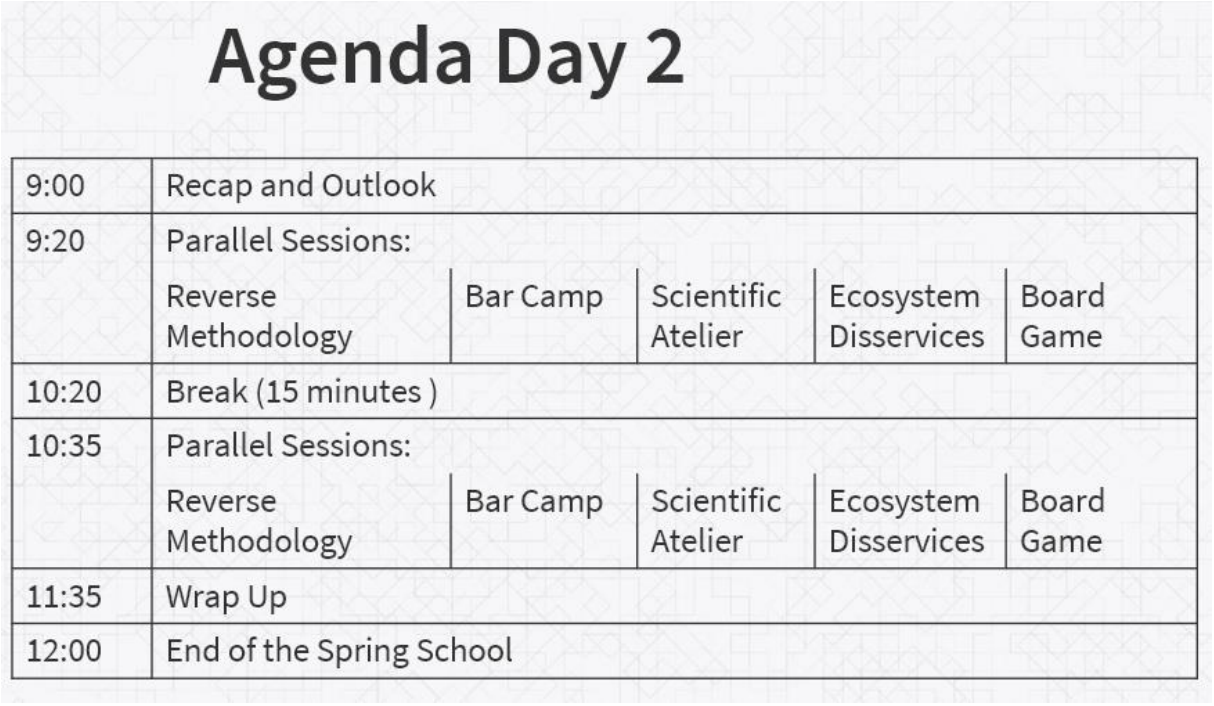
Figure 2. Agenda of Day 1 of the Virtual Spring School (09.04.2024)

Agenda Day 1

9:00	Welcome and Introduction
9:20	Expert Lecture: Introducing the BETTER Life project and the concept of Socially Engaged Research
10:05	Expert Lecture: Expectations regarding SER and Addressing challenges when applying the concept of SER.
10:50	Break (10 minutes)
11:00	Expert Lecture: How to create good space for science communication at universities
11:45	Wrap Up and Outlook for Day 2 Sessions!
12:00	End of the first day

Day 2 of the Virtual Spring School took place on April 9th, 2024, and was focused on the implementation of interactive workshops which the participants were able to sign up for at the end of Day 1. As such, five parallel sessions were offered to the students and took up most of the hours of Day 2. Due to the time constraints and the difficulty of hosting interactive events online, participants could only choose one of the sessions. Below is the agenda of Day 2.

Figure 3. Agenda of Day 2 of the Virtual Spring School (10.04.2024)



Agenda Day 2

9:00	Recap and Outlook				
9:20	Parallel Sessions:				
	Reverse Methodology	Bar Camp	Scientific Atelier	Ecosystem Disservices	Board Game
10:20	Break (15 minutes)				
10:35	Parallel Sessions:				
	Reverse Methodology	Bar Camp	Scientific Atelier	Ecosystem Disservices	Board Game
11:35	Wrap Up				
12:00	End of the Spring School				

The content of each point on the agenda will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. All lectures were made available to the students and some of the expert input was recorded and made available to students via Eventbrite. The next section will provide a summary of the content of all presentations and workshops. It is not sensible within this report to discuss each lecture in a slide-by-slide format, but all lectures and contents are available on the BETTER Life SharePoint and were made accessible to the students in their entirety.

2. Day 1 of the Virtual Spring School

2.1 Welcome and Introduction

The Virtual Spring School was opened by MLU at 9 am on Tuesday, the 9th of April. After the Word of Welcome, participants were asked to take a few minutes and fill out a short Mentimeter Survey. Within the survey, the participants answered the following questions:

1. Country of current residence
2. Study Progress
3. Academic or Career Background
4. Familiarity with the term "Socially Engaged Research"
5. Experience with Socially Engaged Research
6. Expectations towards the Virtual Spring School

Of the ~70 participants present in the call, nearly 50 of them filled out the survey. Below is a short summary of the responses:

1. Serbia had the most numerous participants (16) followed by Latvia (14), Italy (7) and Germany (6). Other countries were presented less often and included Poland, the Czech Republic, the Philippines and Nepal. It should also be noted that only ~45 of the 70 participants present in the ZOOM meeting responded to this question.
2. Regarding the study progress, it was interesting to see that most respondents were either in the process of conducting their PhD (21) or had already finished it (14). The other 10 responses were either by students currently doing their MSc (5) or having finished with their MSc but not yet started with a PhD (5). This shows that the intended target audience of ECRs was successfully reached.
3. Regarding the academic or career background, a wide variety of scientific disciplines were present. Most participants were from the fields of Environmental Sciences (19) and Biology (12), but there were also numerous participants from Social Sciences, Education, Business & Administration, Engineering, Chemistry,

Physics, Economics and others. As such, many different experts from all kinds of Life Sciences were present at the meeting.

4. Regarding their familiarity with the concept of socially engaged research, a word cloud showed that most participants thought of the words “collaboration, community and participation” when thinking about SER.

Figure 4. Word Cloud of SER Perception

5. When asked about their experience with the topic of SER, respondents could indicate with a slider from 1 (very new to the topic) to 10 (very familiar with the topic). The average result was 3 and thus showed that hosting such an informative Spring School was a good idea given how little experience participants had with the topic.

6. Lastly, regarding their expectations, respondents were able to write a short sentence on what they were hoping to learn over the next two days. Most answers were along the lines of gaining a better understanding of SER, learning new (practical) skills and methods, gaining inspiration & learning something new, getting to know other people in this field of study or learning how to better adapt their own research to societal needs.

The results of the survey proved that the intent and objectives of the Virtual Spring School were well-defined and “in need”. Additionally, the intended target audience in ECRs was

largely reached, given that an overwhelming majority of the respondents had finished their MSc and were either conducting their PhD or already finished with it. The expectations of the participants were also very much aligned with the structure and content of the Virtual Spring School.

After the survey, MLU continued the opening session to remind participants about the code of conduct (i.e. be punctual, use a friendly tone, feel free to ask questions at any time etc.) and then presented the objectives of the Virtual Spring School (which were already addressed in section one of this document). Lastly, the agenda was discussed and presented.

2.2 Expert Lecture I – Introducing the BETTER Life Project and the Concept of Socially Engaged Research

The first theoretical input for the Virtual Spring School consisted of an expert lecture introducing the goals of the BETTER Life project and providing an overview of the concept of socially engaged research. The lecture was given by Dr. Eng. Emilia Binchiciu (Helixconnect) and Prof. Gordan Racic (EDUCONS). In their presentation, they spoke about the reasoning behind the creation of the BETTER Life project and consortium, as well as discussed together with the participants why the BETTER Life project and its toolkits could be beneficial. They also introduced the topic of Socially Engaged Research and spoke extensively on capacity building, enhancing competencies, building networks and communities, developing toolkits and methodologies as well as how the advancement of SER in sciences could be shaped with the help of the toolkits and the adoption of the concept by the participants.

2.3 Expert Lecture II – Expectations Regarding SER and Addressing Challenges When Applying the Concept

The second expert lecture took place at 10:05 am and was held by Dr. Lina Landinez (ACEEU) and Adekola Ashonibare (ACEEU) who focused on the expectations part, while Arjan de Groot (MLU) spoke during the second half of the lecture on the various challenges that need to be considered when attempting to align scientific research with societal needs. In the first part of the lecture, ACEEU spoke on the needs of SER in the current geo-political landscape in Europe. For example, only 32% of academic researchers collaborate

with non-academic sectors, showcasing the need for collaborative and interdisciplinary research when addressing societal challenges. They also provided an explanation of the various steps included in SER at a research project level and institutional level. Lastly, they discussed various principles of SER such as the active involvement of stakeholders, ethical considerations and a transparency and transdisciplinary approach.

In the second part of this lecture, Arjan de Groot (MLU) spoke on the challenges, limitations and possible solutions. The identified challenges were:

- The Role of Citizens in Science and Science Creation
- Communication between Stakeholders
- Lack of Concepts and Strategic Vision towards the implementation of SER
- Academic Capacities and Research on SER

For each point, the lecturer outlined the current problems and challenges and then discussed together with the participants possible approaches and solutions. After speaking on the challenges, the BETTER Life toolkits were then linked to the possible solutions and provided the participants with additional insights into the various tools that the BETTER Life project developed.

2.4 Expert Lecture III – How to Create Good Space for Science Communication at Universities

After a short break, the first day of the Virtual Spring School continued with its third expert lecture focusing on creating space for communication of scientific results at universities. Based on the experiences that the consortium made during several stakeholder workshops, think tank sessions and bootcamps, communication problems was identified as one of the most important barriers when it comes to enhancing SER. As such, this lecture aimed at introducing means of improving science communication. The lecture was organised by EDUCONS and conducted by Aleksandra Ziembinska-Buczynska from the Silesian University of Technology of Poland. In her lecture, she discussed how science communication can be conducted more efficiently and where the largest challenges lie in the current scientific landscape. She continued then to speak on various formats to enhance science communication and presented a multi-stage approach on how to involve citizens and ensure an effective communication strategy.

2.5 Wrap-Up of Day 1 and Outlook to Day 2

After the theoretical inputs in the form of three lectures, UNICAM concluded the first day of the Virtual Spring School with a short thematic wrap-up of the day's topics. This session offered participants another opportunity to ask questions or share their opinions on the lectures and discussions from the first day. The wrap-up facilitated a deeper understanding of the material and encouraged an exchange of insights among the participants.

The day concluded with MLU presenting an overview of the interactive workshop sessions scheduled for Day 2. This preview highlighted the hands-on activities and collaborative projects designed to reinforce the theoretical knowledge gained on Day 1. Following the presentation, MLU organized sign-ups, allowing participants to choose the workshops they were most interested in. This ensured that everyone could engage in activities that aligned with their interests and learning objectives, setting the stage for an engaging and productive second day.

3. Day 2 of the Virtual Spring School

3.1 Recap and Outlook

Day 2 of the Virtual Spring School started with a short recap of the activities and lessons learned of the previous day as well as an outlook for this second day of the event. The overview was prepared and held by Dr. Diana Surová (CZU). Considering that some participants from Day 2 were not presented on the first day, the recap gave a short summary of each of the sessions and provided participants with the main takeaway messages from each of the sessions. The presentation can also be accessed on the BETTER Life SharePoint.

Regarding the Outlook for Day 2, MLU organised the distribution of breakout rooms based on participants' preferences as indicated at the end of Day 1. Unfortunately, the Bar Camp only had very few interested participants and, as such, did not take place in its intended format. All other parallel sessions, however, garnered interest and took place. Each session was hosted and conducted by different consortium partners of the BETTER Life project. Below follows a short overview of the different sessions.

3.2 Interactive Workshop Sessions

Reverse Methodology
This session was hosted by UNICAM and contained an explanation of the Reverse Conceptualization methodology. Participants were provided with an (already finished) SER study and participants then had to retrace the steps and discuss how to achieve an ideal result and which steps would have needed to be undertaken. Participants were invited to draw on personal experiences and apply knowledge they had gained in previous experiences.

Scientific Atelier
This workshop was hosted by Helixconnect and conducted by Dr. Adrian Solomon. In this interactive workshop, the participants discussed concrete ideas for improving science

communication. As part of the workshop activities, the group discussed how to best communicate the results of scientific research and development to the general public, why citizen science is necessary and how SER can help foster a diverse process and inclusiveness of different opinions and needs.

Ecosystem Disservices

The third interactive workshop was hosted by EMU and conducted by Dr. Anton Shkaruba. In the session, participants learned about the concept of Ecosystem Disservices (EDS) and how to involve citizens and local actors in landscape and urban planning processes with the help of the EDS concept. The session contained an overview of the various problems and challenges that may arise from natural processes and functions, as well as outlined various exampled of EDS and presented a decision-making framework for the identification and management of EDS in urban settings. A case study was shown and discussed with participants, after which participants received the task to discuss and recommend certain measures to improve the situation outlined in the presented case study.

Educative Boardgame

The last session was hosted by MLU and conducted by Arjan de Groot. In the session, participants were given the opportunity to play an online version of the educative boardgame developed by the BETTER Life project. The boardgame is designed to be played by 5 players, each representing a different societal stakeholder such as Academia, Municipality, Industry, NGO or Citizens. Participants were able to choose one of the stakeholders, after which they received individual policy goals. The rules of the games were explained (which are hosted on BETTER Life's Digital Centres of Excellence) and the game began. Throughout the game, participants were made familiar with the mechanics of the game and were able to understand how playing the game explains the need for collaboration in a complex society where each stakeholder traditionally prioritizes their own needs.

3.3 Wrap-Up and Closing Remarks

After all interactive sessions had concluded, the organisers and participants reconvened in a plenary session. There, each session lead briefly gave a summary of the activities and proceedings of the session. Afterwards, the participants were asked about their experience with the Virtual Spring School. To gather more honest feedback, participants were also provided with a link to an online questionnaire that allowed participants to give feedback

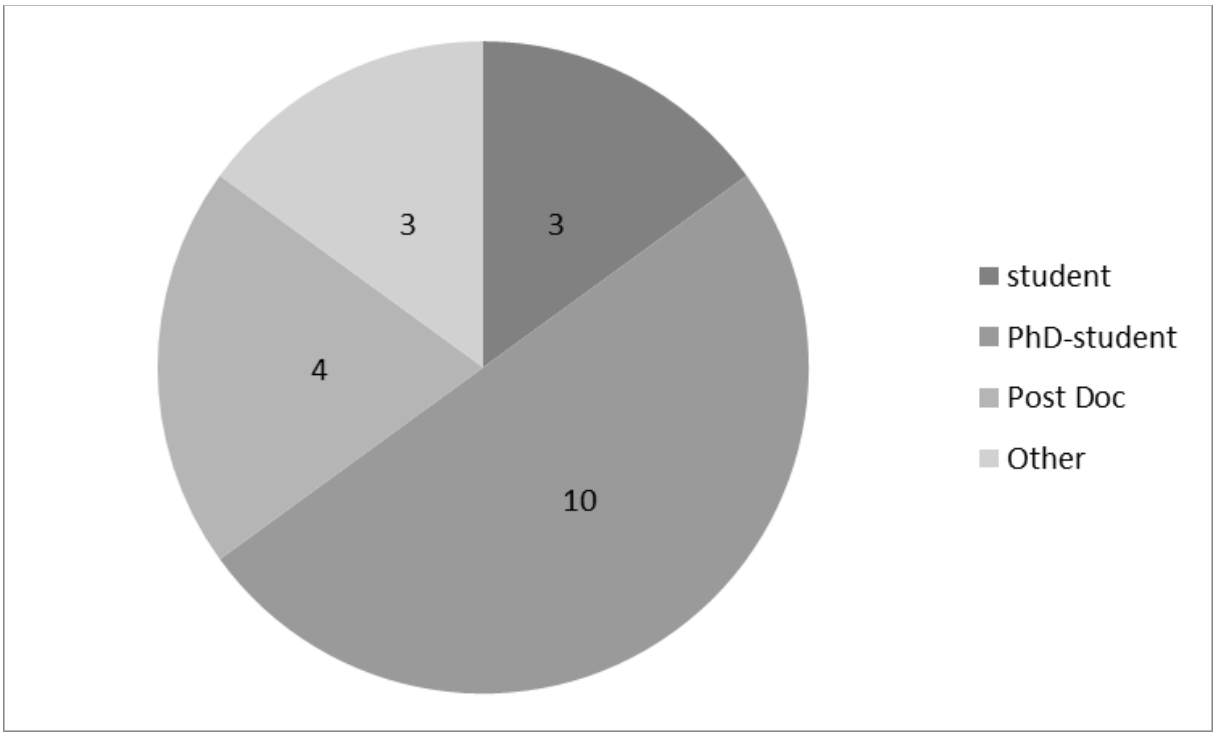
and voice recommendations for future activities. A summary of the feedback is presented in the next session of this report. Afterwards, MLU gave closing remarks and reminded participants that there will be an in-person Summer School in the Czech Republic in September 2024. A short Q&A session between the BETTER Life consortium and the participants concluded the Virtual Spring School.

All lecture content and screenshots of Day 1 and Day 2 are available on the BETTER Life consortium webpage and will be uploaded to the Digital Centre of Excellence in addition to this report.

4. Conclusion and Feedback

The BETTER Life Virtual Spring School proceeded smoothly and without major technical issues. All lecture content was presented in a timely manner and the interactive workshop sessions were received very well (see feedback below). In terms of participation numbers, Day 1 had a consistent number of participants between 60 and 70, whereas for Day 2, the numbers went down to ~40 throughout the day, although it should be noted that all participants who participated in Day 2 were present throughout the entirety of the day. After the closing remarks on Day 2, all participants were invited to fill out a short online questionnaire with the intent to provide the consortium with valuable feedback. Below are the results of the feedback questionnaire.

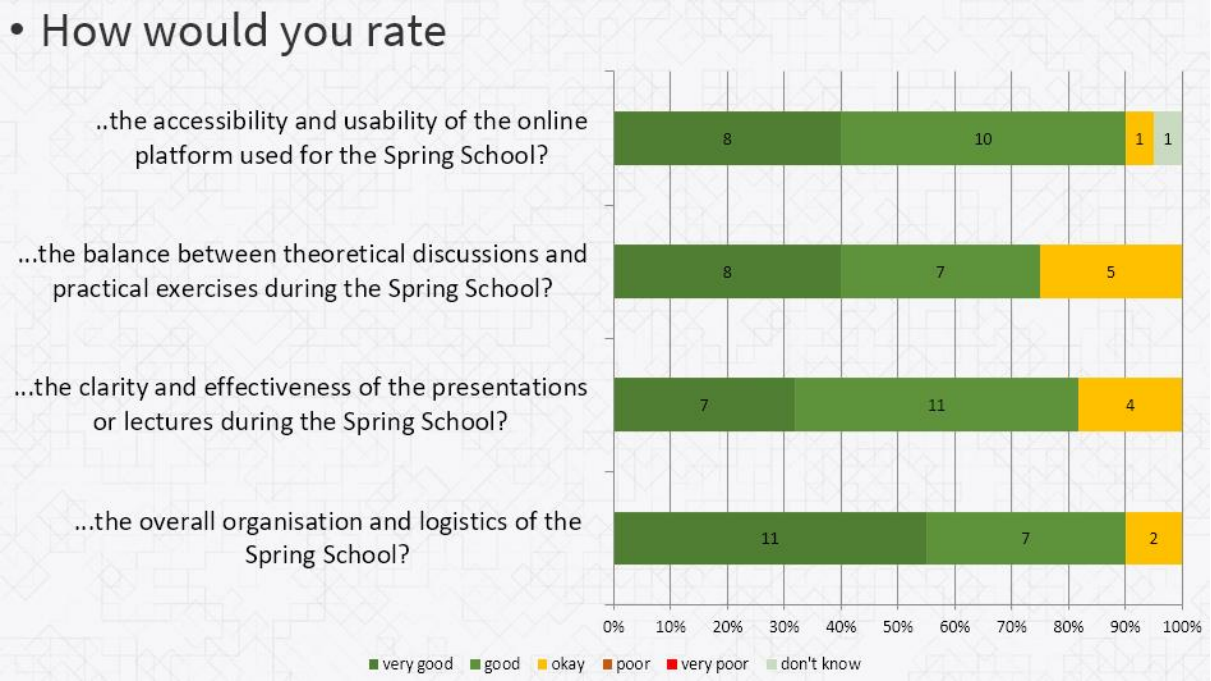
Figure 5. Virtual Spring School Feedback: ECRs



- 23 respondents filled out the survey, of which most were PhD students.

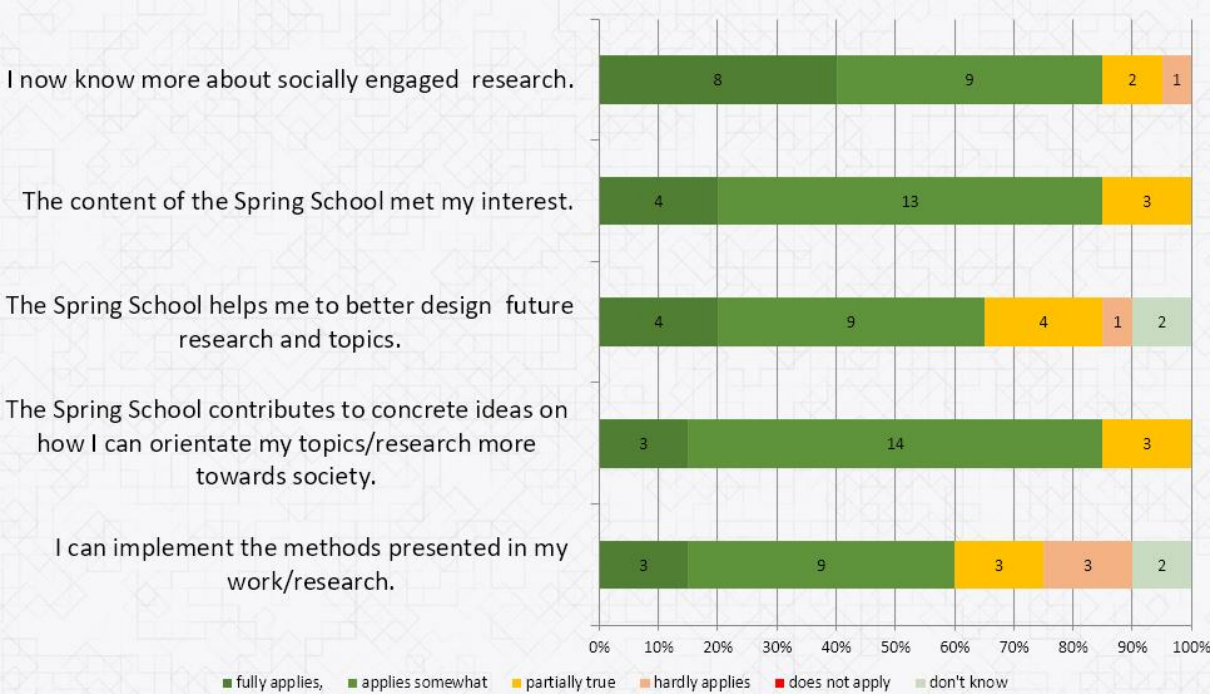
- Respondents were asked about how they would rate certain aspects of the Virtual Spring School. In particular, the questionnaire inquired about:
    - Accessibility and usability of the online platform ZOOM
    - Balance between theoretical discussions and practical exercises
    - Clarity and effectiveness of the presentations
    - Overall organisation and logistics

Figure 6. Virtual Spring School Feedback: Organisation



- Respondents were also asked to provide an honest statement on the knowledge they gained from participation. As such, the questionnaire asked students how much they agreed with the following statements:

Figure 7. Virtual Spring School Feedback: Impact



Positives

In conclusion, there are many positives to draw from the Virtual Spring School based on the feedback and based on the comments made by participants during the event. For example, the **target audience** of the event was largely reached (the majority of participants were PhDs or Post-Docs). Also, the Zoom platform and the organisation and support surrounding the spring school were evaluated very positively. The breakout sessions on Day 2 were well received and generally commented on being preferable to the lecture-focused the first day. Moreover, most of the participants were present for both days, and compared to other free online events, the number of participants was very satisfactory, as was the circumstance that only ~20 participants left between the first and second day.

Participation in the breakout rooms was also very positive as all the participants were eager and motivated to engage in the various activities that were offered. Also, it should be noted that the event had a large diversity in terms of scientific background and country of residence. As such, it was not dominated by participation from a particular country or background. Lastly, when asked about their willingness to participate in future events hosted by BETTER Life, 90% of the respondents were willing and interested in doing so.

Altogether, the comments during the sessions and the feedback provided after the Spring School clearly underline that the event was overall successful and well received.

Possible Improvements

Despite the largely positive feedback and the active participation of everyone involved, there is still room for improvement for a potential second virtual summer school-like event within the BETTER Life project. For example, despite 88 participants signing up, in the end, only 65-70 participated on the first day, and the number was reduced to 40-45 on the second day. As such, a more thorough and more intensive outreach to various networks would have been beneficial.

Based on the feedback and comments, it would have also been beneficial to better coordinate and align each of the theoretical inputs. It would be advisable to upload the presentations multiple weeks in advance so that they can be properly adjusted to each other and form one coherent series of lectures. The organisation of the breakout groups for the interactive workshop sessions also has room for improvement. It might have been sensible to provide students with detailed information on each of the breakout sessions at least one week in advance so that students can properly decide which session they want to join. This would also facilitate a smoother selection process and allow for more balanced group numbers.

Considering the positive feedback on the practical and interactive sessions, it might be prudent to design more interactive content already on the first day, so as to better engage the participants in the beginning and avoid a scenario where some participants do not show up for the second day.

Lastly, another point to improve would be to perhaps focus more on how to apply the various tools and methods in a practical setting. Some respondents indicated that they gained a considerable amount of knowledge on the topic of SER but that they are not certain on how to best put this knowledge into practice. As such, the practicality and more guidance on how to apply the concepts and tools could have improved the experience of the Virtual Spring School considerably.

It should be noted that the consortium, after a discussion following the conclusion of the Spring School, is considering offering a second online “spring school” perhaps in early 2025. We see great potential in the outreach and use of this format and think that the experience of the first Virtual Spring School could be continued and improved in a second version.