NEOLAiA Focus Academy

Course Syllabus

Focus Academy on EU Strategies for Inclusive Virtual Worlds
Course information
Organising / issuing institution(s): University of Jaén (UJA), Spain, as coordinating and host institution and proposed awarding institution, in cooperation with Bielefeld University, Germany; the Ştefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania; the University of Tours, France; and University of Nicosia, Cyprus. Formal institutional arrangements and the allocation of academic responsibilities will be finalised before publication of the student call. Responsible faculty / department: Faculty of Social and Legal Sciences, University of Jaén. Department of Public and European Common Law, through the area of Public International Law and International Relations, in cooperation with Philosophy of Law and the participating academic units at partner universities. Contact person: Dr Jonatán Cruz Ángeles, Course Director and Academic Coordinator at the University of Jaén: jangeles@ujaen.es. Administrative and organisational support: NEOLAiA Office at the University of Jaén, neolaia@ujaen.es. Country(ies) / region(s): Spain, Germany, France, Romania and Cyprus, corresponding to the participating academic institutions. The on-site component will take place at Las Lagunillas Campus, University of Jaén, Andalusia, Spain. Applications are open to students from all NEOLAiA partner universities. ECTS credits: 3 ECTS, subject to approval by the competent academic bodies and prior agreement on recognition by the students' home institutions. Total estimated workload: 75 hours, calculated at 25 hours per ECTS, comprising 50 hours of online learning and 25 hours of on-site learning. Travel, breaks and optional cultural and social activities are excluded from this workload. On-site / synchronous activities: 33 hours in total: 25 hours of on-site seminars, workshops, supervised project activities and assessment in Jaén, plus 8 hours of synchronous online learning. The online allocation includes a one-hour session open to the wider university community and the public. Online / asynchronous / self-study: 42 hours of guided asynchronous learning and independent work, including readings, recorded materials, formative quizzes, individual case preparation, transnational group work, forum contributions and peer feedback. Together with the 8 synchronous online hours specified above, these activities constitute the 50-hour online component. Level / cycle: Bachelor / Master / Doctoral (EQF / QF-EHEA level, where applicable): Primarily advanced Bachelor and Master students, corresponding to EQF levels 6 and 7 and the first and second cycles of the QF-EHEA. Doctoral students may also participate where the course is relevant to their research and training needs; participation does not constitute a separate doctoral-level qualification.

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Delivery mode: Online synchronous / online asynchronous / onsite / blended: Blended learning, combining synchronous online sessions, guided asynchronous activities and independent study with a compulsory five-day on-site component. International student teams will work collaboratively across both components.

Compulsory onsite component: Yes / No: Yes. Participation in the on-site component in Jaén is compulsory for completion of the full course and the award of 3 ECTS. Attendance at the public online session or participation through a separate virtual-only route does not, by itself, qualify for the full course credits.

Duration: Proposed online component: 15 March–16 April 2027, subject to agreement among the academic partners. Confirmed on-site component: 19–23 April 2027, Monday to Friday, in Jaén, Spain.

Semester / term: Spring semester of the 2026–2027 academic year.

Language of instruction: English.

Entry requirements / prerequisites: Enrolment at a NEOLAiA partner university; sufficient academic preparation to engage with the interdisciplinary course content; motivation to explore European approaches to inclusive virtual worlds; and English-language competence equivalent to at least CEFR B1. No formal language certificate, programming experience or personal virtual-reality equipment is required. Applicants must be available to complete both the online and on-site components and satisfy their home institution's applicable mobility requirements. Students from all NEOLAiA partner universities may apply. Competitive selection will take place only if the number of eligible applications exceeds the published capacity, using transparent criteria announced in the call.

Instructors

University of Jaén, Spain — Dr Jonatán Cruz Ángeles, Course Director and Local Academic Coordinator. He will oversee the academic design and delivery of the Focus Academy, coordinate the participating universities, supervise the learning environment and ensure coherence between the online and on-site components. His teaching will address EU and international legal approaches to virtual worlds, fundamental rights and governance. He will coordinate assessment, quality assurance and academic reporting. Contact: jangeles@ujaen.es. Prof Ramón Ruiz Ruiz will contribute to the teaching team, focusing on philosophy of law, ethical reasoning, digital identity and the normative foundations of participation in virtual environments, subject to the final teaching allocation. Contact: ramonrr@ujaen.es.

Bielefeld University, Germany — Marie Berens, Proposed Local Academic Coordinator. She will coordinate Bielefeld's academic contribution and support participating students from her institution. Her contribution will focus on fundamental rights in virtual worlds and comparative European perspectives, including the preparation of teaching materials, collaborative case analysis and project feedback. She has indicated availability for the on-site component on 19–23 April 2027; departmental authorisation and the final allocation of responsibilities remain to be completed. Contact: marie.berens@uni-bielefeld.de.

University of Tours, France — Colombine Madelaine, Local Academic Coordinator and Online Instructor. She will coordinate the participation of the University of Tours, which will send five students to the course. She will contribute to joint academic planning, preparation and guidance of students, and teaching in the online component. Her session topic and timetable will be agreed with the teaching team. Contact: colombine.madelaine@univ-tours.fr.

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Ştefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania — Raluca Onufreiciuc Husdup and Luiza Florentina Curelusa, Instructors. Both will contribute to course teaching, learning resources and student guidance. Raluca Onufreiciuc Husdup is proposed as the local academic coordinator, subject to confirmation, to liaise with the course director and coordinate Suceava's contribution. Their specific teaching topics, delivery formats and timetables will be agreed jointly. Contacts: raluca.onufreiciuc@fdsa.usv.ro and luiza.curelusa@usv.ro.

University of Nicosia, Cyprus — Prof Constantinos Phellas, Proposed Local Academic Coordinator. His proposed contribution will address ethics, human dignity, social inclusion, wellbeing and the governance of virtual environments, strengthening the interdisciplinary character of the course. He will coordinate the university's academic contribution and student participation. Contact: phellas.c@unic.ac.cy.

Course description and objectives

The Focus Academy on EU Strategies for Inclusive Virtual Worlds examines how European law, public policy and ethical principles can shape accessible and inclusive virtual environments. Combining perspectives from law, philosophy, sociology, education and international relations, the course explores digital identity, fundamental rights, privacy, equality, platform responsibility and access to remedies. Students will apply these perspectives to practical challenges involving virtual campuses, public services and cultural spaces, developing proposals that support meaningful participation by people with diverse backgrounds, abilities and needs.

The course directly addresses NEOLAiA's Inclusion and Diversity pillar by examining discrimination, accessibility barriers and the participation of vulnerable or underrepresented groups. It contributes to Digital Transformation through critical engagement with immersive technologies, artificial intelligence and the governance of virtual worlds. Its combination of online collaboration and physical mobility also supports Enhanced Mobility, enabling students from all NEOLAiA partner universities to learn and work together in an international academic environment.

The course will be jointly developed by academic staff from the universities of Jaén, Bielefeld, Nicosia, Tours and Suceava. Participating academics will agree on the learning outcomes, contribute complementary teaching resources and case studies, and coordinate assessment and student guidance. Online preparation will lead into the on-site component in Jaén, taking place from 19 to 23 April 2027. Throughout both components, mixed-nationality and interdisciplinary teams will develop a shared project, combining comparative analysis, practical workshops and peer feedback.

The main objectives are to establish a common understanding of virtual worlds and digital identity; explain the EU's approach to their development and regulation; critically assess risks to fundamental rights, equality and human dignity; apply accessibility and inclusive-design principles to practical scenarios; and evaluate governance options and mechanisms of accountability and redress. The course also aims to strengthen intercultural teamwork, critical digital literacy and academic communication in English. Students will bring these skills together in an evidence-based legal, policy or design proposal for a more inclusive virtual environment.

Objectives

To develop a shared, interdisciplinary understanding of virtual worlds, digital identity and immersive technologies, examining how their design and operation influence human agency, social interaction and participation.

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To examine the European Union's approach to virtual worlds and digital transformation, enabling students to distinguish policy objectives from binding legal obligations and understand the relevance of European regulatory instruments to specific virtual environments.

To strengthen students' capacity to identify and critically assess risks to fundamental rights, including privacy, data protection, equality, freedom of expression and human dignity, with particular attention to vulnerable and underrepresented users.

To promote the application of accessibility, universal-design and inclusive-learning principles to virtual environments, helping students identify barriers to participation and formulate practical responses to disability-related, social, cultural and economic inequalities.

To explore the ethical and governance challenges arising from platform power, artificial intelligence and cross-border interactions, assessing the responsibilities of public institutions, private providers and users, together with mechanisms of accountability and access to effective remedies.

To develop intercultural collaboration, critical digital literacy and academic communication in English through sustained teamwork among students from different NEOLAiA universities and disciplinary backgrounds, connecting online preparation with the on-site learning activities in Jaén.

To enable students to integrate legal, ethical and social perspectives into an evidence-based proposal for an inclusive virtual educational, public-service or cultural environment, supported by stakeholder analysis, feasible safeguards and constructive peer feedback.

Learning outcomes and competencies

LO1 — Conceptual understanding and critical digital literacy. Explain the main characteristics of virtual worlds and assess how avatars, immersive technologies, artificial intelligence and platform design influence digital identity, human agency and participation, using appropriate interdisciplinary terminology.

LO2 — Legal analysis and use of sources. Identify the European legal instruments and policy initiatives relevant to a defined virtual-world scenario; distinguish binding obligations from policy objectives; and support a reasoned analysis with appropriate legal and academic sources, recognising limitations in their scope and application.

LO3 — Fundamental rights and ethical reasoning. Analyse competing rights and interests in a practical case involving privacy, equality, freedom of expression or human dignity; identify risks affecting vulnerable or underrepresented users; and justify proportionate safeguards and possible remedies.

LO4 — Accessibility and inclusive problem solving. Evaluate a proposed virtual educational, public-service or cultural environment using an accessibility and inclusion checklist, identify barriers affecting different user groups, and recommend feasible improvements grounded in inclusive-design principles.

LO5 — Governance, accountability and applied synthesis. Map the principal stakeholders and their responsibilities, compare alternative governance or redress mechanisms, and develop a coherent legal, policy or design proposal addressing one clearly defined problem. The proposal should explain its rationale, implementation requirements and principal limitations.

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LO6 — Intercultural collaboration, communication and reflection. Contribute responsibly to an international and interdisciplinary team across the online and on-site components; communicate supported conclusions in written and spoken English; respond constructively to feedback; and critically reflect on individual contributions and learning.

Contents

Module 1 — Philosophical foundations, justice and democratic participation in virtual worlds. This module introduces virtual worlds as spaces governed by rules, values and relationships of power. Drawing on legal philosophy, it explores freedom, equality, dignity, autonomy and responsibility, together with the legitimacy of rules established by public institutions and private platforms. Particular attention will be paid to democratic participation, the justification of restrictions on users' conduct, and the relationship between individual freedom and collective interests. Students will critically assess the principles that should guide the organisation of an inclusive virtual community.

Module 2 — International and European legal frameworks for virtual worlds. This module examines the EU initiative on Web 4.0 and virtual worlds within the broader context of international cooperation and digital governance. Topics include jurisdiction, cross-border activities, the responsibilities of public and private actors, and the relationship between European regulatory ambitions and globally operating platforms. Selected aspects of the Digital Services Act, Digital Markets Act and Artificial Intelligence Act will be considered where relevant to the course scenarios. Drawing on research into virtual learning environments, the module will also explore institutional simulations and virtual public, educational and cultural spaces as settings for applied legal analysis.

Module 3 — Fundamental rights and European judicial protection. This module examines fundamental rights from constitutional and EU-law perspectives, including the scope of the EU Charter, proportionality, competing rights and the relationship between public authority and private platform power. It also addresses the European Convention on Human Rights and relevant Strasbourg case law, particularly concerning privacy, freedom of expression, equality, positive obligations and effective remedies. Students will examine how existing European rights-protection frameworks can inform the assessment of novel situations involving avatars, online interactions and immersive environments, distinguishing established legal principles from their proposed application to virtual-world scenarios.

Module 4 — Data protection, automated decision-making and accountable public administration. This module connects administrative-law principles with the digital transformation of public services and participatory platforms. Topics include transparency, access to information, public engagement, privacy, the collection of personal and biometric data, and the use of automated systems in virtual environments. Particular attention will be paid to facial recognition, monitoring practices and the safeguards required when public institutions adopt immersive or AI-supported services. Students will assess a practical scenario involving a virtual public service and propose measures to improve transparency, accountability and protection of users.

Module 5 — Citizenship, diversity, social inclusion and wellbeing. This module combines legal, sociological and bioethical perspectives on citizenship, belonging, human rights and inclusion. It examines distinctions between nationality, European citizenship and membership of a digital community, addressing participation by migrants and refugees, barriers to accessing services, and the relationship between legal status and inclusion. It also explores identity, cultural and sexual diversity, ageing, vulnerability and wellbeing. These perspectives will inform the analysis of discriminatory practices, exclusion, accessibility barriers and the conditions required for meaningful participation by diverse users.

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Target group, entry requirements, selection and registration

Target group and recommended academic profile. The course is open to students from all NEOLAiA partner universities, including institutions that do not contribute teaching staff. It is primarily intended for advanced Bachelor and Master students in Law, Political Science, International Relations, Public Administration, Philosophy, Sociology, European Studies and related disciplines. Students in Education, Communication, Digital Humanities or Computer Science, as well as doctoral researchers, may also participate where they demonstrate a relevant academic interest. The cohort will bring together complementary perspectives on the legal, ethical and social challenges of inclusive virtual worlds.

Entry requirements and prerequisites. Applicants must be enrolled at a NEOLAiA partner university, demonstrate motivation to engage with the course themes, and possess English-language competence equivalent to at least CEFR B1. They must be available to complete the online learning activities and attend the full on-site component in Jaén from 19 to 23 April 2027. No formal language certificate, programming experience, previous training in immersive technologies or personal virtual-reality equipment is required. Students must also satisfy their home institution's applicable mobility requirements.

Expected number of participants. The indicative planning estimate is 18–24 students, including students from the University of Jaén and five students expected from the University of Tours. The final capacity will be established and published before applications open, taking account of teaching resources, facilities and student support. Applications will be welcomed from every NEOLAiA partner university, without fixed institutional quotas. Recruitment planning will also take account of the applicable minimum number of eligible international mobile students required for Erasmus+ organisational support.

Admission and selection criteria. All eligible applicants will be admitted if the number of applications does not exceed the published capacity. Competitive selection will take place only if eligible applications exceed the available places. In that event, a joint academic committee coordinated by the University of Jaén will apply criteria published in advance: motivation and connection with the course themes, 40%; academic relevance and preparedness, 30%; and readiness for international and interdisciplinary collaboration, 30%. Where applicants are equally suitable, disciplinary and institutional diversity and access for students with fewer mobility opportunities will inform the decision, consistently with institutional rules. Decisions will be documented, and a reserve list will be established where necessary.

Registration procedure. A common call will be circulated throughout the NEOLAiA network and actively promoted until the registration deadline. Students will submit their enrolment details, academic background, a short motivation statement and confirmation of availability through the registration procedure communicated by their home institution. Home universities will verify eligibility and forward applications to the coordinating team at Jaén. Eligibility checks and preparation of mobility documentation will take place throughout the application period. The coordinator will consolidate applications, apply competitive selection only if required, and communicate admission decisions. Home institutions will formalise nominations and the relevant learning, recognition and mobility arrangements.

Registration deadline and late admission. The ordinary application deadline will be 14 March 2027 at 23:59 CET, immediately before the planned start of the online component on 15 March. Admission decisions will be communicated by 15 March, and admitted students will receive

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immediate access to the learning platform and introductory materials. If places remain available, late applications may be considered individually for as long as full academic participation remains feasible. Late admission will require approval by the course coordinator, an agreed plan to complete any missed learning activities, meaningful participation in the collaborative project, and confirmation that the necessary recognition and mobility arrangements can be completed before travel. The same eligibility and, where necessary, selection criteria will apply. All admitted students must fulfil the same learning outcomes, assessment requirements and full 75-hour workload, including the 50-hour online component and the compulsory 25-hour on-site component.

Student support and mobility arrangements. Registered students will receive the final programme, assessment requirements, platform access instructions and practical information. Accessibility and reasonable-adjustment requests will be handled confidentially through the appropriate university services. Erasmus+ grant allocation will follow each sending institution's procedures separately from academic admission; the course registration deadline does not extend any earlier institutional funding deadlines. Academic enquiries may be addressed to jangeles@ujaen.es, with organisational support available through neolaia@ujaen.es.

Teaching and learning activities

Online learning activities. Students will complete an asynchronous preparatory component using materials provided through the institutional learning platform, including selected readings, presentation slides and short case studies. They will review the materials, prepare cases for discussion in Jaén and begin developing their group project. Clear instructions and deadlines will guide this work, without requiring live online classes.

On-site seminars, workshops and supervised activities. The programme in Jaén will combine interactive seminars, practical workshops and supervised applied learning. Activities will include a deliberative exercise on fair rules for a virtual community, an EU regulatory and cross-border governance simulation, and a fundamental-rights case clinic. A practical exercise will examine transparency, personal-data collection and automated decision-making in a virtual public service. Citizenship and inclusion exercises will combine legal, sociological and bioethical perspectives.

Collaborative project and practical outputs. International teams will develop a short proposal for an inclusive virtual educational, public-service or cultural environment. Students will identify the main legal and social challenges, consider accessibility and participation, and suggest practical safeguards. Group discussions and feedback during the on-site week will help refine their proposals. The project will culminate in a short written submission and a brief group presentation.

Activity open to the wider community. An open session during the on-site week, provisionally entitled "Inclusive Virtual Worlds: Rights, Citizenship and Participation", will welcome students, faculty, researchers, administrative staff and wider society, including public-sector professionals and civil-society organisations. It will combine an accessible introductory presentation with questions and discussion. The activity will be advertised through NEOLAiA and partner-university communication channels. External attendance will not confer the course's 3 ECTS.

Accessibility, feedback and participation support. Materials will be made available in advance and in accessible formats. Activities will use standard computers, without requiring personal VR equipment or programming skills. Feedback will support students during the on-site activities and project development. Approved late entrants will receive guidance on completing the preparatory work and joining their teams while meeting the course requirements.

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Course structure and calendar

The course comprises 75 hours of learning, equivalent to 3 ECTS, distributed between a 50-hour online component and a 25-hour on-site component. Preparatory activities will take place during March and April 2027, before the on-site week in Jaén from 19 to 23 April 2027.

Online preparation — March–April 2027. Students will work with selected readings, presentation slides and practical cases provided through the learning platform. They will familiarise themselves with the course's main concepts, prepare cases for discussion and begin developing their international group project. Instructions and deadlines will be communicated in advance.

On-site component — Jaén, 19–23 April 2027. The programme will provide five academic hours per day, combining interactive seminars, practical workshops and supervised project work. It will include an open session on rights and inclusion in virtual worlds for students, faculty, staff and wider society.

Monday 19 April — Foundations, justice and European governance. Philosophical and legal foundations of virtual communities; EU and international approaches to virtual worlds; and a deliberative exercise on legitimate and inclusive community rules. Teams will refine their project's objectives and guiding principles.

Tuesday 20 April — Fundamental rights and effective protection. Constitutional and European perspectives on privacy, freedom of expression, equality and proportionality. Practical case discussions will build on the preparatory materials and help students identify relevant rights and remedies.

Wednesday 21 April — Data protection and accountable digital public services. Transparency, personal and biometric data, automated decision-making and public participation. Teams will examine a virtual public-service scenario and propose appropriate safeguards.

Thursday 22 April — Citizenship, diversity and wellbeing. Legal status, belonging, migration, cultural and sexual diversity, ageing and vulnerability. Practical exercises will help teams address accessibility and inclusion in their proposals.

Friday 23 April — Integrated project and final assessment. Supervised project finalisation, brief group presentations and discussion, followed by course evaluation. Each team will submit its short written proposal by the end of the course.

Assessment

Participation — 30% of the final grade. Students will be assessed on their active engagement in online and on-site activities, contributions to discussions and practical exercises, and cooperation within their international teams. This component will assess understanding of the course themes, critical reflection and collaborative skills.

Final group project — 70% of the final grade. Each team will prepare a short written proposal for an inclusive virtual educational, public-service or cultural environment and present it briefly at the end of the course. The project will be developed progressively during the scheduled activities, with feedback from the teaching team. Assessment will consider the appropriate application of course concepts, the relevance of the proposed inclusion measures, and clarity of presentation. Each student will explain their contribution and participate in the discussion.

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Successful completion requires an overall grade of at least 5 out of 10 and fulfilment of the compulsory online and on-site participation requirements. All assessment activities are included within the course's 75-hour workload.

Quality assurance

The course will follow the applicable University of Jaén quality procedures and the NEOLAiA Focus Academy framework. The participating academic coordinators will jointly review the programme, workload, learning outcomes and assessment arrangements before delivery.

Students will have opportunities to provide feedback during the course and will complete a short final evaluation questionnaire, using the NEOLAiA template where provided. This will address teaching quality, workload, accessibility, organisation and international collaboration.

The coordinating team will review student feedback and completion results with the partner universities, identify improvements and provide the documentation required by the relevant NEOLAiA structures, particularly WP2 and Task 2.2.

Additional comments

Accessible learning materials and appropriate participation arrangements will support students from different academic backgrounds and with different needs. No personal virtual-reality equipment or programming knowledge is required.

Credit recognition and mobility arrangements will be coordinated with students' home universities. Optional cultural and social activities may complement the programme in Jaén and encourage intercultural exchange; these activities will take place outside the assessed workload.

The final teaching timetable, practical information and online access details will be communicated before the course begins.

References

Boellstorff, T. (2015). Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human. Princeton University Press.

Chalmers, D. J. (2022). Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy. W. W. Norton & Company.

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Lastowka, G. (2010). Virtual Justice: The New Laws of Online Worlds. Yale University Press.

Lemley, M. A., & Volokh, E. (2018). Law, virtual reality, and augmented reality. University of Pennsylvania Law Review, 166(5), 1051–1138.

Madary, M., & Metzinger, T. K. (2016). Real virtuality: A code of ethical conduct. Recommendations for good scientific practice and the consumers of VR-technology. Frontiers in Robotics and AI, 3, Article 3. https://doi.org/10.3389/frobt.2016.00003.

Nakamura, L. (2002). Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet. Routledge.

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The academic readings will be complemented by the following policy and accessibility resources:

European Commission. (2023). An EU initiative on Web 4.0 and virtual worlds: A head start in the next technological transition. COM(2023) 442 final, 11 July 2023. Official text.

World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). (2021). XR Accessibility User Requirements. W3C Working Group Note, 25 August 2021. Official document. This resource will support practical consideration of accessibility and diverse user needs.

Selected legal texts, judicial decisions and case materials will be provided through the institutional learning platform. Reading guidance will connect the bibliography to the course modules, with open-access versions and university library resources used where available.

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