



COURSE UNIT (MODULE) DESCRIPTION

Course unit (module) title	Code
Human Rights in Contemporary Societies: Power, Interpretation and Advocacy	

Academic staff	Core academic unit(s)
Coordinating: prof. dr. Eglė Šumskienė Other(s):	Vilnius University Faculty of Philosophy, Universiteto str. 9, LT-01513 Vilnius

Study cycle	Type of the course unit
First	Erasmus course

Mode of delivery	Semester or period when it is delivered	Language of instruction
Face to face	2 nd (spring) semester	English

Requisites	
Prerequisites: none	Co-requisites: This course is not available to students who have taken or are taking the Erasmus course <i>Human Rights and the Principles of Sustainability</i>

Number of ECTS credits allocated	Student's workload (total)	Contact hours	Individual work
5	135	48	87

Purpose of the course unit		
The course aims to equip students with a comprehensive understanding of human rights as they are shaped by power relations, interpreted across institutional and professional contexts, and advanced through advocacy in contemporary societies. The course will explore key concepts, theories, and debates, and examine, how human rights are constructed, contested, and applied in local, national, and global settings. The course will combine theoretical approaches with institutional practices and concrete case studies, thereby it will encourage critical reflection on the interpretation of human rights norms and the role of professionals, organisations, and social actors in their realisation. Students will develop the ability to analyse human rights issues across disciplines and to apply human rights perspectives to research, policy, and practice, with particular attention to advocacy as a response to structural inequalities and social power.		
Learning outcomes of the course unit	Teaching and learning methods	Assessment methods
Will know and understand the concepts and approaches of social responsibility and equal opportunities, multi-community development, public policy, and development cooperation to promote human rights and empower communities.	Problem-oriented lectures, seminars (text analysis, comparative assessment and systemic analysis of practical issues, group discussions), individual studies (individual search of information, critical literature studies and the analysis of theoretical and practical problems).	Participation in seminars, discussions, midterm assessment, podcast
Will be able to understand and apply an interdisciplinary perspective to address complex human rights issues related to specific societal structures and institutions, analyse the causes and consequences of these problems.	Problem-oriented lectures, seminars (text analysis, comparative assessment and systemic analysis of practical issues, group discussions), individual studies (individual search of information, critical literature studies	Participation in seminars, midterm assesment

	and the analysis of theoretical and practical problems).	
Will be able to explain, evaluate, and forecast local and global future societal social processes, assessing trends in demographics, migration, public policy, and other relevant changes. This comprehension will inform the implementation of pragmatic solutions aimed at fostering human rights and equal opportunities.	Active learning methods, including problem solving, discussions and debates, case analysis. Preparation of a podcast in a group.	Participation in seminars, discussions and podcast
Will be able to empower communities to address complex challenges, create and introduce social innovations by applying principles of networking and partnership.	Active learning methods, including problem solving, discussions and debates, case analysis. Policy debate performance. Role playing exercise. Preparation of a podcast in a group.	Participation in seminars, podcast
Will be able to collaborate constructively in interdisciplinary and intercultural groups, organize teamwork, empower communities, and build partnership networks.	Active learning methods, including problem solving, discussions and debates, case analysis. Policy debate performance. Preparation of a podcast in a group.	Participation in seminars, discussions, and podcast
Will be able to assess the potential social, ethical, legal, economic, and political implications of their actions, recognizing moral responsibility for their activities for the benefit of future societies.	Problem-oriented lectures, seminars (text analysis, comparative assessment and systemic analysis of practical issues, group discussions), individual studies (individual search of information, critical literature studies and the analysis of theoretical and practical problems). Policy debate performance.	Participation in seminars and discussions during the lectures
Will be able to understand and address complex societal issues by applying principles of human rights, equal opportunities, and ethics.	Problem-oriented lectures, seminars (text analysis, comparative assessment and systemic analysis of practical issues, group discussions), individual studies (individual search of information, critical literature studies and the analysis of theoretical and practical problems).	Participation in seminars, discussions during the lectures, and midterm assesment
Will be able to independently organize and plan their professional activities, reflect on their own and others' achievements, and make decisions, adapting to changes in the environment and society.	Problem-oriented lectures, seminars (text analysis, comparative assessment and systemic analysis of practical issues, group discussions), individual studies (individual search of information, critical literature studies and the analysis of theoretical and practical problems).	Participation in seminars, podcast

Content	Contact hours							Individual work: time and assignments	
	Lectures	Tutorials	Seminars	Workshops	Laboratory work	Internship	Contact hours, total	Individual work	Tasks for individual work
1. Introduction to human rights. Human rights as legal norms, moral claims, and social practices. Overview of course objectives, structure, and expectations.	2		2				4	4	In a group discussion, students share their perspectives on what human rights mean to them, and how they perceive the intersection between the two

									concepts. Division into groups and choosing the seminar theme for their future work throughout the term.
2. Historical development of human rights. Historical emergence of human rights in relation to power, conflict, and social struggle.	2						2	4	Reading Marks (2016).
3. Human rights in modern times. Development of human rights from early modern foundations, beginning with the Magna Carta. Examine how ideas of rights evolved through constitutionalism, revolutions, and the rise of the modern state.	2		2				4	8	Students select a specific human right and analyse its historical roots and development, tracing how it emerged, changed, and became institutionalised over time.
4. Contemporary and international human rights. The role of global institutions, legal frameworks, and transnational actors shaping the interpretation and implementation of rights today.	4						4	8	Reading Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2005)
4. Power and human rights. Structural inequalities, exclusion, and marginalisation. State power, institutional power, and professional authority. Critical perspectives on human rights (sociological, political, post-colonial).	2		2				4	8	Students analyse the chosen human rights issue through the lens of power relations, identifying how state authority, institutions, and professional actors shape its interpretation and implementation.
5. Stigma, Discrimination, and Human Rights. Undermining realisation of human rights by shaping social attitudes, institutional practices, and unequal access to resources. Power, labelling, and stereotypes operating at individual and structural levels.	4						4	8	Reading UN, WHO (2023, pp. 121-135)
6. Interpreting Human Rights. Legal interpretation vs. everyday interpretation of rights. Human rights in policy, institutions, and professional practice. Competing interpretations. Translation of human rights norms into local and national contexts	2						2	8	Reading UN UDHR
7. Human Rights and Institutions. Human rights within public administration, local governance, and NGOs. Bureaucratisation and proceduralisation of rights. Accountability, responsibility, and institutional resistance	2		2				4	8	Students identify and analyse the key institutions responsible for the protection and implementation of the chosen human right at local, national, or international levels. Institutional roles, responsibilities, and limitations, as well as tensions between formal obligations and lived human rights outcomes.

8. Sustainability and human rights. Major theoretical approaches that analyze the intersection of sustainability and human rights, such as: environmental justice, capabilities approach, ecological economics and intersectionality.	2						2	8	Reading Tsiotsou, R. H., Kabadayi, S., & Fisk, R. P. (2024)
9. Advocacy as Human Rights Practice and response to power and inequality. Individual, collective, and systemic advocacy. Advocacy strategies.	4		2				6	7	Students design a concise advocacy strategy related to their chosen human rights issue, identifying a clear objective, target audience, and key message.
10. Framing human rights issues in public and professional contexts. Voice, silence, and representation. Risks of simplification, stereotyping, and “humanitarian aid porn”. Emotional narratives and evidence-based arguments.	4		2				6	7	The role of experts by experience in their chosen human rights theme, analysing how lived experience contributes to knowledge production, advocacy, and policy influence.
11. Future Challenges and Directions. Emerging human rights issues (digitalisation, AI, environmental justice). Shifts in global power and their implications for human rights. Re-thinking advocacy and interpretation in changing societies. Students’ disciplinary perspectives on future human rights practice.	2		4				6	9	Students identify and analyse key future challenges affecting their chosen human right, considering social, political, technological, or environmental changes. How these emerging challenges may reshape power relations, interpretation, and advocacy in the years ahead?
Total	32		16				48	87	

Assessment strategy	Weight %	Deadline	Assessment criteria
Podcast assessment.	50%	Last seminar	At the last seminar students will present the podcast they record on the basis of information they gathered throughout the seminars during the semester. 5 points – Excellent. The podcast provides a sophisticated and well-researched analysis of a specific human rights issue, clearly demonstrating how power relations shape its interpretation and realisation. It offers original, critical insights into advocacy strategies, integrates theory with concrete examples, and shows a strong understanding of institutional and social contexts. 4 points – Very good. The podcast presents a well-structured and thoughtful discussion of a human rights issue, with clear attention to power, interpretation, and advocacy. Relevant research and examples are used effectively, though the analysis may be less original or comprehensive than at the highest level. 3 points – Good. The podcast demonstrates a solid understanding of the chosen human rights issue and addresses power relations, interpretation, and advocacy in a generally coherent way. Research and examples are present, but analysis remains descriptive or uneven in depth. 2 points – Basic. The podcast addresses a human rights issue but engages only superficially with power, interpretation, or advocacy. Discussion relies on general

			statements, with limited evidence of research or critical reflection. 1 point – Limited. The podcast shows minimal understanding of the human rights issue and offers little or no meaningful analysis of power relations, interpretation, or advocacy. Content is unclear, poorly supported, or largely descriptive. 0 points – Not achieved. The podcast does not address human rights, power, interpretation, or advocacy, or the task is not submitted.
Group discussion assessment.	20%	Seminars	2 points – Actively engages in discussions and textual analysis, offering insightful contributions, critically evaluating arguments and theories, and posing meaningful questions. Demonstrates creativity in proposing solutions to the issues raised. 1 point – Participates in seminars and contributes to discussions occasionally, offering general opinions and minimally engaging with peers. 0 points – Misses more than 20% of seminars or rarely participates.
Midterm assessment.	30%	Beginning /middle of April	The students will receive 3-4 open ended questions. 3 points – Provides a well-developed and accurate response that directly addresses the question, demonstrates strong understanding of relevant concepts, and offers clear reasoning or examples. 2 points – Provides a generally correct response that addresses the question, showing basic understanding of key concepts, though explanation or depth may be limited. 1 point – Provides a limited or partially relevant response, showing minimal understanding or unclear reasoning. 0 points – Does not answer the question, provides an incorrect response, or leaves the answer blank.
Attendance	Attendance at lectures is optional. Attendance at seminars is compulsory. Students who miss more than 20% of seminars will fail the course.		

Author (-s)	Publishing year	Title	Issue of a periodical or volume of a publication	Publishing house or web link
Required reading				
United Nations	1948	Universal declaration of Human Rights		United Nations https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights	2005 (old but a very good one)	Fact Sheet No. 30, The United Nations Human Rights Treaty System: An introduction to the core human rights treaties and the treaty bodies		https://www.refworld.org/reference/themreport/ohchr/2005/en/53216
United Nations, World Health Organisation	2023	Mental health, human rights and legislation. Guidance and practice	Pp 121-135	https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/WHO-OHCHR-Mental-health-human-rights-and-legislation_web.pdf
Spahn, A.	2018	“The first generation to end poverty and the last to save the planet?”— Western individualism, human rights and the value of nature in the ethics of global sustainable development.	<i>Sustainability</i> 10(6), 1853.	https://ideas.repec.org/a/gam/jsusta/v10y2018i6p1853-d150366.html

Tsiotsou, R. H., Kabadayi, S., & Fisk, R. P.	2024	Advocating human rights and Sustainable Development Goals: an ecosystem-based Transformative Service Research (TSR) approach.	<i>A Research Agenda for Service Marketing</i> (pp. 225-249).	Edward Elgar Publishing. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368817670_Advocating_Human_Rights_and_Sustainable_Development_Goals_An_Ecosystem-based_Transformative_Service_Research_TSR_Approach
Immler, N. L., & Sakkers, H.	2022	The UN-Sustainable Development Goals going local: learning from localising human rights.	<i>The International Journal of Human Rights</i> , 26(2), 262-284	https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13642987.2021.1913411#abstract
Stephen P. Marks	2016	Human Rights: A Brief Introduction	Harvard University	https://content.sph.harvard.edu/wwwhsph/sites/134/2016/07/Human-Rights-A-brief-intro-2016.pdf
Recommended reading				
Knuckey, S., Hoffman, B., Perelman, J., Reddy, G., Ancheita, A., & Jain, M.	2020	Power in human rights advocate and rightsholder relationships: critiques, reforms, and challenges.	<i>Harv. Hum. Rts. J.</i> , 33, 1.	
Kinefuchi, E.	2022	Wangari Maathai: Advocacy for the Environment, Human Rights, and Democracy	<i>Palgrave Handbook of Global Sustainability</i> (pp. 1-10).	<i>The Cham</i> : Springer International Publishing.
Arts, K.	2017	Inclusive sustainable development: a human rights perspective.	<i>Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability</i> , 24, 58-62	
Video: Aimee Meredith Cox	2022	Loophole of Retreat: Venice		