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Carving out a Niche in the Sustainability Confluence for Environmental Education Centers in Cyprus and Greece

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Abstract: Given the environmental issues that today's societies confront, such as climate change, waste management, ecosystem deterioration, etc., environmental education is becoming increasingly important. Adoption of environmental education as an integral part of the educational system is required for the Environmental Education Center (EEC) to be able to provide knowledge, skills, and values so that society can become active and environmentally responsible through awareness-raising. According to the scholarly published research, EECs can positively affect local communities and create an environmentally friendly culture. In addition, given that EECs can even play a significant part in the development of lifelong learning activities at the education and sustainable development nexus, it is considered critical to establishing future potentials and dynamics. Thus, aiming to analyze EECs' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) within our complex and ever-evolving world, educators, students, and other fellow citizens in Cyprus and Greece participated in a survey in which they were asked to fill in a questionnaire, specifically developed for each group category. The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of the implications arising as a result of effective environmental education absence, as well as the importance of a holistic approach through EECs. Moreover, it offers the research community a solid framework for future innovation in citizen engagement and training.

Keywords: sustainability; environmental awareness; behavior change; SWOT analysis; qualitative analysis; education for sustainable development; green movement; environmentalism; environmental science; environmental education



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1. Introduction

The personal relationship of individuals with the environment in the present time proves to be the beginning of all the problems that govern it [1–3]. The increasingly rapid growth rates and the lack of rational management of environmental issues have the effect of continually degrading and destroying natural resources, resulting in the degradation and deterioration of ecosystems [4,5].

According to Global Environment Outlook 5 (2012) [6], the five environmental issues that require immediate management in Europe are air quality, biodiversity, chemicals and waste, climate change and drinking water [7,8]. An important role in tackling these problems on a local scale, which is the beginning of the widening of initiatives and actions at a broader level (regional, national, transnational), is held by local communities [9]. The first and most important stage in the development of active and sensitized local societies

is their training as well as their practical application to local, initial environmental issues, more generally or more broadly [10].

Sustainable development seeks to secure a new policy where economic development interacts in harmony with environmental protection and social well-being [11,12]. With “lighthouse” in the triptych Economy, Society and Environment, Sustainable Development is defined as “development that satisfies the present, without affecting the potential of future generations to meet its needs” [13,14]. Such an approach effectively limits the uncontrolled economic development that has the sole purpose of economic prosperity, without taking into account the environmental parameter and corresponding limits to environmental protection that only concentrates on the environment [15].

In this framework, it is considered that the education of citizens regarding sustainability constitutes one of the most powerful drivers to combat the areas of concern and a critical intervention from local authorities to establish the potential impact on climate change mitigation [16,17]. An important pillar of boosting awareness among citizens includes prevention activities. According to the Waste Framework Directive [18], waste prevention measures need to be taken before the categorization of material or discarded products (i.e., chemicals, materials, substances). On the contrary, prevention activities should aim at the reduction of the quantity of waste beforehand. Therefore, waste prevention activities should not be based on general observations and implementations that might confuse the learning process of the citizens but should focus on individual waste streams, behaviors, local culture and waste characteristics (i.e., composition, production, recycling, and recovery, etc.) [17,19]. Awareness activities relating to sustainable development and waste reduction (i.e., recycle, reuse, refurbish and recovery) are key components to the transition towards sustainable development [20–22].

According to Pappas et al. (2022) [23], both industrial and domestic alterations are able to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and aid the development of strategies toward sustainability. An important component of the implementation of such activities is the acceptance of them on behalf of the public through a willingness to contribute to such a concept and not only the enforcement of policies towards the final goal of climate mitigation. Understanding the problems and opportunities to the transition towards sustainability from all sides comes only through education of the citizens and the integration of individual responsibility and thoughtful actions before an item becomes waste [23]. Areas of investigation include the environment (i.e., limited resources, health implications due to climate change and waste accumulation), society (i.e., social behavior and acceptance towards sustainability, job openings due to new sustainable development strategies) and economy (i.e., waste disposal fees, increase in prices due to limited resources).

Because of the importance of social interaction and innovation to address sustainability challenges, environmental and sustainable education has been deemed of utmost importance in higher education institutions. The main objectives of environmental education include not merely increasing eco-awareness among citizens but also creating sensitivity around environmental topics. It aims at improving critical thinking and interactions between the public and the environment, but also, it assists individuals in more research regarding environmental issues [17,24]. Education regarding sustainable development empowers learners to make informed critical decisions while taking both individual and collective actions to change society regarding the environment. Environmental education is a lifelong process not bound by age which enhances the cognitive, socio-emotional, socio-economic and socio-environmental progression of learning. It responds to urgent and dramatic challenges faced by the globe due to continuous and collective human activity with catastrophic environmental, social and economic consequences which endanger the survival of our own species. It provided the learners with the necessary skills, values and knowledge to address global issues like climate change, resource usage and waste, loss of biodiversity, etc. It is necessary for the comprehension of consequences and opportunities of everyday actions on behalf of the citizens, while at the same time, can act as a pressure lever towards inert governmental bodies from the citizens and vice versa [25,26].

The integration of sustainable education in the curriculum aims to cultivate social innovators and contributors who are willingly participating in local and EU strategies and plans regarding sustainable development [27]. The development of effective environmental education programs is a tool for the enhancement of positive environmental attitudes and values, boosts knowledge and skills for individuals and communities and strengthens the collaboration of the public, authorities, stakeholders, decision-makers, scientists and academia for a positive environmental action [28]. At the same time, according to Ardoin and Bowers (2020) [29], environmental education in the early childhood years gives even better results than in higher years and has gained increasing momentum. This is due to the combination of persistent environmental challenges of the world along with existing interests exhibited by children. In their systematic review, Ardoin and Bowers (2020) [29] investigated empirical studies of environmental education programs focusing on a 25-year span. Results from 66 investigated studies indicated that participants of earlier ages (0–8 years old) revealed the development of environmental literacy, cognitive development as well as emotional and social development. However, according to Moustairas et al. (2022) [30], obstacles to public acceptance of the development of education centers are affected by many variables and mostly demographics, environmental consciousness, recycling behavior and economic incentives.

Emerging from this growing interest in environmental education, environmental education centers (EEC) were established. These institutions are highly connected to environmental international and local movements and are considered one of the most important factors of extra-curriculum education [31,32]. They are encouraged to cooperate with citizens and prolong the learning experience to replace traditional learning [33]. They have substantial power to influence local communities, students and, by extension, policymakers in the transition towards sustainability [34]. EECs of all countries take the largest share in the realization of the vision of Environmental Education/Education for Sustainable Development [35,36]. EECs are standard learning organizations and constitute a network of decentralized public educational structures for environmental education and sustainability and support at the local, national and international levels. EECs serve the following goals [34–36]:

1. The development and implementation of educational programs for students of all levels of education,
2. The development of training programs and the provision of training to educators, either by living or distance, or by combining them,
3. The production and distribution of educational material in schools and the community in paper and/or digital form,
4. The development of national and regional thematic and/or methodological networks,
5. Cooperation with schools and general structures and education staff with the community and public and private bodies,
6. Cooperation with Universities and Technological Educational Institutes for relevant research and educational activities.

This research aims to analyze and evaluate the contribution of EECs to environmental education in Cyprus and Greece, as well as new trends in education, the adoption of which by EECs will further strengthen their role.

2. Literature Review

This study explores EECs whose primary purpose is to deliver environmental education in order to promote environmental awareness. This criterion is satisfied by a group of institutions that differ in terms of organizational structure and form, teaching goals, objective(s) and means, as well as content and accessibility. However, the scope of this analysis exempts academic entities with a primary commitment to research.

Continuous and lifelong learning constitute the main characteristics of sustainable development education. Therefore, activities of EECs are to be developed in a holistic and expansive manner to include all three pillars of sustainability (environmental, social,

and economic). To benefit from such establishments, social learning should be a key ingredient where people from different backgrounds and experiences, values and learning perspectives come together and commit to problem-solving of not yet found sonot-yet for sustainability. The purpose of EECs is also the motivation of civilians to not only participate but to innovate regarding pre-existing perspectives and designs and come up with new ideas derived from everyday life [37].

The United States, Canada, Australia, and several European Union member states have established both publicly as well as privately funded EECs. Despite the considerable differences, similar trends and patterns could well be identified around the planning and development of EECs. Several EECs are working to promote environmental education and awareness. The types of these EECs vary according to their origin, environment and funding as well as continued development over the years. They include school farms, eco-museums connected to natural spaces, interpretation and natural centers [38,39].

For instance, support for environmental education is state-dependent within the systems of government in the United States, Canada, and Australia, resulting in various degrees of EEC growth [40–43]. In Europe, and in particular Italy, Slovenia, Spain, Cyprus, and Greece, governing systems benefit from the EU's supporting policies and, consequently, monetary resources in order to develop EECs [44]. Conversely, when central government financing ran out in Great Britain, the entire EEC network established to that point was privatized [45]. Thus, it is difficult to avoid the view that the passive support of higher administrative political systems not only supports the EECs development but also reinforces those establishments' resilience and sustainability.

International research on EECs mainly adopts a qualitative perspective and has only marginally addressed the perceptions of EECs' functions and contributions. For the needs of the present research, a review of certain previous studies on the perceptions of the direct and indirect recipients of environmental education, as well as the direct and indirect outcomes makes much sense.

Simmons (1991) [46] surveyed EEC workers, finding substantial support for goals and objective(s) set by environmental education institutions related to behavioral change, owing to heightened environmental awareness, although with doubts about localized environmental issues with political overtones. Hart (1996) [47] observed a widespread absence of empirical studies monitoring teachers' perceptions attitudes, pedagogical tools and methods and levels of engagement in environmental education. Nevertheless, according to Mavrikaki et al. (2004) [48], environmental education is a valuable educational procedure that, however, engages just a minority of instructors due to its elective nature. Flogaitis, Daskolia and Liarakou (2005) [49] used a survey to assess the environmental education approaches, motives and counter-motives linked to environmental education. Based on the empirical findings, the researchers argue that praxis-focused training sessions might help environmental education diffusion. Following that, Erickson and Erickson (2006) [50] explored the aspects related to the EECs' performance from the management point of view, concluding that strong personnel (i.e., educators) is the most important aspect. Around the same period, Ballantyne and Packer (2006) [43] conducted in-depth interviews with EECs' senior management in order to understand and assess the various ways in which such centers partnered with or worked within compulsory education establishments. Their findings support that the cooperation mechanics developed establish fully-fledged relations in a way that environmental education consistency, advancement and continuance are ensured, even after the completion of the individual environmental education programs.

Ernst (2009) [51] rendered the fine nuances between environment-based education and general environmental education and is currently investigating the qualitative and quantitative aspects of environmental education activity in the United States, supporting that lack of funds was the primary constraint on environmental education. Conversely, in 2012, within the context of a larger research project on environmental and outdoor/nature-based education, a study attempted—to the best of the authors' knowledge—to collect and analyze educators' perspectives for the first time. Despite the fact that the majority of the

survey respondents indicated that outdoor/nature-based training was not a part of their initial education syllabus, their replies suggest that outdoor/nature-based education plays a significant part in the overall learning outcomes [52].

A recent (2018) study, upon comparing EECs, supports that such centers primarily focus on providing a supporting mechanism for other organizations, the formation of networks, and developing initiatives to address local environmental demands, rather than contesting a strategic implementation role directly conducting environmental education [53]. In addition, it is stressed that EECs should invest in developing national, regional and local environmental education policies in close cooperation with the competent bodies, as well as seek stronger and more direct participation in achieving sustainable development goals.

Building on previous learnings, Moustairas et al. (2022) [30] attempted to determine the elements influencing public support for establishing EECs. According to their findings, the formation of an EEC is influenced by demographics (admittedly country/region and culture specific), environmental awareness, recycling behavior, and economic incentives. This conclusion reflects on the public's feeling of individual efficacy and sense of responsibility, supporting that environmentally friendly activities do not solely fall within a bourgeoisie of environmental gurus, thus arguing that those principles have a limited role in establishing a society's "eco-consciousness." Furthermore, the authors, through their statistical analysis, indicate that the acceptability rates of establishing an EEC will rise if further importance is placed on local sustainable development, effectively complementing the Agenda 2030 sustainable development goals as well as the circular economy model.

While EECs are encouraged to engage in lifelong and conventional training, they are also encouraged to join forces with regional and local authorities and the forces of production, as well as civil society in making decisions directly or indirectly relating to their quality of living, in order to become a channel in achieving sustainable development [54]. An empirical study was conducted in 2013 attempting to investigate the role of EECs in remote regions [37]. The research suggests that the activity of EECs in remote areas positively affects the local community, both in terms of direct benefits for consumers, businesses, and the economy as well as indirect benefits, such as creating desirable places to live with a strong identity and pride in the community, and—perhaps most importantly—that young learners are becoming environmentally aware and can develop into prospective enforcers of sustainability.

However, when the scope is narrowed from the importance of the development of lifelong learning environmental education activities to the benchmarking of the defining potential and future dynamics, pertinent research becomes scarce, thus leaving room for the current research to fill this gap, attempting to assess the various arguments in favor of and against EECs' course of action within a constantly changing world and under the pressure of environmental degradation.

3. Materials and Methods

To assess the role and contribution of EECs as well as their greater influence on society, this study focuses on the following research questions [55,56]; (a) What is the degree of influence of the EECs in shaping environmental consciousness? (b) What are EECs' contributions to the dissemination of sustainability principles? (c) What are the learners' views on environmental issues and to what extent are they influenced by EECs actions? (d) What are the limiting factors, the necessary structures and processes that will contribute to the modernization of the EECs in order to gain momentum and increase their impact?

In order to identify issues encountered by EECs in their operations and attainment of their goals, as well as contemporary developments in environmental education, this study attempts to comparatively determine those aspects between Greece and Cyprus that are considered an advantage and which are not. To do so, the current research adopts data from the internationally published scholarly literature on the role and the actions of EECs in Greece and Cyprus. In addition, the Strategic Planning of the European Union, which

contains policies, directives, and regulations, as well as information from the Pedagogical Institutes of the two countries, were used.

A strategic research approach was developed, and the means to collect the necessary information were defined as follows:

1. Target Audience: For the scope of the current research, the audience that was targeted was EECs educators, students of the Lower and Upper Secondary School age (i.e., 12–18 years old), as well as their parents (including custodians).
2. Collect Responses: The target audience was invited to participate in a survey. The survey included closed-ended questions that will be addressed in the form of questionnaires in each target group. The survey was designed and conducted in accordance with the Greek and Cypriot legislation and with institutional requirements. All participants gave their informed consent to participate prior to the start of the survey. They were informed about the aim of the study and that they could terminate their participation at any time without negative consequences. The survey was anonymous, and the participants gave consent to use their answers for research. The participation of both countries is presented in Table 1. The survey was conducted during the spring and summer 2020 terms, namely from mid-January to late July.
3. Data Processing: Survey data processing, including sorting and cleaning, and converting data into a usable format, towards transforming the raw data into structured information that can then be analyzed for insights.
4. Exploratory Analysis: This part concerns the collection, organization, analysis, interpretation and presentation of the data in relation to the research issues on which the research focuses.
5. SWOT Analysis: A framework for identifying Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (herein after; SWOT Analysis) was conducted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the contribution of EECs to environmental education, as well as the threats and opportunities for overcoming any weaknesses and addressing threats towards a more effective, creative, and innovative operation of these educational institutions. SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool used that constitutes a cognitive process that studies the relations between external and internal factors and surroundings of a territory, business, product, or organization based on mixed subjective and objective evaluation [57,58]. The SWOT acronym is derived from the English words: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats [59,60] and is a key to identifying strengths, eliminating weaknesses, as well as seizing opportunities and responding to threats. Strengths are positive aspects of the analysis, while weaknesses are negatives related to the system's internal aspects. On the other hand, opportunities and threats refer to the external aspects and refer to positive or negative interactions with the system respectively [61]. The internal evaluation of the environment under consideration aims to identify the strengths and weaknesses mainly of internal resources such as personnel, products and services [62], while also examining threats and risks due to the external competitive environment [63].
6. TOWS Matrix: SWOT analysis has been adopted by many organizations [64] and businesses, mainly because of its simplicity and the advantages it offers, such as addressing weaknesses that affect the achievement of goals, understanding the business or organization's philosophy, the prospect of exploiting the strengths to achieve the desired goal [65,66]. Coupling the S-W-O-T parameters by two, after identifying them and ranking them, yields four coupled parameters, each corresponding to a strategy type. The characterization and type of strategies resulting from this coupling, namely the TOWS matrix, where the strategic planning framework is specifically at the decision-making stage, are [67–70]:
 - Development Strategy (maxi–maxi), “S-O”: This strategy focuses on exploiting the strong points to seize opportunities.
 - Corrective Strategy (mini–maxi), “W-O”: This strategy seeks to minimize and improve weaknesses that hinder opportunities.

- Maximizing Strategy (maxi–mini), “S-T”: This strategy focuses on exploiting the strong points to address and minimize threats to the environment.
- Defense Strategy (mini–mini), “W-T”: The goal of the strategy is to minimize weaknesses in order to avoid threats.

Table 1. Involvement of social groups in research.

Country	Students	Parents	Educators
Cyprus	72	72	9
Greece	77	-	12

The right strategy choice is derived from the image described by the SWOT matrix and results in proportion to the overriding parameter. If the “S-O” Development Strategy prevails, then the organization has many opportunities as well as advantages and is recommended to adapt. A “W-O” Correction Strategy is appropriate when the organization’s internal weaknesses prevent it from taking advantage of existing opportunities. Therefore, in this case, this strategy focuses on addressing and correcting the weaknesses as much as possible. If the “S-T” Improvement Strategy prevails, it means that although the organization faces many external threats, it has strong points and advantages in mitigating them to achieve its goals. The “W-T,” Defense Strategy is chosen if an organization receives many external threats and its internal forces are insufficient to deal with them. The overall research roadmap for the current research is graphically presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Graphical illustration of the research roadmap.

4. Results

The founding of the EECs emerged in the 1970s when the idea of Environmental Education was reinforced through the conferences of Tbilisi (1977) and Moscow (1987) [71]. The enlargement of Environmental Education was primarily aimed at implementing actions in direct contact with the environment, which would be ensured by the operation of the EECs. This enabled the educational community and students [43] to develop skills on the subject of environmental protection, supplying it with knowledge and techniques that theoretical education could not provide in the past. These newly acquired skills will include awareness and sensitivity, knowledge and understanding of key concepts (i.e., circular economy, sustainable development, etc.), cultivation of talented individuals regarding sectors of environmental protection (i.e., environmental engineering, governmental bodies, law, etc.), new attitudes towards sustainability, willingness to actively participate in national

or EU legislation and action plans as well as the necessary critical thinking skills to identify challenges and opportunities for improving individual prevention activities of everyday life [72,73]. EECs evolved further in 1990, in the sense of “Sustainable Development” as a central term of Environmental Education, while the idea came to fruition in the mid-decade with the Rio Agenda 21 conference in 1992, stressing the urgent need to create EECs as facilitators in linking education and society [74]. Since then, EECs have become the connecting link between education and the social community, offering all social strata the opportunity to directly interact with environmental issues, educating and directing critical thinking, awareness and participation.

In Cyprus, the establishment of the EECs was launched in 2000, when the Ministry of Education of Cyprus developed the “National Strategic Plan for Environmental Education Focusing on Sustainable Development,” which was completed in 2004. With the adoption of EU policies, the implementation of its planning integrates Environmental Education into the education system of Cyprus, aiming to inform students and the general public about environmental issues through the actions developed by Tosh and extra curriculum activities [75]. There are five EECs in Cyprus today, and two more centers are expected to open and operate. Each one of Cyprus’ EECs supports specific programs that can be taught by students in all schools in the country but also functions as a network, thereby achieving constructive cooperation between them [76].

In Greece, EECs were established by law 1892/90. Following the implementation of this Law, the creation of EECs began, setting out the aims, functions and actions around the EU as well as the qualified staff for the Centers [77]. Sixty EECs operate in Greece today throughout its land and island area. The first EEC was established in 1993 in Achaea’s Kleitoria [44] and others throughout the country. Moving on to the idea, the main directions of the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs were the rational distribution of the student population, the genuine interest in local communities and the utilization of existing infrastructure. Thus, eight more EECs were established in 1995, twelve in 1997, seventeen in 1998, thirty-one in 2003 and fourteen in 2006 [78]. The EECs are distributed so that each prefecture of Greece is supported by one EEC, and each district by nine. However, the student population is not generally evenly distributed, with the result that some EECs are underperforming.

4.1. Level of Training and Evaluation of EECs Educators

As regards the possession of postgraduate degrees by educators and as shown in Figures 2 and 3 for the question “What is the specialization of your postgraduate and doctoral studies, if any?” an advantage is the possession of postgraduate studies in the subject. Namely, 67% of Cypriots declared that they hold a postgraduate degree in Environmental Education and Sustainable Development and 11% in Ecology, Management and Protection of the Natural Environment, Natural Sciences Teaching and Environmental Education and Biotechnology, Ecology and Biodiversity. On the contrary, in the case of Greece, 76% of the respondents did not hold a postgraduate degree, which is a weakness of the EECs with regard to the existing training and specialization of their educators, while 8% of the educators hold the title of Educational Planning, Investment Finance in REN (Renewable Energy) and Models of Design and Development of Educational Units, Physical Education and Quality of Life. A big difference is presented in the two cases as Cyprus has a clear advantage over Greece, as shown by the results.

To the question “How do you assess the level of training of your educators?” in the case of Cyprus, 49% of students consider their level very high, 33% high, 17% satisfactory and 1% moderate. In the case of Greece, only 18% consider that the level is very high, 43% high, 34% satisfactory and then 3% moderate and low (Figure 4). Although objectively, students are not able to evaluate the training of their instructors, it is a very serious threat, especially for Greece, the non-acceptance and assessment of the level of training of the educators by the students. In the case of Cyprus, the training of educators is better, according to the viewpoint of the student learners; however, improvements are needed. This indicates

significant internal weakness of structures to highlight the skills of educators or to select managers with knowledge transfer skills to gain the acceptance of learners, a parameter necessary to accept the knowledge being passed.

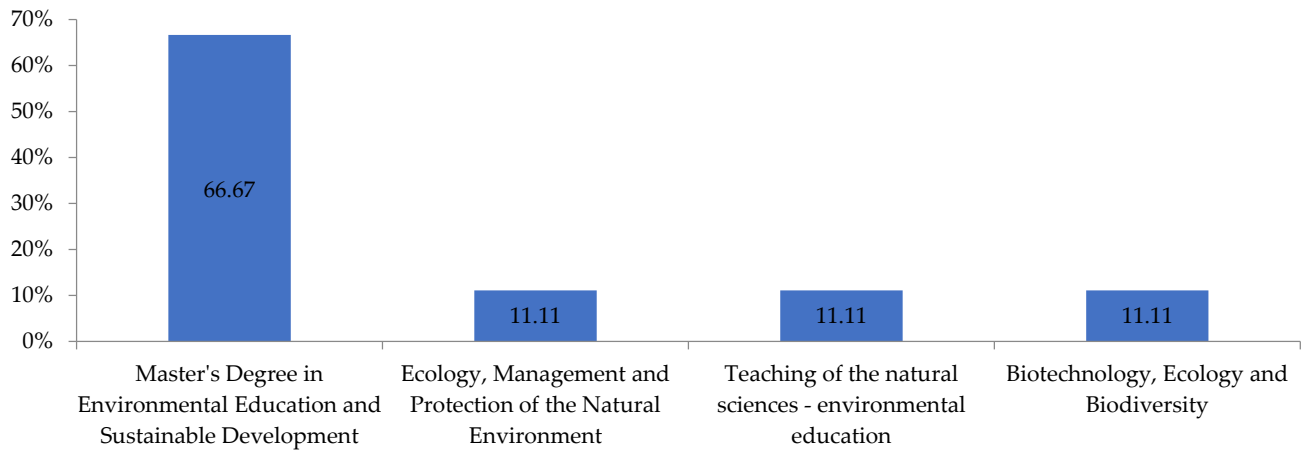


Figure 2. Level and type EECs educators in Cyprus.

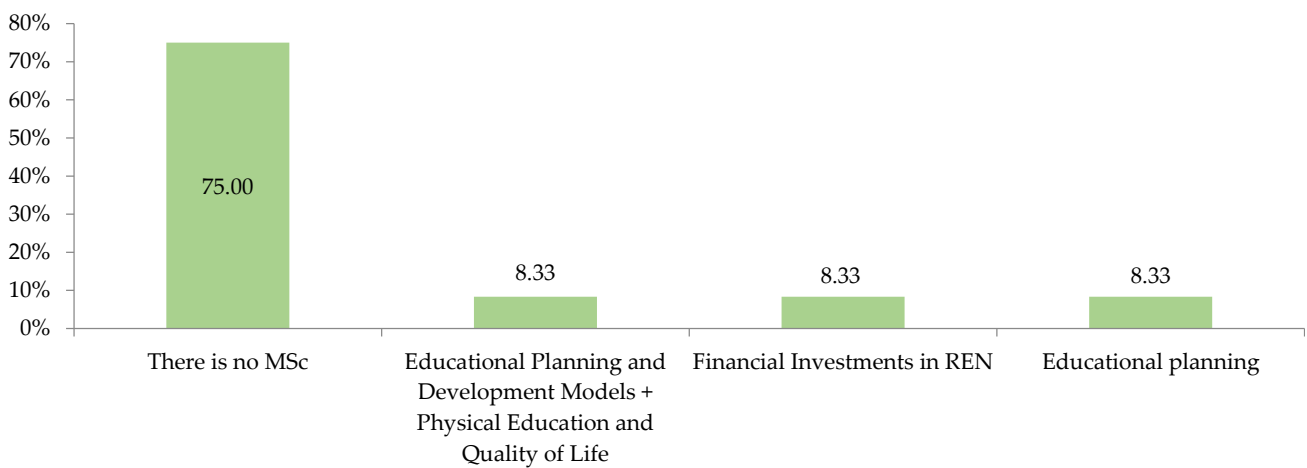


Figure 3. Level and type EECs educators in Greece.

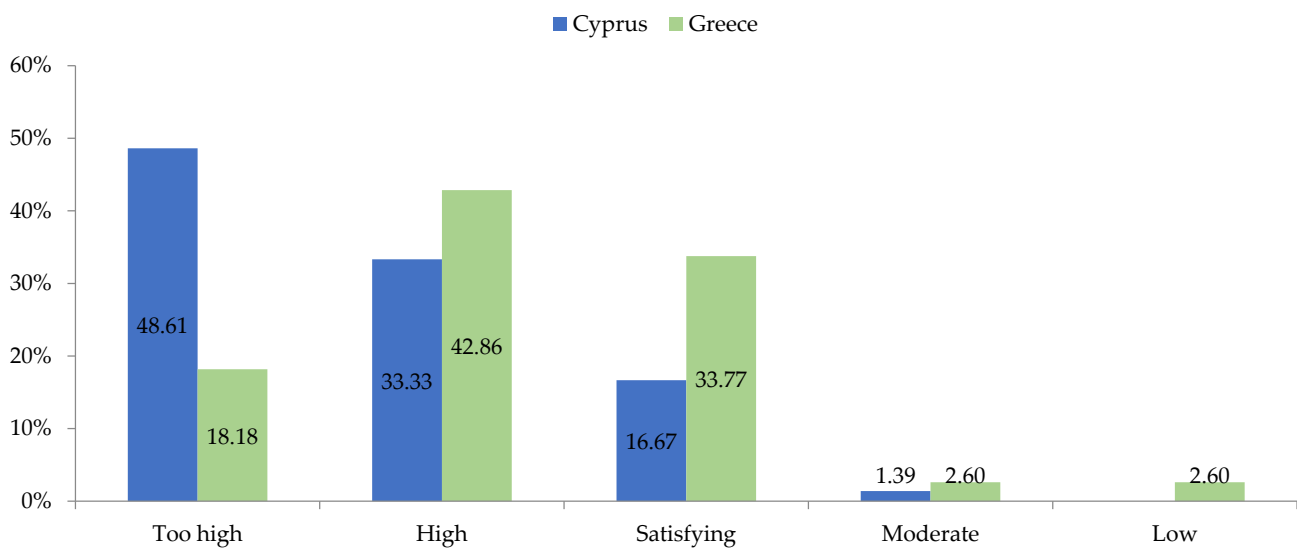


Figure 4. Evaluation of EECs educators by students in Cyprus and Greece.

4.2. Knowledge of the Differences between Different Forms of Environmental Education

An overwhelming majority of 89% of educators in Cyprus (Figure 5), answered the question “Do you know the characteristics that differentiate Environmental Education from Education for Sustainable Development?” stating that they know the differences between the two terms, shaping the answer to a free text in the questionnaire, indicative of the level of training. In the case of Greece, half of the responders (Figure 5) responded that they are not aware of the characteristics that differentiate environmental education from education to sustainable development, which demonstrates the need for training and is currently assessed as a weakness.

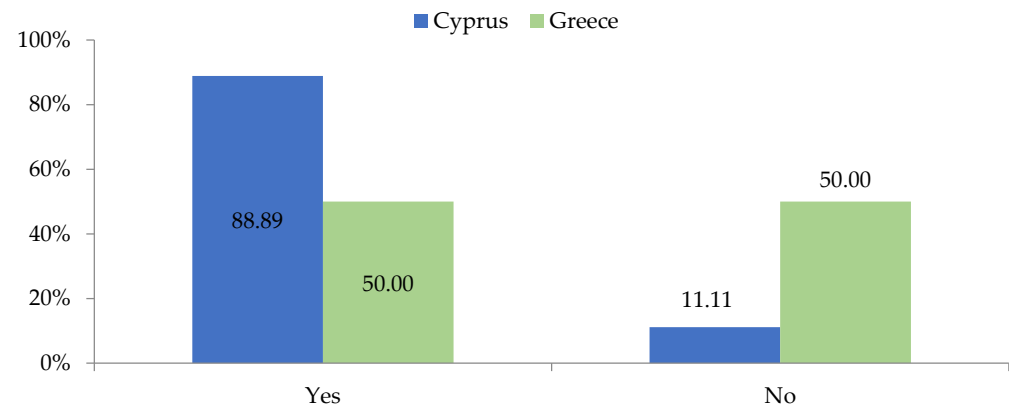


Figure 5. Differences between Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable Development in Cyprus and Greece.

4.3. Feedback in EECs by Students

For both countries, there is a lack of feedback from trainees or school units about their satisfaction after the end of their visit to the EEC. Relatively to Cyprus, 67% say it is sometimes, 22% is always done, while the remaining 11% is rare. A total of 33% (Figure 6) of educators say they receive feedback sometimes or rarely and, perhaps for this reason, a large percentage of them are satisfied with the degree of influence of EECs but feel that improvements are needed. In fact, the degree of influence may be partly exacerbated by the degree of learners’ satisfaction, which many times educators may not know.

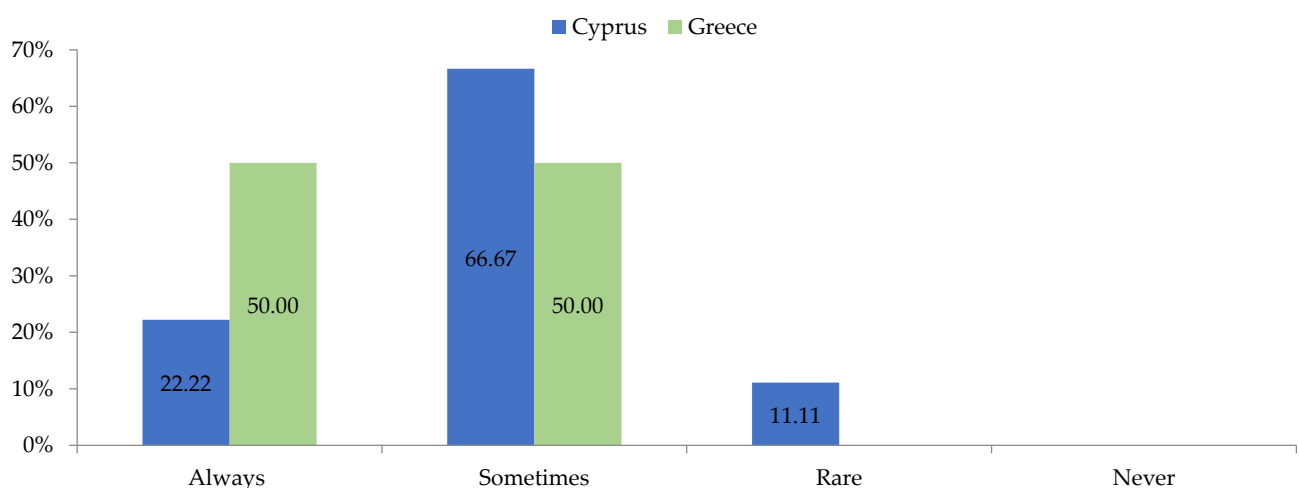


Figure 6. The feedback received in Cyprus and Greece.

For Greece, half of educators said they always receive feedback (Figure 6) on students’ satisfaction while half stated that they do not receive any.

The lack of feedback deprives the EEC of both countries of knowing their outward image, which would help them to understand the degree of influence they exert. This may

be the result of possible incomplete cooperation between EECs and school units or the absence of the implementation of an effective operational protocol.

4.4. Satisfaction of Trainees with the Practical Part of Education

The students who participated in activities with a practical part also replied to the question “If your training had a practical part, are you satisfied with your degree of participation in it?.” According to Figure 7, 74% of students responded in Cyprus that they are very satisfied with their participation in the practical part, while 23% answered moderately and 3% little. In Greece, satisfaction for the practical part is expressed by the students at 86%, while 11% express moderate satisfaction. Greece’s dissatisfaction corresponds to 3% of the respondents. Therefore, in the case of student satisfaction for practical actions, 26% of the non-positive answers should be recorded as a weakness in the case of Cyprus, it needs attention and especially redesign of the actions so that the EECs can gain all the students.

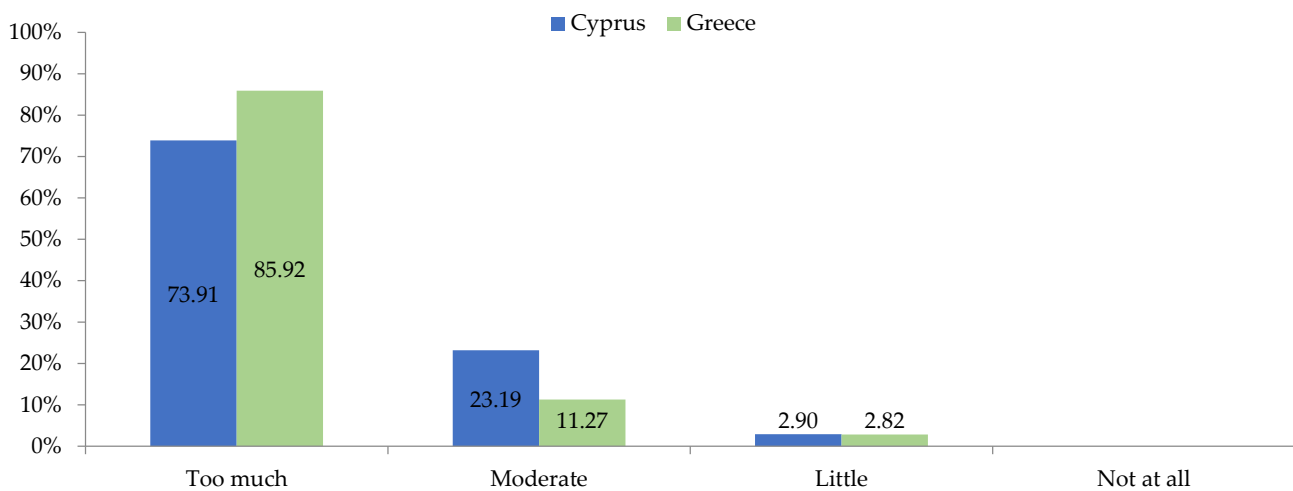


Figure 7. Satisfaction of trainees with the practical part of education in Cyprus and Greece.

There is a contradiction in Cyprus with the question “From the image you have acquired to this day, to what extent learners are satisfied in the case of practical training?” as 100% of educators (Figure 8) replied that the students are very satisfied, confirming the conclusion that led to the following questions that Cypriot educators seem to have no real picture of the degree of EEC influence on students, which is a serious threat in this case. On the contrary, in the case of Greece, educators seem to have become more aware and understand their influence on students and therefore also an opportunity that, if successful, will be able to redefine new strategies to approach the issues they are developing and approaching the target group.

Cypriot educators appear not to have a real situation of the degree of influence of EECs on students, which is a major threat in this case. On the contrary, in the case of Greece, educators seem to have become more aware and understanding of their influence on students, and therefore this is also an opportunity that they will be able to redefine if they use it, new strategies for approaching the issues they are developing and targeting target groups.

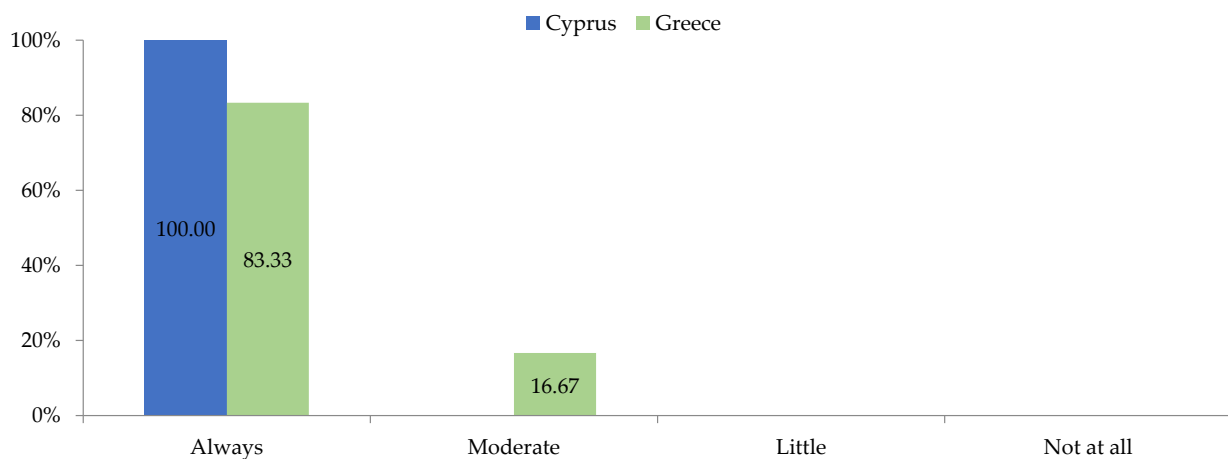


Figure 8. Satisfaction of trainees with the practical part of education according to educators in Cyprus and Greece.

4.5. General SWOT Results

Proceeding to the SWOT matrix, the results are derived, by conjugating Opportunities with Strengths (S–O), Opportunities with Weaknesses (O–W), Threats with Strengths (T–S) and Threats with Weaknesses (T–W). The results in Cyprus are 30 cases/opportunities, 17 threats/strengths, 21 opportunities/weaknesses and 12 threats/weaknesses. The case of Greece, there are 13 cases/opportunities, 11 threats/strengths, 10 opportunities/weaknesses and 32 threats/weaknesses.

4.6. SWOT Matrix Findings Analysis

At the end of the analysis, consequently, with the extraction of results from the SWOT matrix, the division of factors into quadrants resulted in the case of Cyprus having the “O–S” Development Strategy while in the case of Greece, the dominant factor distribution is that of “T–W”, Shrink and Defense.

It is clear that in the case of Cyprus, the combination of high teacher education with the interest shown by pupils and parents is the key to a sound Development Strategy, where by adopting innovative teaching methods, they will be able to raise the awareness of the public [50,79] and reverse any negative situation. The willingness of Cypriot teachers to collaborate with both research and academic institutions and similar infrastructures can offer a variety of contemporary environmental topics, providing new knowledge to the public and exerting a positive influence on them. Equally important in raising the awareness of trainees are the appropriate staff and infrastructure available in the Cypriot EECs, enhancing their role and strength. Finally, funding through European programs and/or by the state will add additional momentum and weight to the work that Cypriot EECs have to do with the adoption of Strategic Development (Figure 9).

In the case of Greece, the adoption of Strategic Defense seems to be the safest solution, as due to the economic crisis, the EECs could not remain unaffected, resulting in a lack of infrastructure and basic tools to complete their environmental education actions. Despite the public awareness and cooperation with academic institutions, non-adoption of the Strategic Planning proposed by the European Union has had a negative impact on the proper functioning of EECs, which has weakened their contribution to the public and thus it also diminished public interest, jeopardizing its viability. It is easily understood that the adoption of a Strategic Defense will “freeze” the adverse situation [80] in which the EECs are located and will have the time needed to adopt radical changes that could reverse the negative condition (Figure 9).

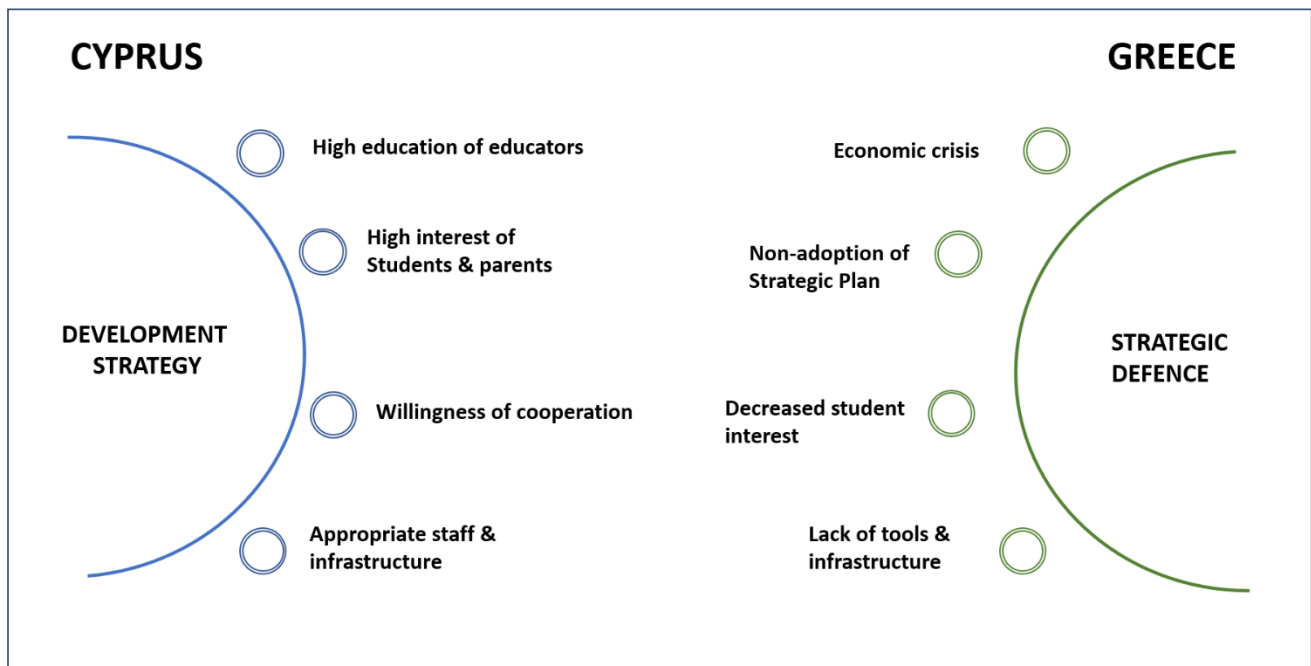


Figure 9. Outline of recommendations regarding the strategy to be followed in Cyprus (Development Strategy) and Greece (Strategic defense) and key aspects of them.

5. Conclusions

In the case of Cyprus, the recommended strategy is a Development Strategy because of the combination of high education of educators and the interest shown by students and parents. At the same time, the willingness of Cypriot educators to cooperate with both research and university institutions and similar infrastructures can offer a variety of modern environmental issues, providing new knowledge to the public and exerting a positive influence on them. An equally important parameter for educating learners is the appropriate staff and infrastructure in Cypriot EECs, enhancing their role and strength.

Regarding Greece, the adoption of Strategic Defense seems to be the safest solution because of the economic crisis as EECs could not remain unaffected, resulting in the lack of infrastructure and key tools for completing their educational environmental actions. Furthermore, despite public awareness and cooperation with university institutions, non-adoption of the Strategic Plan proposed by the European Union has had a negative impact on the proper functioning of the EECs and therefore the impact of EECs is decreasing and the students' interest also.

It is easy to see that the adoption of a Strategic Defense will “freeze” the situation in which the EECs are located and will have the required time to adopt radical changes that could overturn the negative situation. In any case, the establishment of EECs in Greece and Cyprus as well as any part of the world requires further action on behalf of different districts which wish to start up such centers. Environmental awareness and education in the form of EECs can provide the setting stone for the transition to a more sustainable society, if the EECs are established and modified wisely, according to the area's profile. It is strongly suggested that further research regarding specific areas for establishing EECs in Greece and Cyprus are investigated, for a prosperous and worthwhile goal toward climate mitigation and sustainability.

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