

Postgraduate Diploma in Sustainable Development

PROSPECTUS



Global perspectives on sustainability transitions and transformations



The Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip) in Sustainable Development offered by the Centre for Sustainability Transitions (CST) is an honours-level qualification and comprises eight taught modules that can be completed over one or two years. The programme is presented at venues on Stellenbosch University main campus and in and around Stellenbosch and Cape Town.



The programme is aimed at working professionals, activists and practitioners, and graduates who want to strengthen their engagement with current sustainability thinking, research and practice.



This qualification is an excellent choice for participants interested in diverse perspectives on how to bring about transformation to just, equitable and sustainable futures. The PGDip is a rigorous academic degree that allows for a diversity of modes of learning, opportunities for practical experience, and group work collaboration.

Institutional setting

The PGDip in Sustainable Development is offered by the Centre for Sustainability Transitions, an internationally recognised research centre located within the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at Stellenbosch University.

The PGDip provides the entry point into the Centre's wider research and postgraduate training environment. Students who graduate from the PGDip, and who are eager to continue their academic research training, can apply for the MPhil in Sustainable Development, and thereafter the PhD in Sustainable Development.





Programme overview

The PGDip will deepen participants' understanding and knowledge of sustainable development ambitions and challenges during this time of global transition. The programme offers collaborative learning and advanced reflection, and personal and professional development opportunities in the emerging fields of sustainability transitions and transformations.

Sustainability transitions and transformations is an evolving field of scholarly inquiry and practice. It is directly applicable to students who are working professionals, practitioners, and activists across diverse sectors of society. The content and approach to teaching, learning and assessment in this programme is tailored to making sustainability studies relevant to a global audience while being rooted in an African context, enriching and applicable to a diverse student cohort who are interested in understanding and making change where they are.

Many students encounter sustainability concerns in their communities or at their places of work which prompt them to apply to our programme

in the hope of making a greater impact and advancing professionally. Our teaching, learning and assessment approach nurtures students' resourcefulness, self-awareness, and creativity, and cultivates an enlivened sense of how positionality, power, justice, and equity inform how, where and with whom they act. Our curriculum promotes inner growth and transformation in addition to delving deeply and broadly into social-ecological change. While grappling within the problem space is critical, the focus is on solutions and avenues for transformative change. This focus on agency helps students to find ways forward, cultivating the capability to respond to increasingly uncertain and troubling times.

For all modules, the learning experience benefits from being embedded in diverse environments where students' learning is connected to live experiments for alternative, exploratory living and working.

Programme learning outcomes

- Identify, describe and analyse key historical and current global economic, political and ecological trends driving global change at multiple scales that culminate in a sustainability polycrisis.
- Distinguish and apply different perspectives and frameworks on multi-level dynamics of change and how these coalesce into relational and dynamics perspectives on sustainability transitions.
- Critically evaluate and cultivate divergent South African, African, and global interpretations of theoretical and practical approaches to sustainable development, considering how these approaches address issues of justice, equity, and human-nature connectedness within social-ecological systems to develop more inclusive and effective strategies for sustainable development.
- Develop effective strategies for initiating social processes that bring diverse stakeholders together for transformative action on social, political and environmental causes, while applying systems thinking.
- Cultivate skills of reflection, reflexivity, empathy, curiosity, negotiation, and experimentation with diverse groups of actors in collaborative learning processes, navigating the intricate ethical and social dimensions of sustainability issues.



Programme structure and curriculum

The programme consists of eight modules reflecting the core research areas of the CST, and which speaks to the heart of our global polycrisis in the ways that students approach challenges and solutions.

Structure and content

Modules provide a global perspective on sustainability transitions and transformations while delving into the dynamics and trends across biodiversity and climate change, just energy transitions, water and food nexus, and sustainable urbanisms. The programme emphasises complexity literacy, governance and institutional change, and leadership and ethics to support just and sustainable futures.

Module descriptions

Sustainability transitions and transformation

This module focuses on the rise to global prominence of the challenges sustainable development, marked by the global commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since the adoption of this international policy framework in 2015. The module begins by sketching the extent and nature of the sustainability polycrisis to better understand the nature of intersecting climate, biodiversity, social, political and economic crises, and do so from a southern perspective, rooted in the African context. Such an orientation is vital for appreciating the multiple pathways towards just, equitable and sustainable futures. The module focuses in on several sustainability frameworks that demonstrate a range of values and approaches to solving what is unsustainable. Going beyond analyses of what is unsustainable, the module draws on emerging literature on sustainability transitions and transformation to begin addressing these key questions. The literature grapples with the dynamics, scales and modalities of change. They are instructive as they equip students with conceptual frameworks and heuristics to observe, analyse and participate in change processes. During the module, students have the opportunity to engage with the diverse strategies of action by change agents working across diverse contexts, thus linking the theories and practices of sustainability.



Complexity literacy and systems worldviews

Complexity thinking marks a pivotal moment in the history of science, as it originates from a perspective emphasising the interconnectedness of the physical, biological, and social facets of our world. The “complexity turn” has furthered this transformation, expanding the horizons, models, and methodologies of science to encompass the characteristics and dynamics of complex interactions between humans and nature. A historical and critical examination of the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings that inform complexity thinking reveals the diversity of worldviews that shape our distinct perceptions of reality and how they influence our decisions and actions in responding to the challenges of sustainability transitions. This module underscores the critical significance of complexity literacy, which offers scholars and practitioners indispensable competencies for facilitating integrated thinking and cultivating relational practices that resonate more purposefully in our interconnected world. The module offers a foundation for a coherent framework for complexity thinking, the operationalisation of the features of complex systems, and the development of process-based strategies for practices that address the challenges of complex human-nature interactions. By doing so, it not only maps the field but also opens the door to transformative learning, research and practices that are better aligned with real-world challenges where change is essential and urgent. It is through complexity literacy that we can navigate and thrive in the ever-evolving landscape of sustainability transitions.

Biodiversity and climate change

The overarching aim of this module is to highlight the interconnectedness between society and ecosystems and to explore concepts and tools to better engage with these social-ecological systems. The underlying premise in this module is that the escalating biodiversity and climate change crises are embedded within complex social, political and economic systems. The framing of social-ecological systems highlights the interconnectedness between society and nature and is used to examine the foundational concepts of biodiversity and climate change. Ecosystem services, which demonstrate nature’s (both positive and negative) contributions to people, provide a lens with which to examine human-nature relationships. Values and worldviews govern relationships within and between social-ecological systems, which influence how these systems are practically valued and measured. This module explores the range of response options for achieving just, biodiverse and sustainable futures, ranging from policy to local innovations. Although emphasising conceptual and theoretical perspectives, the module highlights several examples of application that can be applied to the management and governance of social-ecological systems.

Financing just energy transitions

Over the next twenty years, the fossil fuel-based material infrastructures of everyday life, in particular energy systems, need to be dismantled (where they exist) and replaced with decarbonised infrastructures. Where infrastructures still need to be constructed on scale (mainly in Africa), these cannot be the same as those that are being dismantled. Estimates suggest that this is going to cost \$3 and \$7 trillion per annum. This module introduces how the global financial system is structured and the role played by a range of central banks, commercial banks, non-banking financial institutions, community banks and state-owned financial institutions. A key focus will be the way global and national financial systems will need to change to ensure that sustainability transitions are properly financed. Africa’s specific challenges to raise the funds required for the just energy transition will be a central theme.



Water and food nexus

This module explores the intricate relationship between water and food systems. Water serves as a major input resource for food systems, while food system processes have a significant impact on water quality and availability. Given the social-ecological challenges arising from the complex interplay between water and food systems, reconfiguring the water-food nexus towards a more just, resilient, and sustainable dynamic is crucial. In this module, students will become more adept at navigating this critical intersection by exploring the complexities, challenges, and opportunities within the water-food nexus. Through interdisciplinary perspectives, students examine innovative approaches aimed at forging more resilient, just, and sustainable futures. Topics covered include hydrological impacts on agriculture, sustainable water management, climate resilience, and policy frameworks for an equitable water-food nexus.

Just and sustainable urbanisms

The module explores the differential dynamics of worldwide urbanisation, with particular reference to the global South. It demonstrates that these large-scale shifts in human movement, economic development and expansion of the built environment hold deeply troubling implications for sustainability. As part of understanding this phenomenon in a more rigorous manner, the module explores the latest thinking on how best to respond to the ecological implications of differential urbanisation for resource consumption and use, with a strong focus on the implications for the majority of urban citizens who find themselves in informal settlements and reliant on informal economic and eco-system processes. The challenge of designing, building and operating more sustainable urban infrastructure systems – in other words, placemaking – is a particular focus of the course. The module looks at how sustainable urban infrastructure has manifested across the African continent as sustainable urban innovations and is specifically interested in exploring innovative financing mechanisms. The module draws on case studies whenever possible to surface the complexity of everyday life and the institutional frameworks and structures that reproduce cities. The module challenges students to critically reflect on the ethical implications of a commitment to building decolonial and sustainable cities and what it means to address urban challenges, and to live, work, play and collectively act with others in practical ways.

Governance and institutional change

This module aims to introduce and deepen participants understanding of why and how change happens, with a focus on governance and institutional change to support sustainability transitions and transformations. Students will be able to correlate the political and developmental outcomes of these change processes. Module participants will identify, evaluate and compare the differences between these approaches and the implications for action by different actors committed to radical change. Students will understand and apply the debates about individuals, networks, institutions and their diverse approaches and practices in driving and directing change, with a view on alternatives to the current crisis-ridden global order. The module combines both theoretical and practical approaches to governance, where conceptual frameworks are complemented with approaches to enliven the ideas in real contexts.

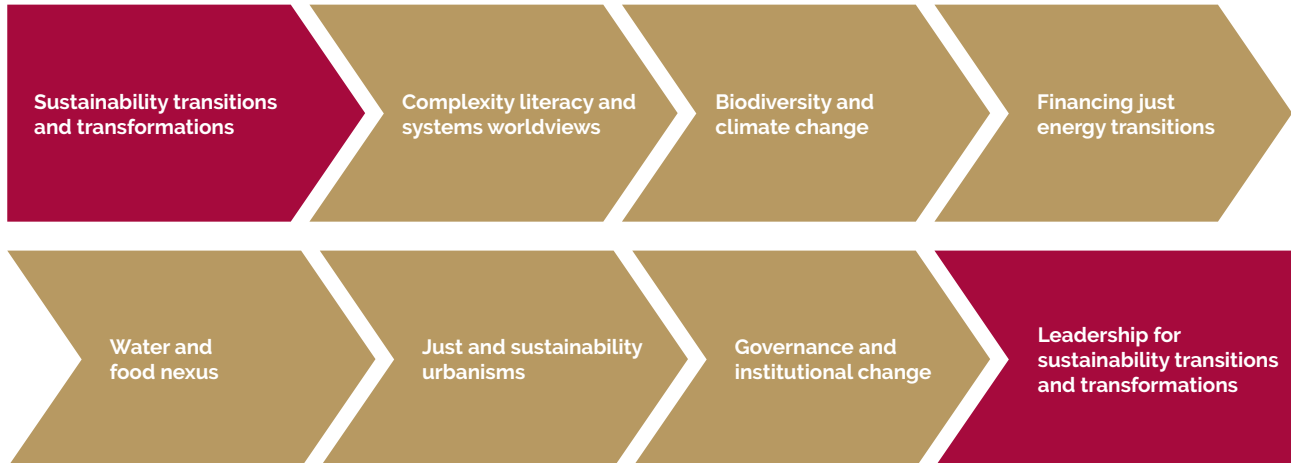
Leadership for sustainability transitions and transformations

This module takes as its starting point that transformational change to advance sustainability transitions and transformations is no longer a choice but a dire necessity. Addressing this need, this module is tailored for future-oriented sustainability leaders eager to lead change processes that might build towards equitable and flourishing societies. Students will grapple with the challenges of ethical leadership while participating in sustainability transitions and transformations. Complex and intractable sustainability challenges call for caring, regenerative, creative responses at the individual and collective level, yet often happen in the context of conflict and difference. Embracing a relational perspective, this module considers what it means, and what it takes, to respond to sustainability challenges, and what work is required to cultivate such response-ability. It aims to enable participants to reflect critically on their fundamental assumptions about transitions, ethics, leadership, authority, belonging, responsibility, notions of self, agency and activism, all within entanglements of human-nature connections. Students will be challenged to explore and respond to the often gruelling and risky demands of exercising ethical leadership for transitions. This final module invites students to draw together their cumulative learning experience in the PGDip. This comes together in the co-creation of a Transitions Exhibition of insights, experiences and offerings that speak to the necessity for leading sustainability transitions and transformations.



PGDip programme structure

120 credits
8 x 15-credit modules



The PGDip consists of eight separate modules. Each module runs over five weeks. In the second week of each module, students are expected to attend compulsory in-person classes which run from Mondays to Fridays, from 08:00 – 17:00.

Each module bears 15 credits and corresponds to 150 notional hours, which is the approximate time it will take to complete all teaching, learning and assessment activities, and ideally, to achieve module outcomes. Of those, 50-hours are deemed to be synchronous (learning) contact time, while 100-hours are self-directed asynchronous learning before and after the compulsory, in-person contact period.



Module structure

Asynchronous learning
100 hours

Synchronous learning
50 hours

Week 1	25 hours	Week 2	30 + 20 hours	Week 3	20 + 5 hours	Week 4	20 + 5 hours	Week 5	20 + 5 hours		
Preparation Preparation assignment 25 hours [Asynchronous]		Engagement Contact time 30 hours Group work 20 hours [Synchronous]		Research, writing and reflection Individual assignment 3 weeks (3 x 20 hours) Reflective learning journal 3 weeks (3 x 5 hours) [Asynchronous]							
Submit prep assignment End of Week 1		Submit group work End of Week 2		Submit individual assignment and reflective learning journal End of Week 5							

Students will engage in relevant literature, classroom discussions, and group work that brings together the diverse threads of academic discourse, practice, and ways of being across the thematic concerns of the programme. Case studies, field trips, and immersive experiences allow students an opportunity to connect with local initiatives and organisations experimenting with sustainability challenges. Online learning platforms support engagement between the in-person contact period and allow students to participate in asynchronous activities. The teaching, learning and assessment approach facilitates rigorous theoretical engagement to internationally relevant bodies of knowledge alongside considered application of knowledge to a diverse range of contexts.

The programme does not make use of traditional examinations. The evaluation approach is based on a combination of group and individual assessments, tailored to the content and approach of the respective module. In all modules, students are required to complete a preparatory assignment, individual assignments, group work projects, and a reflective learning journal.



Admission requirements and selection process

We invite applications from across a wide range of professional spheres and academic disciplines. The PGDip in Sustainable Development is oriented towards people who are passionate about bringing positive change, are looking for a deeper understanding of the sustainability challenges and acknowledge that such change is the emergent outcome of investing in personal and professional development.

The programme is oriented towards:

Recent graduates from diverse academic backgrounds looking to supplement their previous qualifications with a stronger understanding of sustainability before pivoting into the world of work.

Working professionals from corporate environments, often mid-career, looking to better understand how a broad understanding of sustainability can enhance their professional contribution.

Entrepreneurs and practitioners looking to reflect on their practice and identify opportunities for enhanced societal impact.

Aspiring early career researchers looking to pursue further studies in the specific direction of sustainability transitions and transformations.

Public sector officials working across various levels of the public sector looking to strongly integrate sustainability into their service delivery and public leadership efforts.

Civil society organisers and activists looking to strengthen their capacity for mobilising change processes across diverse settings and a space to deepen their reflective practice.

Admission into the PGDip

Option 1: Any bachelor's or BTech degree or a relevant four-year diploma (NQF level 7) with a 65% pass mark. Relevant work experience will also be considered for admission.

Option 2: To apply to the programme on the merit of recognition of prior learning (RPL) for access you are required to have any tertiary three-year programme of formal studies (NQF level 6) and five years' working experience. Your qualifications and experience must comply with the recognition of prior learning (RPL) regulations of the University, the Faculty, and the Centre for Sustainability Transitions, respectively.

The number of students selected will be influenced by, among other things, staff capacity and the availability of resources within the Centre, as well as academic merit and University transformation objectives. As staff capacity and resources may fluctuate from year to year, the number of students selected can also differ from year to year. Further details about the selection process can be found in the Yearbook.

Programme fee

The estimated fee for this programme is R68 500.00 (ZAR) for South African students. To generate a proforma invoice, visit <https://web-apps.sun.ac.za/student-fees-estimate/#/home>. Select eight modules for the PGDip in Sustainable Development programme to generate an estimate for module and programme fees for 2025. International students are encouraged to visit the website of Stellenbosch University International at <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/SUinternational> for information on the fee structure for international students.

How to apply

To apply, visit <https://student.sun.ac.za/signup/>.



Career pathways



The approach to sustainability offered within the PGDip programme cultivates a way of seeing the world that prepares graduates to engage in complex challenges and co-produce solutions that support just and sustainable futures, wherever they may find themselves professionally.



This orientation and the skills, values, and knowledge that comes with it, is relevant and required to transform the way businesses, governments, and civil society organisations operate. Having the skills to grapple with complex social-ecological systems challenges positions students well for the world of work and the call to action across all sectors of society to be part of positive change for an equitable and sustainable future.



There are several possible personal development and career pathways including careers in government, academia, international and national non-profit organisations and agencies, commercial institutions, and the banking and finance sectors, following the completion of the PGDip in Sustainable Development.


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