

‘Sustainable Development in Practice

1) Name of institution

De Montfort University

2) Name of the initiative

Sustainable Development in Practice (SDIP)

3) Initiative outline

SDIP is a 30 credit module within the MSc programme ‘Energy and Sustainable Development’. It is taken annually by a small cohort of predominantly international students with an engineering background. It aims to provide the Transferable Skills and Transformative Capacities needed for learners to support a green transition.

4) Context/history/need for initiative

SDIP was developed in 2024, largely based on a predecessor ‘Leading Change for Sustainability’. The module was designed specifically to develop sustainability competencies for application in professional settings with a focus on environmental sustainability issues.

5) What happens and how is it assessed

The module is made up of interactive taught sessions, focused on group-based engagement with core topics and challenge-based group tasks. This includes responding to live briefs provided by colleagues from the university and the local community.

Key focus areas are;

- Self-awareness and respect for diverse viewpoints, included through activities to reflect on and hear the group’s life experiences prior to the course, as well as core values and beliefs
- Reflective practice as a key focus, addressed through an assessed activity where learners reflect on trying to adopt a pro-environmental behaviour of their choice during the course period
- Putting practice-based and research-informed knowledge on an equal footing, through regular use of case study videos and guest speakers from local government, NGOs and businesses
- Experiential learning, including a visit to an inspiring local eco-housing development and a campus tour focused on sustainability features
- Embedded one-day accredited Carbon Literacy Training, covering the causes of climate change and leading to pledges for action by learners.

Many students focus predominantly on what is assessed. The module therefore ensures that anything essential is assessed (such as engagement with the real-life behaviour change task), but also supports students to focus on the task without undue anxiety. The presentation assessment has a high weighting (30%) for Q&A responses, responding to the reality that slides and content can now be generated through GenAI tools.

6) Green Skills developed or applied

Transferable Skills developed include: Collaboration; Communication; Critical Thinking; Empathy; Growth Mindset; Open-mindedness; Problem-solving; Teamwork

Transformative Capacities focussed upon include: Ability to analyse unequal systems of power; Disruptive vs Normative Thinking; Political agency and activism; Reflexivity; Respecting diverse viewpoints; Systems thinking; Trans-cultural, trans-spatial, trans-temporal mindsets; Valuing traditional and indigenous knowledge; Working within complexity.

7) Contributions to leverage points

In terms of Project Drawdown's leverage points, a key focus is 'Natural resources and just transition solutions' (embedded through Carbon Literacy and a focus on the Clean Energy Sustainable Development Goal) and Stakeholder Communication (embedded through the presentation and report-based assessments and in-class group activities). A values-based mindset is cultivated through a range of activities prompting reflection on values and respect towards diverse perspectives on values. (LP1,2,7)

8) Impact, successes, challenges

Students report year-on-year that the module has a **transformative effect** on them, by making them internalise the ethos of sustainability through taking action and appreciating how the actions of others achieve societal change.

The module has had **spillover impact in the wider community**, with several aspects of the course delivered as standalone training for partner organisations locally.

9) Advice for others

The module demonstrates that students have an appetite for active learning and are open to developing their sense of self as having agency and commitment to make a difference on sustainability issues. This might feel difficult for educators more comfortable with supporting students to 'learn about' a topic at a distance rather than through experiential learning incorporating personal action and reflection, but this extra engagement seems to be a key ingredient in transformative learning.