

Independent Study Project ISPR-3000 (4 credits)

Malawi: Sustainable Development Practice

This syllabus is representative of a typical semester. Because courses develop and change over time to take advantage of unique learning opportunities, actual course content varies from semester to semester.

Course Description

The Independent Study Project (ISP) is an academic project that is designed to provide students the opportunity to deepen their understanding of decolonial approaches to sustainable development in Malawi. A central aspect of the ISP is the collection and use of primary data; the ISP does not involve extensive library research that could be done in the United States, but rather takes advantage of the student's presence in the Malawi with access to materials and information sources available on-site. A local advisor, who specializes in the student's particular field of interest, is designated for the student by the academic director (AD). All topics must be finalized and approved by the AD, and advisors must be selected and confirmed before the project commences. As part of the RME course, meetings will be held throughout the semester with the AD and academic tutors of the program to finalize the topic, select an appropriate advisor, define a clear topic and a research question, and identify potential sources of information, etc. Allowing for travel and time to write, edit, and print the final paper, this does not offer a great amount of time for actual field study. For this reason, the topic must be very specific and well-focused. At the end of the course, the student must submit a paper and make a presentation of their fieldwork. The ISP advisor and academic director then evaluate the project in writing. The AD will submit a grade and narrative evaluation of the project to SIT, and in turn these assessments are then forwarded to the student's home university.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course students will be able to:

- Implement an individual project that investigates a particular development issue;
- Utilize effective field study methods and techniques to gather data;
- Integrate and analyze data from a variety of primary and secondary sources;
- Communicate the results of a study in both a written report and an oral presentation;
- Apply relevant ethical concepts in undertaking field research.

Instructional Methods

SIT's teaching and learning philosophy is grounded in the experiential learning theory developed by Kolb (1984; 2015) and informed by various scholars, such as Dewey, Piaget, Lewin, among others. Experiential learning theory recognizes that learning is an active process that is not confined to the formal curriculum; "knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 2015, p. 49). Learning involves both content and process. Learning is holistic and happens through various life experiences upon which students draw to generate new ways of knowing and being. Learning involves a community and is a lifelong endeavor. Learning is transformational. The suggested four step-cycle of a *concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation* embedded in the experiential learning model is not linear and might not always happen in that specific order, as any learning is highly context dependent. These stages of taking part in a shared experience; reflecting on that experience by describing and interpreting it; challenging their own assumptions and beliefs to generate new knowledge; and ultimately applying new knowledge, awareness, skills, and attitudes in a variety of situations and contexts are important for students to engage in to become empowered lifelong learners.

Assignments and Evaluation

Assignment Descriptions and Grading Criteria

In conjunction with the ISP advisor, the academic director evaluates student performance on the ISP. Assessment of the written work and oral presentation is based on the formulation of the research question, accuracy of the information conveyed, the breadth and appropriateness of sources, the depth of analysis and insight, the level of cultural sensitivity displayed, and the quality of expression. Special emphasis will be placed on the student's ability to integrate primary and secondary sources and to present the findings in a clear, organized, and well-synthesized format, with attention to the ethical context of field study. Students will be evaluated on their ability to:

- Work independently and respectfully in Malawi and in cooperation with institutions and advisors;
- Develop a logical and coherent framework for the study project and clearly justify how the chosen topic lies within the scope of the program and region;
- Critically discuss and evaluate available and relevant theories, papers, and published materials on the proposed project;
- Clearly present the main objectives of the project, further developing them when needed;
- Present and justify a reasonable methodological framework to achieve the proposed objectives;
- Critically describe the data collected, analysis performed, and results;
- Present and discuss problems, findings, and conclusions based on the methods used, data and information collected, and/or analysis performed;
- Be able to present all steps of the project clearly and coherently in a written and oral format for an independent audience.

1) Independent Study Project (ISP) (90%)

Students will spend a minimum of 185 hours on the ISP. This includes time spent reading, developing contacts, collecting data (by interviewing, taking field observations), writing, and meeting with the academic director and advisor. The final product is a typed and bound ~30-page paper, double-spaced, 12-pt standard font. A highlight of the assignment is a 15-minute presentation to fellow students, program staff, and other invited guests. Alternative forms of Independent Study Projects are a possibility students may explore in consultation with the academic director.

Assessment of the ISP is done on the basis of SIT's assessment rubric for the Independent Study Project with the grading evaluation and criteria listed below.

Evaluation criteria for ISPs include:

Title/Acknowledgements/Abstract

- The title is succinct, interesting, and engaging, and it clearly explains the project
- The acknowledgments are complete and professionally written
- The abstract clearly summarizes the project

Research Question/Objectives/Justification

- The study/research question is relevant, thought-provoking, and original
- The project aims to contribute information on a topic relevant to local community and/or other researchers
- The objectives of the study are clearly presented and appropriate
- The justification of the project is clear and contextualized

Context and Literature Review

- The content is relevant. Important themes and background information is provided
- The paper includes appropriate, high-quality relevant background sources, including several from peer-reviewed journals

Methods

- The explanation of methodology is clear and accurate and supporting materials are included
- Implementation of methods through the research process is thoughtful and handed with care
- The methods are appropriate

Ethics

- Human subject policies and ethical research guidelines are adhered to and thoroughly discussed
- Appropriate consideration is given to informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of research participants, in keeping with human subjects protocols and the SARB-approved ISP proposal
- The ISP is responsive to host community needs, as applicable

Presentation of results/findings

- The findings are complete and are logically and convincingly presented
- The prose discussion of findings is clear, succinct, and logical
- Tables, graphs, photos, and direct quotes are relevant and support the argument

Depth of analysis/Conclusions

- Important implications raised by the findings are included
- The argument is well-structured and different sources of information are well-integrated
- Patterns in the findings (or lack of a pattern) are identified and discussed
- The author gives logical explanations of what findings mean
- The author clearly and specifically related his/her findings to the study/research question and to previous research in the field

Technical aspects/Effort

- The paper is organized into major sections and/or follows the guidelines in accordance with the orientation of the program
- Table of contents, in-text citations, and reference list or bibliography are done correctly and completely
- There are no mistakes in writing, grammar, spelling, and punctuation

2) Oral Presentation (10%)

Assessment of the ISP Oral Presentation is done on the basis of SIT's assessment rubric for the Independent Study Project Presentation with the grading evaluation and criteria listed above.

Evaluation criteria for the Oral Presentation include:

- Organization of presentation, with a view to holding audience interest
- Use of appropriate examples and personal experiences
- Clear explanation of ISP strategy and implementation

Assessment

ISP – 90%

ISP Oral Presentation – 10%

Attendance and Participation

Due to the nature of SIT Study Abroad programs, and the importance of student and instructor contributions in each class session, attendance at all classes and for all program excursions is required. Criteria for evaluation of student performance include attendance and participation in program activities. Students must fully participate in all program components and courses. Students may not voluntarily opt out of required program activities. Valid reasons for absence – such as illness – must be discussed with the academic director or other designated staff person. Absences impact academic performance, may impact grades, and could result in dismissal from the program.

Late Assignments

SIT Study Abroad programs integrate traditional classroom lectures and discussion with field-based experiences, site visits and debriefs. The curriculum is designed to build on itself and progress to the culmination (projects, ISP, case studies, internship, etc.). It is critical that students complete assignments in a timely manner to continue to benefit from the sequences in assignments, reflections and experiences throughout the program.

Students may request a justified extension for one paper/assignment during the semester. Requests must be made in writing and at least 12 hours before the posted due date and time. If reason for request is accepted, an extension of up to one week may be granted at that time. Any further requests for extensions will not be granted. Students who fail to submit the assignment within the extension period will receive an 'F' for the assignment.

Grading Scale

Grades are given both fairly and rigorously and in accordance with the system below. They will reflect a combination of absolute quality of performance, progress made, and the ability to take into account and assimilate the academic director's and the teachers' advice in assessing the work done. An "A" letter grade reflects exceptional work and a perfect combination of academic competences and personal research and analysis. It shows great ability to integrate field-based investigation and personal reflection into a structured and well-argued paper. A "B" letter grade reflects serious and methodical work as well as a substantial effort at analyzing and understanding cross-cultural issues. A "C" letter grade shows the work meets the requirements but needs more in-depth reflection and personal involvement. A "D" letter grade is insufficient and clearly reflects lack of work or serious deficiencies.

94-100%	A
90-93%	A-
87-89%	B+
84-86%	B
80-83%	B-
77-79%	C+
74-76%	C
70-73%	C-
67-69%	D+
64-66%	D
below 64	F

Program Expectations

- Show up prepared. Be on time, have your readings completed and points in mind for discussion or clarification. Complying with these elements raises the level of class discussion for everyone.
- Have assignments completed on schedule, printed, and done accordingly to the specified requirements. This will help ensure that your assignments are returned in a timely manner.

- Ask questions in class. Engage the lecturer. These are often very busy professionals who are doing us an honor by coming to speak.
- Comply with academic integrity policies (no plagiarism or cheating, nothing unethical).
- Respect differences of opinion (classmates', lecturers, local constituents engaged with on the visits). You are not expected to agree with everything you hear, but you are expected to listen across difference and consider other perspectives with respect.
- Storing Your Work: Keep several copies of your work as back up and keep one copy accessible to you through an online forum, such as an attachment in your email, the course learning management system, or cloud-based storage. This way your work will always be available to despite technical issues. Lost files, deleted drives, or computer crashes are not excuses for late, missing work.
- Personal Technology Use: Cell phones and other personal electronics can be used for taking notes and other class activities. Off-task usage is not acceptable. You may be marked as absent for habitually using them for something other than classroom activities.
- Content Considerations: Some texts and activities you will encounter in this course delve into sensitive topics that may be emotionally and intellectually challenging. Our classroom is a space where we can engage with challenging ideas, question assumptions, and navigate difficult topics with respect and maturity. As possible, I will flag content and activities that are especially graphic or intense, so we are prepared to address them soberly and sensitively. If you are struggling to keep up with the work or participate in the course because of the nature of the content and activities, you should speak with me and/or seek help from counseling services.
- Classroom recording policy: To ensure the free and open discussion of ideas, students may not record classroom lectures, discussion and/or activities without the advance written permission of the instructor, and any such recording properly approved in advance can be used solely for the student's own private use.

SIT Policies and Resources

Please refer to the [SIT Study Abroad Handbook](#) and the [Policies](#) section of the SIT website for all academic and student affairs policies. Students are accountable for complying with all published policies. Of particular relevance to this course are the policies regarding: academic integrity, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), research and ethics in field study and internships, late assignments, academic status, academic appeals, diversity and disability, sexual harassment and misconduct, and the student code of conduct.

Please refer to the SIT Study Abroad Handbook and SIT website for information on important resources and services provided through our central administration in Vermont, such as [Library resources and research support](#), [Disability Services](#), [Counseling Services](#), [Title IX information](#), and [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) resources.

Course Schedule

Please be aware that topics and excursions may vary to take advantage of any emerging events, to accommodate changes in our lectures' availability, and to respect any changes that would affect student safety. Students will be notified if this occurs.

ISP To Do List

1. Decide on a topic

This stage can often be difficult in narrowing down topics of interest. This is where the student asks: "What do I want to study? What do I want to explore and learn from the ISP? Where do I want to spend my ISP month? Is there a topic I have always been interested in and want to learn more about?" Think about the ISP as an opportunity for self-fulfillment and both a personal and academic growth, or as a steppingstone for further research or studies in a particular area.

The student must be able to define a distinct and feasible project. By the time the final ISP proposal is submitted, students will be required to clearly state their overall research project in one short paragraph.

2. Define your research questions and research methods (draft research proposals)

In the process of submitting draft proposal and through regular consultations with the Academic staff of the program, students will have to clearly define their ISP topic and research questions. Focusing their interest on a clear and precise question will enable students to begin their ISP period with necessary clarity and focus and will help them complete the task successfully within a given period of time.

3. Complete a final research proposal

The final ISP research Proposal should provide a clear description of the topic, research question(s) and methodology and annotated bibliography. The proposal will help anticipate what the student is going to do during the research period and potential challenges that may arise. The proposal should also help students to clearly define the focus of the research at hand so that students end with a project that can be accomplished within the given period of time.

4. Contact an ISP advisor – share your ISP research proposal

In order to complete the project, each student is matched with an advisor. The AD will match students with appropriate advisors who can best support chosen topics and research question. All academic advisors are part of the SIT academic network.

The following aspects are taken into consideration when choosing ISP advisor for each student:

- The advisor should be a person with an expertise in the field of interest, who is able to work with a student to create, plan and successfully complete their ISP, and subsequently evaluate it. The person should have an academic degree (MA or PhD) in relevant field, and should be able to give necessary guidance and support.

- Once students start their ISP, they are required to meet with ISP advisor at least three times, in order to define, discuss, and evaluate their progress, i.e., by discussing and defining parameters of the research, determining research methodology, suggesting sources and contacts, assisting in organization of collected information, and reviewing the student's final submission.
- It is **STUDENT'S** responsibility to initiate contact with ISP advisor and to make (and keep) appointments with them. It is student's responsibility to form respectful relationship and communication with their ISP advisor.
- A failure on the part of the student to regularly communicate and meet with the ISP advisor three times – as required – will be reflected in the final ISP grade.
- ISPs that are not supported by the assistance of ISP advisor will not be accepted.

5. Complete, sign and hand in SIT forms: site approval form, ethical guidelines, and SIT Study Abroad Review Board (SARB)

In addition to completing their ISP Research Proposal, students are also required to submit a Site Approval form that clearly states their whereabouts on each and every day of the ISP; the AD and program staff must be able to reach the students during the ISP period in case of any emergency (global or local). Ethical guidelines include completion of both reading/agreeing to adhere to our written ethical policy, but also successful completion of our SIT Study Abroad Review Board (SARB) process. This will be discussed in detail in RME classes. Please note that until items 4 and 5 above (ISP Proposal, Site Approval, and Ethical Guidelines Forms) are satisfactorily completed, students will not be allowed to embark on their ISP. Funds for ISP accommodation and food will not be released to a student until all pre-ISP requirements are successfully met.

6. Arrange accommodation for the period of your ISP (4 weeks)

It is STUDENT'S responsibility to arrange accommodation for four weeks of the ISP period (week 11-14 of the semester). The Program Assistant will be available to assist with and advise students in this process. Depending on the choice of the ISP location, students may be able to reside with a homestay family or find an alternative accommodation approved by the Academic Director in accordance with SIT guidelines of safety and security.

Human Subjects Review

All ISP proposals must reflect a thoughtful and culturally appropriate consideration of the effects of the student's inquiry on the participants in the project. To that end, you are required to submit an "Application for Review of Research with Human Subjects," which includes questions about any potential harm that might come from your study; appendices include interview and survey protocols. If the Academic Director believes that you have not sufficiently addressed the concerns of this policy, he/she may ask you to revise your proposal. Standards for this review are developed in country and reflect local academic practice.

If a student's research has been funded by a US government agency or if she/he plans to take this research back to his/her home school or community for further dissemination, then the student must follow more stringent standards, i.e., not only those of the host community, but also those of the Office for Human Resource Protections, with which SIT is registered. Any questions or concerns are forwarded to SIT's Institutional Review Board for review.

ISP Written Format—Organization and Presentation

I. Title page

II. Table of Contents

Your table of contents should contain heading of chapters or sections into which your ISP is divided, and the main headings and subdivisions in each section, noting all page numbers. *The table of contents falls into technical aspects that are also subject to evaluation.*

III. Abstract

A tightly written (no more than 200 words) summary of your paper. In one paragraph only summarize the introductory and conceptual aspects of your study, your main research question, methods used and the main final conclusion/analysis of your study.

IV. Introduction

Length can vary considerably depending on the topic and your style of writing. Aspects of your ISP that might be covered should include:

- A. Objectives of the study: discuss your motivation and academic interest in chosen topic, and in your research question (RQ), articulate the relevance of your chosen topic. This should come first – make sure your reader gets to know your RQ in very early stages of your paper.
- B. Clarification of research question(s) and topic of study.
- C. Definition of major terms (if necessary). If you use a large number of non-English terms, include them in a Glossary or Appendix ONLY at the END of the ISP.

Please note: In the evaluation rubric, Introduction falls into the category of Context (i.e. background information) and Literature Review.

V. Literature Review

A brief overview of existing literature and work available on your topic of inquiry forming a background and entry discussion prior to your analysis. The literature review is extremely important as it reveals the extent of your overall research and reflects your ability to identify theoretical underpinning fitting a given contextual background, necessary to inform yourself sufficiently and develop greater understanding of the topic of your research.

VI. Methods & Ethics

- A. Field study methods employed
 - i. When conducting semi-structured interviews, you are expected to complete minimum 4 interviews. When discussing your methods, you should specify the following:
 - a. Explain the choice of selected participants in your study
 - b. Specify the number of interviews you conducted (include a chart in Appendix)
- B. To protect the identity of your interviewees, you should refer to them as Interviewee or Participant, and when designating more of them, use either

- numbers (Interviewee/Participant 1, etc.), or letters (Interviewee/Participant A, etc.).
- C. Discussion of your positionality and how it may affect the ethics of your paper.
- D. Reflect on broader ethical dimension of the research and of the entire project.

VII. Findings

You will want to use section headings, and most likely, sub-headings, to maintain a strong sense of organization of your paper. This section will form the bulk of your ISP, and must specifically include sections containing findings, your own reflection, discussion and analysis. Quotations and references to other works should be accurately cited. Any diagrams, figures or tables should be labeled properly.

VIII. Conclusions

Your conclusions should demonstrate how your ISP fulfilled the objectives outlined in your introduction, and summarize the main outcomes of your study. This section is not always given the attention it deserves – it is common to find only a half-page of discussion of conclusions – as if the writer has run out of petrol! This section should bring out the best in you as a researcher. You need to make powerful arguments at this point, relate your findings to larger public issues, and derive implications. Please, also include Recommendations for further study in this section: this should consist of a short list of recommendations on how your study might be expanded upon, or be used as the basis for future ISPs & Limitations of the study: though optional, this section is highly recommended. Legitimize your study by pro-actively pointing out its shortcomings and biases (all studies have them, of course).

IX. Bibliography

This should include all literature and documents used and cited from using APA style (follow research methods in-class instructions).

X. Appendix

- A. Interview Questions
- B. A chart of the interviews conducted [see below the format you should follow].
- C. Relevant (and cited) statistical information, charts, maps, photographs or any additional relevant material.

Technical Aspects

Quotations & Paraphrasing

Every use of quotes, reference and bibliography should follow the format discussed in class. You will never quote an entire interview in the paper, nor should you copy and paste entire interviews. Should you use a quote that is *more than 3 lines long*, indent and single space it.

In-text citations and Bibliography

Whether you provide a direct quotation, or merely express another's idea in your own words, you should (by both academic and personal ethical standards) give the individual credit for that idea. You should do this by including in-text citation that, in conjunction with Bibliography list, provides proper information about your sources. Many of your citations will come from

interviews conducted. All interviews should be cited respecting the anonymity of interviewees' identities and their names. You also need to cite all information taken from secondary sources.

You should follow the standard APA style. *Please note, when quoting from any text, page numbers are required in your in-text citation!*

Page Limit

The final paper is a 30-page paper, double spaced, 12-pt standard font (not including Bibliography and Appendix).

Page Layout

- The body of the text should be in font size 12
- The footnotes should be in font size 10
- All text should be in the same font you choose to use
- Your text alignment needs to be justified

RUBRIC: Independent Study Project Paper	
Category	Possible Considerations
Title / Acknowledgements / Abstract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The title is succinct, interesting, and engaging; and it clearly explains the project -The acknowledgements are complete and professionally written -The abstract clearly summarizes the project
Research Question / Objectives / Justification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The study/research question is relevant, thought-provoking, and original -The project aims to contribute information on a topic relevant to the local community and/or other researchers -The objectives of the study are clearly presented and appropriate -The justification for the project is clear and contextualized
Context and Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Context: The content is relevant. Important themes and background information are provided so reader understands study/research question and its place within the field of research -Literature Review: The paper includes appropriate, high-quality of relevant background sources, including several from refereed journals, indicating familiarity with key publications on the topic -Creative projects: background information is relevant to both the thematic topic being explored and the previous history of artistic work in this field. -Practica: the goals of the practicum are meaningful and are stated clearly; a focus project and how it relates to the program theme are clearly described. The history and work of the practicum organization, how its work relates to the program theme, and how it fits into the context of other similar organizations are all accurately described.
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The explanation of methodology is clear and accurate and supporting materials are included in appendices (if applicable) - Implementation of methods through the research process (e.g., interviewee recruitment) is thoughtful and handled with care -The methods are appropriate -Practica: a clear and complete description of the work undertaken is given, including dates and hours worked
Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Human Subjects policies and ethical research guidelines are adhered to and thoroughly discussed -Appropriate consideration is given to informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality of research participants, in keeping with human subjects protocols and the SARB-approved ISP proposal -The ISP strengthens relationships and contributes to mutual trust between the author and research participants in ways that are respectful, culturally appropriate, and collaborative -Natural science ISPs not involving human subjects show an awareness of and respect for environmental ethics, as appropriate to the topic -The ISP is responsive to host community needs, as applicable
Presentation of Results / Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The findings are complete and are logically and convincingly presented -The findings are clearly differentiated from discussion or interpretation -The prose discussion of findings is clear, succinct and logical -Any tables, graphs, photos and direct quotes are relevant and support the argument -Creative projects: The thinking and concepts behind the creative work, as well as the messages contained within it are clearly explained, and the intended audience (and availability to that audience) is described.

Depth of Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Important implications raised by the findings are included -The argument is well-structured and different sources of information are well-integrated -Patterns in the findings (or a lack of a pattern) were identified and discussed -The author gives logical explanations of what findings mean -The author clearly and specifically related his/her findings to the study/research question -The findings are linked to previous research in the field -Creative projects: An analysis of the creative piece is given, including an assessment of its educational value and aesthetics -Practica: A description and analysis of how the organization/focus project is set up and functions are given; the organization's strengths, weaknesses and challenges are discussed; observations of the organization or project are placed in the context of the existing literature
Conclusions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The main findings are summarized and discussed within the broader implications or concerns of the study -The author made research-based recommendations, as appropriate, and made recommendations for future study -Practica: a range of lessons learned from the practicum are detailed
Technical Aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The paper is organized into major sections (and sub-sections, as appropriate) and/or follows guidelines established in accordance with the orientation of the program/discipline -Table of contents, In-text citations, and reference list or bibliography are done correctly and completely -There are no mistakes in writing & grammar, spelling & punctuation -The paper is clean, legible, well-formatted, professional in appearance, and aesthetically pleasing
Effort	Determinations of ISP effort vary per program
Creative Project, Performance, or Practicum	Criteria for review of creative works or performances, or for successful completion of practica, will be determined by the program academic director