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Independent Study Project

ISPR-3000 (6 credits)

Australia: Rainforest, Reef, and Cultural Ecology

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) offers students the opportunity to undertake an in-depth, analytical, and individualized study of an aspect of Australian ecology or human-environment interactions. Students obtain hands-on research experience using the scientific paradigm and interacting with local experts to creatively investigate a topic of interest. ISP integrates the concepts and tools learned in the Rainforest, Reef, and Cultural Ecology Seminar and Environmental Field Study Seminar to develop research questions and methods, collect an extensive set of primary data in the field, and analyze and interpret the results within the context of the literature. By taking responsibility for developing learning goals and outcomes and remaining focused in their attention to details, students learn from their successes as well as their setbacks. For many students the ISP represents the culmination of their semester's work and understanding of experiential learning in a field setting.

Course Objectives:

- To acquire knowledge of the potential strengths and weaknesses of the scientific paradigm
- To gain an in-depth understanding of some aspect of Australian ecology or human-environment interactions through the application of hypothesis testing and rigorous analysis
- To develop motivation, curiosity and a sense of self-sufficiency in the development and execution of sound and rigorous research methods and data collection techniques
- To gain confidence in interacting with host country professionals and lay persons
- To integrate, analyze, and synthesize information from a variety of written and oral sources
- To increase the capacity to think critically and creatively and communicate ideas effectively and precisely in both written and oral presentation.
- To recognize and appreciate the personal and professional responsibilities and ethical implications associated with researching both human and natural communities.

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Learning Outcomes
Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Articulate the relevance of a personal interest and resultant research question(s)
- Analyze the effect of personal pre-conceptions and the process of gathering primary information and interacting with people and the environment
- Execute ethically and technically appropriate field study methodologies and techniques to gather data
- Exercise critical thinking and scientific caution in the interpretation and systematic analysis of study results
- Communicate a field study in both a written and an oral presentation
- Exhibit motivation, self-confidence, professionalism, adaptability, and a critical appreciation of the research process

Language of Instruction
This course is taught entirely in English.

The ISP Process

Students work with the Academic Staff from day one to identify interests and frame these within a range of appropriate ISP topics. Then, students conduct background research before contacting relevant local experts knowledgeable on the subject (some of whom will become the student's ISP advisors). From this inquiry a specific question is developed around which students can collect primary data and evidence from field observations and experiences. A student's initial ideas could come from previous interests, the local media, or lectures, readings, or discussions with visiting lecturers. The ISP is not a library-based research project. It is not the role of the CD to develop the topic, only to act as a guide; though topical ideas and pre-conceptions may be challenged in relation to practicality and safety issues.

Once a student has clarified a topic of interest, she or he will cultivate local contacts in order to identify and build a relationship with an ISP advisor. The ISP advisor is generally recognized as an expert or authority in the student's field of study and will help guide the student in the practical aspects of her study. In conjunction with the advisor, or the AD, the student refines the research question and develops appropriate methods and approaches.

Course Requirements

Requirements for the ISP include the following:

1) At least 180 hours (90 contact hours) of project-related work; the quality of written and oral work is expected to reflect this commitment.

2) A detailed and up to date account of all work in an ISP Work Journal commencing with the student's arrival in country. This journal should reflect the effort of the entire project and include background information, methods development, records of important contacts and meetings, study site, and data collection with field notes.

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3) A preliminary and a final proposal (including a budget) must be submitted by the student prior to departure for field work.

4) A completed ISP report is in the form of a 20-40 page research paper, using the student's primary data and built upon an appropriate understanding of the theory and literature behind the study topic.

5) A 20 minute, professionally appropriate oral presentation covering the background, aims, findings, and conclusions of the report and ISP work.

ISP Constraints and Requirements

- The project must fall within the focus of the program. It must deal with an ecological or human ecology topic. Topics involving Indigenous people(s) or remote settings are usually ethically and logistically very hard to organize. You will need to start organizing these early in the semester and demonstrate at an early stage that you have the support of an Indigenous organization.

- Topics that cannot reasonably be completed in one month, or are better done in the US are inappropriate. The project can be undertaken anywhere in Australia that is appropriate to the topic and is safe. Since there is another SIT program operating around northern New South Wales, you need to gain approval from the directors of both programs before undertaking a project there.

- The CD will be the final arbiter on whether a project meets the safety standards of the program. The CD must always be able to contact you within 24 hours and you must check in with program staff every Monday and Friday during the ISP period.

- You must maintain contact with your Advisor throughout the ISP period and, at a minimum, once a week.

- 5. Students must read and abide by the SIT Study Abroad policies and procedures for ethical study of human subjects. Students must at all times consider the rights and well being of the people and environments studied.

Assessment

Final grades for this course will be based on the following weighting:

ISP Report	65%
ISP Oral Presentation	15%

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ISP Proposals (preliminary and final)	10%
ISP Journal	10%

The ISP written reports are evaluated on the basis of content, organization, technical accuracy, clarity of ideas, and depth of analysis and synthesis. Comments and evaluations of the project advisors may be taken into consideration when the Centre Director assigns final ISP report grades. Oral presentations are assessed by the Academic Director on their organization, clarity of communication, and factual content, evidence and logic used in convincing their audience of their conclusions. ISP proposals are assessed based on the student's analysis of the theoretical background to the research question, and the proposed methods and logistics (including a detailed schedule and budget) for collecting data. ISP journals are assessed on the student's inclusion of all background work related to the ISP which was not able to be directly included in the final ISP report (including communications logs, contacts, literature reviews of relevant articles, project brainstorming, and a log of hours worked at particular tasks).

A major emphasis of the ISP course centers on fostering student independence in pursuing the research agendas and executing the study; therefore, it is the responsibility of the student to develop and impose her or his own deadlines within the ISP period. Dates for submission of the final paper and oral presentation are inflexible. Late work receives the loss of a half a grade point for every day it is late.

Advisors

Project advisors are identified by the student in conjunction with the Academic Staff, and are most often researchers, academics, or professionals working directly on the topic of student interest. In broad outline, the Project Advisor helps the student refine her or his topic considering local conditions, availability of resources and the duration of the study. The Project Advisor supervises the student's progress through regular meetings and submits to the Academic Director a brief written evaluation of the student's work near the end of the program. It is critical that students recognize their advisors are there to assist them in guidance, but that ultimately the students "own" their ISP project.

Readings

Students are expected to use books, peer reviewed articles, and past student ISP's from the program library and SIT's electronic library database to gather information about their specific topic, possible methods, and overall relevance of their topic of interest.

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Attendance and Participation

Participation is assessed based on consistent, informed engagement in class sessions, simulation activities, and experiential learning. This includes preparation for discussions, constructive collaboration within teams, responsiveness during simulations, and professional conduct during site visits and guest engagements. Students are expected to contribute thoughtfully, listen actively, and engage respectfully with peers and external partners throughout the course.

Consistent participation in classes, site visits, and required program activities is essential to the academic experience. Students are expected to participate fully and may not opt out of required components, as these activities are integral to course learning and collective discussion. If circumstances such as illness affect attendance, students must communicate promptly with the Program/Academic/Center Director or a designated staff member. Absences may affect academic performance and course grades, and repeated or unexcused absences may result in additional academic or programmatic consequences. When absences are unavoidable, alternative academic work may be required.

Late Assignments

Because this program integrates classroom learning with site visits and debriefs, assignments are designed to build on one another and connect directly to learning on location. *Timely submission is therefore important for maintaining continuity and full participation in the academic experience*. Extensions may be granted *in limited circumstances and on a case-by-case basis* with approval from the Center/Academic/Program Director or a designated staff member. Requests should be made in writing as early as possible and no later than 12 hours before the posted due date. Students are expected to communicate proactively if challenges arise. Work submitted after an approved extension period may receive a reduced or failing grade, depending on the circumstances.

Grading Scale

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

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Program Expectations
To support a respectful, engaging, and academically rigorous learning environment, students are expected to approach this program with professionalism, preparation, and openness. Because this is an intensive, field-based program, individual conduct directly shapes the quality of the shared academic experience.

- **Learning Community:** Students are expected to engage respectfully with differing perspectives, including those of classmates, guest speakers, and local partners. Agreement is not required, but attentive listening, intellectual openness, and respectful dialogue are essential.
- **Content Considerations:** Course materials and activities may engage sensitive or challenging topics. The classroom is a space for thoughtful, respectful engagement with complex ideas. When possible, faculty will flag particularly intense content in advance. Students who find that course content affects their ability to participate or keep up with coursework are encouraged to communicate with faculty and seek appropriate support.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Schedules and activities may change in response to local conditions or logistical realities. Students are expected to approach such adjustments with flexibility and professionalism. Adaptability is considered part of meaningful engagement in the program.
- **Academic Integrity:** Students are expected to complete all work honestly and ethically, in accordance with academic integrity standards outlined in course and program policies (see link to full policy below).
- **Managing Academic Work:** Students are responsible for maintaining reliable access to their academic work by keeping multiple copies using secure storage methods (e.g., cloud-based platforms or the learning management system). Technical issues such as lost files or device failures do not excuse late or missing work.
- **Personal Technology Use:** Personal devices may be used for note-taking and course-related activities. Off-task use is not acceptable, particularly during discussions, site visits, or guest presentations, as it detracts from collective engagement.
- **Course Communication:** Course materials, assignments, and updates will be posted on Canvas. While the course calendar provides a general structure, adjustments may occur based on program flow or site-based learning opportunities. Students are responsible for checking the course site regularly and communicating promptly about access issues.

SIT Policies and Resources
Students are expected to work independently on their projects, document activities in their work journal, produce a quality written paper and an engaging oral presentation. They should coordinate their research with the Academic Director and Project Advisor, and are expected to adhere to the highest levels of professional and ethical behavior.

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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.

Credit Hours: School for International Training (SIT) adheres to the standard that 1 credit hour equals no less than 45 hours of coursework. The calculation is based on the standard 50-minute academic hour. The number of credits each course carries determines how many total hours each course involves in a semester. Of the 45-hours for 1-credit hour, one third is designated for direct faculty instruction. Direct faculty instruction includes all learning activities led by the faculty whether in the classroom or in the field — lectures, guest speakers, site visits, hands-on field activities, etc.
The full policy on credit hours can be found here.

AI Usage: SIT's policy on Generative AI and Academic Programs is included as an addendum to the academic integrity policy.

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, Accessibility Services, Counseling Services, Title IX information, and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion resources.

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