UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

SYLLABUS DEL CORSO

Sustainability Transitions

2627-1-F4902N002

Learning objectives

The objective of the course is to provide the conceptual tools needed to analyse why tourism destinations remain locked in unsustainable configurations, and what would have to change for them to move.
In detail, in line with the learning objectives of the degree programme, the course articulates its educational goals as follows:

1. Knowledge and understanding
   The course provides the theoretical foundations of sustainability transitions research: socio-technical systems, the multi-level perspective, social practice theories, the analysis of power, justice frameworks, and the geography of transitions.
2. Applying knowledge and understanding
   The course offers the main analytical methods used in the study of sustainability transitions and requires students to apply them to real tourism destinations.
3. Independent Judgment
   The course develops the capacity to distinguish measures that change the configuration of a destination from measures that stabilise it while improving its reputation, and to identify who bears the costs of change.
4. Communication Skills
   The course enhances both oral and written communication skills in English through group presentation, structured discussion and written assessment.
5. Learning Skills
   The course fosters a critical and open-minded approach towards the plurality of perspectives in the field of sustainability transitions, including a critical awareness of the vocabulary of sustainability in tourism.

Contents

Sustainable tourism as a goal and as a process.
Tourism as a socio-technical system.

The analytical frameworks of sustainability transitions research.
Power, justice and geography in tourism transitions.
The governance of transitions in destinations.

Detailed program

Part I – Why transitions
Why sustainable tourism has been understood as a destination to arrive at rather than a process to follow, and what changes when tourism is analysed as a socio-technical system: wicked problems, the limits of incremental improvement, and the difficulty posed by a sector as fragmented as tourism.
Part II – The core frameworks
The analytical tools the course works with. The multi-level perspective and its application to the history of a destination, path dependence, and the theories of social practice that explain why interventions aimed at changing individual behaviour so rarely succeed.
Part III – Power, justice and geography
Who holds a destination in its present configuration and who would bear the costs of changing it. Power and incumbent resistance, the three dimensions of justice, the tension between the speed of an intervention and its fairness, and the scales at which effects are produced or displaced.
Part IV – Governance and synthesis
How transitions are governed at destination level, what participatory approaches presuppose, and why the way a destination body is funded shapes what it can pursue. The course closes with a critical assessment of the field and of the uses to which its vocabulary is put.

Prerequisites

Knowledge of the theoretical and methodological foundations of the social sciences, and good writing and communication skills.

Teaching methods

31 hours of the course employ a 'didattica erogativa' (DE) mode: lectures with the use of slides, audio and video, together with the third hour of each teaching block, in which the framework just presented is applied to shared case material through discussion with the class.

25 hours of the course employ a 'didattica interattiva' (DI) mode: instructor-led group sessions, in which students work on an assigned tourism destination, present their analysis to the class and question the work of other groups.

The teaching is delivered in English and the study materials are in English. All set texts are available open access at no cost to students.

Assessment methods

The exam is written and lasts two hours, is handwritten and is ‘closed book’.

Part A (12 marks). Three answers from a choice of six short open-ended questions on the theoretical frameworks of the course.
Part B (18 marks). A compulsory analysis of an unseen case describing a real tourism destination and a decision facing its administration. Students are asked to analyse the situation using the frameworks of the course; they are not asked to recommend a course of action.
The written exam aims to evaluate students' theoretical knowledge, critical understanding, and ability to apply analytical tools to sustainability transition processes. Evaluation criteria include: whether frameworks are used to reach conclusions rather than merely described; the accuracy and economy of terminology; whether the analysis identifies who bears the costs of change; the integration of several frameworks into a single analysis; and the clarity and structure of argumentation.
The larger share of marks rests on application to an unseen case rather than on recall, in line with the emphasis the course places on independent judgment and on the transfer of analytical tools to new situations.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Book (open access, CC-BY-NC-ND). Wesche, J., and Hendriks, A. (Eds.). (2026). Introduction to Sustainability Transitions Research. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009437318
Chapters:
• Hendriks, A., and Wesche, J. Sustainability transitions research: An introduction (Ch. 1, pp. 1–14)
• Geels, F. W. The multi-level perspective on sustainability transitions: Background, overview and current research topics (Ch. 2, pp. 15–33)
• Hebinck, A., and Loorbach, D. Explorative transition governance: Understanding by engaging in transitions in the making (Ch. 3, pp. 34–55)
• Laakso, S., Keller, M., and Backhaus, J. Social practice theories and sustainability transitions studies (Ch. 6, pp. 108–120)
• Raj, G., Avelino, F., and Bribois, M.-C. Power in sustainability transitions (Ch. 12, pp. 221–240)
• Heidenreich, S., Martiskainen, M., and Ryghaug, M. Issues of justice in sustainability transitions (Ch. 16, pp. 297–316)
• Coenen, L., Binz, C., Murphy, J. T., and Truffer, B. Place and scale in sustainability transitions (Ch. 21, pp. 389–402)
• Simoens, M., Hendriks, A., and Frank, L. Between deep roots and a broad crown: Reflections on the development of sustainability transitions as a research field (Ch. 28, pp. 517–527)
Articles (all open access). From the special issue Sustainability Transitions in Tourism, edited by P. Niewiadomski and P. Brouder, Tourism Geographies, 26(2), 2024:
• Niewiadomski, P., and Brouder, P. (2024). From 'sustainable tourism' to 'sustainability transitions in tourism'? Tourism Geographies, 26(2), 141–150. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2299832
• Magnusson, T., Karabag, S. F., Wigger, K., and Andersson, G. (2024). Sustainability transitions in tourism: On the transformation of a fragmented sector. Tourism Geographies, 26(2), 157–172. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2291700
• Flood Chavez, D., Niewiadomski, P., and Jones, T. (2024). From niches to regime: Sustainability transitions in a diverse tourism destination. Tourism Geographies, 26(2), 173–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2280179
• Niewiadomski, P., and Mellon, V. (2024). Transitioning towards sustainable tourism in the Outer Hebrides: An evolutionary investigation. Tourism Geographies, 26(2), 214–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2283730
• Tops, J., and Lamers, M. (2024). Just tourism transitions? Sustainability policy interventions and implications on Boracay, Philippines. Tourism Geographies, 26(2), 237–254. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2289996
Further reports, policy documents and grey literature indicated by the instructor during the course.

Sustainable Development Goals

DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES | RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION | CLIMATE ACTION