

ISF Graduate Research Program Learning Modules

To complement learning opportunities offered through the UTS Graduate Research School, ISF delivers a recurring program of short learning modules to build the research capacity of ISF staff and students. The modules help participants to build transdisciplinary knowledge and skills relevant to completing or supervising a research degree in sustainable futures. They also cover communication of research to diverse audiences.

Modules have an online component in Canvas and are supported by live sessions, typically held once a year. Most can be easily completed within a week. The current modules are summarised below although the program continues to expand to meet student and supervisor needs.

Sustainable Futures Foundations

At ISF our mission is to create change towards sustainable futures. But what does that mean? Sustainability is a deeply contested term. One person might use it to mean 'sustaining life on Earth for millennia' while another might use it to mean 'sustaining my company's profits this financial year'. This short module shares some of the most common frameworks used at ISF for explaining what we mean by sustainability.

Knowledge Co-production for Sustainable Futures

This module introduces the theory and practice of knowledge co-production for sustainable futures, including transdisciplinary research, learning and practice. ISF has been a pioneer in transdisciplinary research and practice. We have consistently argued that you can't respond to global sustainability challenges without bringing multiple disciplinary perspectives to bear and working closely with actors outside academia.

Sustainability Transitions and Transformations

Because ISF's mission is to create change towards sustainable futures, it's important that our research staff and students have some common theoretical frameworks for understanding how change happens and how it can be guided or facilitated. As the scale of sustainability challenges has become clearer, the fields of sustainability transformations and transitions emerged in acknowledgement of the magnitude of change we need to achieve. This module is an introduction to those fields and some of their key theories and methods.

Anticipation and Foresight

Our module on anticipation and foresight aims to provide a practical introduction to anticipatory thinking (or futures thinking) for sustainability research and practice. Anticipatory thinking and sustainability are intertwined. Thinking about the future can warn us of unsustainable trends and imagining possible futures can help us collectively move towards and beyond sustainability. There is a long tradition of futures theory and practice we can draw on to more systematically explore possible futures, better prepare for what might lie ahead and actively create the futures we desire. The module introduces key futures concepts, tools and methods, such as visioning, scenario planning, Three Horizons, backcasting and causal layered analysis.

Research Design for Sustainable Futures

This module is ISF's ongoing attempt to organise and make sense of our collective knowledge about approaches to research, i.e. research design. It covers ontology, epistemology, paradigms, worldviews, theory, methodology and methods. Because so many of those words end in 'ology', this learning module is affectionately known as The Ologies Module.

Systems Thinking and Practice for Sustainable Futures

Many people today are interested in making a positive contribution to society and the world. We often hear the phrase "we need systems change" to address life's and societies' many interconnected social, cultural, political and environmental challenges. Many people are interested in or work in the field of sustainability because they feel this is where they can create such change but often lack the foundational thinking,

sensibility and literacy that is required to effect positive systems change. Systems thinking offers essential skills and tools that will help build a deep understanding and experience of complexity. Systems thinking thrives on curiosity for exploration, experimentation, innovation, collaboration, co-creation and a commitment to continual learning.

This 6-week module is currently offered as a paid course although ISF staff and students can register at a discounted price.

The Golden Thread for your Thesis

This module is about ‘finding your Golden Thread’ – the thing that ties your thesis together and gives it coherence. The Golden Thread has been described as ‘the central argument that pulls through your whole thesis, and creates coherence across the literature review, the research questions, the theoretical and conceptual framework, the methodology, and finally the analysis and organisation of the data and the conclusions you are able to draw (on the basis of that argument you set out to make)’.

The Graduate Research Program Retreat

This annual, two-day off-site retreat has a bespoke learning program, designed and delivered by ISF students and supervisors. Each year, Program staff consult with the student and supervisor community to identify high priority topics to include in the retreat and design tailored learning experiences around these topics. For example, in 2024, topics included social writing, applications of AI to graduate research and measures of success for transdisciplinary PhDs. Topics covered at the annual retreat are frequently turned into stand-alone modules in the years that follow.