

# “Put digitalisation and sustainability at the core of academic curricula”, project management educators urged

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**A leading academic has called for a fundamental shift in how project management is taught at universities to ensure graduates can address pressing issues like climate change and digital transformation.**

Professor Christine Unterhitzenberger, Professor of Project Management at the University of Leeds, argues that sustainability and digitalisation need to be central to project management degrees if the profession is to deliver the changes society needs.

Professor Unterhitzenberger highlights the lack of clarity surrounding how the goals set at the recent COP28 climate change conference will be achieved. Project, programme, and portfolio management (P3M) professionals will be critical in filling the gaps and delivering change, she says. Universities, therefore, must equip the next generation with the knowledge and skills necessary for this challenge by embedding sustainability into project-related courses.

“What’s clear is that there’s no plan for how COP28 targets will be met. It will require substantial transformation of business and society and the project profession will have to play a crucial role.

“At the moment, I feel the project profession is waiting for someone else – maybe the government – to put legislation or policy in place and then we [the project profession] follow. As a profession, we need to take a more proactive role. There needs to be a broader conversation within the profession about that, then take that to government and industry, to explain how we deliver these transformations.

“Universities really need to work to embed sustainability into their curricula. There has been a lot of development of our understanding of sustainability in recent years, but this isn’t always reflected in curricula. I would like to see it included more holistically, so that it’s an underlying theme throughout programmes that defines what we teach and how we teach it.

“This needs to be based on rigorous research to further enhance our understanding of sustainability in the context of projects. It’s not just about decarbonisation – that’s related to the project output and maybe outcome. It is also about the project management processes and practices employed to get to sustainable project outcomes.”

The limitations of AI are another area where project management education needs to adapt, according to Professor Unterhitzenberger. Ensuring students are AI and data literate will prevent projects and project professionals from being swept up in current hype surrounding the technology.

“Without an in-depth understanding of AI’s limitations, not only will it not provide value, but it can actually harm students’ achievements – and, later on, project professionals’ work,” she explained. “We need to cut through the hype and understand what it can do and what it can’t do.

“Yes, AI can produce a schedule or a budget. But what are the intentions behind those? What are the considerations? If we don’t have AI literacy, we can’t evaluate quality of outputs.”

Professor Unterhitzenberger identifies governance as a key area requiring closer scrutiny in the context of AI use. She is currently collaborating with a PhD researcher to explore how digital transformation shapes decision-making legitimacy and agility. Further research on governance, AI use, and digital transformation is planned, focusing on questions such as: “If a generative AI tool gets something wrong on a project, who takes responsibility? And how is the use of AI regulated in contracts? These are areas we need to understand better.”

While acknowledging the challenges of researching rapidly evolving fields like AI and climate change, Professor Unterhitzenberger emphasizes the importance of rigorous academic inquiry.

“Research should not simply focus on current trends or incremental technical developments related to AI or digital transformation,” she says. “It needs to advance our theoretical understanding of phenomena with long-lasting impacts on project management practice.”

Professor Unterhitzenberger highlights a strong student interest in sustainability, presenting an opportunity for universities to develop their offerings. Collaboration between the business and education sectors could also be beneficial.

She said: “Students are so interested in sustainability. As educators, we need to use that momentum. My call is to colleagues to look at what they teach and embed it into curricula

“Universities are always open to collaboration with industry. Industry can support by providing topics for dissertations, for example, or by volunteering employees to be interviewed for research or participate in surveys.”

Professor Christine Unterhitzenberger will be speaking at [APM's Education and Research Awards](#), held as part of its 2024 conference "Navigating Tomorrow: Future Skills for Project Professionals." The conference takes place on 5-6 June at the Coventry Building Society Arena, Coventry, UK. [More information and ticket availability](#) can be found [here](#).