

Sustainable Leadership Programme Case Study (2024-2025)

Policy Briefing (Department for Education) and Student Testimonials



PODIEM



Department for the
Economy
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An Roinn
Geilleagair

Skill Up



Sustainable Leadership Programme Driving Change and Delivering SKILLS for Northern Ireland



Figure 1 – Cohort One, September 2024

From Insight to Action: The Origins of the Programme

In Autumn 2024, Ulster University launched its Sustainability Breakfast Initiative to better understand what Northern Irish businesses and stakeholders needed from the Business School regarding sustainability. A clear theme emerged: **sustainable leadership**.

In response, Ulster University Business School, in partnership with PODIEM and funded by the Department for the Economy (DfE), developed and delivered the Sustainable Leadership Programme, for 42 Sustainability Leaders in Northern Ireland, a pioneering initiative equipping business leaders with the knowledge and skills to drive meaningful environmental and economic change.

*“The beauty of this [programme] is the diversity of participants...
I learnt more than just academic theory but also practical real-life application.” –
Thomas Potter*

*“I highly recommend this course to anyone who is interested in contributing to positive sustainable change in their workplace... Everyone in the cohort was very supportive, and the relaxed atmosphere meant conversations flowed naturally. –
Grainne Loughrey*

Launching a Movement: Sustain Exchange Summit and MLM Summit

The programme debuted in October 2024 at the Sustain Exchange Summit in Belfast, where participants engaged with global sustainability pioneers. Attendees took part in an exclusive session with John Elkington, the “father of sustainability,” who emphasised: *“take your carbon reporting as seriously as you take your accounting.”*

The second cohort attended the MLM Summit, a flagship leadership event in Northern Ireland. The 2025 summit, held at Titanic Belfast, featured insights from transformative leaders such as Jim Gavin (GAA Coach & COO, Irish Aviation Authority), Mark Pollock (Resilience Advocate), and former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. These experiences provided direct access to world-class expertise and inspiration, reinforcing the programme’s commitment to bridging theory with practice.

“This programme gave me the skills and ideas to really be able to make a change.” – Anna-Marie McAlinden

“I am definitely going away from this course with a different mindset towards sustainability. It has allowed me to see that if we all do our small part, the world will start to change in a big way.” – Edith McGaughey

The Programme in Action: Learning Through Real-World Challenges

Spanning five full-day sessions, the Sustainable Leadership Programme combined academic expertise, industry insight, and live consulting projects to tackle real-world sustainability challenges.

“Hands down the best PG course I’ve taken – fun, insightful, and you leave feeling you’ve not only learned but actually made a positive difference.” – T Buckley

The Curriculum

- **Strategy and Transformation** – Embedding sustainability into business operations.
- **Leadership Development** – Building resilience and ethical decision-making.
- **Project-Based Learning** – Solving sustainability challenges in local organisations.

This hands-on approach helped participants not only learn but apply sustainability principles within their organisations, fostering long-term impact.

“Informative and challenging.” – Michael Hermin

“Very engaging and valuable course.” – Peter McHugh

“As a catering business owner, this course helped me shape my thinking around inclusive food practices and sustainable leadership, giving me the confidence to communicate what we’re already doing well — and the motivation to keep building on it.” – Krystal Mohn

Impact on Northern Ireland's Economy and Workforce

With two successful cohorts completed, the programme is already contributing to Northern Ireland's green transition, aligning with commitments under the NI Climate Change Act (2022). Business leaders now leave with practical strategies to lead sustainability within their sectors.

"This programme was a great opportunity to learn and explore new ways to be a force for good within my business. More importantly, it brought together people from very different industries, showing that a commitment to our environment spans all sectors and all levels." – Neil Allen

The importance of green skills development was echoed by Chris Martin at the Sustain Exchange Summit:

"The green transition is threatened by business leaders' failure to develop and source green skills"



Figure 2 – Cohort Two, March 2025

Learner Experience: Transformative and Practical

The impact is perhaps best captured by the participants themselves:

"Really great opportunity to get the ball rolling with sustainability practices in organisations and start visualising to get things done." – Emily Keenan

"So much benefit in such a short space of time." – Jamie Hamilton

"Making change for the future of the next generation." – Margaret Allen

A Model for Future Partnerships

The Sustainable Leadership Programme showcases the power of strategic collaboration between academia, government, and industry. Ulster University, PODIEM, and DfE have created a model for impactful, practice-driven learning that's already helping reshape the future of business in Northern Ireland.

As sustainability continues to rise on the global agenda, this programme equips leaders with the insight and experience to drive lasting, positive change.

"This course is for everyone." – Gordon Cross

"Learning is a practical journey, and I want to continue." – Kevin Wilson

"It was a very thought-provoking and emotional journey – not what I expected, but very positive in terms of personal development, sustainable awareness and education – a new triple bottom line." – Alister Bell



