

Educating for Sustainability: A Review of Higher Education's Contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals

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ABSTRACT

A key player in accomplishing the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the UN General Assembly in 2015 are Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs continue to play a crucial role in fostering a world that is environmentally sustainable, economically feasible, and socially just as agents of knowledge. The purpose of this study was to comprehend how HEIs globally are implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and how these institutions contribute towards these goals. A thorough analysis of the literature was carried out by examining the role that HEIs play towards these global goals. The review covered research worldwide published between 2015 and 2024. The studies conducted before 2015 were not included in the review because the agenda of SDGs was adopted in 2015. A comprehensive exploration was conducted using reliable databases, including Google Scholar, Springer and the International Conference on Sustainable Development (ICSD) website. Keywords associated with "SDGs and HEIs," "SDGs, education institutions" and "SDGs, Education for sustainability" were employed for reviewing the literature. A total of 22 relevant studies meeting the inclusion criteria were chosen for the review, and to find gaps in the body of existing literature a thematic analysis was utilized in the synthesis. The review unveiled the diverse nature of HEIs' engagement with the SDGs, underscoring the critical role these institutions play in achieving them.

Keywords and Abbreviations: *SDGs and HEIs; SDGs, Education institutions; SDGs, Education for sustainability. SDGs (Sustainable development goals); HEIs (Higher Education Institutions); SD (Sustainable Development); ESD (Education for Sustainable Development).*

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all by 2030. Comprising 17 interconnected goals and 169 targets, the SDGs address a wide range of global challenges, including poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. The SDGs provide a comprehensive framework for sustainable development that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions, emphasizing the need for collective action and partnerships to achieve transformative change. These goals aim to transform how economies and societies function and engage with the

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environment. They are a plan of action for people, the planet, and prosperity (Kestin, et al. 2017).

If we are to accomplish SDGs and grow and advance sustainably, education at all levels, but especially at the higher education level, is essential. Sustainability benefits from education in two ways. One way to ensure environmental protection and conservation is by cultivating awareness, knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and actions in people of all ages. On the other hand, fostering social justice and inclusion, as well as economic sustainability, can be achieved through the advancement of human talents and interests that further human knowledge, the development of civic skills that enable meaningful engagement in politics and civil society, and the development of productive skills that enhance and maintain prosperity and competence (Bolstad, 2003 & Nevin, 2008).

The UN has established the SDG4 Quality Education, which includes a mention of Education for Sustainable Development in its seventh goal in response to the 2030 Agenda. (4.7): "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development." (Ferrer & Chalmeta, 2021).

For the sustainable achievement of SDGs and continued growth, higher education holds paramount importance. According to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN, 2017), Higher Education Institutes have the potential to advance sustainable development (SD) and facilitate the implementation of SDGs through several means: firstly, by integrating sustainability principles across all university curricula and educational and research endeavours; secondly, by serving as important local centres of knowledge for sustainability; and thirdly, by prioritizing sustainability in their own planning and administrative processes.

By conducting research, producing knowledge, developing skills, and engaging with the public, higher education institutions are in a good position to support sustainable development and the realization of the SDGs in their communities, nations, and regions. The term "higher education" refers to various post-secondary educational settings, such as trade, technical, and vocational schools, universities, colleges, academies, and institutes of technology that grant degrees and certificates in either professional or academic fields. To build the capacity required for development, progress, and socioeconomic and environmental sustainability anywhere in the world, high-quality higher education is essential (Heleta & Bagus, 2021).

Higher education "must be centrally placed in the development agenda of nations" for meaningful and sustainable development to be achieved in any nation. Without high-quality education, including a functional higher education system and institutions that offer students relevant and high-quality education, skills, and knowledge as well as generate and disseminate new knowledge and research essential for societal and human development and progress, developing nations cannot improve the living conditions of their citizens and advance inclusive and sustainable development (Heleta & Bagus, 2021).

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The role of HEIs in advancing the SDGs is increasingly recognized as crucial. According to Professor Jeffrey Sachs:

“The pathways to sustainable development will not be identified through a top-down approach, but through a highly energized era of networked problem-solving, that engages the world’s universities, businesses, non governmental organizations, governments and especially young people, who should become the experts and leaders of a new and profoundly challenging era” (Sachs, 2012, p. 2211).

To integrate sustainability principles across disciplines, curricula, and institutional practices, higher education institutions (HEIs) are essential. UNESCO (2019) states that in addition to being one of the SDGs' four targets, Higher education is also a key component of the goals concerning gender equality, decent work and economic growth, poverty, health and well-being, climate change, responsible consumption and production, and peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Higher education institutions can empower students, faculty, and staff to become change agents and contribute to a more sustainable future by integrating the SDGs into teaching, research, and campus operations. Preparing the next generation of politicians, administrators, scientists, philosophers, and other actors who will be entrusted with building our world is one of HEIs' primary responsibilities (Neubauer & Matthieu, 2017). As a result, sustainability must be integrated into research and teaching rather than just being a component of campus operations (Ávila et al. 2017).

Research indicating how higher education institutions have been taking sustainability goals into account in their strategic plans is also lacking thereby justifying the need to undertake the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education plays an important role in supporting sustainable development pathways by increasing knowledge, building capacity through training, and working with local communities to strengthen resilience (Berchin et al. 2021).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for higher education in low-income countries were examined critically in the study by Heleta and Bagus, 2021. They analysed that though SDG Goal 4, Target 4.3, calls for universal access to high-quality post secondary education by 2030, many nations do not have the resources available to reform higher education. The SDGs place more emphasis on providing opportunities for a small number of people to study abroad than they do on helping these nations rebuild their shaky higher education systems, which will continue to rely on foreign aid. Notwithstanding the rhetoric of inclusivity in the SDGs, many people will be left behind if higher education in low-income nations is neglected. To promote sustainable development and equity, a key component of the SDGs should have been giving local capacity building in higher education in these countries top priority.

In order to evaluate the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) alignment with UN initiatives, the study by Aleixo et al. 2021, looks into how the SDGs are implemented in Portuguese public higher education institutions, with a particular emphasis on undergraduate and master's programs. 198 courses directly address the SDGs, according to an analysis of 2,556 courses offered by 33 different institutions. Universities place a higher priority on SDG integration than polytechnics do. Additionally, master's programs show a stronger inclination

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towards incorporating the SDGs, especially in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and environmental sciences. This highlights the variety of strategies used in higher education to promote sustainability.

The study by Fleacă et al. 2018, emphasizes the growing importance of sustainable development in fostering global prosperity, drawing attention from various stakeholders including civil society, businesses, and academia. It highlights education's crucial role in addressing societal challenges posed by sustainable development, yet identifies a deficiency in higher education institutions' ability to fully incorporate sustainable development principles. To enhance their role as entrepreneurial entities in advancing sustainable development goals (SDGs), the study suggests that higher education institutions must implement tailored processes to embed sustainability across all aspects of education and learning.

Angelaki, 2024 explores the increasing trend of integrating sustainability into higher education, particularly in the ICT field. The study advocates for integrating sustainability into undergraduate ICT curricula and examines its impact on students' environmental awareness and attitudes. Results indicate a significant positive effect on students' intention to engage with sustainability, though there is room for improvement in university engagement with sustainability initiatives.

Very few institutions use sustainable development holistically, which applies it to all conventional sustainability dimensions by integrating it into the social, economic, and environmental pillars. For higher education to be in line with the global sustainability agenda, changes must be made to policies, curricula, and practices related to Higher Education for Sustainable Development (Franco et al. 2019).

Leal Filho, et al. 2023, investigated the extent of engagement by higher education institutions in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), addressing a lack of clarity on this matter globally. Through a survey of 209 experts from 65 countries, findings revealed a recognized opportunity for increased collaboration within and between universities regarding SDG integration into teaching and research. However, the study suggests a need for greater emphasis on revising curricula and research programs to incorporate the SDGs, as well as encouraging student involvement in advocating for SDG-related content.

To improve how different subjects come together to teach sustainable development in universities, Mokski, et al. 2023, explored existing ideas and challenges in teaching this subject and suggested a new way to mix different teaching methods. They proposed using both existing courses and new ones dedicated to sustainable development, along with research projects and online learning, to involve more students from different academic backgrounds.

Owens, 2017 assessed how the SDGs were incorporated into university and multilateral agendas, as well as how higher education was incorporated into the development agenda. The study emphasized the significance of partnerships between regional higher education institutions and publicly funded research as essential elements for higher education to successfully contribute to the framework for sustainable development.

The study by Leal Filho, 2023 examined the integration of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into higher education institution (HEI) strategies across 28 countries, finding

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limited emphasis on SDGs compared to general sustainable development initiatives. It highlighted a shortage of training opportunities for university staff on SDGs and suggested measures to increase SDG presence in HEI programs to enhance their contribution to global sustainability challenges.

A study by Leal Filho, et al. 2021, examined the relationship between governance—the availability of trustworthy policies and resources for sustainable development—and the implementation of sustainability in higher education. It examines the budget, organization, policies, and difficulties in universities incorporating sustainability. Despite differences in opinion, governance is thought to be essential for universities to successfully integrate sustainability into their plans.

Many universities have made commitments to integrate sustainable development into their academic programs over the last 20 years. The study by Lozano, et al. 2015, examined whether these promises result in concrete sustainability initiatives within these organizations. It looked at several topics, including research, education, and institutional frameworks, through a survey and literature review of sixty articles. The results have shown that although there are instances of sustainable practices, initiatives frequently stay dispersed. However institutional commitment to sustainability and real implementation are strongly correlated, with academic leadership being a key factor. Among the suggestions are incorporating sustainability into policies, endorsing proclamations, and guaranteeing thorough execution across the organization.

Mbithi, et al. 2021, examines challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Africa and proposes reforms and investments needed to strengthen higher education for sustainable development. It employs a systematic review of literature from various sources, blending data from UNESCO and World Bank databases. Utilizing the Human Capital Theory, emphasizes the importance of improving human capital through education. Findings highlight a lack of promotion of academic mobility within Africa and insufficient HEI-industry partnerships to address workforce demands. The study underscores the need for HEIs to adapt to global market needs, foster partnerships, and develop curricula to address contemporary challenges such as unemployment, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately aiming to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education.

The study by Aleixo, et al. 2018, investigates into how stakeholders in Portuguese public higher education institutions perceive sustainability and sustainable higher education institutions. The study employs qualitative techniques such as content analysis and interviews to determine that while stakeholders are aware of sustainability, they are not aware of sustainable higher education institutions. The primary obstacle to sustainability is found to be financial, indicating the need for conceptual and organizational adjustments like finding new funding sources and improving educational programs. This study adds to our knowledge of how higher education institutions can advance sustainability and enhance higher education for sustainable development.

Pakistani universities are carrying out their mandate to offer high-quality instruction in compliance with the regulations of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Using qualitative techniques, such as department head interviews from four general universities, it is discovered that although administrators

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are dedicated to putting sustainable initiatives into action, their main obstacles are a lack of resources and insufficient experience (Salman, et al. 2023).

The study by Shava, et al, 2023, evaluated the progress of Higher Education institutions in Africa towards achieving Agenda 2030 on sustainable development. Through interviews with deans, lecturers, and administrators from three universities in Zimbabwe, it identified structural, cultural, and agency-related challenges hindering progress, such as lack of financial support and absence of sustainable development strategies. Recommendations include funding for reorganizing higher education structures to facilitate the achievement of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) goals.

The study by Ekene and Oluoch, 2015, examines Marist International University College's (MIUC) role in promoting sustainable development in Kenya through education. Using a qualitative case study approach, it involves 15 respondents, including graduating students and staff members. Findings reveal that the university faces challenges such as financial constraints and limited programs, limiting the diffusion of knowledge for sustainable development. Recommendations include government funding for private universities and developing more market-driven programs to enhance impact.

Leal Filho, et al. 2019, conducted a study that discusses the paucity of data regarding universities' contributions to regional sustainability initiatives. It presents the findings of a qualitative investigation into the sustainable development programs of twenty-two universities across several nations, with a focus on collaboration, knowledge exchange, and local community needs. The study supports improvements in university actions and local sustainability initiatives and emphasizes universities' potential as local sustainability actors.

Sonetti, et al. 2021, investigated perceptions of sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) among members of an Italian polytechnic university community. Survey data from 1408 respondents revealed diverse understandings of sustainability and SDGs, with an emphasis on eco-centric views and limited awareness of societal challenges. Significant differences among academics, technical staff, and students were observed. Results indicated a gap between personal and institutional perceptions of SDGs, suggesting that the university is not yet seen as a community actively promoting sustainability beyond education.

The research by Filho, et al. 2024, explores the awareness and involvement of students in global initiatives linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. Using an extensive research methodology that includes case studies, bibliometric analysis, and a survey of 602 students from 53 countries, it concludes that the degree to which students participate in SDGs activities is correlated with the degree to which their institutions are committed to implementing the SDGs. Moreover, students' engagement is highly influenced by having taken courses or studied subjects related to the SDGs. The study makes suggestions for raising HEI students' awareness of and participation in sustainable development.

The integration of sustainable development (SD) into higher education institutions (HEIs) in Portugal was investigated in the study conducted by Aleixo, et al. 2016, including the practices of SD in various Public Higher Education Institutions (Universities and Polytechnics) by means of a review of the literature and an analysis of institutional webpages. The results show that while HEIs have different approaches to SD and actively share their practices, overall, SD integration in Portuguese HEIs is still in its early stages.

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To advance ESD, university educators must improve their knowledge of sustainability and their capacity to incorporate it into curricula and learning opportunities. The study by Mula, et al. 2017, critically reviews current practices, policy frameworks, and literature on ESD and professional development in higher education, drawing on a pan-European collaboration involving 33 countries. The results show that while ESD is becoming more and more important on a global scale, universities are still unable to properly incorporate it into their curricula and training programs for faculty. To improve teachers' ESD competencies and encourage institutional change toward sustainability in higher education, the study emphasizes the necessity of comprehensive professional development programs.

METHODOLOGY

This study intended to thoroughly investigate Higher Education's Contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals using a systematic literature review methodology. The purpose of this study was to comprehend how HEIs globally are implementing the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and how these institutions contribute towards these goals. A thorough analysis of the literature was carried out by examining the role that HEIs play towards these global goals. The review covered research worldwide published between 2015 and 2024. The studies conducted before 2015 were not included in the review because the agenda of SDGs was adopted in 2015. A comprehensive exploration was conducted using reliable databases, including Google Scholar, Springer and the International Conference on Sustainable Development (ICSD) website. Keywords associated with "SDGs and HEIs," "SDGs, education institutions" and "SDGs, Education for sustainability" were employed for reviewing the literature. A total of 22 relevant studies meeting the inclusion criteria were chosen for the review, and to find gaps in the body of existing literature a thematic analysis was utilized in the synthesis. The review unveiled the diverse nature of HEIs' engagement with the SDGs, underscoring the critical role these institutions play in achieving them.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive review emphasizes the pivotal role of Higher Education Institutions in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals set forth by the United Nations. HEIs serve as indispensable agents of knowledge dissemination, tasked with fostering environmental sustainability, economic viability, and social justice globally.

Through an exhaustive analysis of literature spanning from 2015 to 2024, this review elucidates the multifaceted engagement of HEIs with the SDGs. From curriculum integration to research endeavours and institutional policies, HEIs exhibit diverse approaches in contributing to sustainable development. Notably, successful case studies and innovative strategies emerge, highlighting the transformative potential of higher education in addressing pressing global challenges.

Despite progress, the review identifies persistent challenges faced by HEIs in mainstreaming sustainability principles. Financial constraints, limited institutional capacity, and stakeholder awareness gaps impede comprehensive integration efforts. However, the review also illuminates promising pathways forward, emphasizing the need for curriculum revisions, faculty training enhancements, and collaborative partnerships among universities and stakeholders.

Moreover, the review underscores the importance of holistic approaches that embed sustainability principles across all facets of university operations. Integrating sustainability

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into teaching, research, and campus management emerges as a critical imperative for HEIs to realize their full potential as drivers of sustainable development.

In conclusion, this review contributes significant insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners striving to advance sustainability in higher education. By synthesizing existing research and pinpointing knowledge gaps, the review lays the groundwork for concerted efforts to strengthen the capacity of HEIs to achieve the SDGs by 2030. Moving forward, sustained investments and collaborative initiatives are paramount to harness the transformative power of higher education in shaping a more sustainable future for all.

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Conflict of Interest

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