

Review Article

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Author for correspondence:

Rommel AlAli

✉ King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia

✉ Email: ralali@kfu.edu.sa

Sustainability in Higher Education: Challenges, Innovations, and Research Prospects

Yousef Wardat^{}, Rommel AlAli^{}

Abstract

Background/purpose. Higher education sustainability is one of the primary influences on researchers, teachers, and policymakers due to its impact on environmental governance, institutional management, and student participation. The objective of this research is to understand the development processes of sustainability initiatives, including challenges, opportunities, and research gaps related to the implementation of sustainable initiatives in the educational, policy, and administrative aspects of colleges and universities.

Materials/methods. The research investigates green campus projects, interdisciplinary sustainable development curricula, and carbon footprint mitigation initiatives at various institutions. It also examines adoption challenges, including financial, political, administrative, and institutional disparities. This literature review, in this case, provides evidence on various frameworks that can assist in undertaking sustainability through emphatically multidisciplinary, student-participatory, and evidence-based approaches.

Results. The constructs and reported insights suggest that sustainability in higher education can be achieved and maintained through a combination of policy changes, stakeholder involvement, and new pedagogy approaches. This report contributes to the existing literature on sustaining higher education institutions by providing examples of recommended practices, suggestions, policies, and expected actions for further study.

Conclusion. Higher education can make significant contributions toward global sustainability concerns by cultivating pro-environmental behaviors, enhancing institutional commitments, and harnessing new technologies. The study advocates for a more deliberate and collaborative approach to sustainability in higher education institutions, ensuring that sustainability is not only taught but also practiced by the institutions in their operations and governance.



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1. Introduction

For the last twenty-five years, researchers as well as professionals have championed for a better higher education system that takes a more progressive view than is the case today. They highlight the essential role that today's universities must play in enabling students to be prepared as rescuer leaders and powerful change agents to resolve social, cultural, ecological, and economic dilemmas. They advocate that higher education should provide students with an environment where experienced and professional experts are ready, willing, and able to support and develop innovative solutions to education's crucial sustainability challenges (Azeiteiro et al., 2015; Bagur-Femenías, Buil-Fabrega, & Aznar, 2020). In addition, universities must demonstrate their commitment to sustainability by implementing measures within their institutions, thereby earning credibility for their actions and setting examples for others (Bracco et al., 2018).

In higher education, sustainability is an effort that seeks to provide students with knowledge, skills, and attitudes to achieve a human developmental level that is commensurate with environmental protection. This aim can be achieved by integrating sustainability across all operations of higher education institutions, including policies, faculty, research, outreach activities, infrastructure development, and student services (Arnold, Vogel, & Ulber, 2021). Such integration raises important issues; for example, what knowledge and skills does a modern, responsible twenty-first-century scientist who graduated with a degree in chemistry need to possess? These questions are becoming increasingly important for consideration due to climate change, resource depletion, and other forms of environmental harm (Barbier & Burgess, 2019). Furthermore, sustainability within higher education institutions can be achieved by enhancing teaching and learning through continual innovations resulting from digital transformations in education (Benta et al., 2015; Benavides et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of cohesion in higher education, highlighting increased resilience and flexibility in academic institutions (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). The rapid shift to remote teaching and learning exposed both the merits and drawbacks of digital education towards sustainability (Arita, 2017). While emergency remote teaching served as an adaptative measure, it also provided insight into how systems can be modified and enhanced to make them more sustainable in the long run (Arnold, Vogel & Ulber, 2021).

Equipping learners, teachers, and scholars to deal with this change is vital because emerging industries tend to focus on value maximization while creating social equity and improving the quality of life. Research on sustainability in higher education institutions is quite extensive; however, many scholars focus not only on the impact of these initiatives on institutional image but also on students, engagement, and motivation (Azeiteiro et al., 2015; Bagur-Femenías, Buil-Fabrega, & Aznar, 2020). If sustainability principles are integrated into the institutions and curricula of higher education, universities produce responsible, active graduates who are prepared to address complex modern environmental and social issues.

Strategic approaches to higher learning have the potential to serve as a transformative beast that empowers future generations with a dose of creativity, eco-friendliness, and an innovative spirit. With a focus on deep interdisciplinary study, sustainability can be better understood and then utilized in order to nurture a new reality where humans effortlessly coexist with nature.

1.1. The Concept of Sustainability in Higher Education

This paper analyzes in detail several challenging problems, possibilities, and new avenues of research within colleges and universities that seek to construct and foster sustainable development at their own campuses (Cabedo et al., 2018; Caniglia et al., 2018). Such important and crucial efforts

go beyond the concrete actions undertaken to include the multifaceted behaviors of students and the tremendous leadership skills of college graduates (Cavicchi, 2021; Colás-Bravo et al., 2021).

In order to achieve a clear and continuous focus that augments the whole collection of articles published in this endeavor, we take up a definition of the term 'sustainability' for purposes of this study that characterizes it with three distinct 'time-based' dimensions (Carayannis & Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). With such characterization, we construct frameworks that profoundly enhance understanding of its relevance in education, which ultimately leads to deep insights. Davidson et al., (2021) argue that increasing understanding of these remarkable time-based dimensions often leads to more significant implications for ongoing research endeavors, higher education policy formulation, and practical implementation. Such factors highlight the importance of adopting a comprehensive avatar of sustainability as a multi-dimensional issue that affects various aspects of academia (Colás-Bravo et al., 2018). In addition, this places greater emphasis on the mandate of preparing the next generation of leaders to tackle the increasingly complex and interconnected issues of the future in a sustainable manner (Coman et al., 2020; Daniela et al., 2018).

Recently, higher education decision-makers have started looking into existing literature on sustainability to base their initiatives, decisions, and strategic directions on guiding literature (Edelhauser & Lupu-Dima, 2020; Espino-Diaz et al., 2020). This emerging trend has led to the gradual development and implementation of effective policies that integrate colleges and universities with the traditional three "E's" - equity, economy, and environment – within various institutional settings across the modern educational landscape (Eltawil et al., 2021). Often, the definition of sustainability contains the primary elements of social equity, environmental, and economic activities, which are crucial for the effective formulation of sustainability strategies (Evans et al., 2017). These three fundamental principles are often categorized under the distinct terms of intergenerational equity, intragenerational equity, and the crucial integration of these two principles to ensure ecological integrity for current and future generations (Fraga-Lamas et al., 2019).

As debates on what sustainability means in various contexts continue to evolve, it has begun to be incorporated into existing policies and actionable strategies that drive change (Fuchs et al., 2020). Frequently, applications of the more nuanced aspects of sustainability 'thinking' are reduced to two broad scopes: one being environmentally responsible management, and the other a more comprehensive narrative that includes the spheres of education – the modern intricacies and challenges of running an educational institution within (Filter et al., 2020).

In this enriching and must-read section, we summarize frameworks and guidelines of sostenibilidad already formulated by some scholars that seek to provide insight into the notable thinking and writing produced in the field of higher education around the world. (Donthu et al., 2020; Dziubaniuk & Nyholm, 2021). This goes further to introduce further settings that frame policy and other actionable steps that educational institutions can craft toward achieving sustainability (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Opening and operating a college campus in today's fast-paced, technologically driven, and environmentally aware world increasingly necessitates the careful incorporation of environmental management considerations into the decision-making process at every level of administration and operation (Bagur-Femenías et al., 2020). However, the conceptualization of sustainability as an overarching thinking framework serves as a beneficial guide that is not only critical in managing day-to-day operations but also in effecting meaningful and lasting changes to the campus culture itself (Barbier & Burgess, 2019). By encouraging a more conscientious, responsible, and conservative approach to environmental stewardship, campuses can effectively responsibly manage their operating costs, all while redirecting some of those savings to foster, develop, and nurture vital initiatives in critical areas such as innovative curriculum design, groundbreaking research, and

impactful community service programs that benefit both students and local residents alike (Benavides et al., 2020; Benta et al., 2015).

In fact, sustainability thinking possesses the immense potential to act as a powerful catalyst for transformative change in the overall ethic of campus behavior and operations, fostering a culture of responsibility, engagement, and stewardship among all members of the academic community (Bracco et al., 2018). When considering the broader implications for policy, we propose that taking decisive, proactive actions regarding environmental management concerns while operating under the guiding principles of the triple bottom line of sustainability can yield a strikingly powerful and resonant public message for any educational institution (Arnold et al., 2021).

Such a compelling message has the potential to resonate profoundly among faculty, staff, and students alike, extending its reach and impact into the surrounding community, thereby reinforcing the institution's unwavering and enduring commitment to sustainability as a core value and imperative that fundamentally defines its mission and purpose (Azeiteiro et al., 2015).

2. Study Significance

It is fascinating how such rigorous research is conducted on an area that has so many gaps that need filling, especially how this study focuses on the enlacing of sustainability with high education and development, which allows us to comprehend how universities can aid in achieving sustainable goals. This research adds to the existing body of knowledge regarding education for sustainability, policy, and curriculum design in an innovative manner. The significance of this study can be categorized into the following key areas:

1. Higher Education and Sustainability, Pioneering Efforts:

This research examines the gaps that exist in the principles of sustainability in the context of university's teaching, learning, governance, and management. By studying multiple sustainability practices in higher education institutions (HEIs), this study develops the concept of sustainability as incorporation into academic work, extracurricular activities with students, and policies of the institution. Thus, students will not only learn about environmental issues but will also learn how to address those problems in a social context.

2. Training Tomorrow's Leaders for the Sustainable World:

Within the context of the study, it is apparent that educational institutions, in particular universities, have a great responsibility in preparing students to be professionals and policymakers capable of addressing sustainability issues. This research helps bridge the divide between theoretical knowledge and practical sustainability applications by further exploring the ways in which universities can teach, conduct research, and operate in a sustainable manner.

3. Combating Global Environmental and Societal Issues:

As climate change, resource scarcity, and social inequality are pressing global matters, students need to be trained in such a way that modern universities enable them to be creative problem solvers. This study provides practical suggestions on how further and higher education institutions can be more proactive in addressing governance and stewardship of sustainability, the environment, and social responsibility.

4. Implications for Policies and Institutions:

This research analyzes specific case studies on the sustainability strategies in higher education provided by various institutions and, thus, offers different insights to university authorities and administrators, policymakers, and educationalists. It captures institutional design principles that would encourage sustainable practices like green buildings, carbon neutrality, waste elimination and

management, and responsible sustainable leadership and policymaking for educational institutions. Also, it contains statements that can help institutions of higher learning work with government, industry, and NGOs towards achieving a sustainable society.

5. Furthering investigations in Sustainability Education Practices:

This study focuses on innovations in higher education towards achieving sustainability by documenting promising practices, barriers and gaps, and potential advancements. It will inform future research on sustainable development educational model, teaching strategies' innovation, and how technology can be used for sustainable development.

6. Outreach Activities and their Socio-Economic Effects, as well as Community Development Partnerships:

This research expands on institutional benefits and outlines how universities can make a difference in local and world communities by developing sustainability-focused outreach and industry engagement activities. Universities can become centers of knowledge that will enable communities, both locally and globally, to embrace sustainable practices which will enhance environmental and social conditions.

2.1. Research Purpose

This research aims to investigate the understanding and application of sustainability within higher education institutions (HEIs) and to determine how universities can nurture environmental, social, and economic responsibility among students as well as faculty and administrative staff. Sustainability is becoming a more critical issue globally, and it is the responsibility of the higher education sector to train leaders who can tackle environmental, social, and economic challenges and promote sustainable development. The study aims to assess how much sustainability practices are captured within the curricular learning activities of the university, its research programs, the operations of the campus, and the institution's policies. It also seeks to determine what impediments and opportunities institutions encounter in attempting to put sustainability into practice and how these challenges can be addressed to achieve more profound and enduring change.

This study draws on the experience of other constituent universities that successfully instituted a sustainability framework to provide insights on best practices, teaching innovations, and policies. The study will also focus on the place of information technology, trans-disciplinary, and community engagement activism in championing sustainability education. Also, it will evaluate the effectiveness of sustainability-driven institutions' practices on students' attitudes, skills, and competencies towards global sustainability leadership.

This research is focused on higher education institutions as the primary focus (560); it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these institutions can act as catalysts for social and environmental changes. Furthermore, it seeks to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and institutional leaders in implementing sustainability-focused programs that align with the SDGs. Through this research, the primary objective is to advocate for sustainability, consisting of institutions to include core characteristics of the institution's mission, vision, and strategic planning, to harness the power of education in establishing a sustainable future.

2.2. Research Questions

1. How can higher education institutions effectively integrate sustainability into their curricula, research initiatives, and campus operations to foster a culture of environmental, social, and economic responsibility?

2. What are the key barriers and opportunities that universities face in implementing sustainability initiatives, and how can they be addressed to enhance their impact on students, faculty, and the broader community?

3. Theoretical Frameworks

We can look at best practices and key examples of how sustainability is integrated into higher education using various theories. It is clear that some frameworks are more useful than others for studying the adoption and practice of sustainability in higher education institutions. One of the more encompassing theories related to this issue is Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which asserts that learning is more than just acquiring information; rather, it is a change in how a given person interprets reality. This theory, within the context of higher education and sustainability, implies that students should be critically self-reflective and actively engaged to fully grasp sustainability's challenges. In doing so, they construct new frames of reference for sustainability. Thus, higher education institutions have a significant task in formulating the curriculum and experiences that will seek to challenge students' deeply held beliefs and stereotypes, thereby actively motivating and enabling them to contribute towards sustainable development.

Another key part of the framework is Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which analyzes how organizations ranging from universities to companies deal with external and internal factors when trying to implement sustainability initiatives. This theory postulates that sustainability policies are often adopted by institutions as outcomes of compliance to regulations, propped societal norms, or through market competition. This perspective gives reasons for the difference in levels of sustainability in higher education; for some universities, integrating sustainability is a matter of compliance, and for others it is a matter of institutional philosophy and practice. It goes without saying that for the purpose of overcoming inertia, these institutional factors will need to be understood. The scheme is designed to go beyond compliance with sustainability policies.

One more important framework out of the three is Systems Thinking Theory (Sterman, 2000). This framework focuses on the interdependencies of system parts. This theory, from a sustainability point of view, argues for the integration of all stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, and the community, in the sustainability process of higher education institutions. Instead of treating sustainability projects as standalone, universities should construct an integrated system where curriculum, research, campus activities, and community service all support sustainable endeavors. This approach will help to ensure that the sustainability goals are not merely superficial, but actually lead to changing the institution's practices in a way that enhances the culture of sustainability at the university as a whole.

Below is a conceptual diagram figure1 illustrating how these theoretical frameworks interact in the context of sustainability in higher education:



Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Theoretical Frameworks for Sustainability in Higher Education

This integrated framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing sustainability efforts in higher education, highlighting the importance of educational transformation, institutional adaptation, and systemic integration.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The research is based on literature and uses a qualitative approach, as it focuses on reviewing existing literature concerning sustainability in higher education. The research analyzes the literature obtained from journals, policy papers, and institutional reports to understand the theoretical frameworks, barriers, and prospects of sustainability in higher education.

4.2. Data Collection Method

The data for this paper is purely secondary data sourced from relevant and scholarly journals available on Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and institutional databases. The selection of literature is done through a systematic process.

1. Search Strategy - A combination of the following phrases will be used - "Sustainability in higher education", "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and universities," "Green Campuses," and "Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)."

2. Inclusion Criteria - Peer-reviewed published articles from journals in the past 15 years from 2008 – 2023. Preference will be given in cited PHD thesis and qualitative and quantitative empirical research studies.

3. Exclusion Criteria - Non-academic sources of information and opinion articles, as well as literature that are outside the area of study, i.e., sustainability in higher education.

4. Data Extraction: The studies will be coded according to major themes such as the integration of sustainability in the curricula, institutional policies, student participation, faculty participation, and other implementation challenges.

4.3. Data Analysis

The selected literature will be analyzed thematically for patterns and gaps. The selected studies will be grouped in four key areas:

1. Sustainability Integration in Higher Education: Concepts, Definitions, Models, and Initiatives such as the UNESCO ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) framework.

2. Institutional Policy and Sustainability: Reviews of university case studies where sustainability is taught as a subject and practiced through curriculum, campus management, and research activities.

3. Implementation Gaps: Common gaps include underfunding, faculty apathy, uncoordinated policies, students' passivity, etc.

4. Sustainability in education – the Way Forward: New directions in teaching sustainability, such as artificial intelligence for sustainability, digital technologies, and interdisciplinary teaching.

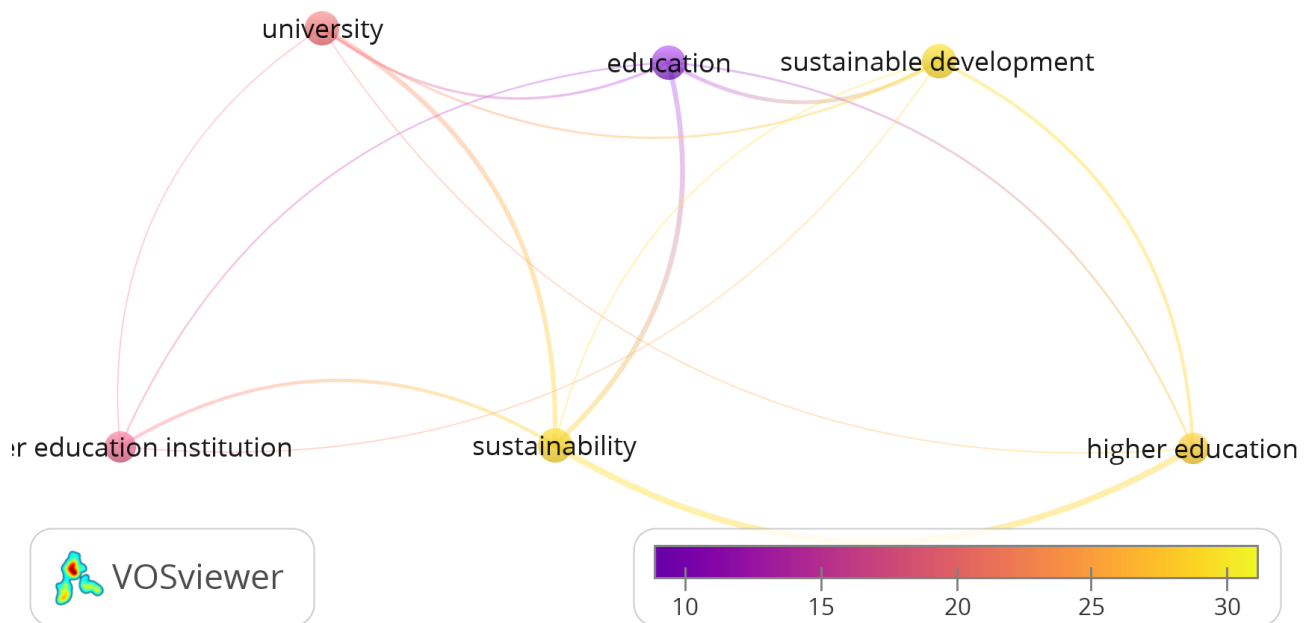


Figure 2. Outcomes of Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis (Source: Authors, Utilising VOSviewer Software)

5. Finding and Discussion

5.1. Current Practices and Challenges

Since the early 1980s, there has been an upsurge in the number of colleges and universities around the world that are making efforts to incorporate a wide range of innovative and progressive strategies to reduce their ecological footprints and improve sustainability practices in a holistic manner (Popa et al., 2020). Such campuses have undertaken a wide spectrum of initiatives which go to the extent of constructing modern state-of-the-art facilities that are not only rated for sustainability but also geared towards the installation of advanced renewable energy sources such as solar panels and wind turbines (Raji & Hassan, 2021). Apart from infrastructure changes, these schools are adopting strict waste polices through reduction and advanced recycling programs that can further mitigate negative environmental impacts and promote sustainable practices (Rodriguez Bolivar et al., 2013).

The integration of sustainability and food initiatives such as local source programs and farm-to-table approaches are also important components related to these efforts, along with the astounding emission-driven innovations in transportation systems and essential energy retrofits within existing buildings (Pu et al., 2022). Usually, these colossal undertakings are not simply institutional; they are backed by strong and immense efforts on the part of students, showing active will and participation to change the prevailing condition within the community (Pretorius et al., 2021). It is the case in many instances that these radical changes are mainly the doing of young, enthusiastic students or altruistically motivated local community groups wanting to make a difference on and off their campuses (Rodríguez-Abitia & Bribiesca-Correa, 2021). This developing and significant phenomenon draws attention to the more grassroots approaches and actions which have now become more relevant in driving and supporting sustainability initiatives in educational institutions.

Institutions are not only showcasing specific projects and initiatives; they also emphasize their capacity to provide robust and reliable metrics and data that effectively support these initiatives and validate their outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, there is a marked and noticeable increase in the way they assert the transformative effects and long-term benefits of these sustainability

practices on a broader scale (Rieckmann, 2012). Such claims about sustainability and progress are intricately intertwined with broader objectives that extend beyond environmental issues—aiming at significant shifts in brand identity, dynamic and strategic marketing efforts, and enhancing institutional reputation among prospective students and faculty (Salmerón-Manzano & Manzano-Agugliaro, 2018). These formulations are further articulated in ways that clearly illustrate the creation of exciting new educational opportunities and substantial reforms in both the content of what students learn and the innovative methods used to teach them in academic settings, promising a future that aligns more closely with sustainable development goals and global challenges (Potkonjak et al., 2016).

Despite a handful of existing documentation that focuses on various universities' environmental sustainability initiatives and the enthusiastic support of university administrators towards those initiatives, an undeniable and significant gap persists in our understanding of actual campus practices that pertain to sustainability (Redel-Macías et al., 2016). We find ourselves in a position where we know remarkably little about how these university-led sustainability practices are being perceived, understood, and valued by both faculty members and students alike (Rodríguez-Abitia & Bribiesca-Correa, 2021). Furthermore, we also lack a clear and comprehensive grasp on the potential barriers that may hinder the success of these invaluable efforts aimed at promoting sustainability on campus (Rieckmann, 2012). It is crucial to explore a multitude of viable and practical solutions that could not only make sustainability education more effective but also much more accessible to the entire university community (Pu et al., 2022).

The vital task of systematically collecting comprehensive and accurate data on various sustainability initiatives seems to be impeded by a wide array of formal, practical, and even systemic barriers that urgently need to be addressed to ensure meaningful progress (Popa et al., 2020). While recent reviews of academic literature are indeed helpful for highlighting the spread and prevalence of such initiatives across various institutions of higher learning, a substantial need remains for both qualitative and quantitative research to be conducted in this pertinent and critical field of study (Pretorius et al., 2021). The research we will discuss in the paragraphs below offers some lean and actionable suggestions regarding significant sustainability practices that can be readily adopted on different campuses. Unfortunately, these insightful suggestions are often buried within texts that do not primarily focus on sustainability as their main topic of inquiry, which can lead to their going unnoticed and underutilized by campus stakeholders (Raji & Hassan, 2021).

It is noteworthy that within the current body of published research, no studies appear to actively investigate how, or even whether, universities have effectively managed to integrate these and similar sustainability practices into their formal educational curricula (Rodríguez Bolívar et al., 2013). Thus, it becomes evident that while sustainability initiatives are indeed widely spread across numerous institutions, a diverse range of challenges must be confronted head-on to facilitate the meaningful adoption of such sustainable practices in genuine and impactful ways (Potkonjak et al., 2016). Many universities and colleges frequently find themselves facing a regrettably limited amount of funding available for the implementation of these initiatives, which are sometimes unjustly dismissed as mere token green projects that lack serious effectiveness and long-term sustainability (Redel-Macías et al., 2016). Additionally, there may be considerable resistance from various quarters, including administrators, educators, and students alike, when it comes to making meaningful educational reforms (Rieckmann, 2012).

This resistance often occurs while navigating through a heavily inertial system that tends to resist substantial change and genuine innovation, further complicating progress in the sustainability arena (Rodríguez-Abitia & Bribiesca-Correa, 2021). As a result, there does not currently exist a reliable and systematic method that can be applied to evaluate the effectiveness of most specific sustainability initiatives within campuses, particularly with regard to their educational impact and meaningful

contribution to both student learning outcomes and wider institutional goals (Salmerón-Manzano & Manzano-Agugliaro, 2018). The extent to which these initiatives are woven into the fabric of formal education—which largely hinges on the determined efforts of faculty members who occupy critical spaces along the boundaries of academic life—remains largely unassessed and under-explored in the current body of literature that examines dynamic educational practices (Potkonjak et al., 2016).

A notable exception to this concerning trend can be found in the commendable efforts related to science education, which serve as a viable and potentially transformative model for future success in integrating sustainability practices into various aspects of the ever-evolving curriculum at institutions of higher education (Raji & Hassan, 2021). In the following section, we will engage in a thoughtful and reflective discussion about potential methodologies as well as robust metrics that can be effectively employed to assess both monistic and pluralistic dimensions of sustainability work in higher education. This will facilitate a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of how to implement and evaluate these initiatives in a more effective and efficient manner as we collectively move forward into an increasingly complex and interconnected future (Rodríguez Bolívar et al., 2013).

5.2. Research Opportunities in Advancing Sustainability in Higher Education

Based on this thorough and comprehensive discussion of significant issues, pressing challenges, and exciting opportunities that lie ahead in the ever-evolving landscape of education, we propose the following extensive and well-rounded research agenda aimed at advancing sustainability in higher education. This proposed agenda serves as a mere representation of the vast possibilities that exist within a multitude of disciplines; wider interdisciplinary research collaborations spanning a diverse variety of fields including environmental science, sociology, economics, and technology, are absolutely necessary to achieve enduring progress in this vital and increasingly critical area of study (Wals & Blewitt, 2010; Zeeshan, Hämäläinen, & Neittaanmäki, 2022).

Moreover, while substantial resources, varied funding avenues, and investment are critically needed to fully realize the tremendous potential that lies within this expansive avenue of research, an increased and concerted focus on the innovative use and applications of institutional data is vital. This should be coupled with the establishment of strong and robust academic partnerships with publicly engaged institutions and community organizations, which presents emerging and promising possibilities for advancing impactful practices, insightful research findings, and meaningful policies in sustainability (Wals, 2014; Zhao, Yin, Fang, & Liu, 2021). These collaborative and multifaceted efforts can significantly strengthen this crucial direction of research in sustainability and foster a more sustainable future for higher education and the broader community, thus contributing to the global goal of environmental responsibility and social equity (Zeng, Li, Wu, & Dong, 2022). By bringing together a diverse set of stakeholders and aligning our collective objectives, we may be able to pave the way for transformative changes and practical solutions to our most pressing sustainability challenges (Winter & Cotton, 2012).

Curriculum development acts as an optimal and absolutely indispensable venue for the effective and meaningful infusion of sustainability principles and practices into higher education (Zeegers & Francis Clark, 2014). It is absolutely essential that a wide-ranging and comprehensive research endeavor be diligently conducted to identify, thoroughly examine, analyze, and deeply understand which specific practices, metrics, and policies can potentially yield substantial and worthwhile budget allocations for the creation and enhancement of sustainability-focused curricula (Yuan, Yu, & Wu, 2021). This rigorous research should also meticulously and systematically focus on the successful and effective infusion of sustainability across a diverse and extensive array of disciplinary curricula that exist within the intricate mosaic of higher education systems today (Wang & Hu, 2017).

There are numerous significant areas that offer valuable comparative data pertaining to distinctive practices that are specifically aimed at enabling institutional learning and fostering an increased and lasting commitment to sustainability in various higher education environments (Rodríguez-Abitia & Bribiesca-Correa, 2021). Notably, these areas include student experiences in innovative sustainability initiatives that promote hands-on learning, proactive community engagement efforts aimed at increasing awareness and understanding, student outcomes as they directly relate to sustainability education, and indicators of alumni achievements that center on enhancing sustainable practices in their professional lives and future careers (Rodríguez Bolívar, Garde Sánchez, & López Hernández, 2013).

Moreover, another promising area for potential in-depth research involves the thorough and critical assessment and evaluation of both positive and negative examples that stem from various sustainability efforts that have been systematically undertaken across numerous college and university campuses (Raji & Hassan, 2021). For instance, a crucial question to investigate thoroughly is how effective established programs focused on recycling and greening student residential housing are in fostering, promoting, and encouraging a genuine commitment to sustainability among students (Salmerón-Manzano & Manzano-Agugliaro, 2018).

Furthermore, it is critical to analyze and compare how each type of sustainability program distinctly contrasts with and diverges from other forms of voluntary initiatives versus mandatory requirements when it comes to genuinely driving a culture of sustainability throughout campus life and student culture (Zhang, Zhao, Zhou, & Nunamaker, 2004). It is equally important to assess what the magnitude of the incremental effect is of engaging in other sustainability initiatives on students' overall engagement with both the specific requirements and their holistic progress regarding sustainability learning—the true magnitude of this 'effect' can provide deeper insights and understanding into the multifaceted dimensions of student involvement and engagement in sustainability efforts (Zeeshan, Härmäläinen, & Neittaanmäki, 2022).

Additionally, it is vital to consider the various multifaceted factors that either drive or significantly prevent the effective implementation of sustainable budgeting practices at institutions of higher education (Zhao, Yin, Fang, & Liu, 2021). Investigating the local, regional, and national variations in sustainable budgeting practices has significant potential to illuminate best practices that could be strategically adopted across campuses nationwide and even internationally (Zeng, Li, Wu, & Dong, 2022). This particular area significantly warrants further in-depth exploration, as the development of a robust, comprehensive, and forward-thinking research agenda focusing on these dynamics may hold considerable potential to advance academic sustainability theory, practical applications, and measurable outcomes in ways that can profoundly and positively impact the future of sustainability in various higher education institutions in our society (Winter & Cotton, 2012).

5.3. Case Studies and Best Practices

Carol S. Spencer serves in the role of assistant vice chancellor for news and programs within the office of University Relations at the prestigious University of California, Berkeley. It is essential to note that I am writing this statement as an individual and not representing the University in any capacity. My extensive research has centered around the critical topic of "greening" college and university campuses. This increasingly significant subject is gaining traction as more colleges and universities are making serious commitments to enhance their sustainability practices (González-Zamar et al., 2020). In total, there are approximately 6,000 postsecondary institutions spread across the United States and Canada, which can collectively serve as powerful vehicles for driving environmental change. These institutions have the potential to lead the way in innovative practices and policies that promote a sustainable future for our planet (Ribeiro et al., 2021).

The case studies included in this section serve as insightful and illustrative examples representing three distinct postsecondary institutions that are actively engaged in comprehensive efforts aimed at helping to create a more sustainable and environmentally friendly society. It is crucial to note that these highlighted case studies are not intended to imply that these specific institutions represent "the best" performances or that they stand out as "leaders" in the diverse realms of academic curricula or campus management practices regarding sustainability (Hammer & Lewis, 2023). Rather, these studies simply present a captivating showcase of a remarkable and diverse array of initiatives and efforts being undertaken by dedicated men and women across the globe, who are motivated by the common and shared goal of promoting sustainability for the benefit of society as a whole (Ali et al., 2023). Nations and institutions are far from achieving the development of a universal "theory of everything" when it comes to effectively fostering and enhancing campus sustainability. Instead, they are engaged in exploring and implementing a variety of flexible, innovative, and context-rich initiatives that are thoughtfully tailored to meet their unique challenges and capitalize on their specific opportunities (Hodges et al., 2020).

Scholars, campus administrators, and nations can all benefit greatly from engaging in a robust process of collaborative learning by sharing their insights, experiences, and comparisons across the comprehensive breadth and inherent diversity of the evolving campus sustainability movement (Heiskanen et al., 2016). Such a form of social learning not only enriches the discourse surrounding sustainability but importantly carries the advantage of being widely relevant to a much broader range of individuals and nations; as it is inherently more transferable and adaptable to fit into a greater variety of circumstances, community needs, and cultural contexts (Jiwane, 2013). Through these collective efforts, we can work towards a more sustainable future, where the lessons learned from one institution can resonate and inspire changes in another, creating a ripple effect that amplifies the impact of our endeavors (Islam et al., 2021).

6. Conclusion

Every college and university is expected to take on sustainability as a part of its core tenets. This stems from the need to prepare students for the globalized world. This research analyzed the different dimensions of sustainability efforts in colleges and universities in the USA and Canada. It was clear from the evidence presented that these institutions are heading towards sustainability, whether it be in education, policy formulation, or actual practices, and are trying to blend environmentalism with development. The research also points out the necessity of collaboration across disciplines, involvement of students, and the utilization of evidence in the planning processes of long-term sustainability.

Sustainability in higher education institutions has been increasingly accepted, but problems still exist, such as the lack of funding, administrative bottlenecks, and the need for greater commitment from senior managers. However, as some case studies have shown, institutions that focus on sustainability are able to cut costs, improve the image of the institution, enhance educational outcomes among the students, and improve their level of contribution to society. Strategies that can be employed for lessening carbon emissions include the use of socially responsible business models, sustainable curricula, green country strategies, and other policies and actions that aid in the promotion of coping strategies against climate change.

Going towards the future, it is important to note that higher education requires the implementation of sustainability both in class work and in the operation of the campus, governance, and even in outreach activities for them to be effective. Improved partnerships between academia, business, and government will also improve the sustainability programs. Finally, the sustainability of higher education will also heavily depend on continuous investigations of practices, policy frameworks, and new technologies.

In this regard, this report calls for further integration of sustainability into an academic institution's core activities to be prioritized. It is also the mandate of every University to foster a sustainability-centric institutional culture so that they can contribute more significantly to tackling environmental impacts and grooming future leaders of the world with the aim of establishing an equitable and sustainable society.

6.1. Conclusion, Future Directions, and Potential Implications

This essay sets out to thoroughly explore the various actions that academic institutions have been taking in an age filled with rapidly expanding sustainability challenges and numerous uncertainties. The challenges we face are numerous, highly interconnected, fast-changing, and quite risky. They, therefore, necessitate a comprehensive systems-based approach that aims to resolve these multifaceted issues through open-mindedness, systems thinking, effective collaboration, and interdisciplinary research that draws on diverse fields of study. We have found that, when confronted with these pressing challenges, an increasing and diverse range of academic institutions from around the globe are beginning to take sustainability seriously as a crucial global issue. This issue encompasses a set of competencies that are best learned through grappling with the real-world complexities of social justice, biodiversity conservation, and socio-economic diversity, as well as identifying critical problems that warrant further research to seek viable solutions. Both "Greening the Ivory Tower" and "The Sustainable University" provide insightful perspectives into the depth of commitment observed in certain institutions as they strive to contribute effectively to developing a community that is more aware of its core environmental and human responsibilities, both on and off the campus itself. However, both authors argue that the intricate journey of uncovering a deeper understanding of sustainability and the overarching global challenge creates a distinctive sense of paradox and action uncertainty that complicates the path forward. These individuals are basing their underlying philosophical and social analyses of sustainability innovation on a careful examination of current and emerging policies, as well as the behaviors expected to evolve in society over the next five, ten, and even twenty years' time. In this section, I outline not only the future but also the critical need for further actions and innovative initiatives. More specifically, I argue that academic institutions must:

Continue to thrive on the immense diversity, timeliness, and complexity inherent in the broad scope of the research needs and projects that are required for sustainability research across all disciplines as local and interconnected problems emerge and unfold over time; * make steadfast commitments to ensuring vibrant, innovative, and curiosity-driven research and teaching that are underpinned by a flexible and evolving set of agreed-upon indicators that truly reflect the increasingly 'outcome'-driven interactions we maintain with these diverse research endeavors, educational efforts, and community engagement projects; * take into account technological advancements and social innovations with great care and rigor, considering not only the short-term benefits but also addressing the often unfair marketing practices that frequently fuel these innovations, while simultaneously striving to enhance the emergent futures that arise from a thorough evaluation of the lifecycle effects associated with various products and technologies; * persist in testing and refining pedagogical approaches that actively create genuine engagement with the real and emerging realities faced by communities, industries, commercial sectors, and non-profit organizations, which not only utilize case studies and real-world experiences but also delve into the paradoxes of learning that promote deep understanding, offering safe and supportive environments that encourage speculation and creativity about our research methodologies and how we negotiate and strategically plan for generative and open futures; and * increasingly challenge the assumptions we hold, the audited funding logics we navigate, and the intricate logic chains associated with the projects and interventions we are striving to harness and investigate in both the present context and in the foreseeable—and even unforeseeable—future. The greatest and most significant challenges for both

research and practical application lie not solely in contemplating 'what' actions we take or what offerings we provide, but more profoundly in questioning 'why' we engage in these endeavors.

Declarations

Author Contributions. All authors have contributed significantly to the research and manuscript preparation. Y.W. was responsible for the literature review and conceptualization. R.A. handled the methodology and data analysis. Y.W. contributed to reviewing, editing, and writing, as well as the original manuscript preparation. Y.W. contributed to validation and supervision, while R.A. assisted with data interpretation and manuscript refinement. All authors have read and approved the article's final version before submission.

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About the Contributor(s)

Yousef Wardat is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Mathematics Education, Yarmouk University, Jordan. He received his Ph.D. in Mathematics Education from United Arab Emirates University, UAE, in 2022. His research interests include a range of interdisciplinary areas, such as data analysis, Quantitative methods, SPSS analysis, mathematical modeling, mathematics education, teacher development, and teacher and student beliefs. He has published several peer-reviewed articles in various mathematics education and teaching and learning journals.

Email: yousef.wardat@yu.edu.jo

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2370-9808>

Rommel Mahmoud AlAli, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Educational Measurement and Evaluation at the National Research Center for Giftedness and Creativity, King Faisal University, Al-Ahsa 31982, Saudi Arabia. His primary research interests include measurement and evaluation, teaching, and learning, curriculum development, human resource development, teacher education, and the design of learning environments.

Email: ralali@kfu.edu.sa

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7375-4856>

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