From Sustainability Commitments to Institutional Practice

Managing Sustainable Development in Higher Education

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The problem: commitment ≠ transformation

Visible commitments

SDG strategies, courses, campus initiatives and sustainability reports

Unresolved question

Do these activities translate into coordinated decisions and verifiable outcomes?

Core distinction: reported activity is not, by itself, evidence of institution-wide change.

Aim and approach

Aim

Synthesize selected peer-reviewed studies on sustainable development integration in universities.

Approach

Critical literature synthesis and analytical proposition — not a new empirical investigation.

Focus: implementation mechanisms, institutional alignment and limitations of assessment.

What the reviewed literature contributes

Whole-institution perspective

Connect education, operations, planning and sustainability culture [1].

Education for sustainability

Identify implementation barriers and contextual variation [2].

Community engagement

Link learning with external stakeholders; outcomes need separate verification [3].

Reporting and disclosure

Reporting may be selective or symbolic; independently verify performance [4, 5].

An institutional integration pathway

1 Strategic commitments

2 Governance and resources

3 Education and operations

4 Stakeholder feedback

5 Outcome assessment

A conceptual sequence for analysis — not a validated causal model.

Beyond a linear implementation model

Adaptive governance

Coordinate decisions, responsibilities and resources as expectations change.

Stakeholder legitimacy

Assess whether engagement shapes decisions rather than simply counting partners.

Sustainability integration is an ongoing organizational capability, not a checklist of initiatives [6].

The SDGs: more than reporting categories

Limited interpretation

SDGs as labels attached to initiatives and disclosure indicators.

Proposed interpretation

SDGs as a normative framework coordinating societal and intergenerational expectations [6].

Key test: do sustainability principles influence institutional priorities and decisions?

What should be measured?

Activities and mechanisms

Courses, partnerships, policies, budget allocations, curriculum reviews.

Outcomes and evidence

Observable institutional change, competencies, community effects and independently verifiable results.

Avoid collapsing indicators with different purposes into one undifferentiated sustainability score.

Conclusions and next steps

- Sustainability is a coordinated institutional management challenge.
- Commitments, implementation and verified outcomes must remain distinct.
- Governance, stakeholders and SDG coordination link the levels.
- Future research should test indicators and sustained outcomes across contexts.

Selected sources: Christou et al. (2024); Vargas-Merino et al. (2024); Rodríguez-Zurita et al. (2025); Nikolaou et al. (2023); Chong et al. (2025); Kotlyk (2026).