

From Policy to Practice: Embedding Sustainability and Ethics in Higher Education for Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

By

Ambe, Benjamin AyuaEmail: ayuambe3@gmail.comDepartment of Education Geography & Sustainable development studies,
University of Calabar, Nigeria.**Ambe, Blessing Benjamin**Email: blessingambe23@gmail.comDepartment of Education Geography & Sustainable development studies,
University of Calabar, Nigeria.**Agomobi, Dikpen Magdalene**Email: magdaleneodu794@gmail.comDepartment of Education Geography & Sustainable Development Studies,
University of Calabar, Nigeria.**Kelechi-James Betty, PhD**Jamesbetty304@gmail.com.Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management Studies,
University of Calabar, Nigeria**Correspondence: Ambe, Benjamin Ayua. Email: ayuambe3@gmail.com****Abstract**

This paper investigated how universities can translate their solemn promises on ethics and sustainability into action and, in the process, make a contribution to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as defined by the United Nations Organization. To achieve it, the paper deep-dives into the research around the globe extracting notions of sustainability, higher education policy, and applied ethics. It is informed by the significant international guides, such as the Education for Sustainable Development Roadmap of United Nations educational scientific and cultural organization (UNESCO) and the Higher Education Guide of the United Nations, not to mention the theoretical understanding of how individuals and organizations actually transform. The paper finds a new practical solution to assist universities in keeping their ethical and sustainability pledges by tearing down policies and models across the world. The divide that is present between universities and what happens on the campus is immense. These problems can be narrowed down to segregated governance systems, lack of adequate human resources that are knowledgeable on sustainability, and lack of follow-through. The paper does not merely assign blame, though it creates a path towards, which it says the actual change lies in shaking the manner in which universities are being run. It is being permissive in that it is allowing more people to make a contribution towards the decisions, it is putting ethics in every facet of the curriculum and the culture is being created where people are actually practicing these values. The paper further outlines a diagram of a structure that depicts how the ethics decision-making and sustainability can work together to help the universities in ensuring that they create a real impact on SDGs. The paper goes ahead to give some practical measures that the university leaders, policy makers and teachers should take. It challenges the new forms of government, leadership training and curriculum redesign based on sustainability and ethics at the top. It is not just theoretical because the framework can help the universities track their progress and streamline their

strategies to the global sustainability goals. The article makes an input into the discourse of tertiary institutions and development which is sustainable. The article brings the policies of the universities and practice in line because the argument is that the ethics do not have to emerge as significant but they serve as the basis to real development of SDGs.

Keywords: Sustainability in Higher Education; Ethics; Governance; Policy Implementation; Education for Sustainable Development (ESD); Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

1. Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations implemented the seventeen big promises of the Sustainable Development Goals to ensure that by 2030, all people can live without poverty, environmental destruction, and neglect (United Nations, 2015). One of them is Goal 4 Quality Education. The message is direct; education is not a mere sidelining toward a sustainable future, but it is the core. At the center of this mission is the colleges and universities. They do not have to cease their influence in the classroom or the lab. It extends to their operational organizational structures, their engagement with the surrounding communities and their daily decisions (Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), 2020; UNESCO, 2021). In recent years, the pressures facing higher education have intensified. Sustainability is something that universities can no longer only discuss; they should also live it first to be able to teach sustainability (White et al., 2025). Barth and Rieckmann (2015) argue that if we want real sustainable development, we need to rethink how we learn and act both as individuals and as a society. For them, education isn't just important; it sits at the heart of the whole sustainability project. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) steps in here. It pushes people to become more aware, skilled, and responsible for shaping what comes next. ESD doesn't just teach about sustainability problems it encourages fresh thinking and real action across economic, social, environmental, and cultural fields. As Sterling (2005) argues, adopting whole systems thinking provides a foundation for transformative change in education toward sustainability.

However, being sustainable in higher education does not mean green buildings or smart technology alone. Ethics now take center stage. They influence decision-making and trace the path on how institutions behave, integrating accountability to individuals and the environment into everyday life (Cebrián and Junyent, 2015). Sustainability in universities, in other words, refers to the process of creating responsible citizens, seeking world justice, and environmental awareness (Boni and Calabuig, 2017). Being responsible citizens implies that it is necessary to assist students in finding out how to make ethical decisions in a chaotic, complex world. Global justice entails ensuring that everybody has an equal opportunity regardless of their places of residence. And environmental ethics could imply universities actually walking their talk not merely talking about values, but living them. Moorthy and Akwen (2020) looked at how environmental ethics pushes us to think about our moral ties to the natural world. They focus on value-based education, saying it shapes students' sense of responsibility and awareness when it comes to the environment. By weaving moral values into the classroom, they argue, we help students develop real ecological consciousness something we need if we want to tackle today's environmental problems. Nguyen (2025) takes a close look at how RMIT Vietnam weaves the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into the School of Communication and Design's curriculum. The research points to real gains in bringing environmental sustainability into classroom practice, but it also calls out a gap there's still work to do when it comes to the social and economic sides of sustainability. Nguyen emphasizes that Education for Sustainable Development needs a balanced approach, one that brings together environmental, social, and economic goals instead of focusing on just one piece of the puzzle. All these ethical strands run squarely through the SDGs, in a direct connection between sustainability and responsibility, as well as justice to future generations.

Universities emphasize the aspect of sustainability in their mission statements and strategic plans. But at the point of fulfilling such promises, the entire situation usually falls apart. It is merely a show too many times. The thing is that it is not policy on paper but that every day, choices made are still oriented towards short-term benefits, financial concerns, and broken leadership. This makes sustainability fail to take root

within the campus. What they lack are the practical means and methods of making ethics a practice: such as shared decision-making, values-based leadership, willingness to be honest and make changes that count. In this paper, an attempt was made to excavate the disconnect between the statement and the practice at universities regarding sustainability, particularly as far as the SDGs were concerned. It examined the relationship, or lack of relationship, between policy, ethical leadership, and everyday reality. The roadblocks were identified, and a framework was outlined to bring about a balance between high level objectives and actual performance through ethics. The aim went beyond slogans. The objective was to demonstrate to universities how an ethical vision could be transformed into real change. The core of the paper was a model that combined ethics and sustainability and provided university leaders with a better way to move forward based on the SDGs.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine how sustainability and SDG policies are translated into institutional practice in higher education institutions.
2. To examine the role of ethics and value-based leadership in bridging the policy practice gap in higher education sustainability.
3. To synthesize evidence on institutional sustainability practices, feedback mechanisms, and SDG alignment in higher education.
4. To develop an integrative conceptual framework linking policy, ethics, sustainability practice, and institutional transformation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Framework

The theory that underlies this paper is based on the connections between policy, ethics, and sustainability practice in tertiary institutions of learning in their pursuit of the UNSDGs. The structure relies on the Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2018), the Institutional Theory (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010), and the Ethics of Care Framework (Gilligan, 1993; Tronto, 1993) to explain a dynamic interplay of three important areas, namely policy formulation, ethical orientation, and institutional practice, as change agents to create sustainability and moral responsibility within higher education (Amaral et al., 2015)

2.2 Framework Description

Essentially, according to the model, policy is the structural basis whereby governments and institutional leadership provide normative expectations of sustainability integration. Policies can be in the form of sustainability charters, strategic plans or accreditation frameworks which stipulate the institutional commitments to the SDGs (UNESCO, 2021). Yet, it is not the policies that guarantee ethical or real-life change. Consequently, the mediating value system which defines how these policies are interpreted and implemented in institutions is ethical frameworks with foundations in global justice, environmental stewardship and social responsibility (Noddings, 2013; Arjen Wals, 2020). The concept of sustainability is therefore made an issue of ethics rather than a compliance problem.

Sustainability practice on the other hand is the operative and behavioral form of policy and ethics. This has curriculum reform, green campus operations, inclusive governance, and community partnerships. The practices demonstrate how closely the HEIs are internalizing ethical and sustainability norms and converting them into action (SDSN, 2020; Findler, Schönherr, Lozano, Reider, & Martinuzzi, 2019; Tilbury, 2011). In this regard, sustainability practice acts as an output and a feedback system that affects the future policy formulation and ethical consideration.

2.3 Integrative Dynamics

The model presupposes the directional and recursive relationship between the three areas:

- Policy → Ethics: Institutional policies can help cultivate some sense of ethics by formalizing sustainability values and expectations.
- Ethics → Practice: Ethical cognition is transformed into pedagogical and operational practices that are sustainable.

- Policy → Practice: New policy reform can be informed by new innovative sustainability practices, which creates a virtuous cycle.

This cycle aligns with the Transformative Learning Theory that emphasizes reflective change in values and action (Mezirow, 2018) and the Institutional Theory, which emphasizes the pressure of norms and legitimacy on organizational behavior and internalizes it (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010). In addition, sustainability, using the Ethics of Care lens, is relational and inclusive, more so, it emphasizes empathy, justice, and interdependence (Mallén-Lacambra and Mamas (2025). Incorporating sustainability and ethics is, therefore, not only a procedural but a fundamental change in institutional identity to being a responsible global citizen.

2.4 Figure Description

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual model linking policy, ethics, and sustainability practice in higher education. The model depicts a triangular, reciprocal relationship where:

- Policy (top vertex) refers to institutional or governance issues relating to sustainability.
- Ethics (left vertex) serves as the mediating factor in the moral and cognitive foundation.
- Sustainability Practice (right vertex) identifies the process of implementing the concepts learned.

The use of bidirectional arrows shows that there is an ongoing process of feedback or learning that can strengthen or correct institutional practices in line with the SDGs.

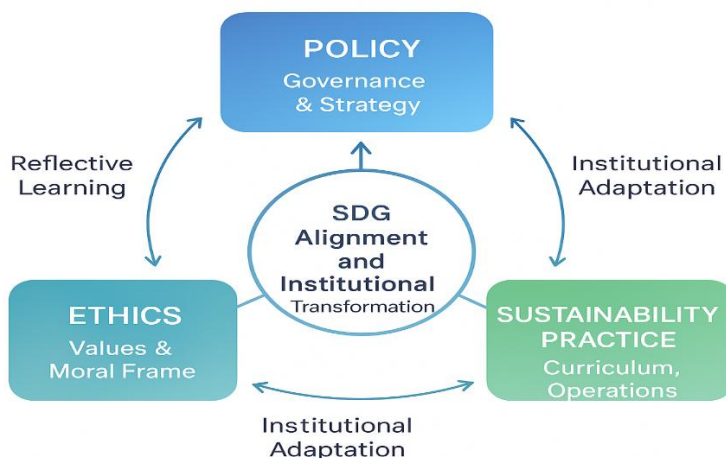


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Interaction Between Policy, Ethics, and Sustainability Practice in Higher Education. **Source:** Author's conceptualization, based on the literature reviewed.

Theoretical foundations

Transformative Learning Theory: this theory views education as a system where the frame of reference of the learners is remodeled via reflective judgement, conversation and metamorphosis of perspective (Mezirow, 2018). In the literature of sustainability, transformative learning has been referred to in explaining how higher education can transcend transfer of technical knowledge to create changing values, identities and behaviour that are needed to create a sustainable development (Mezirow, 2018; Cranton, 2023). Transformative approaches nurture curricular and pedagogical practices in the advancement of ethical rationale and enduring adherence to the SDGs by giving precedence to critical reflection and emancipatory learning.

Institutional Theory.

The institutional theory helps in understanding why universities implement specific sustainability measures and why the commitment to policy may be symbolic. Classic institutional views reveal that organizations react to external regulative, normative and mimetic forces to achieve legitimacy which in most cases only leads to isomorphism and not deep structural change (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell,

1983). When applied in higher education sector, institutional theory emphasizes the interaction between external demands (e.g., accreditation requirements, funding incentives, global SDG norms) and internal governance practices to prune up the adoption, adaptation or decoupling of sustainability initiatives (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The lens is helpful in the interpretation of the policy practice gap: institutions can publicly embrace the language of sustainability to communicate a message of legitimacy without always adopting sustainability into practices, performance incentives and institutional academic operations. Care ethics and associated systems. The ethics of care predicted relational duties, empathy, and contextualization of moral thought to be the main approaches in ethical action (van Dijke et al., 2019; Noddings, 1988). Care ethics viewpoints in tertiary institutions demonstrates the focus on interpersonal relations, responsiveness to communities, and moral responsibility to both human and nonhuman stakeholders replacing the purely instrumental or compliance-driven approaches towards the one based on the care, stewardship, and justice (Noddings, 1988). The combination of care ethics, transformative learning, and institutional approaches presupposes that the embedded sustainability must be based not only on the curricular modification and the governance shift but on the introduction of caring institutional cultures that emphasize the well-being, equity, and the sense of intergenerational responsibility.

Empirical and policy syntheses: global and regional reports

Significant international publications and industry surveys have reported on gains and continuing issues on mainstream sustainability in HEIs. The roadmap and related ESD programmes of UNESCO position education in the core of SDGs fulfilment, provides guidance and policy instruments to ensure integration in the areas of pedagogy, governance, and community participation (UNESCO, 2021). These reports acknowledge the significance of the overall solutions to connect formal curriculum, informal learning and institutional process with more holistic sustainability objectives.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Guide -facilitating Education for the SDGs in higher institutions provides viable means of how a university can mainstream SDG-relevant teaching, research, and engagement. The SDSN guide also identifies best practice and institutional levers (commitment of leadership, reviewing of curriculum, student involvement and partnerships) as the ability to fast-track ESD, but it also recognizes the asymmetry in implementation across situations (SDSN, 2020). The international surveys on Higher Education and Research on Sustainable Development (IAU) have a global survey in which the actions of institutions are mapped and the heterogeneity by geographical region and the type of institution is also indicated. Survey reports by IAU (2016 cycles; Drissi et al, 2025) record increased awareness of the SDGs in institutional plans but also expresses that there is a constraint in institutionalizing ESD into the key processes of the institution and systematic metric of the institutional impact (IAU, 2019; IAU HESD resources). These surveys are revealing in that, although most HEIs report on sustainability commitments some of them are implemented in a shallow and in-depth manner.

Synthesis and identified gaps

There are a number of insights that are coalesced between the theoretical and policy literatures. To begin with, transformative learning offers the pedagogical means to transform the values of individuals and groups, yet it needs institutional sponsorship and an empowering culture (Mezirow, 2018). Second, institutionalized control and external forces have a tendency of giving rise to performative compliance, as opposed to substantive change unless governance, incentives as well as accountability are conscious with the goals of sustainability (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Third, an ethics of care can be employed to offset pure instrumental methods by making relational responsibility and justice central to ethical demands and thereby enhancing moral demands of structural reform (Noddings, 1988; Gilligan, 1993).

This notwithstanding, there are significant gaps. It is reported worldwide that it depends on strategic statements and pilot projects that rarely result in a transformation of the sector (UNESCO, 2021; SDSN, 2020). The scarcity of empirical and conceptual focus on ethical operationalization, in other words, how ethical engagements are institutionalized in governance practices, performance measures, and decision making in the daily activities of HEIs is also identified in the literature. Also, though IAU surveys are cross-regional snapshots, the literature relatively lacks theorizing the experiences of the African universities and

other under-represented settings in the postulations of ethics and institutional change (IAU, 2019). The issue of this regional disparity is important since the priorities and practices of ethics and sustainability are developed and implemented within various systems of tertiary institutions based on the priorities of politics, economics, resourcing, or socio-cultural factors.

The current theory and policy advice indicate that an integrative conceptual model is necessary in which an ethical mediation process is at the core of the plan-practice translation in the field of tertiary institutions, which should relate transformative pedagogy, institutional incentives, and cultures of care to quantifiable contributions to the SDGs. Such a model is developed in the next section of this paper: it argues that ethics must be formulated as the mediating factor that transforms normative commitments into a sustained institutional practice.

4. Methodology

The research design of this paper was conceptual and theoretical in nature, focusing on incorporating existing literature into the development of a conceptual framework that could contribute to the development of an “interpretive model” for making sustainability and ethics a practice in HEIs. As stated earlier, the study did not rely on data collection or employ an empirical research methodology. However, the research used a “conceptual synthesis” methodology.

4.1 Research Design

The approach in this study hinges on a conceptual review and synthesis design. The conceptual design is fitting for illumination of constructs, analyses of intersections from a theoretical position, or the building of a conceptual framework (Jaakkola, 2020). The research relies on the use of Transformative Learning Theory, Institutional Theory, and an Ethics of Care Framework. The research used the aforementioned frameworks as a foundation of understanding how institutions of higher learning incorporate sustainability or an ethics framework. The design allows the research an interpretive focus.

4.2 Literature Search and Selection

The literature search was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, focusing primarily on publications from 2010 to 2025. The search terms included “sustainability in higher education,” “ethics and sustainability,” “education for sustainable development,” “policy implementation,” and “achievement of SDGs in higher education institutions.” Relevant policy and institutional documents from UNESCO, SDSN, and IAU were also reviewed.

A total of 42 sources were reviewed, comprising empirical studies, conceptual and theoretical works, books, and policy reports. Sources were selected based on their relevance to sustainability integration in higher education, ethical leadership and values, institutional governance and transformation, education for sustainable development, and SDG implementation. The selected literature was thematically coded and synthesized around three dimensions: sustainability policy and institutional governance, ethics and values, and sustainability practices aligned with the SDGs.

4.3 Conceptual Analysis and Synthesis

The process of analysis involved the implementation of thematic coding and concept clustering of the reviewed literature. The identified themes were coded based on three wide dimensions, including (1) sustainability policies, structures, and institutional governance; (2) the principles or foundations of ethics, including the valuation of ethics; and (3) institutional practices based on alignment with the SDGs. The research article is aimed at the establishment of a triadic conceptual framework, which explicates the mediatory nature of ethics with regard to institutional policy rhetoric/sustainability practice. The methodology corresponds to the integrative review methodology (Snyder, 2019), which focuses on the conceptual coherence, theoretical foundation, and integration of fragmented views into a single model. The process does not only help to integrate theoretical knowledge, but also reveals important gaps, in particular, the lack of attention to the ethical operationalization and the absence of African HEIs in the global sustainability discourse.

4.4 Scope and Limitations

As a conceptual work, this research does not include testing or verification of findings. Theoretical integration is the key benefit of this research. However, the concept framework does provide a solid foundation upon which researchers can focus on testing the effect of interactions among policies, ethics, and practices on the issue of sustainability within institutions of higher learning.

4. Results of the Literature Synthesis and Discussion

4.1 Results of the Literature Synthesis

The literature synthesis generated three major themes corresponding to the objectives of the study: policy articulation and institutional implementation; ethical mediation and value-based leadership; and institutional sustainability practices, feedback mechanisms, and SDG alignment. The reviewed literature showed that sustainability commitments were increasingly reflected in higher education policies and strategic plans, but their translation into institutional practice remained uneven. The synthesis also indicated that ethical values, leadership, institutional learning, and accountability were important mechanisms for bridging the policy practice gap. The major findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Synthesized Findings from the Reviewed Literature

Theme	Evidence from the Reviewed Literature	Synthesized Finding
Policy articulation and institutional implementation	UNESCO (2021), SDSN (2020), Cebrián et al. (2021), Holst (2021), Hinduja et al. (2023)	HEIs increasingly incorporated sustainability and SDGs into policies, strategic plans, curricula, and institutional missions, but implementation remained inconsistent because of weak governance coordination, limited resources, and inadequate institutional commitment.
Ethical mediation and value-based leadership	Noddings (1988, 2013), Gilligan (1993), Nicholson and Kurucz (2019), Vázquez-Verdera and Escámez-Sánchez (2022), Wei et al. (2024)	Ethical values, care, justice, responsibility, and value-based leadership provided an important bridge between formal sustainability commitments and everyday institutional decisions and practices.
Institutional practices, feedback mechanisms, and SDG alignment	Findler et al. (2019), IAU (2019), Tilbury (2019), Leal Filho et al. (2023), Drissi et al. (2025)	Effective sustainability integration required whole institution approaches involving curriculum, governance, campus operations, community engagement, monitoring, and institutional feedback linked to specific SDGs.

Source: Authors' synthesis of the 42 reviewed sources.

4.2 Theme 1: Policy Articulation and Institutional Implementation

The first theme concerned the gap between sustainability policy commitments and their implementation in higher education institutions. The literature showed that universities increasingly incorporated sustainability and the SDGs into strategic plans, institutional missions, curricula, and governance frameworks. UNESCO (2021) and SDSN (2020), for example, emphasized institutional leadership, curriculum transformation, student engagement, governance, and partnerships as important mechanisms for advancing sustainability in higher education. However, the literature also indicated that the existence of policies did not necessarily guarantee substantive institutional transformation. Studies reported inconsistencies in governance coordination, implementation, resource allocation, and institutional commitment (Cebrián et al., 2023; Hinduja et al., 2023; Holst, 2021).

The finding therefore suggested that sustainability policy was necessary but insufficient. Effective implementation required institutional structures, resources, leadership commitment, monitoring mechanisms, and accountability systems capable of translating policy commitments into everyday practice.

4.3 Theme 2: Ethical Mediation and Value Based Leadership

The second theme focused on the role of ethics in connecting institutional policy with sustainability practice. The synthesis indicated that sustainability was not solely a technical or administrative issue but also involved questions of responsibility, justice, inclusion, care, and intergenerational obligations. Noddings (1988, 2013) and Gilligan (1993) provided the ethical foundation for understanding care, responsibility, and relationships as important dimensions of institutional decision making. Nicholson and Kurucz (2019) and Vázquez-Verdera and Escámez-Sánchez (2022) further emphasized the relevance of relational and ethical leadership to sustainability.

The literature consequently suggested that ethical leadership could serve as a mediating mechanism between policy commitments and institutional behaviour. Where sustainability policies were supported by ethical values, inclusive decision making, and responsible leadership, institutions were more likely to translate formal commitments into meaningful practices. Conversely, where policies were treated primarily as instruments of compliance or institutional legitimacy, a policy practice gap could persist.

4.4 Theme 3: Institutional Sustainability Practices, Feedback Mechanisms, and SDG Alignment

The third theme concerned the translation of sustainability commitments into institutional practices and the extent to which such practices were aligned with the SDGs. The synthesis showed that effective sustainability integration extended beyond curriculum reform to include campus operations, governance, research, community engagement, staff development, student participation, monitoring, and institutional reporting (Findler et al., 2019; IAU, 2019; SDSN, 2020; Tilbury, 2019).

The literature further indicated that institutional feedback mechanisms were important because sustainability practices could generate evidence for reviewing and improving institutional policies. This suggested a reciprocal relationship in which policy influenced practice while experience from institutional practice informed subsequent policy development. Such feedback could strengthen institutional learning and improve alignment with relevant SDGs. Recent evidence also showed growing institutional efforts to connect higher education practices with specific SDG outcomes (Drissi et al., 2025; Leal Filho et al., 2023).

4.5 Integrated Discussion of the Findings

Looking at them jointly, the three themes revealed that the translation of sustainability commitments into institutional transformation depended on the interaction of policy, ethics, and practice. Policy provided the formal structure and direction; ethics provided the values and moral orientation required for responsible decision making; and institutional practice provided the mechanism through which sustainability commitments became observable actions and outcomes.

The synthesis therefore supported the proposed conceptual model in which ethics occupied a central bridging position between policy and sustainability practice. The model further suggested that institutional learning and feedback could strengthen the relationship among these dimensions and improve alignment with the SDGs.

The findings also addressed the central problem identified in the study: the persistence of a policy practice gap in higher education. Rather than treating sustainability as a matter of policy compliance alone, the literature supported an integrated approach in which governance, ethical leadership, curriculum, institutional operations, and accountability mechanisms were mutually reinforcing. This provided the conceptual basis for the proposed framework of SDG alignment and institutional transformation presented in Figure 1.

5. Implications of the study and Recommendations

5.1 Policy Implications for Higher Education

The discussion highlights that a paradigm shift is pertinent in governing HEIs' sustainability. There is a need for policymakers's efforts in inscribing sustainability values into national frameworks of higher education. This shall be achieved by establishing a clear link with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 13 (Climate Action), or SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Institutions). This will encompass governing HEI missions, policies, and accountability frameworks according to ethics of responsibility, environment, or equity (Tilbury, 2019).

The HE governance structures should embrace the whole-institution concept, which will ensure that issues related to sustainability become an element of the institutions' organizational framework as opposed to being relegated to the background. This will not only ensure that there is consistency in the policies related to sustainability, but it will also ensure that there is monitoring of institutions on compliance with sustainability criteria (Wei et al., 2024). Autonomy can also ensure that institutions develop localized policies on issues of sustainability (Hinduja et al., 2023).

5.2 Pedagogical Implications for Curriculum and Staff Training

At the pedagogic end, to integrate sustainability, there is a need to have transformative learning processes that develop critical thinking, global citizenship, and ethical reasoning (Mezirow, 2018; Noddings, 1988). Sustainability pedagogy and ethics of care must be incorporated in the faculty development program, training lecturers to be role models and instruct productive global citizenship (Bourn, Hunt, & Bamber, 2017). It is necessary to implement interdisciplinary curriculum reforms to connect science, social studies, and humanities with the help of problem-based and experiential learning methods (Tilbury, 2019, Chang et al., 2022).

Sustainability literacy must be institutionalized in all programs at universities, and this is done by curriculum audit and staff capacity-building workshops. On-going professional development programs may assist teachers in putting sustainability theory into practice and support the alignment between the policy statements of the institution and the realities of the classroom (Pedersen, 2017). Also, there must be reward and promotion mechanisms to reward the faculty efforts towards sustainability teaching, research and community engagement (Vuong et al., 2017).

5.3 Practical Steps for Embedding Ethics and Sustainability

Introducing ethics and sustainability into HEI culture is a systemic and planned behavior. To begin with, the creation of Sustainability and Ethics Committees should be introduced in the institutions to lead the strategic planning, review the progress, and maintain transparency. Second, sustainability learning can be done in green campus laboratories, which include energy audits, waste lessening projects, and eco-literacy (Ghufronudin et al., 2024).

Third, collaboration with the local communities, industries, and civil societies can bring the ethical and sustainability agenda off campus. These partnerships support the idea of universities as social actors, to act justly, inclusively and in a way that is ecologically balanced (Gilligan, 1993). Finally, the sustainability concept needs to be incorporated into an institutional reporting and accreditation to make institutions accountable and maintain a culture of ongoing betterment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Maki, 2023).

To conclude, the current challenge of sustainability in tertiary institutions needs to be addressed systemically, that is, through a convergence of governance, pedagogy, and institutional practice around collectively held ethical commitments and global aspirations. Aligning policy and practice with the SDGs will make HEIs engines of ethical leadership and social transformation in the 21st century.

Conclusion

This theoretical discussion has helped shed light on the complex correlation between policy, ethics and sustainability practice in tertiary institutions of learning. The discussion has shown that although sustainability policies have been embraced by many universities, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are supported in most of the universities, it is clear that a policy-practice gap is still present. A mix of transformative learning theory and institutional theory, as well as the ethics of care, offers a

multidimensional viewpoint on the interaction of values, structures, and linkages to bring about the ethical implementation of sustainability.

Among the valuable lessons that may be learned in the process of such synthesis is the idea that the process of integrating sustainability in higher education is not a technical and administrative task but a moral and pedagogical one. Policies must not remain mere rhetoric speeches but become actual institutional cultures according to which the ethical reflection, the inclusiveness, and the environmental responsibility define the everyday decision-making process. True reforms, which incorporate sustainability performance accountability, faculty growth, and curriculum change, are the creatures of genuine change (Tilbury, 2019; Chang et al., 2022).

Moreover, institutional isomorphism, which is imposed by accreditation and the spreading of world policies, tends to lead to symbolic compliance, but not a change (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Consequently, to promote sustainability successfully in HEIs involves structural and cultural realignment due to the incidence of an ethic of care that accentuates interdependence, justice, and collective responsibility (Hassan, Murtaza, & Rashid, 2024).

Future Research Directions

Since this study is conceptual in nature, there is a need to conduct further empirical studies to prove and enhance the proposed framework. Cross-regional studies would be useful in comparing the impact of various governance settings on the translation of sustainability policies into action. Longitudinal study would be able to trace institutional shift in time, which would determine those things that perpetuate or impede ethical and sustainable transformation. Besides, participatory action research that includes administrators, faculty, and students might provide context-specific ideas regarding how ethical decision-making can transform institutional behavior.

Finally, the future research should be aimed at the gap between theory and praxis, shedding light on how a higher education may be responsible not only as a knowledge imparting, but also as a transformative agent to the realization of the SDGs by providing ethically sound and sustainability-oriented education.

References

- Amaral, L. P., Martins, N., & Gouveia, J. B. (2015). Quest for a sustainable university: A review. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 16(2), 155–172. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-02-2013-0017>
- Amenta, E., & Ramsey, K. M. (2010). Institutional theory. In *Handbook of politics: State and society in global perspective* (pp. 15-39). New York, NY: Springer New York.
- Arjen Wals, A. E. J. (2020). *Sustainability-oriented education: Learning to care for our common future*. UNESCO.
- Basheer, N., Ahmed, V., Bahroun, Z., & Anane, C. (2024). Exploring sustainability assessment practices in higher education: A comprehensive review through content and bibliometric analyses. *Sustainability*, 16(13), Article 5799. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16135799>
- Barth, M., & Rieckmann, M. (2015). *State of the art in research on higher education for sustainable development*. In M. Barth, G. Michelsen, M. Rieckmann, & I. Thomas (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of higher education for sustainable development* (pp. 14–29). Routledge.
- Boni, A., & Calabuig, C. (2017). Education for global citizenship at universities: Potentialities of formal and informal learning spaces to foster cosmopolitanism. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 21(1), 22–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315315602926>
- Bourn, D., Hunt, F., & Bamber, P. (2017). *A review of education for sustainable development and global citizenship education in teacher education* (UNESCO GEM Background Paper). UNESCO. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10030831>
- Cebrián, G., & Junyent, M. (2021). Competencies in education for sustainable development: Exploring the student teachers' views. *Sustainability*, 7(3), 2768–2786. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su7032768>
- Chang, T.-S., Wang, H.-C., Haynes, A. M., Song, M.-M., Lai, S.-Y., & Hsieh, S.-H. (2022). Enhancing student creativity through an interdisciplinary, project-oriented problem-based learning

- undergraduate curriculum. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 46, 101173.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2022.101173>
- Cranton, P. (2023). Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide to theory and practice (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003448433>
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). *The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields*. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147–160.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101>
- Drissi, M., Meftah, S., & Skalli, L. (2025). The role of universities in implementing the sustainable development goals (SDGs): A case study of Hassan First University, 2018–2023. *Discover Sustainability*, 6, Article 926. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-00483-3>
- Findler, F., Schönherr, N., Lozano, R., Reider, D., & Martinuzzi, A. (2019). The impacts of higher education institutions on sustainable development: A review and conceptualization. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 20(1), 23–38.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-07-2017-0114>
- Ghufronudin, G., Liestyasari, S. I., Budiati, A. C., Parahita, B. N., Astutik, D., & Siregar, R. S. (2024). Enhancing ecological awareness through innovative green sociology teaching approaches. *Jurnal Pendidikan Progresif*, 14(3), 139–152. <https://doi.org/10.23960/jpp.v14.i3.2024139>
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard university press.
- Hassan, M. U., Murtaza, A., & Rashid, K. (2024). Redefining higher education institutions (HEIs) in the era of globalisation and global crises: A proposal for future sustainability. *European Journal of Education*, 59(5), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12822>
- Hinduja, P., Mohammad, R. F., Siddiqui, S., Noor, S., & Hussain, A. (2023). Sustainability in higher education institutions in Pakistan: A systematic review of progress and challenges. *Sustainability*, 15(4), 3406. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15043406>
- Holst, J. (2021). Whole institution approaches to sustainability in education: A systematic review and conceptual synthesis. *Environmental Education Research*, 27(8), 1151–1174.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2021.1938851>
- Hussain, S., Halim, H., & Mokhtar, M. (2021). Embedding sustainability in higher education: Challenges and pathways for ethical institutional transformation. *Sustainability*, 13(15), 8612.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/su13158612>
- International Association of Universities. (2019). Higher education and research for sustainable development (HESD) global survey. <https://iau-aiu.net/Higher-Education-and-Research-for-Sustainable>
- Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches. *AMS Review*, 10(1–2), 18–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0>
- Leal Filho, W., Lange Salvia, A., & Pires Eustachio, J. H. (2023). An overview of the engagement of higher education institutions in the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 386, Article 135694.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.135694>
- Leal Filho, W., Aina, Y. A., Dinis, M. A. P., Purcell, W., & Nagy, G. J. (2023). Climate change: Why higher education matters? *Science of the Total Environment*, 892, Article 164819.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2023.164819>
- Low, B. (2019). The intersection of legitimacy needs, actions and reform policy: The case of private higher education. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 34(5), 1041–1053.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JBIM-10-2018-0314>
- Maki, P. L. (2023). *Assessing for learning: Building a sustainable commitment across the institution* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003443056>
- Mallén-Lacambra, C., & Mamas, C. (2025). Ethics of care: A theoretical underpinning for relational inclusivity. *Educational Theory: Interuniversity Journal*, 37(2).
<https://doi.org/10.14201/teri.32183>

- Mezirow, J. (2018). Transformative learning theory. In K. Illeris (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning* (2nd ed., pp. 15–29). Routledge.
- Misra, D., & Stensaker, B. (2024). Balancing control and legitimacy in higher education policy implementation. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(12), 2343–2356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2306340>
- Moorthy, R., & Akwen, G. T. (2020). Environmental ethics through value-based education. *Bangladesh Journal of Bioethics*, 11(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.3329/bioethics.v11i2.49257>
- Nguyen, L. (2025, February 17). *Integrating sustainability in curricula of School of Communication & Design: Towards education for sustainable development*. RMIT University. <https://research-repository.rmit.edu.au>
- Nicholson, J., & Kurucz, E. (2019). Relational leadership for sustainability: Building an ethical framework from the moral theory of ‘ethics of care’. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 156(1), 25–43.
- Noddings, N. (1988). An ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements. *American journal of education*, 96(2), 215–230.
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. Univ of California Press.
- Pedersen, K. W. (2017). Supporting collaborative and continuing professional development in education for sustainability through a community of practice approach. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 18(5), 681–696.
- Sterling, S. R. (2005). Whole systems thinking as a basis for paradigm change in education: Explorations in the context of sustainability (Doctoral dissertation, University of Bath, United Kingdom). CREE, University of Bath. <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=9063064>
- Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). (2020). Accelerating education for the SDGs in universities: A guide for universities, colleges, and tertiary and higher education institutions. Retrieved from <https://www.unsdsn.org/resources/accelerating-education-for-the-sdgs-in-universities>
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Tilbury, D. (2019). *Education for sustainable development: An expert review of processes and learning*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org>
- Tilbury, D. (2011). Higher education for sustainability: A global overview of commitment and progress. In GUNI (Ed.), *Higher education in the world 4: Higher education's commitment to sustainability: From understanding to action* (pp. 30–37). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. Routledge.
- UNESCO. (2021). Education for sustainable development: A roadmap. UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374802.locale=en>
- UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org>
- United Nations. (2015). Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
- van Dijke, J., van Nistelrooij, I., Bos, P., & Duyndam, J. (2019). Care ethics: An ethics of empathy?. *Nursing ethics*, 26(5), 1282–1291.
- Vázquez-Verdera, V., & Escámez-Sánchez, J. (2022). University and social sustainability from care ethics. *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria*, 34(2), 233–252. <https://doi.org/10.14201/teri.28346>
- Vuong, T., Rowe, A. N., Hoyt, L., & Carrier, C. (2017). Faculty perspectives on rewards and incentives for community-engaged work: A multinational exploratory study. *International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 10, 249–264. <https://doi.org/10.3316/INFORMIT.120380385334693>

- Wei, C., & Chen, J. (2024). How do higher education policies influence the shaping of sustainable development values in China: A three dimensional framework. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, 12, Article 1481652. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2024.1481652>
- White, R. M., Saunders, C., & Robinson, Z. P. (2025). Sustainability research, teaching and practice: Towards transdisciplinary knowledge co production in universities. In R. M. White, S. Kemp, E. A. C. Price, & J. W. S. Longhurst (Eds.), *Perspectives and practices of education for sustainable development: A critical guide for higher education* (pp. 162–188). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003451563-8>