

Building a Sustainable Identity: Higher Education Institutions in Transition

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Summary:

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a pivotal role in advancing sustainability through teaching, research, and institutional policies. However, embedded sustainability strategies in HEIs remained largely unregulated and difficult to quantify. There is a lack of standardised frameworks to assess how HEIs contributed to sustainability beyond individual policies and campus greening efforts. Therefore, this paper explores how UK HEIs integrates sustainability into their institutional strategies and assess whether sustainability rankings, such as the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings and QS Sustainability Rankings, drive genuine environmental and social progress or primarily serve as image-building tools. Through a systematic literature review, the study examines sustainability transitions in UK HEIs, analysing their commitments to carbon neutrality, ethical investment, and responsible governance. Findings reveal that while UK HEIs recognise the importance of sustainability, their approaches vary significantly, with many prioritising environmental targets over a balanced integration of social and economic sustainability. The study concludes that while sustainability rankings enhance transparency and accountability, HEIs must adopt structured, long-term strategies beyond rankings to achieve meaningful impact. The paper recommends a more holistic and integrated approach to sustainability reporting, governance, and funding to ensure universities contribute authentically to global sustainability goals while maintaining institutional resilience and credibility.

Keywords: Sustainable campus, Net Zero, sustainable innovation, SDG, Higher Education Institutions, and United Kingdom.

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Track 30: Sustainable and Responsible Business

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have played a critical role in societal transformation, acting as key drivers of knowledge creation, research, and policy influence. Their pioneering nature has positioned them as leaders in shaping sustainability discourse, with their operations, research, and teaching directly influencing environmental, social, and economic progress (Tilbury, 2011; Leal Filho, 2011). Initially, sustainability efforts within universities primarily focused on institutional carbon footprints, including energy management, waste reduction, and

responsible resource consumption (Burmam et al., 2021). However, these initiatives were often fragmented and lacked comprehensive accountability mechanisms.

HEIs soon recognised that their role in sustainability extended beyond operational management. To truly foster sustainable development, HEIs need to integrate sustainability across multiple dimensions- including their curriculum, research agendas, and external collaborations (Prosperitas, 2023). The shift towards embedding sustainability into academic programmes enabled universities to train future professionals equipped with the skills to address global environmental and social challenges (Burmam et al., 2021). Despite these efforts, sustainability initiatives in HEIs remained largely unregulated and difficult to quantify. There is a lack of standardised frameworks to assess how HEIs contributed to sustainability beyond individual policies and campus greening efforts.

As sustainability frameworks evolved, universities recognised the need to move beyond isolated operational changes toward a more strategic and structured approach. This led to the integration of sustainability into broader institutional functions such as curriculum design, research priorities, and external partnerships (Prosperitas, 2023). This shift ensured that graduates were equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to address pressing global sustainability challenges (Burmam et al., 2021).

Methodology

A systematic review of existing literature on sustainability in higher education was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) framework. This approach ensures a transparent and replicable methodology, addressing the objectives outlined in the previous sections. A preliminary search was performed across multiple academic databases and institutional reports to identify peer-reviewed research and grey literature relevant to the topic. Firstly, existing literature, such as published articles, research papers, and Government policy documents, are reviewed and analysed. A structured search was conducted using relevant keywords to retrieve literature that aligns with the study's focus. Secondly, questionnaires and interviews will be utilised, the former directed towards sustainability experts in HEIs, and both targeted towards sustainability conscious students.

Findings

The Evolution of Sustainability in UK HEIs

Sustainability has become a central pillar in the strategic planning of UK universities. Traditionally, only a select few institutions addressed environmental and social issues in a structured manner. However, mounting environmental challenges and increasing public and governmental scrutiny have prompted a widespread reassessment of the role HEIs could play in fostering sustainable development goals (SDGs). HEIs are not only reconfiguring their operations to reduce their carbon footprint and integrate social responsibility but are also aligning their overall institutional strategies with the global SDGs (Tilbury, 2011).

Historically, sustainability initiatives in UK universities were isolated and often driven by individual academic departments or external research projects. In recent years, however, a shift

has been observed towards comprehensive sustainability strategies that are embedded within the core institutional framework (HEPI, 2024). Universities are now formulating and publicly releasing detailed sustainability strategies that align with broader organisational missions and their NetZero Commitments. This integration is evident in areas ranging from curriculum reform to campus operations, research agendas, and community engagement (Advance HE, 2024).

Even before the establishment of the UN SDGs in 2015, a few UK HEIs had already embedded sustainability into their institutional strategies. For example, the University of Plymouth established the Centre for Sustainable Futures in the late 1990s and launched one of the earliest UK sustainability initiatives in 2005 (Cotton et al., 2009; Sterling and Thomas, 2007). Similarly, the University of Edinburgh and University of St Andrews invested in renewable energy projects and aligned their research agendas with sustainability principles early on. The number of HEIs prioritising sustainability continued to grow during the UN's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) from 2005 to 2014, accelerating sustainability integration into higher education.

By 2014, approximately 17% of UK HEIs published sustainability reports to highlight their sustainability commitments (Sassen et al., 2018). Following the adoption of the SDGs in 2015, UK HEIs began formalising their sustainability strategies, leading to a significant increase in public disclosures. The incorporation of sustainability within HEIs has gained traction due to growing regulatory pressures, increased student demand, and the establishment of sustainability rankings, such as the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings, QS Sustainability Rankings, and the People and Planet University League. These frameworks encourage universities to integrate sustainability within institutional policies and demonstrate leadership in environmental and social governance (QS, 2023; Times Higher Education, 2022).

Reasons for growth of Sustainability in HEIs

Legislative and policy drivers: The UK government has introduced policies encouraging HEIs to prioritise sustainability. HEIs are required to comply with environmental regulations, carbon reduction targets, and sustainable procurement guidelines (People and Planet, 2022). Additionally, funding bodies such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) have incentivised HEIs to incorporate sustainability by linking funding to environmental performance. (Cotton et al., 2024)

Institutional initiatives: Many UK universities have established sustainability offices, implemented carbon neutrality strategies, and integrated sustainability into curricula. Sterling (2013) and (Žalėnienė and Pereira, 2021) highlight that HEIs are increasingly moving towards sustainability-focused education, offering degrees and research programs that address climate change, renewable energy, and sustainable business practices. The shift towards sustainability has also led HEIs to engage in partnerships with businesses, non-profits, and governmental organisations to drive real-world impact.

Student activism and engagement: Students have played a significant role in advancing sustainability within HEIs. Activist groups such as People and Planet have campaigned for

HEIs to divest from fossil fuels, improve energy efficiency, and adopt ethical investment strategies (People and Planet, 2022). Surveys indicate that students are increasingly considering sustainability policies when choosing universities (HEPI, 2024). As a result, HEIs are responding by integrating sustainability into their recruitment strategies and student engagement programs.

The transition to sustainability rankings

Initially, sustainability commitments in higher education institutions (HEIs) centered on internal policies and external reporting mechanisms. However, the introduction of sustainability rankings significantly reshaped institutional approaches by establishing standardised benchmarks for performance measurement. These rankings created strong incentives for universities to enhance their sustainability efforts, as higher rankings could bolster institutional reputation, attract environmentally conscious students, and secure external funding opportunities.

The first notable ranking to assess HEIs based on sustainability was the People and Planet University League (2007), which evaluated UK universities on ethical investment, waste management, and carbon reduction. However, this ranking was UK-specific and did not align with global sustainability frameworks. A pivotal shift occurred in 2019 with the launch of the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings, the first global university ranking system to measure HEIs' sustainability performance against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Times Higher Education, 2022). This was further expanded by the introduction of the QS Sustainability Rankings in 2022, which assess universities based on environmental impact, social responsibility, and contributions to sustainability research.

The growing influence of sustainability rankings has significantly influenced institutional priorities, prompting many HEIs to enhance their sustainability strategies and reporting mechanisms (Zhou, 2024). While rankings promote transparency and competition, they also raise concerns about ranking-driven optimisation, where institutions focus on boosting their sustainability scores rather than implementing meaningful, long-term sustainability transformations.

Sustainability as a brand in higher education institutions

Sustainability rankings have become central to shaping university policies. The THE Impact Rankings, QS Sustainability Rankings, and People and Planet University League assess HEIs' sustainability performance based on environmental impact, social responsibility, and governance (Times Higher Education, 2022; QS, 2023). These rankings influence institutional reputation, funding opportunities, and international collaborations. However, despite their benefits, sustainability rankings present challenges. Some HEIs engage in “ranking-driven optimisation,” where efforts are directed toward improving scores rather than enacting substantial sustainability reforms. Scholars such as Shou (2024) critique these rankings for methodological inconsistencies, questioning their comparability and comprehensiveness. The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI, 2024) has also warned of potential “greenwashing,”

where institutions superficially enhance their sustainability credentials to climb rankings without making genuine, long-term changes.

HEIs priorities in sustainability: The people-planet-profit perspective

Universities focusing on 'People' (Social Sustainability)

HEIs that prioritise community engagement, ethical governance, and inclusivity align closely with the 'People' pillar of sustainability. These HEIs focus on partnerships, ethical investments, and student well-being, which directly correlates with THE Impact Rankings, as this system evaluates SDG contributions. For instance, Aston University and University of Northampton emphasise community engagement and responsible business practices whereas De Montfort University incorporates social justice and ethical investment in its sustainability strategy. HEIs in THE Impact Rankings generally have a strong SDG-aligned focus, with a broader commitment to social sustainability.

HEIs focusing on 'Planet' (Environmental Sustainability)

HEIs predominantly prioritise environmental sustainability, with a strong focus on carbon reduction, biodiversity conservation, and energy efficiency. Many HEIs align their efforts closely with SDG Goal 13 (Climate Action) and typically aim for early net-zero targets. For instance, Birmingham City University, University of Lincoln, and Coventry University focus on carbon neutrality and biodiversity whereas University of Warwick and Nottingham Trent University emphasise energy efficiency, waste management, and sustainable transport. HEIs with clear net-zero commitments (e.g., Keele University, University of Leicester) integrate sustainability into both operations and academic curriculum. HEIs that prioritise environmental sustainability tend to have comprehensive decarbonisation strategies, which are critical for reducing institutional carbon footprints (HEPI, 2024).

HEIs focusing on 'Profit' (Economic Sustainability and Research Impact)

Few HEIs emphasise economic sustainability, leveraging sustainability research, institutional branding, and partnerships to strengthen their global reputation. For instance, University of Birmingham, University of Warwick, and University of Nottingham are research-intensive institutions that integrate sustainability into high-impact research and academic curricula whereas Loughborough University focuses on innovation, energy efficiency, and sustainable transport, aligning with the QS Sustainability Rankings, which emphasise research and institutional prestige.

Potential benefits of embedding sustainability strategies into HEIs

While sustainability rankings such as THE Impact Rankings and QS Sustainability Rankings serve as important benchmarks, they often fail to capture the full scope of sustainability integration within HEIs. (SAMPJ, 2018) Many rankings primarily assess sustainability in campus operations, funding, and governance but lack comprehensive metrics for evaluating research-based sustainability efforts. This is where voluntary sustainability accords and frameworks play a crucial role in addressing these gaps. HEIs that integrate sustainability strategies benefit in multiple ways including: (1) Increased funding opportunities - many

sustainability accords provide access to specialised grants and research funding for institutions prioritizing sustainable research and innovation. (2) Enhanced Reputation and Global Recognition - being a signatory to initiatives like the SDG Accord or UN PRME enhances an institution's standing in global sustainability rankings, attracting students and faculty interested in sustainability. (3) Improved Institutional Accountability and Transparency: Aligning with sustainability frameworks helps HEIs demonstrate a structured and measurable approach to sustainability, improving governance and institutional resilience. (4) Collaborative Opportunities – Sustainability conscious HEIs enhances partnerships between businesses, and government bodies, enhancing knowledge exchange and best practices in sustainability research.

Conclusion

This study investigates how UK HEIs are embedding sustainability strategies within their strategic framework. The findings reveal that while HEIs acknowledge the importance of sustainability, their approaches vary significantly. Many focus on either environmental, social, or economic sustainability rather than adopting a holistic triple bottom line approach (People, Planet, Profit). Although some HEIs have well-defined sustainability strategies with clear targets, others operate within broad frameworks lacking structured implementation. Notably, no HEI has fully integrated the Triple Bottom Line approach, with most prioritising one dimension over a balanced approach. Moreover, while many HEIs reference the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), only a few have incorporated all 17 SDGs into their long-term sustainability strategies. This fragmented approach raises concerns about greenwashing and the risk of sustainability efforts being limited to isolated projects rather than system-wide transformation.

Despite the importance of sustainability, financial constraints remain a major obstacle for HEIs transition to sustainability. Transitioning to renewable energy, sustainable infrastructure, and responsible procurement practices requires significant upfront investment. The current economic landscape, including rising energy costs, inflation, and budget limitations, complicates sustainability financing, making it difficult for HEIs to allocate sufficient resources. Furthermore, sustainability teams within HEIs are frequently underfunded, limiting the ability of institutions to implement ambitious sustainability strategies.

Sustainability rankings, such as the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings and QS Sustainability Rankings, significantly influence university sustainability strategies. These rankings provide institutions with a platform for transparency and accountability, boosting their global reputation and attracting sustainability-conscious students, faculty, and funding opportunities. Sustainability is no longer an optional pursuit for HEIs, it is a strategic necessity that impacts institutional resilience, funding opportunities, student recruitment, and global reputation. To secure their long-term success, HEIs must move beyond fragmented initiatives and adopt structured, transparent, and long-term sustainability strategies. By actively engaging with sector-wide accords, sustainability rankings, and financial sustainability measures, HEIs can solidify their role as global sustainability leaders. Through robust governance,

interdisciplinary education, and strategic collaboration, UK HEIs can drive meaningful sustainability change, both within and beyond their campuses.

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