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EXAMINING THE ADOPTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL #4: QUALITY EDUCATION IN SELECTED TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT
Integrating Quality Education into higher education institutions remains critical. Amidst this challenge, I explored the viewpoints and standpoints of motivation and barriers to SDG adoption. I used a descriptive qualitative study employing in-depth interviews with four participants and a focus group discussion with four participants selected through purposive sampling. My findings highlight persistent barriers, such as limited stakeholder awareness, superficial engagement, and structural constraints, key enablers include strong institutional vision, accreditation requirements, and a commitment to social responsibility for SDG 4 adoption. I recommend mediating analysis using Barrier as a mediator on the correlation between motivation to apply and adopt SDG. Further, utilize the emerging sub-themes as indicators of quantitative study.
KEYWORDS- *Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 4, Higher Education Institutions, Quality Education, Philippine Tertiary Education*

INTRODUCTION

Progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) remains uneven across countries, reflecting the persistent challenges in their adoption within higher education institutions (HEIs) (Liu et al., 2024). While the global higher education sector has strengthened its commitment to sustainability in response to the 2030 Agenda, significant barriers hinder full engagement. Financial limitations, inconsistent Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, integration into curricula, and institutional inertia prevent HEIs from fully realizing their role in sustainable development (Althonayan, Tarasova, & Isaenko, 2021). Moreover, weak collaboration between universities, government agencies, and industries further impedes progress. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring HEIs can effectively contribute to achieving the SDGs and fostering long-term sustainability.

In many countries, higher education institutions face numerous challenges in their efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (Filho et al., 2020; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021; Charoenratana et al., 2021). In Indonesia, higher education institutions face both challenges and opportunities in implementing the SDGs. The creation of SDG Centers, sustainability offices, or similar units demonstrates an initial recognition of the importance of the SDGs within these institutions (Charoenratana et al., 2021). In the report published by University Canada West in 2021, it was acknowledged that due to the expansive nature of sustainable development and the scale of universities, it is challenging to account for all SDG activities, partnerships, and commitments occurring on campuses throughout Canada.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines face significant socio-economic challenges that impact their capacity to adopt and implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Issues such as poverty, inequality, and inadequate infrastructure create systemic barriers that hinder universities from fully committing to sustainability efforts (Filho et al., 2020). Limited access to technology and research funding further restricts faculty and students from engaging in initiatives that promote sustainable development, thereby slowing progress toward achieving the SDGs (Liu et al., 2024).

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The significance of this study is multi-faceted, primarily aimed at benefiting stakeholders in higher education institutions (HEIs) by illuminating the social, economic, and environmental factors that influence the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By identifying these key factors, the research may offer valuable insights that can guide the development of evidence-based policies to tackle the existing challenges faced by universities in fulfilling their commitments to sustainability. Moreover, the findings may enhance educational strategies, equipping educators with a deeper understanding of how to incorporate the SDGs into their curricula and institutional practices. This knowledge can lead to targeted interventions that foster a more sustainable educational environment and prepare students to be effective agents of change in their future careers (Althonayan et al., 2021; Chankseliani et al., 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In framing this study, I draw upon the Institutional Theory framework of Al-Shami et al. (2018), as cited by Kasuma et al. (2020). Institutional theory refers to three key mechanisms, coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, that drive institutional change and result in similarities in either structure or processes (Al-Shami et al., 2018).

Coercive pressure refers to the influence of regulations imposed by individuals or groups surrounding technology users, encouraging actions that benefit themselves (Al-Shami et al., 2018). Normative pressure arises when individuals, often unknowingly, adopt similar attitudes, behaviors, and practices as those around them (Shi, Shambare, & Wang, 2008). Mimetic pressures drive individuals or organizations to deliberately and consciously replicate the behaviors and practices of prominent and successful peers, using them as models to follow (Jan et al., 2012).

Key drivers and motivating factors that promote Sustainable Development Goal #4: Quality Education adoption

The integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the university is strongly influenced by its vision and institutional culture, reinforcing its commitment to global engagement. By embedding sustainability principles into academic and operational frameworks, the university fosters a learning environment that prepares students to contribute to global development efforts.

Institutional Vision/Mission. Entering higher education represents a significant transition for students, making them more receptive to institutional norms and expectations. As a result, first-year students are more likely to adopt communicated messages and engage in established behaviors, making sustainability communication campaigns particularly effective for this group. In contrast, older students may have already formed social circles and community norms, making it more challenging to influence their attitudes and behaviors toward sustainability (Lertpratchya et al., 2017).

I realized that institutional culture plays a significant role in shaping the mindset and direction of preservice teachers. When a university embeds global values such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its vision and operations, it sets a clear expectation for students to align their actions with these principles.

Accreditation and Recognition. In an era defined by interconnectedness and escalating environmental challenges, the assertion that "promoting sustainability strengthens the institution's credibility and relevance in a globally connected world" resonates with increasing urgency. However, from a research-driven perspective, this statement is not a simple truism but a complex proposition demanding nuanced investigation. This study explored the academic dimensions of this claim, examining the interplay of stakeholder expectations, global norms, and the critical role of measurement and communication in establishing institutional sustainability.

I believe that central to this analysis is the concept of institutional legitimacy. In a world where information flows freely, and stakeholders possess heightened awareness, institutions are increasingly judged by their commitment to environmental and social responsibility. Stakeholder theory posits that organizations must address the diverse expectations of their constituents, be they students, investors, or the broader public. Sustainability has transitioned from a peripheral concern to a core expectation, compelling institutions to demonstrate genuine commitment. Failure to do so risks eroding reputational capital, a crucial asset in a competitive global landscape. Research into organizational reputation underscores the value of building a positive image through demonstrable sustainability

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initiatives. This involves more than superficial gestures; it necessitates integrating sustainability into core operations and strategic decision-making.

Barriers that impede the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal #4: Quality Education

According to Zickafoose et al. (2024), the integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education institutions faces several challenges, including insufficient financial resources, weak institutional commitment, limited interdepartmental collaboration, unmotivated faculty and staff, minimal support from university leadership, and a general lack of awareness and necessary resources. These barriers hinder the effective implementation of sustainability initiatives within tertiary education, making it crucial for institutions to develop strategic policies and resource allocation frameworks to enhance SDG adoption.

Awareness and Knowledge as Barrier that Impedes the Adoption of Sustainable Development Goal #4. At the University of Mindanao, a significant barrier to SDG adoption identified during interviews with student leaders is the lack of awareness and understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Participants highlighted that many students have limited knowledge of the SDGs and their relevance, while key individuals within the institution also demonstrate insufficient awareness of sustainability initiatives. This lack of familiarity poses a challenge to the effective integration of SDGs into academic and institutional practices.

Superficial Engagement as Barrier that Impedes the Adoption of Sustainable Development Goal #4. The challenge of ensuring that students meaningfully engage with and internalize the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) beyond academic discussions highlights a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. While SDGs may be incorporated into coursework, their impact remains limited if students do not actively participate in sustainability initiatives or see their relevance in real-world contexts.

Institutional Barrier as Barrier that Impedes the Adoption of Sustainable Development Goal #4. Insufficient funding and resource constraints pose significant barriers to the effective implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education institutions. Without adequate financial support, institutions struggle to develop and sustain SDG-related programs, research, and community initiatives. Additionally, challenges in executing SDG plans, such as bureaucratic hurdles, lack of institutional coordination, and limited stakeholder engagement, further hinder progress. To overcome these obstacles, universities must explore strategic funding mechanisms, foster partnerships, and integrate sustainability into long-term institutional planning to ensure meaningful and lasting SDG adoption.

Concrete Manifestation of Sustainable Development Goal #4

Adoption in the Institution. Strong and strategic collaborations play a vital role in reinforcing the university's commitment to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by fostering interdisciplinary partnerships, resource-sharing, and collective action. By engaging with government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), industries, and academic institutions, the university can expand its impact, enhance research opportunities, and implement effective sustainability initiatives. These collaborations not only provide access to expertise, funding, and best practices but also create a shared responsibility for addressing global challenges, ensuring that SDG efforts are comprehensive, impactful, and sustainable in the long term.

Robust Collaborations as Concrete Manifestation of Sustainable Development Goal #4 adoption in the Institution. The notion that robust collaborations are fundamental to strengthening a university's commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is not merely a matter of common sense but a principle deeply rooted in academic research and established theoretical frameworks. In an era marked by complex global challenges, the need for collective action and shared expertise has become paramount, making collaborative partnerships an indispensable tool for universities seeking to advance the SDG agenda.

Well-defined SDG policies and resource allocation are essential for implementation. Establishing a clear policy framework and well-defined mechanisms is essential for the effective implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the university. A structured approach, supported by a dedicated organizational framework and clearly assigned roles, ensures that sustainability initiatives are efficiently coordinated, systematically executed, and continuously monitored. By providing a strong foundation for accountability and collaboration, well-developed

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policies empower institutions to streamline decision-making, optimize resource allocation, and drive long-term commitment to sustainability efforts.

The establishment of a clear policy and mechanism, supported by designated personnel and a defined organizational structure for task assignment, is paramount for the successful implementation of any complex initiative, including university-wide efforts towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This assertion is grounded in organizational theory, strategic management, and public administration research, which emphasize the importance of formal structures and processes in achieving organizational objectives.

Statement of the Problem

The implementation of Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 (Quality Education) in higher education institutions (HEIs) is fraught with challenges, opportunities, motivating factors, and specific conditions that influence their effectiveness. This study aimed to answer the following objectives:

1. What motivates tertiary institutions to adopt Sustainable Development Goal #4 as perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?
2. What impedes tertiary institutions in the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal #4?
3. What are the concrete manifestations of SDG 4 adoption in the institution?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Guided by the research questions, this study utilized a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach, aiming to explore and detail each case through participants' interviews and corroborating insights from informants, Creswell (2013). As indicated previously, this study examined the adaptation of sustainable development goals in selected HEIs; hence, qualitative approaches are most appropriate for gathering information based on human perceptions and understanding it. The study also aims to explore an event or perception that requires qualitative methodologies to achieve data saturation.

Research Participants

This study was conducted at the University of Mindanao (UM), one of the largest and most established higher education institutions in Davao City, Philippines. As a key academic institution in the region, UM plays a significant role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through research, community engagement, and institutional initiatives.

Research Instruments

I utilized purposive sampling in the selection of my study participants, ensuring the inclusion of individuals whose experiences and insights are critical to the research objectives. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method where participants are chosen based on specific characteristics that align with the study's purpose. As noted by Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016), purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants who can provide relevant and valuable information for the study, ensuring a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. For this research, two (2) administrative officers and faculty were selected for in-depth interviews (IDI) and three (3) students for focus group discussions (FGD).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is used to extract themes from the participants' responses, as described by Daly, Kellehear, and Gliksman (1997), who define it as the process of identifying themes that capture significant aspects of a phenomenon. The University of Auckland (n.d.) outlines six phases of thematic analysis: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the analysis.

The data collection process began with securing an endorsement letter from the Dean of the Graduate School of the Holy Cross of Davao College to request permission from the University of Mindanao participants for their involvement in the study. Approval letters were obtained from each participant to formally authorize their participation in the research.

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Once the approval letters were secured, the researcher sought permission from the respective deans and administrators to proceed with the study. A pilot test was conducted with the student leaders to prepare the researcher for the actual data collection process and refine any minor details of the instrument. The results of the pilot test were excluded from the final data analysis.

The one-on-one interviews were scheduled based on mutual agreement with the participants. During the interviews, the researcher requested consent to use an audio recorder, and the recordings were transcribed by the researcher for further analysis and as a gesture of gratitude, participants were provided with snacks post-interview.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the identified themes and sub-themes based on a thorough analysis of the gathered data. A total of four themes, Coercive Pressure, Normative Pressure, and Mimetic Pressure, along with eleven sub-themes, were recognized, providing valuable insights into the factors influencing SDG adoption in selected tertiary institutions. These sub-themes help in understanding institutional barriers, key drivers, and recommendations for sustainability integration within higher education.

The University of Mindanao who were chosen to be the participating institution motivation behind their adoption of SDG #4. The findings show that the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal #4 was influenced by the institution's motivations and barriers. From the responses of different stakeholders, student leaders, faculty, and administrative officers, eight (8) major sub-themes emerged, namely: 1) Institutional Vision/Mission, 2) Accreditation and Recognition, (3) Commitment to social responsibility, (4) Lack of awareness on SDG's adoption, (5) Superficial engagement with SDG activities, (6) Limited Funding and Resources, (7) Well-defined SDG policies are essential for implementation, and (8) Allocation of resources for SDG research and execution.

Normative Pressure. Normative pressure arises when individuals or institutions unintentionally adopt similar behaviors, attitudes, and practices based on societal expectations. Hovav (2017) explained that this pressure is shaped by an individual's perception of their environment, influencing their decisions regarding adoption.

Mimetic pressures influence individuals and institutions to adopt established behaviors and best practices by consciously emulating the actions of successful and well-regarded counterparts. Within the area of SDG implementation in higher education, universities may look to high-ranking institutions that have effectively integrated sustainability initiatives. This tendency to replicate proven models becomes more prominent when institutions face challenges in SDG implementation, prompting them to follow strategies that have yielded success elsewhere (Lestari, 2018).

Mimetic pressures arise from uncertainty and play a significant role in driving institutions to adopt established models through imitation (Liang et al., 2019). When faced with ambiguous challenges, universities may look to other institutions that have successfully integrated SDG initiatives, adopting their strategies as cost-effective solutions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2005). Similarly, normative pressures emerge from professionalization, where academic institutions are influenced by industry standards, best practices, and the expectations set by experts in the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2018).

Commitment to Social Responsibility. A strong sense of social responsibility serves as a powerful internal motivator for higher education institutions to adopt SDG #4. By acknowledging their critical role in societal development, socially responsible universities intentionally work toward fostering positive change and addressing global challenges. This perspective is consistent with the view of Bringle and Steinberg (2016), who emphasized that quality education, as promoted by SDG #4, is essential for advancing social justice, economic progress, and sustainable development. As such, institutions deeply committed to social responsibility are more likely to integrate SDG #4 into their academic, research, and community engagement initiatives.

Lack of Awareness on SDG's Adoption. A major barrier to effectively integrating SDG #4 in higher education institutions is the widespread lack of awareness and comprehension of the SDGs among faculty, staff, and students. This aligns with the assertion of Fadeeva and Mochizuki (2017), who noted that many members of the academic community possess only a surface-level understanding of the 2030 Agenda and its associated goals, particularly the

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targets linked to quality education. Such limited knowledge hinders the ability to see how the SDGs, especially SDG #4, can enhance teaching, research, and community outreach. As a result, institutions may struggle to incorporate these goals into their strategic vision and everyday operations.

Superficial Engagement with SDG Activities. Even when some level of awareness exists, institutions may exhibit superficial engagement with SDG activities, particularly concerning SDG #4. This can manifest as symbolic gestures or isolated initiatives that are not deeply embedded within the institution's core strategies and operations. The notion that organizational involvement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) needs significant enhancement to contribute meaningfully to their achievement is consistent with the argument put forth by Mhlanga et al. (2018), as cited by Saizarbitoria et al. (2021

Limited Funding and Resources. A major practical obstacle to the widespread adoption of Sustainable Development Goal #4 within higher education institutions is the persistent limitation of funding and available resources. This aligns with the assertion by Fernandes and Swami (2023), who identified inadequate financial resources as a primary challenge for educational institutions. Their research indicates that many schools and universities grapple with limited funds, which impedes essential investments in infrastructure, technology integration, and teacher training.

Well-defined SDG policies are essential for implementation. Well-defined policies serve as the foundation for successful SDG implementation, providing the necessary framework for organizations to translate global goals into actionable strategies. The effectiveness of SDG policies depends on their clarity, adaptability, and alignment with institutional capabilities.

Allocation of Resources for SDG Research And Execution. Effective resource allocation is critical for translating SDG policies from aspiration to action. The budget, as a fundamental reflection of government plans and policies, necessitates the prioritization and evaluation of SDGs during the budgeting process. The challenge of securing adequate resources for sustainable development is particularly acute for countries already burdened by economic and socio-political difficulties. This aligns with the perspective of Byomkesh (2020), who emphasized the conflicting viewpoints and differing priorities among stakeholders at all governance levels regarding the allocation of limited economic and social resources, which further complicates the mobilization of funds for sustainable development initiatives.

Implications

Significant advancements have been made in the pursuit of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4), leading to new insights and increased potential for collaborative efforts focused on delivering quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for everyone (United Nations, 2020). However, the landscape is evolving due to emerging technologies, shifting skill requirements, economic instability, and environmental deterioration. Persistent obstacles continue to hinder access to education and equitable educational outcomes, and challenges in tracking progress persist. Given that education is not merely a component of sustainable development but also a crucial catalyst for its realization, its integration into national development plans and strategies is essential for achieving all the SDGs.

To strengthen SDG #4 adoption, universities should design and implement institutional frameworks that ensure meaningful integration of sustainability goals in curriculum, research, and community engagement. Establishing dedicated SDG offices or task forces, along with faculty development programs, will enhance the university's capacity to mainstream SDG #4 in its academic and operational agendas. These structures should support interdisciplinary collaboration, student engagement, and policy innovation tailored to the local educational context.

Additionally, cultivating a culture of awareness, commitment, and accountability is essential for long-term sustainability integration. Capacity-building workshops, stakeholder consultations, and orientation programs can equip university personnel with the necessary knowledge, tools, and motivation to lead SDG-related initiatives. Practical interventions—such as SDG-focused research grants, cross-sector partnerships, and institutional reporting mechanisms—will not only operationalize sustainability goals but also create a model for transformative education rooted in equity, inclusivity, and lifelong learning.

By aligning internal strategies with global development priorities, higher education institutions will be better positioned to fulfill their role as agents of change. This will ultimately contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future through the delivery of quality, inclusive, and transformative education.

Future Directions

Future researchers may explore the complex relationships influencing SDG adoption in Higher Education Institutions through a mediating study. This quantitative approach could investigate how the identified motivations for SDG adoption and the barriers encountered in SDG adoption mediate the overall adoption of SDG #4 within these institutions. Furthermore, future research can also employ a qualitative case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the specific challenges faced by Higher Education Institutions in their SDG adoption journey and the coping mechanisms they develop to navigate these barriers.

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