

# Commitment of Higher Educational Institutions to Sustainability Agenda: Comparative Study of GCC and ASEAN

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study focuses on the comparative analysis of higher educational institutions of two country unions – GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) – with an attempt to obtain evaluation of their commitment towards sustainable development agenda.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The research is mostly qualitative. For the purposes of the comparison 60 random universities representing GCC have been selected; in the same manner, 90 universities have been randomly selected to represent ASEAN. The research focuses on whether the key strategic statements reference problems related to sustainability and sustainable development. In addition, these strategic statements are mapped to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) formulated by the United Nations.

**Findings:** Both regions demonstrated very close level of referencing the term “Sustainable” and its derivatives in the mission statements – about 5% of the sample. Extended analysis that also included visions, values and goals expanded this rate to 11.5% in case of GCC and 15.5% in case of ASEAN. The higher education institutions (HEIs) of ASEAN addressed considerably wider range of SDGs, than HEIs of GCC – 7 against just 3.

**Research limitations/implications:** The content analysis is based on English versions of strategic documents. Laos was excluded from consideration due to impossibility to access its HEI’s websites in English language.

**Practical implications:** Outcomes of the study highlight the rate of commitment of HEIs in two key regions of the world to ideas of sustainable development. The research arms the educational decision-makers of the national level to take better decisions regarding perspective directions of development.

**Originality/Value:** The study provides basic understanding of how deep the ideas of sustainable development are already incorporated into the life of higher educational institutions of the studied regions and suggests the directions of further, more in-depth analysis.

**Keywords:** GCC, ASEAN, sustainable development, sustainability, higher education, sustainable development goals

**Category:** Literature Review paper

## **1. Introduction**

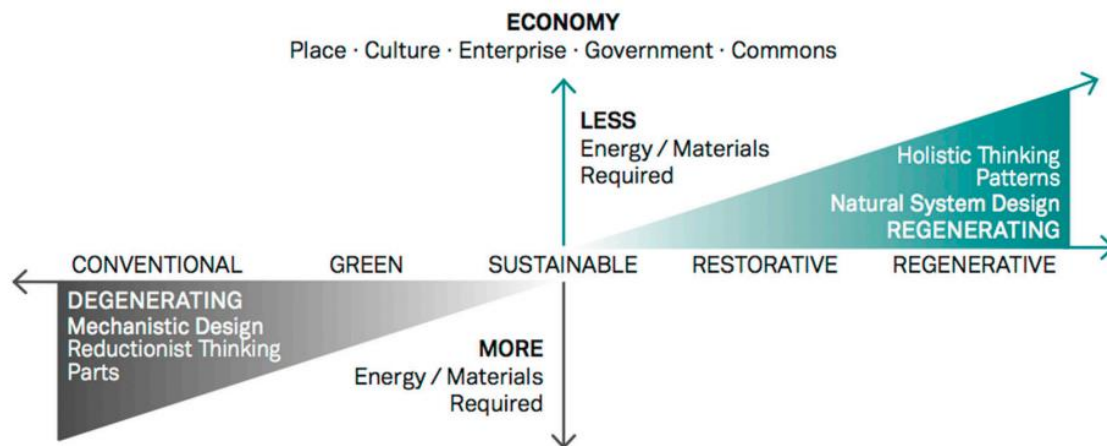
More than three full decades has already passed since the World Commission on Environment and Development made public a report titled *Our Common Future* (1987) which was dedicated to future developmental perspectives, and which set the foundation for the concepts of sustainability. The key idea of the report was that both governments and people should consider environmental challenges while taking the decisions related to socio-economic development. Such approach should allow to satisfy needs of the current generation without compromising the same of the next generations. Since then, numerous countries have already induced principles of sustainability into their legislations in the form of laws, regulations, and policies (Chaturvedi et al., 2017; Adams, 2006). A more recent milestone is represented by eight Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. They targeted such issues as poverty and hunger, accessibility to primary education, health issues, problems of equality and sustainability and served as guidelines for development until 2015. This action plan played positive role in fighting poverty, while it was less effective in fighting inequalities and disparities (Millennium Development Goals Report, 2015). The most recent developments in the area are reflected in the declarations made by the United Nations and European Commission (*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015; *The European Green Deal*, 2019). The first one replaced the Millennium Development Goals and focused on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets that form the universal agenda of sustainable development strategy. The European Green Deal is the part of the European Commission's efforts to implement the UN's 2030 agenda. Alongside with other provisions, the document underlines the role of education in its intention to become carbon-neutral by 2050.

An international conference held in France in 1990 resulted in a declaration (Talloires Declaration of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, 1990) in a form of a ten-point action plan that accentuated the role of higher education institutions in changes related to sustainable development. Initially signed by 22 university representatives, as of June 2020, the declaration had 515 signatories from 60 countries. The attention of universities should not be limited only by the sphere of education, but rather should be extended to other fields in which SDGs are formulated (Leal Filho, Shiel, Paço et al., 2019). It's believed that Universities can play a vital leadership role in mind setting and shifting the attitudes and behaviours towards the concept of sustainability development (Sonetti et al., 2019), and therefore its important to consider the commitment of higher education institutions leadership to sustainability, as it evident from the literature that the success of sustainability implementation is based on the support of top management of higher education institutions (Aleixo et al., 2016; Jorge et al., 2015; Milutinovi and Nikoli, 2014; Adams, 2013; Grindsted, 2011) . In the article we attempt to analyze the level of education institutions commitment to sustainability agenda in two regions.

## **2. Literature Review**

The issue of Sustainability and its association with sustainable development have been enjoying constantly increasing attention in the last decades and it's becoming a global issue which will change the world (Utama et al., 2018) and it became a topic of interests within the academic arena (Salvioni et al., 2017). The concept of sustainability has been defined and explained as a process that meets today's and future generation's needs (Aleixo et al., 2016; Brandon and Lombardi, 2010), while other authors clarified that sustainability is viewed as a dynamic equilibrium within humans and ecosystem (Sarrica et al., 2018; Brown, 2016). For further clarifications, Aleixo et al.

(2016: 2), stated that to clarify the concept by categorizing it from five different perspectives, namely (i) that of conventional economists, (ii) non-environmental degradation, (iii) integrational (encompassing economic, environmental, and social aspects), (iv) inter-generational, and (v) holistic. The holistic perspective is the most complete because it comprises: (a) the integrational and the inter-generational perspectives, and (b) a balance between economic, environmental, and social aspects as well as the short, medium, and longer-term perspectives. The holistic approach seems to offer a better understanding of the concept which is also supported by (Fullerton, 2015; Dias, 2015; Sonetti et al., 2019) through figure 1



**Figure 1:** Sustainability and regenerative economy  
 (Source: Sonetti et al., 2019: 2)

The popularity of the concept is reflected in multiple studies ranging from waste management in restaurants (Stöckli et al., 2018) to future sustainability scenarios for higher education institutions (Beynaghi et al., 2016), academic conferences, seminars and workshops, and even entire journals dedicated both to special issues related to sustainability or general concepts and future perspectives of sustainability. In view of this, it has been highlighted that higher education plays a critical and crucial role in promoting and practising sustainable development (Dean et al., 2018; Lane, 2017; Gokool-Ramdoo and Grant, 2016; Fernandez-Sanchez et al., 2014), and having a focus on sustainability (Geng and Zhao, 2020).

In continuation with the area of sustainable development at an institutional level, the United Nations adopted 17 goals of sustainable development (SDGs) aimed at achieving sustainability in areas, such as social and economic development, innovation and infrastructure, poverty, equality, nature, and others (see Figure 2). According to Sustainable Development Goals Report (2020), even though the pandemic effect on economic, social, and political systems was devastating, in such areas as health and well-being, education and learning and gender equality some progress has been achieved. At the same time, food security, access to water and energy alongside with economic development areas suffered the most.

Importance of higher education to advancement of sustainable development agenda can hardly be overestimated. Multiple authors (e.g., Cortese, 2003; Stephens et al., 2008; Dyer and Dyer, 2017;

Shawe et al, 2019) perceive it as indispensable tool in shaping the mindsets of the learners that in a several year perspectives will (or will not) start to implement sustainability principles at their workplaces and in a decade will become a decision-maker. Nowadays, there are even several journals that are dedicated to education for sustainable development. In addition to this, educators play a critical role as mediators, executors, and developer of local and global education policies in reflection of SDGs (Chinnasamy and Daniels, 2019). Furthermore, a shift in higher education must take place to support the movement and the alignment with the global sustainability development agenda (Barth and Reickmann, 2012; Garcia-Gonzalez et al. 2017; Kanie and Biermann, 2017; Yonehara et al. 2017; Franco et al., 2019). Boron et al. (2017: 38) supported this further by stating that *the ultimate purpose of academic teaching programs orientated around sustainability is to support the practical attainment of a sustainable future for industry, business, and society.*



**Figure 2: Illustration of SDGs**  
(Source: Seto-Pamies and Papaioikonomou, 2020, P. 2)

Having such an important role, higher education institutions (HEIs) should follow principles of sustainability themselves in a systematic manner to have a positive impact on sustainability agenda. Being a powerful instrument of strategy development and implementation (Cortés-Sánchez and Rivera, 2019; Huang et al. 2019), mission statements (as well as other strategic-level statements, like vision, goals/objectives, and values) can help to evaluate the level of education institutions commitments towards the sustainability agenda. This study extends on previous research and reflects an attempt a comparative analysis of strategic statements of HEIs located in GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) regions from the perspective of their commitment to sustainability agenda.

### **3. Significance and objectives of the study**

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in the creation and development of economic systems through quality education offerings, knowledge dissemination, innovations, entrepreneurial activities, environmental awareness, and competitiveness (Salvioni et al., 2017). Moreover, higher education institutions play a vital leadership role in promoting and support the

implementation of sustainability agenda (Sonetti et al., 2019; Aleixo et al., 2016; Jorge et al., 2015), and shaping the minds of learners who will be the future of any nation (Chinnasamy and Daniels, 2019). Therefore, it's fair to say that educational institutions are perceived as a key driver of sustainability and shaping the future of such an agenda. In view of this, their activities must be reviewed in reflection of the sustainability agenda, and therefore the purpose of the article is to analyze the level of education institutions commitment to sustainability agenda in two regions. Specifically, the study focuses on the comparative analysis of higher educational institutions of two country unions – GCC and ASEAN – with an attempt to obtain absolute and relative evaluation of their commitment towards sustainable development agenda.

#### **4. Methodology**

To achieve the objectives of the research, the authors intended on the use of qualitative research methods and more specifically, content analysis. For the purposes of the comparison, a sample of 60 random universities representing GCC region have been selected; in the same manner, 90 universities have been randomly selected to represent ASEAN region. Every country of the regions under comparison is represented by 10 institutions. The research focused on whether the key strategic statements – vision, mission, values, and goals – reference problems related to sustainability and sustainable development. In addition, these strategic statements are mapped to 17 Sustainable Development Goals formulated by the United Nations.

The research design of the study is based on content analysis, as there are fewer rules to follow and therefore the risk of confusion is reduced (Bengtsson, 2016). For the purpose of the analysis, for each GCC country (United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Sultanate of Oman, Kuwait and Kingdom of Bahrain) and each ASEAN country except Laos (Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia), 10 higher education institutions were randomly selected (60 institutions in total for GCC and 90 institutions for ASEAN). Selection of institutions was completely random and was not based neither on the academic status level (college, university college, academy, university, etc.), nor on whether an institution is specialized or not. Then, their key strategic statements - namely mission, vision, values, goals - were accessed through their internet sites/websites. Laos was excluded from analysis, as it was impossible to obtain strategic statements for its institutions. There were few stages followed in compiling the data:

- **STAGE 1:** The first stage of analysis was aimed at revealing the presence of such terms as “sustainability”, “sustainable development” and their derivatives in mission statements.
- **STAGE 2:** The second stage focused on revealing these terms in vision, core values, and goals.
- **STAGE 3:** On the last stage, the content of mission statements was mapped to the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) formulated by the United Nations that set out a vision for a better world that relies on cooperation and interdependence (Owen, 2017). The results of mapping were compared to the Social Progress Index Ranking (2020).

The English versions of strategic statements have been taken and used for the purposes of analyses. In some cases, the difference between English version of statements and versions in national



languages have been observed; however, it was minor and could be neglected. Slight differences could also be possible in cases when strategic statements were formulated in national language first and then translated into English. The collected data was subjected to anonymization procedure to avoid any conflict of interests

## 5. Results and Discussion

Majority of randomly selected educational institutions had made their key strategic statements available to public. In case of GCC it was 56 out of 60 (or 94%), while ASEAN educational institutions demonstrated comparable openness with 88 institutions out of 90 (or almost 98%) making the mission statement readily available through the web-portals.

The initial step focused on the basic analysis of whether the term “sustainability”, “sustainable development”, or their derivatives are present in the institutional mission statements of the sample investigated. This initial stage revealed that 3 out of 60 (or about 5%) sampled mission statements of GCC educational institutions contained the above-mentioned terms. Very similar observations have been made over the ASEAN institutions of higher education – the same amounted at 5 out of 90 (or also about 5%).

Fully understanding that relation to sustainability could be reflected in other strategic-level statements, we extended our analysis to vision statements, formulated goals or objectives of institutions and their sets of values. The analysis under such conditions allowed us to take into consideration several other examples. In some cases, the strategic statements just contained reference to sustainable development and sustainability. In other cases, the web-portals of analyzed institutions contained entire sections dedicated to sustainability agenda with not only effective slogans, but with action plans and annual reports. Such cases have been observed in both regions under consideration. Overall, the extension allowed to increase the number of sustainability-aligned institutions of GCC to comparable 11% (7 cases out of 60) and 15% (14 cases out of 90) in case of ASEAN.

The next step of analysis took a closer look at the institutional mission statements from the perspective of to which extent they are aligned with SDGs formulated by the United Nations. Summary of the results is mapped in Table 1.

Table 1: Mapping of Institutional Mission Statements to UN Sustainable Development Goals

Region	SDG1	SDG4	SDG5	SDG8	SDG9	SDG10	SDG15
GCC	2 (3%)	-	-	10 (17%)	15 (25%)	-	-
ASEAN	1 (1%)	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	8 (9%)	9 (10%)	3 (3%)	1 (1%)

In reference to the collected data, the authors witnessed multiple observations and they are highlighted as follow:

**Firstly**, mission statements of higher education institutions from the ASEAN region could be mapped to a broader range of Sustainable Development Goals – 7 SDGs against 3 SDGs in case of GCC (see Table 1). As a result, mission statements that represent ASEAN region reflect coverage of a much wider variety of problems associated with sustainability agenda. If in case

GCC mission statements focused mostly on economic growth and innovation (SDG8 and SDG9) and to a lesser extent on poverty (SDG1), colleges and universities of ASEAN regions considerably extend this range by addressing issues of quality education and gender equality (SDG4 and SDG5), as well as reduction of inequality and life on land (SDG10 and SDG15) see Table 1. It is worth mentioning, that SDG4 that is related to quality education is completed missed by the sampled HEIs of GCC and is not at leading positions in case of ASEAN institutions.

**Secondly**, in both regions the number of explicit mentioning of sustainability in the mission statements is considerably lower than the indirect referencing to problems that constitute the sustainability agenda. For the GCC region this ratio is 3 to 27, while for the ASEAN region it is 5 to 27.

**Thirdly**, both regions have their own distinctive leaders in addressing the sustainability agenda (by the number of institutions, which strategic statements could be mapped to one or several SDGs). In the GCC region these leaders are in Qatar with 4 institutions followed by Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia with 3 institutions. In the ASEAN region it is Indonesia, Vietnam, and Philippines with 4 HEIs each and Brunei with 3 HEIs (Table 3). The collected data does not show signs of a relationship between the level of social development and the level of commitment to sustainability agenda.

The collected data does not allow to make exhaustive conclusions on the country-specific characteristics because of limited country-level samples, it still shows tendencies that can be confirmed by deeper country-specific research.

Table 2: Terms that link institutional strategic statements with SDGs

Sustainable Development Goal	GCC	ASEAN
<b>SDG 1: No Poverty</b>	Elevate the social and living standards	Welfare of society
<b>SDG 4: Quality Education</b>	N/A	Ensure access to high-quality education widen access to quality education education for sustainable development
<b>SDG 5: Gender Equality</b>	N/A	For female students

<b>SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth</b>	Prosperity economic growth and development propelling ... knowledge-based economy advance the development goals social development economic and social development addressing local and regional challenges	Dynamic Economy spread knowledge and innovation sustainable economy economic and social development propel national economy
<b>SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure</b>	Research ... contributes ... to the needs and aspirations of society build science and knowledge society solutions for ... problems in surrounding communities	Innovation research-based education high-impact research diversified knowledge impactful research and innovation research for sustainable development research and technology transfer undertake research promote research and innovation
<b>SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities</b>		For ethnic minority students social transformation through integration of cultural minorities education opportunities for minorities
<b>SDG 15: Life on Land</b>		To support environmental and forestry-related fields

Table 3: Number of HEIs, Which Strategic Statements Could Be Mapped to SDGs

Region	Country	Number of HEIs with positive mapping to at least 1 SDG	Social Progress Index Ranking (2020)
GCC	Qatar	4	70.58
	Bahrain	3	-
	Saudi Arabia	3	65.06
	Kuwait	3	77.47
	UAE	2	70.6
	Oman	1	71.41



<b>ASEAN</b>	Vietnam	4	68.85
	Indonesia	4	69.49
	Philippines	4	66.62
	Brunei	3	-
	Thailand	2	70.72
	Myanmar	2	55.99
	Malaysia	1	76.96
	Cambodia	1	56.27
	Singapore	0	85.46

Overall, both regions under comparison address the problems related to sustainability agenda more indirectly, than explicitly, which is clearly seen in the terms used in their strategic statements (see Table 2). For example, both GCC and ASEAN HEIs address economic growth, which can be referenced with SDG 8. However, the used terms are mostly general – e.g., the frequent “economic growth”, “prosperity”, or “economic and social development”. Only in case of an ASEAN institution “sustainable economy” is mentioned.

Educational institutions of both compared regions, if at all, focus on not more than two SDGs. As a rule, these are SDG 8 and SDG 9 that cover economic growth and innovation. At the same time, other aspects of the same SDGs – e.g., decent work and infrastructural development – are usually ignored. Such focus characterizes even well-established institutions with a century-long history and dozens of programs belonging to diverse areas. However, specialized educational institutions of ASEAN region tend to focus relatively more on the corresponding SDGs than their GCC analogues that still prefer the same focus on SDG 8 and 9 (e.g., addressing SDG 15 made by a forestry-related institution).

Structure of referencing specific sustainable development goals in the strategic statements reflects existing problems of societies and even local communities in which educational institutions are operating, as well as existing directions of development of societies. In this way, the HEIs of the GCC region mainly focus on economic development and innovations – the key areas of formalized national-level perspective vision documents. For the similar reasons the HEIs of ASEAN countries address a wider range of problems. For example, and HEI located in Mindanao, Philippines, explicitly target the cultural minorities. In the same way it is next to impossible to see referencing of refugees by GCC educational institutions, as strict policies of national governments do not allow this problem to emerge.

According to Rashid (2019), there is a link between entrepreneurship education that contributes to development of entrepreneurship in each country and, in this way, supports the economic development and innovation. This fits well the results of our study, as HEIs in both GCC and ASEAN regions are mainly focused on SDG8 and SDG9 (economic development, research, and innovation). As this study suggests, entrepreneurial education also indirectly affects poverty and inequality. Basing on our study, to a lesser extent it is characteristic to the HEIs of ASEAN, while the same in the GCC region don't have related problems and, hence, avoid these topics in their strategic statements. Similar observations are made by multiple researchers (Baumol et al., 2011; Martin et al., 2013; Walter and Block, 2016).

The phenomenon that we observed – imbalance in referencing multiple SDGs with accent on economic development and research/innovation – has been already witnessed by other scholars. For example, Kopnina (2020) notes excessive anthropocentricity in education for sustainable

development. Similar observations were made in earlier studies of Jackson (1993) who refers to extractive economy that concentrates on how natural resources are extracted from earth and transformed into goods without paying sufficient attention to replenishing these resources. The same can be still witnessed nowadays, when according to García-Feijoo et al. (2020) selfishness still prevails in the neoclassical paradigms of managerial education.

Incorporation of ideas of sustainability is not as complicated, as it may seem. Making an accent on female entrepreneurship will contribute to achievement of SDG 5 that covers gender equality problems (Kato and Kratzer, 2013; Huis, Lensink et al., 2019; Yunis et al., 2019). However, for the best results the work should only start with strategic-level statements and should be carried out in the systematic way throughout all activities of an organization (Mader et al., 2013).

The observations made in this research regarding the GCC region are confirmed by multiple scholars. Azar and Raouf (2019) describe multiple sustainability-related problems of GCC specifically naming the unsustainable consumption patterns of limited resources, as well as economic and social imbalances. However, as Beutel (2021) notes, GCC region shows mixed results on the road to sustainability. Even though Abubaker, Al-Shihri and Ahmed (2016) underline the importance of sustainability concepts' induction on the early stages of engineering education, the study of Alshuwaikhat, Adenle and Saghir (2016) carried out as institutional assessment Saudi Arabian educational institutions concluded that they lack academic courses related to sustainability. These corresponds well to our observations regarding very moderate commitment to sustainability agenda from the side of GCC-based HEIs.

To the similar extent our findings regarding the ASEAN region correlate with research results of other scholars. Pramudianto (2018) notes that sustainable development has already become an indispensable part of the regional environmental legal system. On a country-level Sr Yuliani and Hartanto (2020) discuss the success of Indonesia's implementation of higher education for sustainable development from the perspective of five domains - knowledge, systems of thought, emotions, ethics and values and actions. Symaco and Tee (2019) studies the role of universities in promotion of social responsibility and sustainable development in ASEAN and note an existing wide variety of initiatives in this area. However, they still must admit that both concepts are still far from being fully integrated into activities of the studied HEIs. Our research also notes better commitment to sustainability agenda from the side of ASEAN institutions.

According to Duarte et al. (2017), problems related to sustainability, namely depletion of natural resources, pollution of the biosphere, as well as different kinds of inequalities gain the attention of societies very slowly, which can be seen in our research as well. However, there is no other way for the HEIs, but to adopt the sustainability principles and work for the better future.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, we would like to underline the major observations that we made and possible directions of further studies.

### *Major observations:*

- HEIs in both regions focus mostly on SDG8 and SDG9 that cover the issues related to economic development and innovation.
- The share of HEIs that uses explicitly and directly the term "Sustainability" and its derivatives in the strategic statements is minimal. However, even without this their strategic statements can still be mapped to sustainable development goals.

- HEIs of ASEAN region are generally more committed to a wider range of issues of the sustainability agenda.
- In both regions there are countries, which HEIs are committed to sustainability agenda.

*Directions of further studies:*

- Expand the comparative analysis to other regions – North and South America, Europe.
- Trace the time dynamics, i.e. perform a study with the same methodology in 4-5 years.
- Perform more precise country-level studies for countries that demonstrated higher and/or lesser commitment to sustainability agenda.

Overall, the obtained results contribute to knowledge base that educational decision-makers both in private and public sector use to take more informed decisions while inducing sustainability-related agenda into the practice of higher education institutions.

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