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Commitment to Sustainability: How Sustainability is Reflected in UAE Universities: An Exploratory Study

T. Serra Gorpe^{1*} Anas Masamreh²

¹ Mass Communication, College of Communication, University of Sharjah, Prof. Dr., P.O. Box 27272, Sharjah, UAE

² Mass Communication, College of Communication, University of Sharjah, MA Candidate, P.O. Box 27272, Sharjah, UAE

*corresponding author: tgorpe@sharjah.ac.ae,

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Abstract. Vision, mission, and value statements are important elements in every organization in communicating the core values and practices the organization follows. In higher education institutions, they play an important role in the road map of the institution and how the institution is engaged with all its stakeholders. The aim of the research is to examine the visibility of information about sustainability on the websites of UAE universities. Universities are important players when it comes to communicating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as they have an important role in societal awareness about sustainable development. To what extent do the mission, vision, and value statements reflect the sustainability of the higher educational institutions that are investigated? The study employs a quantitative content analysis method to explore elements of SDGs by looking for keywords that are associated with the terms 'sustainable' or 'sustainability' and associated with the 17 SDGs. The sample includes 27 local universities across the UAE. The collected data from universities' websites are analyzed using AntConc, a software for textual analysis. Only nine universities included a general term for sustainability in their documents. There was a mention of only six SDGs, and SDG9, followed by SDG4, were the most mentioned ones. The performance of the higher educational institutions in sustainability and how these are communicated should be focused strategically. The study will show the way to look at local practices when it comes to SDG communication and be the catalyst for comparative studies that can help establish best practices and guidelines for universities in the region.

Keywords:

SDGs, Sustainable Development, United Arab Emirates, mission, vision

1. Introduction

Due to the rapid technological and social development in the United Arab Emirates, education has been one of the top national priorities, and in 2021 it has been given special emphasis in the national agenda [1]. Higher education also is an ever-advancing field in the UAE; the first higher education institution was established in 1976 [2], and now in 2023, there

are 73 accredited higher education institutes in the UAE, including 38 universities, 20 colleges, 9 academies, and 6 institutes [3].

Sustainability has been on the UAE national agenda not only recently but since days of the past. The late Sheikh Zayed has numerous sayings and quotes that embody this care and keenness for sustainability and preserving the environment. One example is the following quote: "Now, we live on this blessed land, and we are responsible for preserving our environment and wildlife not only for ourselves but also for our children and grandchildren [4]." This legacy continues to this day and is culminated by dedicating the year 2023 to sustainability with the theme "Today for Tomorrow [5]."

Universities initially reflected their mission with teaching, but in the 19th century, teaching and research became their specific feature. At present, universities are contributors to social change and not solely teaching and research entities [6]. Higher education sector is going through major transformations and challenges in the 21st century. Efficiency, effectiveness, participation, leadership, and environmental responsiveness are mentioned as the five governance issues in academic institutions [7]. Therefore, it is much more a necessity than before to develop an effective institutional strategy based on the priorities of higher educational institutions. Strategic planners of today need to establish a more thorough, professional approach to strategy development. Clarity and transparency about institutional performance, strategic intent, and sought outcomes should be clear [8]. Allison and Kaye [9] mention two critical outcomes of strategic planning: it helps the organizations to make clear decisions on the purpose and strategy and make them committed to these decisions.

Vision statements lead and inspire organizations for a better future. Mission statements define and guide an organization's management purpose [10]. They are an instrument for the strategic management process. Mission statements are important because it helps to manage the relationships between the organization and stakeholder groups and address relevantly to each stakeholder strategically [11]. The mission and vision statements are the face of the organizational strategy and determinations [12]. Studies state that vision must agree with the values of the organization [13].

Fantauzzi et al. [6] refer to the studies done in several countries, and in their paper, they mention several factors which influence the mission statements of the universities, such as their history, the government or market impact on them, and their cultural background. They refer to findings of studies done in Turkey, the American context, Wales, Scotland, England, Ireland, Ukraine, and Spain with respect to their mission and vision statements, and state that within the Italy context, official statements are not thoroughly investigated because the strategic planning is new to their higher education.

Sustainability is a new priority for every kind of organization, including universities. Sustainable management of campuses is important because universities occupy large areas with different types of facilities and a high population, and thus, they need to utilize their current resources by thinking about the future generation. Moreover, their graduates will serve their communities, and they need to learn how to apply sustainability [14].

Fantauzzi et al. [6] discuss the concept of a sustainable campus through various studies conducted about it. Some studies emphasize the economic, environmental, and social perspectives, and the environmental one prevails. Some universities adopt a broader definition of it, and they see themselves as having a major role in achieving sustainable

development and guiding societies. A sustainable university is defined in some studies as a university that uses its sources sustainably by having sustainable campuses and creating public awareness of the issue.

Now sustainable development is one of the most significant discussion points for both academia and governments. The 2030 Agenda highlights the importance of an SD education as follows in Goal 4: quality education, which proposes that students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to contribute to SD [15].

Sonetti et al.'s work [16] on Italian universities between 2016 to 2019 related to education for sustainability strategies suggest six ways that universities can implant sustainable development. These are: to include the sustainability concept at all levels, deliver training to curriculum developers, offer executive courses for external stakeholders, promote policies that support sustainable development, involve students with creating learning environments that sustain sustainability, and develop courses for real-life collaborative projects that help for change.

There is no one formula for implementing sustainability in universities. The literature points out to many ways, methods, and approaches. Table 1 summarizes how universities contribute to SGSs.

Table 1. How universities can contribute to the SDGs [20]

Word	Frequency
Education and learning	Education for SD Contribute to implementing the SDGs Creation of capacities Mobilize and involve youth
Research	Research on SDGs Inner and trans-disciplinary research Innovations and solutions Local and national implementation Creation of capacities for research
Governance, culture, and University Activities	University governance and management aligned with the SDGs Strategic planning incorporating the principles of SDInclusion of the SDGs accountability Sustainable campuses
	Public commitment Cooperation and alliances Action and intersectoral dialogue Development of policies and advocacy that promote the SDGs Mobilization and positioning of the

Word	Frequency
Social leadership	sector in favor of the SDGs Demonstrate commitment to the university sector

In the light of brief information on the changing role of universities, the importance of sustainability, and an overview of how universities are integrating sustainability into their practices, this paper aims to analyze how universities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have incorporated sustainability and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their mission, vision, and value statements. The content on the official websites of the UAE universities- the declaration of the mission, vision, and values have been analyzed to understand to what extent the universities integrate sustainability and communicate them officially to their stakeholder groups. The study focuses on mission, vision, and value statements leaving out other types of information, such as the strategic planning of universities or any other relevant source or practice.

2. Results and Discussions

2.1. Methodology

The study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do the mission, vision, and value statements, in general, reflect the sustainability of the higher educational institutions investigated?

RQ2: To what extent do mission, vision, and values statements reflect elements of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs)?

The study employed a quantitative content analysis method to explore elements of SDGs by looking for keywords associated with the terms 'sustainable' or 'sustainability' and associated with any of the 17 SDGs. The sample includes 27 local universities, excluding the branches of international universities and excluding other types of higher education institutes such as colleges, academies, or institutes.

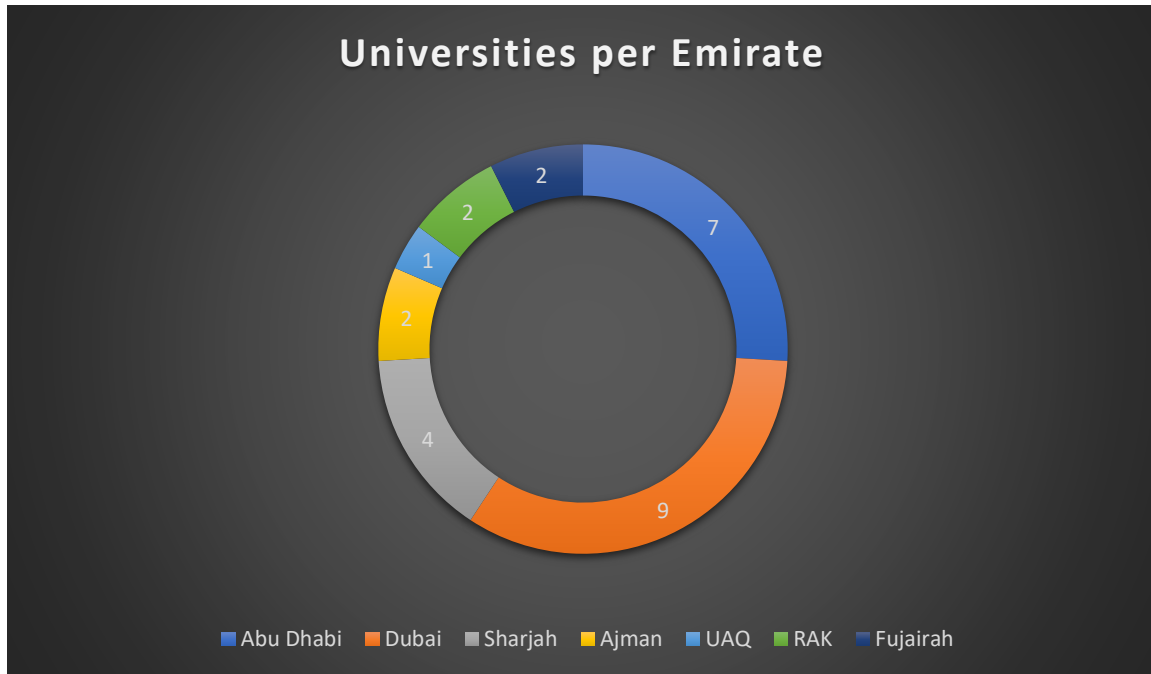
The analysis is done on the expressed vision, mission, and values of these universities on their websites and looks for a) mention of sustainability and sustainable development in general and b) mention of one (or elements of one) of the 17 UN SDGs.

2.2. Sample

Although there are some variations and nuances in categorizing universities in the UAE, generally, they are public and private, in addition to branches of international universities. Only public and private local universities are included in the sample.

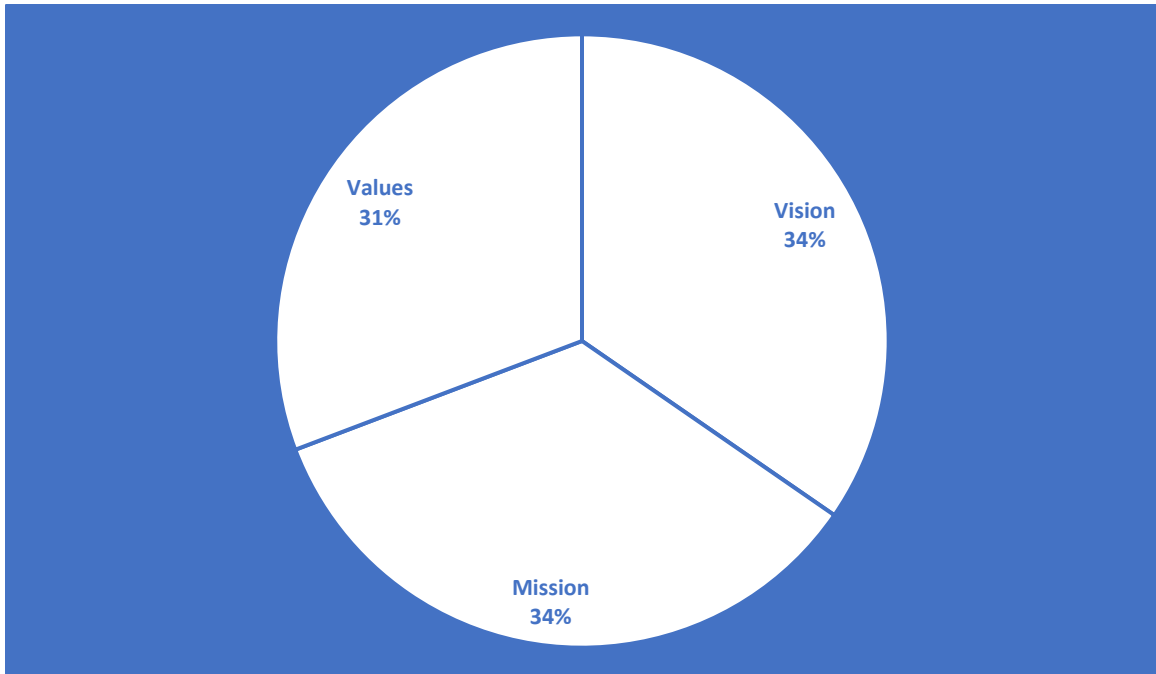
The oldest University is United Arab Emirates University, which was established in 1976, and the most recent one is the University of Khorfakkan which was established in 2022 after being a branch of the University of Sharjah since 2007.

The analysis has been made on two federal and twenty-five private higher educational institutions in the UAE. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the universities with respect to their location. The universities studied are located in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah Emirates, while the two universities are from the other Emirates.



Mission, vision, and value statements are dealt with as documents – with each record as 1 unit of analysis.

Figure 2 shows the statements analyzed. All 27 studied universities had vision and mission statements, but only 24 had value statements. Out of those 24, 4 had variations to the title 'values statements' and names as: "Our Mandate, Education Philosophy, Strategic Priorities, Strategic Pillars."



Out of 27 universities, 10 universities had a specific page on their university website related to sustainable development and related issues. Only 3 universities had a sustainability report on their website.

With respect to research question one, a frequency list has been generated by using AntConc, telling us about the most repeated words in all these documents. AntConc is a free software that is used for corpus and textual analysis¹⁷. It has been used for linguistics studies and large-scale textual analysis in generating academic words in applied linguistics¹⁸ and in word-use analysis in subjects such as natural sciences¹⁹.

Only words that have been repeated a minimum of ten times have been included in the analysis. Connecting words such as and, the, to, etc., and generic words that are not likely to have any significance (such as university, student, or faculty) are excluded from the analysis. Table 2 shows the most repeated words in the mission, vision, and value statements.

Table 2. Most repeated words in statements

Word	Frequency
Research	55
Community	52
Innovation	37
Excellence	29
Development	21
Global	20
Integrity	20
Engagement	18

Word	Frequency
International	17
Health	16
Environment	15
Future	15
Professional	15
Standards	15
Respect	14
Leaders	13
Responsibility	13
Support	12
Work	12
Social	11
Society	11
Transparency	11
Accountability	10
Sustainable	10

The word "development," which was repeated 21 times throughout the analyzed documents, was coupled with different words. Some examples of this are as follows: In the mission statement of a Dubai-based university, the institution is dedicated to "Contributing to the human development of the community in Dubai, UAE, and the region." A Sharjah-based university mentions in its mission statement that it prepares its students "for an effective contribution to the development of their societies and the global community." Human development, educational, technological, societal, and economic development were mentioned. The means of development were through being competent, socially responsible, innovative, creative, entrepreneurship, interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and quality programs. The scope of development covered Dubai, UAE, the region, and in some statements, the world.

The word sustainable was repeated ten times. Some examples of how they are coupled with other words are as follows: "Sustainable collaborative arrangements," sustainable environment, sustainable initiatives, and sustainable quality healthcare.

The keywords analysis is conducted on 78 documents in two stages. In Stage 1, the analysis took into consideration some keywords, and in Stage 2, elements of 17 SDG were sought in the analyzed documents.

Stage 1: Using keywords: sustainability, sustainable development, SDGs.

Only 9 (33.3%) universities had at least one of the keywords sustainability, sustainable, or SDGs in at least one of the analyzed documents (mission, vision, or value statements). A total of 17 keywords were found in these 9 universities, and Table 3 shows in which document this is observed. Value statements carry more keywords related to sustainability.

Table 3. Sustainability mentioned in the statements

Type of Document	Vision	Mission	Values	Total
Number of Keywords	3	6	8	17

Below are some examples of how it is mentioned in the mission, vision, and value statements.

In the mission of an Abu Dhabi federal university:

"The University aims to reinvigorate the educational journey by fostering research and paving the way for lifelong learning that exceeds expectations and meets the needs of society in order to achieve sustainable development.

In the vision of an Ajman-based university:

To be a leading international Academic Healthcare Institution through the integration of quality health professions education, research, healthcare, and social accountability for sustainable community development.

One of the values of a Ras Al Khaimah-based university is Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and it is defined as "to encourage creative, enterprising ideas and the translation of those ideas into sustainable initiatives."

Stage 2: Using elements of the 17 UN SDGs as keywords:

The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals [20] that are searched in the analyzed documents are as follows:

1. No Poverty
2. Zero Hunger
3. Good Health and Well-being
4. Quality Education
5. Gender Equality
6. Clean Water and Sanitation
7. Affordable and Clean Energy
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth
9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure
10. Reduced Inequalities
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities
12. Responsible Consumption and Production
13. Climate Change
14. Life Below Water
15. Life on Land
16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions
17. Partnerships for the Goals

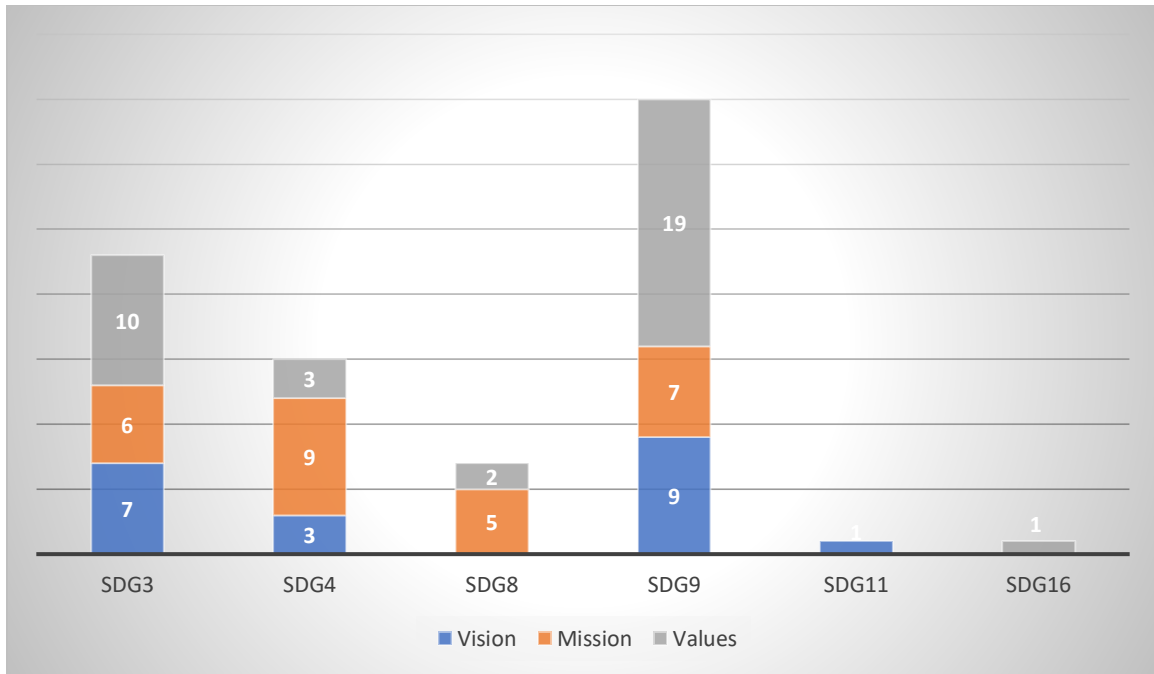


Figure 3. SDGs and type of statements

It is noted that the most common SDG in all the documents analyzed is SDG9- Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (42.6%), followed by SDG3- Good Health and Well-being (28%), and the third one is SDG4- Quality Education (18.3%). SDG9 and SDG3 are mostly found in the Values Statement, but SDG4 and SDG8 are found mostly in the mission statements. The other SDGs mentioned are SDG8- Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG11- Sustainable Cities and Communities, and SDG16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.

Words that have slight variations to the words of the SDG titles were also included in the analysis. For example, SDG4 (Quality Education) was presented as “education that meets international standards” and “world-class education.”

Table 4 shows the number of keywords found in all the studied documents related to each of the six SDGs.

Table 4. Number of SDG mentions in documents

SDG		Number of keywords found in all documents analyzed	%
SDG3	Good Health and Well-being	23	28%
SDG4	Quality Education	15	18.3%
SDG8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	7	8.5%
SDG9	Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure	35	42.6%
SDG11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	1	1.2%
SDG16	Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	1	1.2%
Total		82	

Table 5. SDG mentions by universities

SDG3	5
SDG4	10
SDG8	6
SDG9	21
SDG11	1
SDG16	1

SDG9 is most repeated overall (35 times) in the analyzed documents and is found in 21 out of 25 universities. SDG3, which is the second most repeated overall (23), is only found in 5 out of 25 universities. Some SDGs are more spread out through a large number of universities, and others are concentrated in a few universities. This gives us a hint that the increase in the number of SDGs mentioned overall does not necessarily give us an indication about representation – especially in the case of SDG3 (Health and Well-being), which was mostly found in health and medicine-specialized universities.

SDG4 (overall 15) and SDG8 (overall 7) were also cited in a proportional number of universities (10 and 6, respectively), and these are not specifically mentioned by a few universities. In SDG11 and SDG16, they were only mentioned once overall, and only one university mentioned each of them.

3. Concluding Remarks

The study looked at to which extent higher educational institutions in the United Arab Emirates declared in their mission, vision, and value statements sustainability and sustainable development goals (SDGs). The official websites of the universities are taken into consideration in the analysis. The sample was formed from local universities. The aim was to analyze what aspects of sustainability UAE universities are focusing on communicating to their external stakeholders.

Only 9 out of the 27 studied universities included a general term for sustainability, which reflects poor visibility in general on sustainable developments. Furthermore, looking at the data, the researchers identify a lack of visibility in most of the SDGs (only 6 SDGs were visible in the analyzed documents). Even for those 6 SDGs visible, one of them (SDG3) is concentrated in two universities, and two (SDG11 and SDG16) were only visible once. On the other hand, the top visible SDG was SDG9 which was cited at least once in 21 universities out of 27, followed by SDG4, which was cited in 10 universities at least once.

Representation of SDGs resonated well with higher educational institutions. But at the same time, one would have expected to see other SDGs mentioned. SDG9, Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure were the top mentioned in all documents analyzed. Universities' need to have collaborations with the industry, and employability is one of the reasons for this collaboration. Also, research and innovation are the core pillars of a higher educational institution. Higher educational institutions are impacting the landscape with

buildings and facilities, so how you manage the infrastructure is important. One would have expected to have more mention of SDG4- Quality Education. Some critical SDGs that could be incorporated could be SDG 12- Responsible Consumption and Production, and SDG10- Reduced Inequalities.

The study is an analysis of communication of sustainability over the official documents displayed on the websites. This does not provide us with information on their actual performance. The ranking systems that the higher educational institutions are part of in the United Arab Emirates give us a picture of their performance. The United Arab Emirates is part of two ranking systems. One of them is the IU Greenmetric World University Rankings, and the other one is the Stars. Communication of sustainability through official documents is important; however, interpreting this by linking this to performance should be done with caution. Higher educational institutions which are performing well on sustainability and part of any ranking systems should consider how to effectively communicate sustainability and link it with their strategic documents. At the same time, what is communicated can also be misleading, and communication may sometimes not accurately reflect the performance. However, the communication of all efforts does create perceptions and reputations about institutions. Thus, communication of sustainability could be taken strategically as well. Organizations too often have no clear understanding of what their strategic vision and mission statements are and how they serve as guiding philosophies for management staff [10]. Thus, the underlying reasons behind strategic planning in higher education institutions should be communicated internally.

The study focused on local universities in the UAE. Further research can analyze the dedicated pages for sustainability to identify trends in visibility and coverage of initiatives and activities conducted by universities and to tally awards or ranking systems universities have.

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