Paths to an Innovative, Humane and Sustainable University: The Creation of the Pro-Rectorate of Citizenship and Sustainability at UFMS

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Abstract. The establishment of the Pro-Rectorate of Citizenship and Sustainability at the Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul (Procids/UFMS) marks an innovative milestone in Brazilian university governance, consolidating an institutional model that strategically integrates citizenship and sustainability into higher education. This pioneering initiative underscores UFMS's commitment to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), demonstrating how universities can actively contribute to sustainable development in its multiple dimensions. The Pro-Rectorate consists of the Citizenship Board (Dicid) and the Sustainability Board (Dides), both responsible for coordinating and promoting actions focused on inclusion, diversity, equity, and sustainable institutional management. While Dicid develops and implements affirmative action and human rights policies, fostering a more inclusive and equitable academic environment, Dides oversees and applies sustainable practices, monitors institutional indicators, and ensures UFMS's participation in national and international sustainability rankings. This innovative organizational structure reinforces the role of higher education institutions as active agents in building more sustainable and socially just societies. UFMS strengthens its leadership in sustainability and citizenship, serving as a reference for other institutions by demonstrating that integrating the SDGs into university management generates concrete and lasting impacts in academia and society.

1. Introduction

In the face of accelerating environmental degradation, social inequality, and geopolitical instability, higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world are increasingly

called upon to play an active role in advancing sustainable development (SD). This global imperative is anchored in the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which serve as a roadmap for building a more just, inclusive, and resilient world [1]. Within this context, universities must transcend their traditional teaching and research missions, integrating sustainability and citizenship into all institutional processes — from governance and planning to pedagogy and infrastructure [2]. In Latin America, universities have been historically engaged in social transformation. However, despite various isolated initiatives, one of the main challenges has been the effective institutionalization of sustainability practices, and policies on citizenship and human rights in their structures. Many HEIs still face difficulties in translating international commitments into coherent and systemic policies that affect the entire community.

The Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS), located in the Midwest region of Brazil, has emerged as a pioneering case in this regard [3,4]. In 2024, the university established a new administrative organization: the Pro-Rectorate of Citizenship and Sustainability (Procids). This innovation integrates social inclusion, equity, institutional governance and sustainability under a single strategic body. By uniting the Citizenship Board (Dicid) and the Sustainability Board (Dides), UFMS has created a transversal governance mechanism capable of incorporating the principles of sustainability, citizenship and human rights into all the university's policies and actions [5]. This article aims to analyze the creation of Procids as an institutional innovation model for SD in higher education (HE). It explores how the university strategically aligned its management and academic initiatives with the SDGs, reinforcing its role as an agent of transformation.
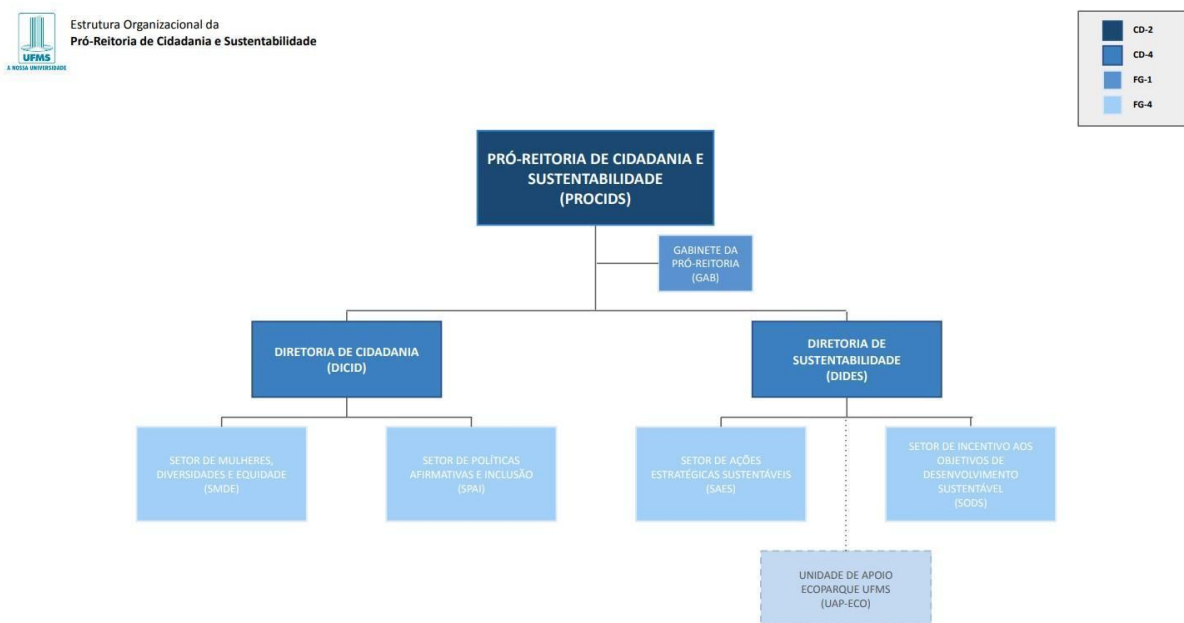

Figure 1. Organizational chart of the Pro-Rectorate of Citizenship and Sustainability (Procids).

2. Scenario

The conceptual foundation of this study is grounded in the multidimensional approach to sustainability developed by Ignacy Sachs, whose work has been pivotal in redefining development paradigms. Sachs proposed that genuine sustainable development cannot be reduced to environmental protection alone; rather, it must simultaneously address

ecological, social, economic, territorial, cultural, and political dimensions [6]. This integrated understanding of sustainability implies a systemic and holistic vision in which interdependence between people, ecosystems, institutions, and values plays a central role. Within the field of HEI, this paradigm becomes especially relevant, as universities are not only centers of knowledge production but also active agents in shaping the future of society through their pedagogical choices, institutional policies, and operational practices.

In this context, the notion of institutional sustainability emerges as a complex and dynamic construct. It encompasses not only the implementation of environmentally responsible practices, but also the promotion of social justice, democratic governance, cultural diversity, and ethical integrity. At the level of university governance, sustainability must be integrated into strategic planning mechanisms, quality assurance systems, curricular design, infrastructure development, and participatory decision-making processes. Institutions that embrace this paradigm demonstrate not only environmental commitment but also maturity, coherence of mission, and long-term resilience. In the UFMS case, this vision is embodied in the creation of the Procids and in the structuring of transversal policies that institutionalize inclusion, human rights, and sustainable development.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative and documental approach, centered on the systematic analysis of a broad set of official institutional documents. The primary sources include the UFMS Institutional Development Plan (PDI), integrated with the Pedagogical Institutional Project (PPI), which together establish the strategic direction of the university and its educational philosophy [7]. This material describes the institutional mission, vision and values, incorporating, among others, sustainability and citizenship as one of its cross-cutting principles. Another important source is the UFMS Sustainability Policy [8], which formalizes the university's commitment to the UN 2030 Agenda and establishes the Sustainable UFMS Program. This initiative is structured through instruments such as the Sustainable Logistics Plan (PLS), the Solid and Health Services Waste Management Plans (PGRS/PGRSS), the Annual Procurement Plan (PCA), and the Carbon Neutral UFMS Program.

The analysis also incorporates the UFMS Report on the Sustainable Development Goals, which presents the institutional mapping of teaching, research, extension, and management activities aligned with the 2030 Agenda [9]. The 2024 report also introduces the pioneering inclusion of SDG 18 (Ethnic-Racial Equality), an innovation developed in Brazil to address historical racial injustices and to promote ethnic-racial equity in public institutions [10]. The study also examines internal programs and policies developed by Procids and its two core boards: the Citizenship Board (Dicid) and the Sustainability Board (Dides). These include policies on accessibility, gender equity, racial inclusion, anti-harassment, environmental management, and integration of SDGs into projects and disciplines.

The methodological procedure consisted of a qualitative content analysis of these documents, focusing on the identification of institutional strategies, normative frameworks, programmatic actions, and measurable impacts that reflect the integration of sustainability and citizenship into the university's operational and academic logic. This documental research was complemented by the triangulation of data from international sustainability rankings, such as QS World University Rankings: Sustainability [11], Times Higher Education (THE) [12] and UI GreenMetric World University Rankings, in which UFMS ranked 68th in 2024 out of 1,477 institutions from 95 countries, 10th in Latin America and 4th in Brazil [13].

3. Results and Discusiions

The establishment of Procids at UFMS in late 2024 represents a transformative milestone in the trajectory of HE in Brazil. This innovation emerges not as an isolated administrative adjustment, but as a reconfiguration of institutional governance inspired by the values of democratic participation, environmental responsibility, and social justice. Conceived in the new administration of Rector Camila Ítavo and Vice-rector Albert Schiaveto, who made a commitment to an innovative, humane and sustainable university, the initiative reflects a strategic movement aimed at building an institution that is more sensitive to contemporary demands. It stems from a deliberate process of strategic reflection led by the university's central administration and materialized through participatory dialogues involving multiple stakeholders, including faculty, students, administrative staff, and representatives from social movements. The goal was to design a structure capable of responding to the complex and intertwined challenges of our time — climate emergency, social inequalities, systemic racism, and threats to democratic coexistence, within the sphere of HE.

Figure 2. UFMS Management Tripod 2024-2028: Innovative, Sustainable, and Humane

Formally incorporated into the UFMS PDI/PPI for the 2025-2030 cycle, the creation of Procids addresses the need for systemic coordination of policies related to equity, diversity, human rights, environmental management, and sustainable development [7]. The PDI/PPI identifies these agendas not as auxiliary functions, but as strategic pillars that must permeate all dimensions of the institution, from its pedagogical matrix to its infrastructure and external relations. By centralizing these responsibilities within a transversal and permanent administrative unit, UFMS breaks with traditional bureaucratic models and embraces a governance model grounded in ethical, political, and ecological commitments.

Procids is composed of two complementary boards, among which the Citizenship Board (Dicid) plays a central role in promoting equity, diversity, and human rights at UFMS. Comprising the Affirmative Action and Inclusion Sector (Spai) and the Women, Diversity, and Equity Sector (Smude), Dicid is responsible for coordinating citizenship-related policies and actions that foster an inclusive and welcoming academic environment. Its mission includes the development and articulation of institutional strategies for the promotion of social justice, the implementation of affirmative action and accessibility measures, and the identification and removal of barriers that hinder equal participation within the university.

Dicid leads several institutional programs such as Diverse UFMS, Indigenous UFMS, I'm a Woman UFMS, and I'm 60+ UFMS, which are structured around specific goals and indicators aimed at promoting inclusion across dimensions as gender, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. These initiatives reflect UFMS's systemic commitment to equity and are implemented across all ten UFMS campuses. In addition to supporting underrepresented groups in accessing and completing HE, Dicid also encourages the development of research, teaching, and extension projects focused on inclusion. Through an integrated and

multidimensional approach, the board not only coordinates structural reforms but also reinforces a culture of human rights and social responsibility across the institution.

Organized into two specialized sectors, the Strategic Sustainable Actions Sector (Saes) and the Sector for Promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals (Sods), Dides is the unit responsible for coordinating and articulating environmental, economic, and social sustainability practices throughout UFMS. Dides is tasked with the formulation, monitoring, and continuous improvement of sustainability policies, ensuring their effective integration into university operations, planning, and governance. It plays a central role in the implementation of the Sustainable UFMS Program, which operationalizes the university's Sustainability Policy through a series of instruments. These documents are designed to guide institutional actions in areas such as energy efficiency, water conservation, mobility, procurement, and solid waste management, with targets, timelines, and indicators.

The coordinated work of Dicid and Dides enables Procids to operate as a transversal governance body, promoting institutional transformation through an integrated and inclusive approach. While Dicid focuses on social equity and accessibility, Dides ensures that sustainability principles are embedded in infrastructure and governance. This synergy results in impactful initiatives, such as mental health programs, violence prevention measures, accessible digital tools, and the curricular integration of the SDGs, demonstrating a comprehensive vision of sustainability that guides how UFMS educates, manages, and engages with society. More than a bureaucratic innovation, the creation of Procids constitutes a cultural shift in university governance. It challenges sectoral logics and fosters a sense of shared responsibility, encouraging the stakeholders to recognize themselves as co-responsible for building a university that is more innovative, humane and sustainable.

4. Citizenship, Inclusion, and Human Rights in the Academic Environment

The strengthening of citizenship and the promotion of human rights within HEIs have become fundamental components for ensuring inclusive, equitable, and socially transformative academic environments. At UFMS, these principles were institutionalized with renewed vigor through the creation of Procids, particularly via the Citizenship Board (Dicid). This directorate is tasked with developing, implementing, and monitoring institutional policies that promote diversity, equity, accessibility, social justice, and the protection of fundamental rights, with a focus on historically marginalized populations.

UFMS has stood out nationally for consolidating a comprehensive ecosystem of structured programs aimed at fostering inclusion and reducing structural inequalities within its academic community. One of the flagship initiatives is Diverse UFMS, a program under construction, directed toward faculty, students, those who identify as black or brown people, quilombola, foreign, refugee or LGBTQIA+. The program goes beyond mere symbolic recognition by operationalizing inclusive pedagogical practices, providing differentiated academic support, and ensuring that access and permanence policies are grounded in affirmative action principles. It represents an institutional commitment to reparative justice, combating structural racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination.

Another pioneering initiative is Indigenous UFMS, its actions are focused not only on ensuring the admission of indigenous students but also on supporting their cultural and academic permanence. The program includes dedicated indigenous student housing, pedagogical and psychological advisory services, and spaces for cultural practices. A notable advancement is the Connected Villages initiative, which addresses the digital divide by expanding internet connectivity and educational technologies to indigenous communities.

This action reflects the university's understanding that true inclusion must extend beyond the walls of the campus and respond to territorial and cultural specificities [14].

The I'm a Woman UFMS Program represents a robust institutional response to the challenges of gender inequality within academia. It brings together multiple strategies that support the academic advancement and well-being of women. Through this program, UFMS has implemented concrete infrastructure measures such as breastfeeding rooms, family-friendly spaces, baby-changing stations, and the installation of "panic buttons" in university facilities to prevent and respond to gender-based violence [15]. These measures are complemented by leadership training opportunities, mentorship networks for female scientists, and gender-sensitized policy reforms. In 2024, the impact of these actions was reflected in the fact that 52.4% of all research, teaching, and extension projects at UFMS were coordinated by women, a significant achievement in terms of gender equity [9].

Likewise, the UFMS 60+ Program and the Open University for the Elderly (UnAPI) are institutional initiatives dedicated to fostering the inclusion and appreciation of the elderly within the university environment [16,17]. UFMS 60+ promotes intergenerational integration through adapted curricular components, extension projects, and support services, emphasizing the recognition of aging as a life stage that deserves rights, visibility, and active involvement in the production and sharing of knowledge. UnAPI/UFMS, as an institutional extension program, organizes and strengthens teaching, research, and extension activities focused on valuing elderly individuals and improving policies and social services aimed at this population. Both initiatives are grounded in the principles of university extension as an educational, cultural, and scientific process that bridges academic and social knowledge, encourages interdisciplinarity and intersectorality, utilizes the university's multi-campus structure, and expands opportunities for community participation in academic life.

An equally impactful initiative is Take Care, I Love You Program, a university-wide well-being and mental health program that brings together psychological counseling, academic guidance, medical services, and emotional support strategies for the academic community. The action adopts a preventive and community-centered approach, focusing on reducing stigma around mental health issues and promoting collective care. This initiative gained further relevance in the post-pandemic context, reinforcing the university's role as a space of safety and emotional support [18]. In addition, UFMS has adopted a series of institutional policies that reinforce its inclusive governance model. The Accessibility Plan ensures physical, digital, pedagogical, and attitudinal accessibility across campuses [19]. The Policy for the Prevention and Combat of Harassment establishes protocols for dealing with moral and sexual harassment, with victim-centered approaches and interdisciplinary response teams [20]. All of these efforts are directly aligned with SDGs 5, 10, 16 and 18.

Through this integrated, and multidimensional approach, UFMS has succeeded in fostering a campus environment that is not only welcoming and inclusive but also structurally committed to human dignity, rights-based education, and democratic values. The university's governance model illustrates how citizenship and human rights can be meaningfully embedded within HEIs — not as isolated programs or departments, but as fundamental principles that shape institutional culture, policy, and practice. This commitment positions UFMS as a reference in inclusive education and offers a replicable model for other universities aiming to align academic excellence with social transformation.

5. Sustainability Practices and Environmental Governance

The institutionalization of sustainability at UFMS was significantly advanced with the

establishment of the Sustainability Board (Dides) in 2021, initially designated as the Sustainable Development Board under the Rector's Office. Subsequently, the university's sustainability agenda has achieved considerable institutional consolidation and substantive depth, largely through initiatives coordinated by Dides. Currently functioning as one of the two boards within the Procids, it holds the primary mandate for the supervision of environmental management, monitoring of institutional sustainability indicators, and the strategic alignment of university operations with the SDGs. Integral to this comprehensive undertaking is the continuous implementation and refinement of the UFMS Sustainable Program, an extensive institutional initiative instituted by the UFMS Sustainability Policy.

This policy guides a comprehensive set of actions that encompass not only technical and infrastructural improvements but also governance innovations that position sustainability as a core value within university management [8]. One of the most emblematic instruments of the Sustainable UFMS program is the Sustainable Logistics Plan (PLS), structured to address eight strategic areas of action: material consumption, energy efficiency, water and sewage management, solid waste management, quality of life in the workplace, sustainable procurement and contracting, staff mobility, and environmental education [21]. By the end of 2024, UFMS had made significant progress toward the 59 targets established for the 2022-2024 period [22]. Each axis of this plan was detailed with specific goals, timelines, performance indicators, and responsible units, allowing for transparent tracking of progress across the university's various campuses and departments.

The PLS/UFMS 2022-2024 demonstrated considerable success, with concrete results reflecting an average target achievement of 92% over the triennium. Regarding consumable materials, notable advancements included the phasing out of disposable plastic cups and the comprehensive digitalization of administrative and academic processes through a significant digital transformation initiative [23]. Illustratively, in 2024, 95% of all undergraduate and graduate diplomas were issued in a digital format, and a cumulative total of 295,508 certificates for sports, teaching, research, and extension activities were delivered virtually between 2022 and 2024 [22]. In the domain of energy, UFMS incorporated new energy-efficient equipment's, replaced conventional lamps with LEDs, advanced its solar energy generation capacity, with 4,972 photovoltaic modules installed, and in a pioneering move, built a Green Hydrogen Plant on the Cidade Universitária campus [24].

The waste management initiatives resulted in a reduction in total waste generated, featured impactful collection events such as the Zero Waste Week and Electronic Waste Collection Week, facilitated new accreditations for recycling cooperatives, and included enhancements to on-campus composting facilities [25,26]. Sustainable mobility was actively promoted through the expansion of bicycle parking infrastructure, and the pioneering Eletroposto UFMS, which serves as both a public fast-charging station for electric vehicles and a laboratory for sustainable mobility research [27]. Moreover, socio-environmental education efforts achieved their goals, exemplified by initiatives like the SDG Multipliers course, fostering a cultural shift towards sustainability throughout the community [28].

Sustainability at UFMS is profoundly embedded within its academic architecture. Since 2018, it is requested that all proposals for teaching, research, or extension projects explicitly delineate their alignment with one or more SDGs. Commencing in the second semester of 2023, this directive was further extended to the teaching plans for all undergraduate disciplines. Such a comprehensive policy framework ensures that sustainability is not relegated to a peripheral status but is, instead, fully integrated into the institution's core curriculum and research agenda. Consequently, over 20,000 projects were registered during

the 2018–2023 period, collectively mapping more than 45,000 distinct SDG associations [3]. This engagement has significantly fostered interdisciplinary dialogue, catalyzed innovative research addressing complex sustainability challenges, and promoted the widespread dissemination of SDG-related knowledge across diverse fields of study.

The institutional commitment to sustainability has also brought UFMS increased visibility and recognition at the international level. In 2024, the university reached the 68th position globally among 1,477 institutions in the UI GreenMetric World University Ranking, standing out for its performance in indicators such as infrastructure, energy use, waste management, transportation, water, and education [13]. Additionally, it was ranked among the top 15 Brazilian universities and the 31 best in South America in the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2025 [11]. These achievements underscore not only the consistency and effectiveness of UFMS's practices but also the relevance of its integrated governance model, which links sustainability to academic excellence and institutional transparency.

These advancements are aligned with the strategic direction set in the PDI/PPI, which explicitly defines environmental governance as a transversal axis guiding all dimensions of university planning and decision-making. This vision consolidates sustainability not as an isolated initiative but as an organizing principle for the university's future. Looking ahead, UFMS plans to further expand its role on the global stage. A major milestone will be hosting the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP-15) of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS) in 2026. This event will reinforce UFMS's leadership in biodiversity protection and strengthen its profile as a HEI committed to sustainability [29].

6. Results and Impacts

The institutional innovation represented by the creation of Procids at UFMS, combined with the systemic integration of the SDGs, has resulted in tangible and strategic impacts across multiple domains of university life. This transformation has redefined the very structure of governance within the institution. Sustainability and Citizenship, once considered complementary or peripheral themes, are now firmly embedded in the university's core planning, management, and decision-making processes. Through its transversal configuration, Procids coordinates and articulates actions that cut across teaching, research, extension, infrastructure, and human resource management, ensuring that all sectors operate in alignment with a unified vision of sustainability and social justice.

Academically, the adoption of the SDGs as a guiding framework has deeply influenced the university's curricular design and research agenda. The requirement for all teaching plans and academic projects to reference at least one SDG has led to a sharp increase in interdisciplinary and socially relevant initiatives. The university's curriculum now reflects a strong ethical and ecological orientation, contributing to the formation of professionals who are not only technically competent but also socially conscious. In terms of inclusion and equity, the impact of Procids has been especially notable. Institutional data from 2024 reveals that women now represent 49.22% of the university's teaching staff and occupy 44.6% of leadership positions, a significant advance in gender parity, and these achievements are the result of programs such as I'm a Woman UFMS [15].

Furthermore, initiatives such as Diverse UFMS and Indigenous UFMS have strengthened the representation and permanence of historically marginalized groups, promoting a campus environment that values cultural diversity, combats discrimination, and ensures conditions for equal opportunity. Internationally, the institutional trajectory of UFMS has garnered recognition and prestige. The university's consistent improvement in sustainability practices

has been acknowledged by key global rankings. These rankings not only validate UFMS's commitment to environmental and social responsibility but also position the university as one of the leaders among HEIs in Brazil and Latin America.

Beyond the academic and administrative spheres, UFMS has expanded its reach and deepened its engagement with surrounding communities. Through programs like Take Care, I Love You, focused on mental health and emotional well-being, and targeted actions led by Procids for the most vulnerable groups, the university has transcended the classroom to influence regional development agendas. These programs are not symbolic, they are anchored in robust planning, policy, and infrastructure, and their results are visible in improved quality of life, increased access to services, and a stronger sense of belonging.

In sum, the integration of citizenship and sustainability at the institutional level has enabled UFMS not only to meet the targets outlined by the 2030 Agenda but also to anticipate and respond proactively to emerging challenges. This forward-thinking approach demonstrates that HEIs can and should act as catalysts for systemic transformation. By aligning their structures, pedagogies, and community engagement strategies with sustainability principles, universities like UFMS are helping to shape a more equitable, inclusive, and resilient society, or as our tripod, human, innovative and sustainable.

7. Final Considerations

The establishment of the Procids at UFMS constitutes a groundbreaking milestone in the transformation of HEIs into agents of systemic change. By creating an administrative structure that unites the Dicid and Dides under a transversal and strategic framework, UFMS not only responds to the urgent demands of the 2030 Agenda, but also advances an institutional model that integrates social justice, environmental stewardship, democratic governance, and inclusive education into the core of university planning and operations.

The innovation represented by Procids transcends traditional sectoral approaches, promoting a cross-cutting logic in which citizenship, equity, human rights, and sustainability are not treated as isolated or complementary agendas but as structuring axes of the university's identity and mission. The results presented in this study demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach: from the formal incorporation of the SDGs into academic curricula and management policies to the implementation of targeted inclusion programs and environmental initiatives aligned with international best practices.

UFMS has institutionalized an ethical-political commitment to groups historically excluded from access to quality HE. The policies coordinated by Dicid reflect a profound understanding of structural inequalities and a willingness to confront them through concrete, measurable actions that guarantee access, permanence, and academic success. In parallel, the Dides has played a decisive role in integrating environmental responsibility into campus infrastructure and daily operations, guiding the Sustainable UFMS Program through strategic instruments. These actions are supported by indicators, participatory mechanisms, and transparency tools that reinforce institutional maturity and accountability.

The transformative scope of Procids can also be measured by the international recognition that UFMS has achieved. The university's rise in sustainability rankings is not merely a matter of positioning, but evidence of the consistency, depth, and replicability of its governance model. These accomplishments signal to the academic community and to policymakers that integrating the SDGs into HE governance is not only desirable but feasible, scalable, and impactful. Another noteworthy aspect is the cultural shift promoted by Procids. The articulation between citizenship and sustainability has fostered a new institutional ethos,

grounded in collective responsibility, intersectoral cooperation, and a long-term vision of development. This ethos permeates both strategic documents and grassroots initiatives. This synergy between macro and micro levels of governance is key to understanding the breadth and depth of the institutional change taking place at UFMS.

Finally, the experience of UFMS reveals that it is both possible and necessary for HEIs to assume a transformative role in the face of today's global challenges, such as climate change, social inequality, and democratic fragility. The creation of Procids represents a strategic shift toward an integrated governance model in which sustainability, equity, and citizenship are not peripheral agendas but central pillars of institutional development. By embedding the SDGs into its curricula, policies, and operations, UFMS has redefined academic excellence through a lens of ethical responsibility and social commitment. This transversal and participatory approach has enabled the university to achieve tangible results — internally, in terms of inclusion and sustainability, and externally, through national and international recognition. More than an administrative innovation, the Procids model affirms the potential of universities to act as agents of systemic change, offering a replicable path toward building more just, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Authors Contribution

All authors contributed substantially to the work. **J.V.C**. was the lead author, responsible for conceiving the research idea and writing the original draft. **L.C.C**. and **L.C**. supported the lead author, contributing to data curation and writing support. **V.D.S.Q**., **C.C.B.F.Í**., and **A.S.S**. contributed to the writing and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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