



# Transformative Changes and Institutional Challenges towards Sustainability: The Case of an Indonesian Private University

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**Abstract.** Universities are widely recognized as agents of change that promote awareness of sustainable development and prepare future leaders to address global environmental and social challenges. The demand for universities to contribute solutions to these issues is increasing, as their role in implementing policies, programs, and institutional initiatives becomes increasingly important. This study aims to explain the role of universities in developing countries, particularly private universities, in achieving sustainable development. A case study approach was employed to obtain more detailed information from the University of Surabaya, a private university in Indonesia. In-depth interviews, group discussions, observations, and document analysis have been undertaken to enrich the data. The study shows that private universities face more complex considerations and challenges in achieving sustainable development. The findings highlight those institutional strategies in private universities are often shaped by financial considerations and regulatory requirements that influence institutional priorities and resource allocation. The study also demonstrates the importance of leadership commitment and organizational culture in supporting sustainability implementation within universities.

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## 1. Introduction

Sustainable development is defined as development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs<sup>1</sup>. United Nations (UN) Member States approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, which offers a common roadmap for peace and prosperity for people and the planet now and in the future. The initiatives to establish policies, create and implement programs, and act in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework reflect the commitment of nations worldwide, including Indonesia, to promoting

sustainable development. The SDGs have become a crucial strategic issue, prompting the government, the corporate sector, and society to work together to achieve them by 2030<sup>2</sup>.

Notably, universities, as higher education institutions (HEIs), play an important role in achieving sustainable development. They also contribute to educating future leaders who are expected to support the successful implementation of the SDGs. Nonetheless, to enact the necessary changes in educational institutions, the principles of sustainability should be incorporated into organizational culture and placed at the heart of HEIs' strategies, including curricula and operational activities<sup>3</sup>.

The concept of sustainable development has different interpretations. Still, in essence, it is an approach to development that balances different and often competing needs with an awareness of environmental, social, and economic limitations<sup>1</sup>. Sustainable development in HEIs includes three dimensions, namely environmental, social, and financial<sup>4,5</sup>, which must be connected to research, creativity, and technological development to contribute to sustainable development<sup>6</sup>.

In both formal and informal contexts, sustainability education aims to offer learning, training, and hands-on experience to promote community involvement, personal development, and transformation in both the natural and human worlds<sup>7</sup>. The goal of sustainability implementation in HEIs is to provide students with the capabilities and competencies not only to learn and generate knowledge, but also to improvise, adapt, innovate, and be creative<sup>8</sup>. In addition, the reputation and prestige of HEIs are also greatly influenced by sustainability<sup>3,9</sup>. The HEIs with the highest rankings are those that foster a culture of sustainability and have a long-term perspective on their students' growth<sup>9</sup>.

Numerous studies have investigated sustainability practices in HEIs. For example, the previous study<sup>3</sup> examined how HEIs affect sustainability and the difficulties and barriers involved in this process. They highlighted the importance of incorporating sustainability principles into organizational culture and placing them at the center of HEIs' strategy, including curricula and operating procedures. Other research<sup>10</sup> proposed an alternate method for evaluating sustainability governance in HEIs. The method focuses on how the HEIs address the functional requirements of sustainability governance across five dimensions: politics, profession, organization, knowledge, and the public. Furthermore, another study<sup>11</sup> identified factors influencing sustainability initiatives in HEIs. The study found that institutional commitment to sustainability and guidance for sustainability implementation in HEIs received the highest scores when considering both internal and external factors. They also argued that encouraging external cooperation is crucial because it can benefit both sides and significantly help achieve the SDGs.

Although various studies on sustainability in the context of HEIs have been conducted, most focus on HEIs in developed countries<sup>4,7,10,12,13</sup> or public HEIs<sup>11,14</sup>. There are still a few studies that discuss sustainability in private HEIs. Thus, there is a gap in studies of sustainability in the context of private HEIs in developing countries.

Despite the increasing attention to sustainability implementation in HEIs, limited studies have explored how sustainability practices are institutionally integrated within private HEIs in developing countries<sup>3,10,11</sup>. Existing studies mainly discuss sustainability initiatives in public HEIs in developed countries, where governance structures, funding systems, and institutional priorities may differ significantly from those of private HEIs<sup>4,7,10-14</sup>. In particular, there is still limited understanding of how private HEIs balance sustainability agendas with financial dependency, market competitiveness, and regulatory demands<sup>3,11</sup>. As a result, sustainability initiatives in private HEIs may be implemented through diverse unit-level approaches and operational priorities rather than

through a fully integrated governance framework<sup>10,21,22</sup>.

Unlike public HEIs that often receive stronger governmental support and public funding, private HEIs in developing countries are generally more dependent on tuition fees, student enrolment, and market competitiveness to maintain institutional sustainability. These conditions may influence how sustainability initiatives are prioritized, funded, and implemented within the institution. Consequently, environmental and social programs in private HEIs are often shaped not only by environmental and social concerns, but also by financial limitations, accreditation requirements, and institutional survival<sup>3,11</sup>.

Considering the distinctions between public and private HEIs' characteristics that shape how management and academic activities are carried out, this study aims to explore the role of private HEIs in integrating sustainability principles into their operations and contributing to the SDGs at both the national and global levels. The characteristics that differentiate private HEIs from public HEIs serve as a trigger for selecting the University of Surabaya (Ubaya) for in-depth research. Specifically, this study aims to understand how private HEIs, such as Ubaya, respond to, design, implement, and evaluate policies, programs, and activities with a focus on sustainable development. This research objective leads to research questions (RQs) of this study, which are: (i) How does Ubaya, as one of the private HEIs, respond to sustainability issues? and (ii) To what extent are Ubaya's programs, strategies, and operations grounded in the concept of sustainability?

This study contributes to the literature on sustainability in HEIs by providing empirical insights into how sustainability practices are interpreted and implemented within the private HEIs context in a developing country. In particular, the study demonstrates how sustainability initiatives are influenced by institutional governance, financial dependency, and organizational priorities, as well as the challenges of integrating the concept of sustainable development across teaching, research, and community service within a coherent institutional framework.

Based on the literature review, RQs, and findings explored in this study, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of sustainability implementation in private HEIs. The framework illustrates how institutional challenges faced by private universities influence institutional responses and sustainability integration processes, which subsequently contribute to SDG-related outcomes and long-term institutional sustainability. The framework also highlights the interconnected roles of governance, organizational culture, and stakeholder collaboration in supporting the development of sustainable universities within a developing-country context.

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 serves as a guide for understanding how institutional challenges, organizational responses, and sustainability integration processes interact within private HEIs. According to this framework, the study further explores sustainability implementation at Ubaya through a qualitative case study approach, as described in the following methodology section.

## **2. Methodology**

In this study, exploratory research is employed as a valuable approach to understand current events, uncover new insights, pose questions, and assess phenomena from a fresh perspective<sup>15</sup>. This study employs a qualitative research approach to uncover hidden motivations and values while also providing a thorough understanding of specific

phenomena<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, this study is designed to understand respondents' perceptions, viewpoints, and interpretations of internal and external factors regarding sustainability.

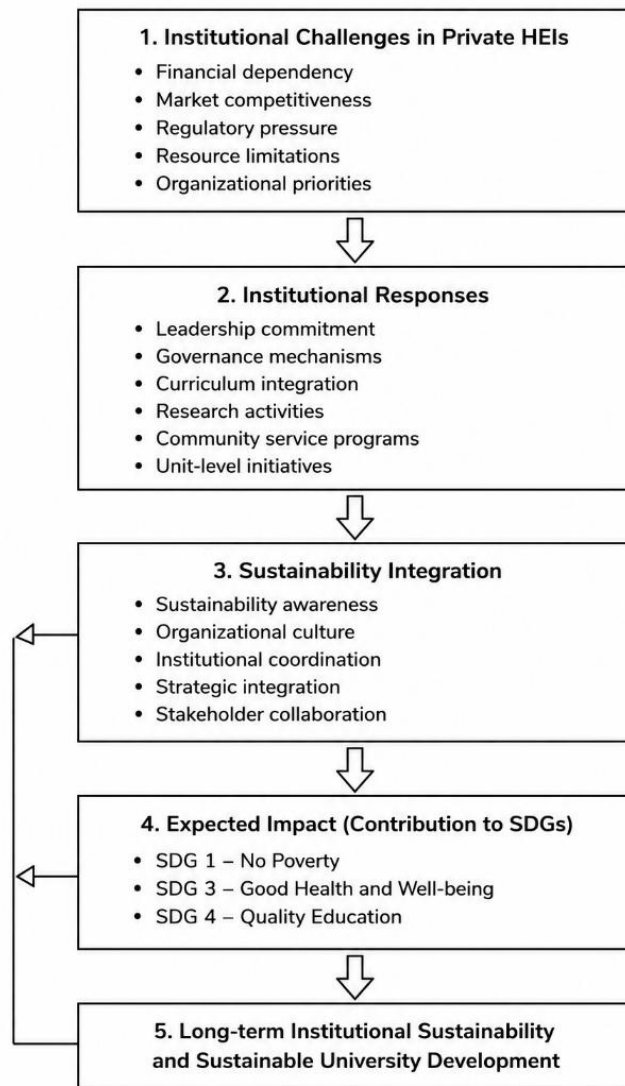


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of sustainability implementation in private HEIs

### 2.1. Data Collection

This research seeks to explore further the sustainability practices undertaken by private HEIs in Indonesia. Therefore, qualitative research was applied in this study, using Ubaya as a case study. This study used a range of data collection methods, including interviews, group discussions, document analysis, and observation.

Ubaya was purposively selected as the case study because it represents a private university operating in a developing-country context, where sustainability implementation is influenced by institutional, financial, and governance-related challenges. In addition, Ubaya has demonstrated various sustainability-related initiatives across teaching, research, and community service activities, making it relevant for exploring how sustainability practices are interpreted and implemented within a private university setting.

This case study involved 15 in-depth interviews with members of the university's top management, including the rector, vice rectors, deans, and heads of supporting units. In addition, four group discussions were conducted with supporting units at the university level, involving both leaders and staff members. Another group discussion was conducted with representatives from the student executive board (*Badan Eksekutif Mahasiswa*).

Each interview session and group discussion was scheduled and managed with the participants and was mostly conducted on campus. The interviews generally lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, and most interviews and group discussions were recorded with participants' consent. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study before the interviews and group discussions were conducted. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participants' identities in the reporting of findings.

During the data collection process, several internal documents were also provided by respondents. These documents included strategic plans, annual operational plans, faculty curricula, and internal reports on research and community service activities at Ubaya. The documents were used to cross-check information collected from interviews and group discussions. In addition, this study collected documents published on the university's official website and public media sources to enrich the data relevant to answering RQs 1 and 2.

## **2.2. Data Analysis**

The data collected from interviews, group discussions, and relevant internal and public documents were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to address the RQs. First, all interview and group discussion recordings were transcribed verbatim to understand the structure, context, and detailed content of the data. The transcripts were then coded and categorized based on the research questions.

The analysis focused on two main themes: (1) how the university responds to sustainability issues through policies, initiatives, and institutional strategies, and (2) how sustainability practices are implemented across teaching, research, and community service activities. The coding process employed keywords related to sustainability awareness, institutional governance, long-term financial viability, organizational culture, regulatory pressure, curriculum integration, research activities, and community service programs.

The analysis process involved cross-checking data from multiple sources to ensure consistency and credibility. Triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from interviews, group discussions, observations, and document analysis<sup>15,16</sup>. The researchers also compared responses among participants from different organizational levels and verified interview findings using institutional documents, public publications, and field observations.

Finally, the findings were interpreted using theories and concepts related to sustainability in HEIs. The analysis also identified relationships among institutional governance, organizational priorities, and sustainability practices in addressing the research questions.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

This study describes how Ubaya understands and practices sustainable development within university operations. The findings reveal that Ubaya demonstrates

its commitment to becoming more flexible in responding to market demand. In the last decade, all components of the academic community and most resources at Ubaya have been encouraged to respond to the requirements of the digital era in Industrial Revolution 4.0. This policy has been developed by university leaders and implemented at all levels, including faculties, supporting units, staff, and students. Most respondents agreed that Ubaya needs to remain adaptive and responsive to changing market demands.

Regarding RQ 1, most respondents are aware of the growing demands from society, organizations, and the government to address sustainability issues by caring for the community and contributing to environmental preservation. Interestingly, the implicit response to sustainability varies throughout the entire university. Leaders at the university and faculty have diverse understandings of what a sustainable university is. Most respondents highlighted that a sustainable university could exist in the long term, whereas others noted that a sustainable university can be demonstrated by how it exists, grows, and improves. Several respondents believed that, as a private university, the most important factor for becoming sustainable is having a stable financial base. This is due to differences in characteristics compared with public universities, which receive government funding. In addition, the majority of private universities' revenue is generated from student tuition fees. Therefore, to maintain campus operations, private universities need to manage their facilities and resources effectively to maintain academic quality and institutional competitiveness.

The variation in respondents' understanding of sustainability also reflects the ongoing process of developing a shared organizational culture regarding sustainability within the university. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that sustainability in HEIs requires not only formal policies and programs, but also a common institutional understanding and cultural integration across organizational levels<sup>3,22</sup>. In this context, sustainability practices appear to depend largely on the awareness and initiatives of individual units and actors within the university.

These findings suggest that long-term financial viability plays a central role in shaping how private universities interpret and implement sustainability initiatives. Unlike public universities that may benefit from greater governmental support, private HEIs are often required to balance sustainability agendas with institutional survival and market competitiveness. This condition may influence the prioritization of programs and resource allocation, resulting in sustainability initiatives that are more pragmatic and operationally driven. Similar challenges have been identified in previous studies, highlighting the influence of institutional resources and governance structures on sustainability implementation in HEIs<sup>3,10,11</sup>.

Moreover, some leaders who participated in this study underline that to maintain strong financial support, Ubaya should demonstrate good governance in managing the resources and facilities in response to market demand. This study found that the rector, vice rectors, deans, and heads of units implemented programs based on the capabilities and competencies of the resources in each unit or faculty. These programs are then documented in the *Sasaran Pokok Program* (SPP), which includes a planning program and a budget prepared by each unit in Ubaya. Once the program is approved at the University level, each unit and faculty will be ready to conduct the program in accordance with the schedule and its SPP. Most activities mentioned in the strategic plan and SPP were also used to measure the lecturer's performance, aligning with the Three Pillars of Higher Education, an obligation for all HEIs in Indonesia to excel in three areas (i.e., teaching, research, and community service).

The findings further demonstrate that sustainability-related activities within the university are closely associated with external performance indicators and regulatory expectations, particularly those linked to The Three Pillars of Higher Education (*Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi*). This finding suggests that sustainability practices are not solely driven by internal environmental or social commitments but are also shaped by institutional accountability and compliance requirements. Similar observations were reported by<sup>12</sup>, who argued that the sustainability implementation in HEIs is often influenced by accountability mechanisms and institutional pressures.

In response to RQ2, the data analysis revealed that every faculty and unit at Ubaya has implemented sustainability programs and activities. Lecturers, staff, and students at Ubaya participate in these programs and activities through curriculum design, research projects, and community service programs. These programs were primarily driven by lecturers and teams who were aware of sustainability issues and sought to fulfill the performance indicators in The Three Pillars of Higher Education. Nonetheless, sustainability-related initiatives concerning infrastructure, facilities, and energy management remain relatively limited.

With the support of human resources, Ubaya demonstrates its dedication to sustainability by advancing energy and facility upgrades, starting with environmental concerns. At present, Ubaya fully supports the efforts of faculty members and ~~unit~~ administrative staff to promote sustainable development. However, the data analysis indicated that university-wide sustainability planning and policy integration are still developing within the institution.

A sustainable university requires a higher education development plan oriented towards green infrastructure. This plan should involve the entire academic community to build a sustainable community and include initiatives to secure funding from various sources for research and development that support the realization of a sustainable university<sup>17</sup>. HEIs need to encourage integration among the implementation of the educational process, research, internal management, and community engagement<sup>17-19</sup>. Moreover, it is necessary to disseminate the green campus concept through research and teaching, promote environmental awareness among all academics, create efforts to conserve natural resources and reduce pollution, and commit to campus design that meets the needs of its users<sup>5,20</sup>.

According to the content analysis, Ubaya launched numerous initiatives to address environmental and social issues, including activities related to curriculum development, research, and community service programs supporting the SDGs<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, these initiatives were implemented across different faculties and supporting units in a decentralized manner. The study indicates that the development of a more comprehensive university-wide sustainability framework and long-term strategic integration remains ongoing, despite the importance of establishing a sustainability vision, mission, and governance structure<sup>21</sup>.

The findings also indicate that leadership plays an important role in facilitating institutional alignment towards sustainability. Although various sustainability-related initiatives have been implemented across faculties and supporting units, the integration of sustainability into a coherent institutional strategy remains evolving. Previous studies emphasize that leadership commitment and strategic governance are essential factors in embedding sustainability within organizational culture and long-term institutional planning<sup>3,10,21</sup>. Without strong institutional coordination, environmental and social programs may remain decentralized and implemented through unit-level initiatives rather

than through an integrated university-wide framework.

Notably, respondents emphasize that the majority of each unit's programs and activities were designed to achieve the Tri Pillars of Higher Education performance indicator rather than directly address sustainability issues. This finding suggests that external performance indicators and institutional accountability mechanisms play an important role in encouraging sustainability-related initiatives within the university.

These findings support the argument that, even though HEIs play a crucial role in social transformation, several obstacles must still be overcome, both internally (e.g., ethical principles in curriculum) and externally (e.g., different types of audiences, stakeholders' needs, and the political environment)<sup>3</sup>. Specifically, there are three types of barriers to implementing sustainability: a lack of awareness, an unorganized HEI's structure, and a lack of resources. To address these challenges, internal communication, organizational culture, and empowerment and involvement should be considered<sup>22</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Sustainability practices in private universities may differ from those implemented in public universities. Regarding RQ1, how Ubaya as a private university responds to sustainability issues, this study indicates that awareness of sustainable university issues exists among leaders at different organizational levels within Ubaya. Respondents showed diverse understandings of the sustainable university concept, including what resources are needed, which indicators are used to measure performance in addressing social and environmental issues, and how to analyze and report on progress towards a sustainable university. Efforts towards becoming a sustainable university were implemented through various unit-level initiatives, indicating opportunities to strengthen institutional coordination and enhance broader contributions to the SDGs.

This case study suggests that sustainability initiatives at Ubaya are still implemented through diverse unit-level approaches, while the integration of sustainability into institutional strategy and governance mechanisms remains evolving<sup>3,10,21</sup>. Sustainability awareness has emerged across various organizational levels; however, a more integrated institutional framework may further strengthen coordination and long-term sustainability implementation within the university<sup>22</sup>.

According to RQ2, which examines the extent to which Ubaya's strategy, programs, and activities contribute to sustainable university development, this study found that various Ubaya units have partially implemented sustainability-related programs. Even though Ubaya has incorporated sustainability concerns into the curriculum, research, and community service, it tends to meet the Tri Pillars of Higher Education performance indicator requirements. In this case study, Ubaya demonstrates its position in the process of understanding and building awareness regarding sustainability. One factor influencing the implementation of sustainability initiatives is the nature of a private university, which relies heavily on long-term financial viability in planning and implementing institutional strategies while responding to market demands and maintaining long-term operations. This study suggests that the development of a sustainable university requires long-term institutional commitment, coordination, and collaboration among relevant stakeholders.

This study contributes to the growing literature on sustainability in HEIs by providing empirical insights into the challenges and dynamics of sustainability

implementation within a private university context in a developing country. The findings highlight that sustainability practices in private HEIs are closely associated with institutional governance, long-term financial viability, organizational culture, and external regulatory demands. The study also emphasizes the importance of institutional alignment in integrating sustainability across teaching, research, and community service activities within a coherent university strategy.

Practically, the findings suggest that university leaders need to strengthen institutional coordination and develop more integrated sustainability governance mechanisms across faculties and supporting units. Sustainability initiatives may become more effective when supported by clear strategic direction, organizational commitment, and long-term institutional planning. For policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of developing policies and support systems that consider the distinctive characteristics and resource limitations faced by private universities in implementing sustainability initiatives.

Nevertheless, this study has several shortcomings that might be resolved in subsequent research. Future studies may expand this research by involving broader stakeholder perspectives, including students, alumni, external partners, and policymakers, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability implementation in HEIs. Comparative studies between public and private HEIs or across different developing-country contexts may also provide deeper insights into how institutional structures, governance systems, and financial conditions influence sustainability practices. In addition, future research may employ mixed-method or quantitative approaches to complement the qualitative findings of this study.

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## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

## **Authors Contribution**

All authors contributed substantially to this study. **E.D.R.** conducted the interviews, group discussions, data collection, data analysis, and drafted the original manuscript. **D.F.K.** conceived the research idea and designed the study, contributed to data interpretation, manuscript review, and critical revisions. **E.D.R.** and **D.F.K.** reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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