


Chapter 10

Sustainable Higher Education Institutions in Emerging Economies: Challenges and Opportunities in the Arab World

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the critical role of sustainability in the higher education sector, emphasising its potential to foster resilience, innovation, and equitable development. At first, the multifaceted dimensions of sustainability in the higher education sector are examined, beginning with a review of its current state and its alignment—or misalignment—with sustainability goals. Subsequent sections explore the integration of sustainability principles into curricula, the adoption of innovative teaching methods, and the pivotal role of technology in reshaping learning experiences. Additionally, the chapter addresses the importance of fostering inclusivity and equity within higher educational systems to ensure that sustainability efforts benefit all members of society. Sustainability in the Arab World is examined at the end of the chapter where the barriers, opportunities, and case studies of success are put into context.

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape has been experiencing intense changes as result of environmental emergencies as well as technological advances and social movements for justice and equality. The Higher Education sector has been responding to such changes and is also being considered a substantial catalyst for change in modern societies. For centuries, Higher Education has been key to the advancement of societies, equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to help them comprehend and influence their communities. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must rethink how they operate and what they seek to achieve in light of the distinctive challenges of the 21st century, such as climate change and biodiversity loss as well as resource depletion and increasing social inequalities (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover,

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the trends of modernisation and competition have caused HEIs to face additional challenges, including those related to broader sustainability concerns, digital transformation, and socioeconomic issues on a local, regional, and global scale. These academic institutions are important centres for the production and dissemination of knowledge that hold unprecedented potential for creating critical sustainable development advancements. The road to sustainability varies among higher education institutions and reflects local socioeconomic contexts as well as cultural, political, technological, and ecological factors.

This chapter explores the role of sustainability as one of the critical components of modern HEIs that serves both resilience building and laying the foundations of innovation and equitable development. An overview of sustainability in higher education is first provided to identify the most relevant aspects of the issue and relate them to the United Nations (UN's) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Subsequent sections delve into the integration of sustainability principles in curricula, the emergence of innovative teaching approaches, and how technology is reshaping educational experiences. The chapter then argues that the establishment of inclusive and equitable higher education systems is essential to ensure that the benefits of sustainability efforts are felt widely across all members of society. The chapter also analyses the consequences of these changes and emphasises the need for collective efforts among policymakers, educators, communities and learners to embed sustainability across future HEIs. The chapter then explores various dimensions of transformation and how they can overcome challenges and capitalise on opportunities to enhance sustainability efforts. The chapter ends with analysing sustainability in HEIs in the Arab World, highlighting its drivers and challenges as well as success cases by explaining the urgent rationale and the practical pathway for leveraging the higher education sector as a centre for sustainability with particular relevance to the Arab World context.

HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR AND SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is defined by the Brundtland Commission (1987) as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). To be balanced, there needs to be systematic changes across every sector in the global economy, but education in particular is a key foundation in strengthening sustainable societies. Despite the complex nature of its operations, education is considered one of the significant drivers for developing social values and competencies, which are indispensable for sustainable development and the behaviours that support it. But traditional education models, including those of Higher Education, tend to be unable to adequately cope with the complex interplay of environmental, social and economic systems. Higher education with a sustainability orientation can help emergent learners acquire competencies like critical thinking and responsible actions, along with designing novelty solutions to global problems (Sterling, 2001; Aleryani, 2024). This requires higher education institutions to bring together principles of sustainability in teaching and research with, practices in sustainable campus management and engagement with the community. The need for HEIs, including those in the Arab World, to embrace sustainability is rooted in the challenges of rapid urbanisation in conjunction with climate change and scarcity of resources, which make the vulnerabilities already prevalent in this region even worse. Institutions of higher education have a unique capacity to respond to challenges within the region such as water shortages and energy inefficiency as well as the social inequality which affects the region so profoundly (UNDP, 2020).

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