GOVERNANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS: A STRATEGIC CONTEXT

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Abstract

This research examines how an external shock affects accountability taken by a university, establishing firm governance to support stakeholders and, in that way, impacting sustainability reporting and university ranking. It adds to a growing literature on the relevance of universities' sustainable development (Dwesini, 2023; Tridalestari & Prasetyo, 2024). This is a research of the University of Iceland (UI), where secondary data, such as UI's pandemic-related announcements, the 2021 and 2022 sustainability reports, and Times Higher Education (THE) impact ranking data, are used to address the overall objectives of the research. This research explores how a university utilizes governance to integrate sustainability into its operations and prepare for future shocks, using lessons learned from responding to a pandemic. The relevant findings present how accountability can promote sustainable development and align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and THE impact ranking, which is aligned with recent research findings (Gamit et al., 2024; Ncube, 2023; Rizki et al., 2023). This research has uncovered ties between social impact and sustainable performance. The findings highlight the negative impact of managerial discretion on higher education institutions (HEI), providing valuable insights for future improvements.

Keywords: University Governance, Accountability, Sustainable Development Goals, Management Decision, Social Impact, Higher Education Institution

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1. INTRODUCTION

It has been established, through various declarations, charters, and partnerships, from the 1972 Stockholm Convention on the human environment onward (Lozano, Lukman, et al., 2013), as well as systematic literature reviews, that higher education institutions (HEIs), such as universities, have a role to play when it comes to reaching the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and achieving the 2030 sustainability agenda as they can contribute "to a socially fair, economically viable, and environmentally protected world" (Serafini et al., 2022, p. 1). This requires that the SDGs are aligned with the core operations (Johannsdottir & McInerney, 2018) of HEIs, namely through teaching, research, outreach, and management (Arroyo, 2017; Freidenfelds et al., 2018; Murillo-Vargas et al., 2020; Serafini et al., 2022), governance, procedures (Leal Filho et al., 2018;

Lozano et al., 2015) and partnership (UN, 2022). This topic has been studied in the context of business schools (García-Feijoo et al., 2020), engineering schools (Romero et al., 2020), and in a historical context where articles from 1998 to 2019 were analyzed demonstrating "that the integration of the Sustainable Development Goals in universities is becoming a field of study under exploration" (Murillo-Vargas et al., 2020, p. 7).

SDG 4 focuses on quality education that is equitable and inclusive and has lifelong learning opportunities for all (UN, n.d.). Teaching and learning at the HEI level need to align with the SDGs through the course curriculum and critical competencies strengthened so that the SDGs can be achieved and sustainable development advanced (Palsdottir & Johannsdottir, 2021a, 2021b). The key competencies originate from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017) and include systems thinking, anticipatory, normative, strategic, collaborative, critical thinking, self-awareness, and integrative problem-solving competencies. However, the implementation of the SDGs at universities is still in its state of infancy, and a more systematic approach and research are needed (Leal Filho et al., 2019; Lozano, Lozano, et al., 2013) on how HEIs can make an impact and perform with regard to the SDGs (Khare & Stewart, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges and opportunities for achieving the UN SDGs and the 2030 sustainability agenda, focusing on the education sector. Unfortunately, many children worldwide miss in-person instruction (UN, n.d.), exacerbating the global learning crisis and furthering inequalities. On the other hand, the pandemic provided an impetus for improving school infrastructure in many countries when classrooms reopened (UN, n.d.). HEIs also faced challenges, with the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HEISI) stressing the need to rebuild societies and advance the 2030 agenda (UN, 2022).

This research aims to investigate how the University of Iceland (UI) was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including governance and accountability taken to support stakeholders like students and staff, and how societal impacts relevant to the pandemic were reflected in the UI 2021 and 2022 sustainability reports. A potential change in the 2023 outcome of the Times Higher Education (THE) impact ranking of the university based on how the university was governed through the pandemic period. By accomplishing these goals, valuable insight is gained into how a university incorporates the emphasis on sustainability or SDGs into its governance and societal impacts during a pandemic. In this context, the primary purposes of the research are:

1) to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the UI;

2) to identify what actions were taken to mitigate the situation and support stakeholders, including students, academic and administrative staff, and the broader society;

3) to understand how the societal impacts are reflected in the UI sustainability reports;

4) to explore if, consequently, there is a change in 2023 outcome of THE impact ranking of the university.

These objectives will deliver a coherent synthesis of how a university shows accountability and integrates the SDGs into its governance and activities and what the societal impacts of a university are during a pandemic.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces the research. Section 2 provides the literature review. Section 3 discusses research methods, and Section 4 presents results. This is followed by discussions of the results in Section 5 and the conclusion, including the research implications, limitations, and future studies, in Section 6.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature background discusses sustainable development and the SDGs in the context of HEIs, consisting of colleges, universities, and polytechnics, and how this now reflects the rankings of universities regarding their impacts. Throughout the paper, HEIs and universities will be used as synonyms. The pandemic implications are also discussed in case of challenges and opportunities.

2.1. Sustainable development, the Sustainable Development Goals, universities, and their rankings

The relevance of universities' sustainable development emphasis has been discussed for quite some time, and the role of the organizations is recognized (Dwesini, 2023; Pertiwi et al., 2021; Tridalestari & Prasetyo, 2024). More recently, the discussion has centred around the SDGs (Omazic & Zunk, 2021), and how the organizations perform against the goals considering areas of teaching, research, stewardship, and outreach (Cortese, 2003; THE, n.d.) including internationalization (Abdrasheva et al., 2022). More detailed are aspects such as institutional or organizational governance, including vision, mission, strategies, policies, declarations, etc. (Lozano et al., 2015), and campus operation, for instance, energy use, emissions, waste and water management, procurement, equality, and diversity. The campus experience, furthermore, includes sustainable development working groups, student and staff engagement, awareness, and visibility of sustainability matters. Education includes courses, programs, curricula, and transdisciplinary, while research includes funding, publication, transdisciplinary and research centres. Further, outreach and collaboration centres, including exchange programs, joint degrees with other universities, joint research, partnerships, and events open to various stakeholders, are also included. The outcome is then validated through assessment reporting and sustainability ranking (Omazic & Zunk, 2021). This aligns with the Five C framework, emphasizing that for sustainability strategies to be successfully implemented, a commitment of leaders, configuration of the operation, alignment with the core operation, communication, and continuous improvement must be emphasized (Johannsdottir & McInerney, 2018).

Furthermore, organizational factors influencing change for sustainability in universities have been explored, whereas communication is seen as a critical component influencing other factors if effectively managed. Other factors studied were leadership, collaboration, knowledge, behaviour, and physical aspects such as the institution's size (Awuzie & Abuzeinab, 2019). Different patterns of implementation processes have emerged. These are

changes students lead, formally or informally, based on concerns from campus operators or when sustainability becomes a selling point for the institution (Barth, 2013). Various drivers for operationalizing sustainability emphasis have been studied, of which administrative aspects entail the main obstacle. More specifically, lack of management support, appropriate technology, awareness and concern, and environmental committee rank highest in research carried out among universities around the globe (Leal Filho et al., 2017). In addition, lack of focus, resistance to change (Veiga Ávila et al., 2019), and structural barriers hindering interdisciplinary learning and cooperation (Waas et al., 2012) are also relevant. Barriers to change can be clustered into three categories: 1) lack of awareness, 2) governance barriers, and 3) lack of resources (Akins et al., 2019; Verhulst, 2012). However, it should be noted that sustainability commitment helped companies overcome resistance in another institutional setting, instead facilitating employee acceptance of change (Johannsdottir et al., 2015). Furthermore, according to a worldwide survey of HEIs, there is a clear link between accountability for sustainable development and implementation at an organizational level (Lozano et al., 2015).

THE has issued performance data on universities for various stakeholders since 2004. More recently, or in 2019 THE impact rankings were founded. It assesses universities against the UN SDGs, where overall ranking is presented, but findings according to all the 17 goals, and how universities' progress towards delivering each of the SDGs (THE, n.d.). THE impact rankings are seen as "the world's first global attempt to document evidence of universities' impact on society, rather than just research and teaching performance" (Bothwell, 2019), and as stated above, the areas of relevance are teaching, research, stewardship, and outreach (Elsevier, 2025). The number of universities participating is constantly growing, from 450 in 2019, 1,118 in 2021, to 1,591 universities from 112 countries/regions in 2023 (THE, n.d.). The research-related metrics are based on university data and evidence in support of progress and contributions to the particular SDG outside of research-based metrics (Elsevier, 2025). It is, therefore, no longer a private matter of universities' performance regarding sustainable development and the SDGs; it is also about their external appearance, image, and potential competitiveness (Gamit et al., 2024; Rizki et al., 2023).

2.2. COVID-19 pandemic implications for universities

The COVID-19 pandemic has had enormous systemic effects locally (Cook & Johannsdottir, 2021; Cook et al., 2022; Johannsdottir et al., 2022), regionally (Wu et al., 2021; Zinecker et al., 2021), and globally (Lee et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020). The number of coronavirus infections and deaths (Park et al., 2020; Worldometer, 2024) affecting various actors of society, including industries (Ecorys et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021), labour markets (Bell & Blanchflower, 2020; Johannsdottir et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020), and universities and education (Onyema et al., 2020; Toquero, 2020; Tran et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has had different, profound, and diverse impacts on universities (Abdrasheva et al., 2022). Immense efforts at all levels were carried out, and rapid changes were made almost overnight. Thus, this demonstrates the resilience of the organizations, their faculty, staff, and students (Abdrasheva et al., 2022). Further, organizational resilience and coping strategies can be assessed based on how they anticipated and planned for the crisis, how well they managed and survived, and if learning and growth took place (Ma et al., 2018).

Adjustment mechanisms and implications (Johannsdottir et al., 2022; Marinoni et al., 2020) include communication with students and staff, alteration of teaching, learning, and examination, closing of institutions and stopping of campus activities, financial consequences of student enrolment, implication for student mobility, weakening of partnership, and consulting authorities. International travels were cancelled, thus affecting research projects. On the positive side were opportunities related to flexible distance learning and teaching possibilities, virtual mobility, alternatives of joint online education, and community engagement initiatives, both impacted positively and negatively depending on their types (Marinoni et al., 2020). Furthermore, either contingency plans for mitigating the impacts were in place, or such plans were developed *ad hoc* (Johannsdottir et al., 2022; Marinoni et al., 2020), and standard communication patterns were identified (O'Shea et al., 2022).

As discussed above, the COVID-19 pandemic affected many aspects of education and research, including crisis response, finances, digital systems, teaching and learning, and student and staff well-being. It also impacted research activities, career trajectories, and internationalization (Abdrasheva et al., 2022). Assessment and reimaging of higher education currently related to universities' role and well-being of society (Abdrasheva et al., 2022; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Cook et al., 2022) where the future is more democratic and sustainable (Bergan et al., 2021), as well as in the case of distance learning, hybrid and online teaching, distance learning infrastructure (Cook et al., 2022; Johannsdottir et al., 2022), virtual classroom formats, online protocols, and professional manners (Neuwirth et al., 2020), requiring scaling up teachers in this field (Toquero, 2020).

3. METHODS

The UI was founded in 1911 and is a state university located in the capital of Iceland, Reykjavik (UI, n.d.-b). While there are seven universities in Iceland, UI is the largest and the only one that offers undergraduate, Master's, and PhD programs in all major academic disciplines. The university operates under the Act of Public Higher Education Institutions No. 63/2006 (*Lög um Háskóla Nr. 63/2006*) and is an independent educational institution. The UI's main organizational units consist of five schools (social, health, humanities, education, engineering and natural sciences) and have 26 faculties and joint administration. UI has around 15,500 students and around 1,800 employees, with a proportion of women receiving a degree at 68% and senior female academics at 36% in 2021. Institutional trust has been measured by Gallup's National Pulse since 1993. According to their most recent research published in February 2023, UI was ranked second among the institutions of society that enjoy the most trust. The proportion of trust in the UI was 73% (Sverrisdóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2023). UI has emphasized its role in creating societal change

by incorporating SDGs in UI's strategy for 2021–2026 (UI26). In 2021, UI published its first sustainability report to follow up on the strategy UI26, where sustainability and diversity are among the four main priorities. Further, UI has announced that it aims to be a leader in sustainability through teaching and knowledge creation (UI, 2022c).

UI is a member of the Aurora Alliance Network, created with financial support from the European Commission in 2016. Aurora is a collaborative network of European high-impact research universities that work on teaching development and innovation within the university setting to meet today's societal challenges and emphasize linking the UN SDGs in all network activities (Dwesini, 2023; Ncube, 2023). The four main domains are sustainability and climate change, digital society and global citizenship, health and well-being, and finally, culture (diversity and identity) (UI, n.d.-a). The governance functions such that the rector currently serves as a network president and was recently reelected for his second term until 2025 (UI, 2023a). The European University program has furthermore secured a second round of funding for the Aurora consortium until 2030.

The data analyses and results are based on content analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Mok, 2022; O'Shea et al., 2022), where 126 publicly available announcements/communications, sent from the university's rector to various stakeholders in emails and posted on the university websites, mainly intended for students and staff, were collected and analyzed. The announcements were sent out from February 27, 2020, until January 28, 2022. Furthermore, the content of 16 news articles describing UI's projects, societal support, and COVID-19-related research was analyzed, in addition to the UI's policy and the content of the 2021 and 2022 sustainability reports (UI, 2022c, 2023b). Additionally, available data for UI from THE impact ranking was explored to provide a reference on how the university is assessed in terms of progress and a progression of the SDGs (Khare & Stewart, 2024; THE, n.d.). Content of relevant webpages and documents were imported into MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2022, where five codes and relevant sub-codes were used for data analysis. The codes used are:

1. University role and strategy:
   a. UI26 policy;
   b. Sustainability and the SDGs (social impact);
2. Governance and stewardship (social leadership):
   a. Emergency response;
   b. Guidance;
3. Teaching and learning.
4. Research (social leadership.
5. Outreach (social impact):
   a. Impact;
   b. THE impact ranking.

4. RESULTS

4.1. University role and strategy

The UI has made sustainability commitments in its 2021–2026 strategy, UI26. It is titled "*A Better University — for a Better Society*", and it is already making a societal commitment. Furthermore, accountability for the SDGs is manifested in the strategy. Still, the UI also wants to become a global leader in the field of sustainability through teaching, research and knowledge creation and, second, UI will lead the way in sustainable operations and carbon neutrality. The governing principles are quality, trust, and agility, while the main priorities are categorized as 1) open and international, 2) sustainability and diversity, 3) strength based on quality, and 4) a good place to work. The priority of sustainability and diversity has four aspects which are:

- *Knowledge contributing to a sustainable society*: UI will lead the way in sustainability through teaching, research, and knowledge creation.
- *Sustainable development*: UI will lead the way in sustainable development by setting measurable targets for carbon neutrality during the strategic period based on national targets.
- *A diverse university community*: UI will be an even better workplace, ensuring equality and attracting students and staff from diverse backgrounds. Students with immigrant backgrounds will receive special support, and an emphasis will be placed on diversity in the student body.
- *Working together with society*: UI's impact on society will be increased with an action plan for improved support and direct dialogue between researchers and stakeholders in order to combat fake news, reinforce trust in science, and lay the groundwork for public policy.

UI also emphasizes the relevance of THE impact rankings, given the importance of making universities' societal impacts accountable, and highlights media, society, industry, and government as important external stakeholders (UI, n.d.-c).

The results, both in the case of implications for UI and actions taken to mitigate the situation, are structured around institutional framework centring around COVID-19 implications for 1) teaching and learning, 2) research, 3) stewardship in operations, 4) outreach and other institutional aspects, and 5) impact rankings (Arroyo, 2017; Elsevier, 2025; Findler et al., 2019; Freidenfelds et al., 2018; Murillo-Vargas et al., 2020; Serafini et al., 2022), as the framework aligns well with the UI26 strategy.

4.2. Governance and stewardship

Under the category of stewardship related to the university governance and campus operations are strategies, policies, and procedures (Leal Filho et al., 2018; Lozano et al., 2015; Mok, 2022), crisis management (Mok, 2022) and best practices regarding sustainability matters. In the case of the pandemic, a response plan was introduced shortly after the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on February 28, 2020, resulting in a declaration from the Civil Protection Department, which raised the national response level to "danger alert" (Atlantik, n.d.). The alignment with an announcement from the Department of Civil Protection was clear, and how changes in the working environment were communicated to different stakeholders, including administration school deans and faculty heads, staff and students, and who is responsible for the communication and what means of communication will be used.

Change in organizational procedures is essentially threefold: 1) flexible and changed working and teaching structure supported in such a way that employees were allowed to move equipment used at work to their homes, 2) the utilization of technological solutions and

infrastructure considerations, 3) and focus on health and well-being. This is very much reflected in the strengthening of communication. Offering a web chat service enabling stakeholders the chance to send messages during and outside office hours, setting up an internal COVID-19 website covering topics such as working from home, information on working arrangements, tools availability, relevant rules and guidance on health and well-being issues are evidence of changes implemented.

"*Remember to exercise and spend time outside since these things are key to mental and physical well-being. Look out for one another and keep in touch over the internet*" (Benediktsson, 2020, March 16).

The university council of the UI was also affected by the pandemic, thus adjusting by holding a web conference where the rector's proposal on teaching arrangements, course assessment, and exams was discussed (UI, n.d.-c). When the number of COVID-19 cases started to rise in the autumn of 2020, measures were taken to set up infection control sections with different building entrances and by dividing staff within the same unit and PhD students working in the same area into subgroups to reduce the likelihood of group infections (UI, n.d.-c). This continued throughout the pandemic, as evident in the UI 2022 sustainability report:

In 2022, UI took various actions to promote stronger infection control against COVID-19, increase the safety for staff and students on campus and contribute to society's efforts to combat the virus, such as providing rapid antigen testing at the university centre, free of charge. In addition, UI contributed to research in relation to COVID-19 (UI, 2021; 2022a).

The outcome of the actions taken by the university was increased societal trust, shown in a Gallup survey and an increased number of applications for the academic school year 2020–2021 (UI, 2020b; Benediktsson, 2021).

4.3. Teaching and learning

Teaching within UI underwent significant changes due to the pandemic, such as when the university was closed, teaching reorganized and distance learning emphasized, or when different restriction rules on gathering were enforced (Atlantik, n.d.). UI response plan for COVID-19 outlined how to respond to these circumstances and how teaching should be performed when onside teaching was suspended or restricted due to national mandates, thus with limited or no access to buildings and classrooms (UI, 2020a). Various distance teaching solutions were employed, such as teleconferencing technology, recording lectures and teaching materials, distance examinations, and implementation of the Canvas learning management system, which was trailed at the beginning of the pandemic so that teaching and learning would follow the course catalogue. Students could continue their studies despite the situation (UI, 2023b; Benediktsson, 2020, August 12). However, in some cases, courses had to be cancelled due to the pandemic (UI, 2022c, 2023b). The scale of the changes was acknowledged in a statement from the university's rector, who said that we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to the faculty and staff who have stepped up to the plate to meet this enormous challenge (Benediktsson, 2020, March 31).

Furthermore, an internal COVID-19 website was set up providing additional information on e-learning, Inspera (the new exam platform operationalized), as well as contact information relevant to academic affairs, including web conferencing, communication systems, the learning management system, recordings, examinations, and pedagogical advice (Johannsdottir et al., 2023). As the university had decided to implement two new teaching platforms, Canvas and Inspera, before the pandemic, the workload on academic staff was immense, and the learning curve was steep when changed teaching methods were added due to the pandemic.

As the outbreak progressed, more solutions were introduced, including extended deadlines for submission of the thesis, online presentations for potential student applicants, and a prolonged application period decided in consultation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and other universities in Iceland. Online teaching stretched, more or less, throughout the fall semester of 2020 and the spring semester of 2021. However, the focus was on offering new students on-site teaching within guidelines from health authorities (Benediktsson, 2020, August 12). Overall, the transformation of teaching and learning was successful, given a "miraculously short time under challenging circumstances" and "hard work, selflessness, talent and inventiveness" of the academic and administrative staff of the University and the adaptability of the students (Benediktsson, 2020, March 31). Rector of the UI expressed sincere thanks to students and colleagues, for the part they have played in bringing about this transformation in these unprecedented circumstances (Benediktsson, 2020, September 11).

4.4. Research

COVID-19 had various implications for research, particularly delays in research and publication output. Explanatory factors mentioned include modified family responsibilities due to the pandemic, increased workload due to changes in teaching methods, delays in journal operational processes, cancellations and postponement of conferences and other research-related events, and staff illness. The impact on staff was researched to investigate the situation, and teaching contribution was valued more highly than before. Impact on post-docs and PhD students, such rules on funding were revised, compensation grants were offered for internally funded projects, and recommendations were made for researchers to contact the grant providers to seek extended deadlines for project deliverables. The format of doctoral defences was changed due to travel restrictions, gathering constraints, and quarantine rules. A blend of in-person and online defences took place, taking into account social distancing rules and other guidelines from authorities (Benediktsson, 2020, November 2).

The pandemic has also created opportunities for knowledge creation through the large amount of research conducted, as can be seen from one of the rector's statements that the UI aims to ensure that staff and student research brings scientific, social and economic benefits to Icelandic industry and the country.

These include studies on the effect of the pandemic on the well-being and lifestyle of Icelanders (Cook et al., 2022), changes in primary healthcare as a response to the pandemic

(Sigurdsson et al., 2020), prediction models to for evaluating the flow of infected individuals and the burden of the pandemic on the health care system, institutional resilience and human resource management (Johannsdottir et al., 2022), the impact of the pandemic on people with disabilities (European Commission, 2021), the spread of misinformation and disinformation and more, thus servicing both the public and the economy (UI, 2022b). Other examples are offered, for instance in the UI 2022 sustainability report:

"UI contributed to research in relation to COVID-19. The Centre for Public Health Science at UI was a participant in the COVIDMENT consortium, a research collaboration involving leading scientific groups from six Northern European countries, focusing on the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on public health, with special emphasis on mental health" (UI, 2023b, p. 21).

4.5. Outreach

The outreach is inward, as it relates to faculty, staff, and students, and outward, explaining university-wide efforts to engage with a broad range of external stakeholders and collaborators. The UI played a significant and noteworthy role during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021 by providing expert knowledge and partnering with relevant stakeholders for the benefit of society, the economy, and the public (UI, 2022c, 2023b). This is evident in the examples of research and the challenges addressed, as discussed in subsection 4.2. At the same time, a series of open educational sessions about the SDGs and the university were cancelled (UI, 2023b) for security reasons according to the applicable health authority's regulations.

"The University of Iceland has decided to cancel the University of Youth, which was due to take place in June and postpone the Knowledge Train, at least until the autumn […] *doing our utmost to reduce the risk of infection in order to keep everyone safe, not least young people"* (Benediktsson, 2020, April 17).

Students from the university assisted the national contact tracing team in tracking contagion cases, a PhD candidate developed educational material for children on COVID-19, a website offering support material for school staff and parents set up (Vísindavefur Háskóla Íslands, n.d.), and isolated elderly people reached through a project called "*Let's Talk*".

"In the eye of the storm, we see students and staff lending their services in the struggle against the disease that now threatens humans across the globe" (Benediktsson, 2020, March 27).

University announcements emphasized throughout the result section were instrumental in the university's inward outreach. Preventive measures were taken to promote infection control and increase safety when rapid antigen testing was made available at the university, free of charge for students and staff. This was also regarded as the university's accountability to keep society safe and to combat the virus (UI, 2023b). Despite the flexibility and solutions offered to the students and staff during the pandemic, the outcome of an internal survey conducted by the Student Council and the University's School of Education faculty revealed increased anxiety among students and a significantly high workload on the staff, increasing their stress level. However, staff felt safe within the work environment established (Gunnarsdóttir & Harðardóttir, 2020). To address the issue, a Student Psychology Clinic offered by the Department of Psychology provides psychological counselling carried out by post-graduate psychology students under the guidance of licensed psychologists. The service is provided to the students and their children at a low cost as a part of their clinical training (Benediktsson, 2020, September 2). Among other institutional aspects are student and staff mobility (Mok, 2022), but examples of relevant issues concerning teaching and learning are discussed in subsection 4.1 and research in subsection 4.2.

Since 2019, THE has ranked universities by their SDG performances. To begin with, below 500 universities were ranked, but now they account for more than 1500. UI has done well, especially following the COVID-19, after the university published its first sustainability report. Table 1 shows this development.

Table 1. THE SDGs ranking of universities

Year	*Ranking*	*Score*	*SDGs*	*No. of universities*
2023	301–400	72.7–76.7	9, 17, 12 and 3	1591
2022	401–600	65.0–71.9	9, 3, 17 and 8	1410
2021	301–400	66.3–70.9	9, 12, 3 and 17	1117
2020	501–600	66.3–70.9	9, 12, 3 and 17	768
2019	301–400	66.3–70.9	9, 12, 3 and 17	467

Source: THE (n.d.).

5. DISCUSSION

The research discusses the integration of sustainable development principles and the UN SDGs in the context of HEIs (UN, 2022, n.d.), including colleges, universities, and polytechnics. It examines how this focus on sustainability is now reflected in university rankings, particularly (THE, n.d.). The COVID-19 pandemic's implications, both challenges and opportunities, on HEIs are also explored (Neuwirth et al., 2020).

Findings from the research highlight the ongoing discourse about the importance of sustainable development in HEIs. The role of universities showing accountability in promoting sustainability and the relevance of SDGs is emphasized, particularly in areas like teaching, research, governance, outreach, and internationalization (Cortese, 2003; THE, n.d.). That links into the details of sustainability efforts within HEIs, including aspects like institutional frameworks (vision, mission, policies) and campus operations (energy use, waste management, diversity initiatives) (Lozano et al., 2015). It also covers student and staff engagement, sustainability awareness, and various activities.

Drivers and barriers to change are explored by various factors that influence sustainability-related changes within universities. There, the role of leadership, collaboration, communication, knowledge, and organizational size matters

(Lambrechts et al., 2017; Verhulst & Boks, 2014). Challenges include resistance to change, lack of resources, and structural barriers (Akins et al., 2019; Verhulst, 2012). Within that empowerment as a driver of change within HEIs, focusing on decision-making authority, specialization, and self-determination is vital (Lambrechts et al., 2017; Verhulst & Boks, 2014). Categorizing drivers of change as internal (stakeholder pressure, staff retention) and external (regulatory compliance, funding opportunities), become part of essential criteria (Bansal & Roth, 2000; Haupt et al., 2015; Johannsdottir, 2015).

THE impact rankings, which evaluate universities' contributions to the SDGs, are vital for universities' impact and SDG assessment (THE, n.d.; Bothwell, 2019). It explains the growing participation of universities and the metrics used to assess their progress towards each of the 17 SDGs. The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact here, where it had an extensive systemic effect on HEIs locally, regionally, and globally (Cook & Johannsdottir, 2021; Cook et al., 2022; Johannsdottir et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021; Zinecker et al., 2021). Universities adapted to the crisis, demonstrating resilience through rapid changes in teaching methods and other operations (Abdrasheva et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2018). Hence, adjustments made by HEIs due to the pandemic, including changes in communication, teaching, campus activities, and student mobility, were made (Johannsdottir et al., 2022; Marinoni et al., 2020). Hence, the research envisions a more democratic and sustainable future for HEIs, focusing on distance learning, hybrid teaching, and the importance of teacher development.

Finally, the research provides a comprehensive overview of how sustainable development emphasis and the SDGs are integrated into HEIs, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these institutions, and the ongoing efforts to adapt and shape the future of higher education.

6. CONCLUSION

This research shows how important it was for UI to embrace sustainability commitments in its strategic plan for 2021–2026. The "*A Better University — for a Better Society*" strategy demonstrates the institution's dedication to societal betterment. It also shows the importance of aligning with the UN SDGs and aiming for a position as a global leader in sustainability through teaching, research, and operational practices.

This research examines the UI strategic approach to sustainability and its alignment with the UN SDGs, emphasizing the integration of sustainability across teaching, research, governance, and operations. The UI26 strategy positions the university as a leader in sustainability by committing to carbon neutrality, fostering diversity, and strengthening societal impact. The results highlight UI's proactive governance framework, emphasizing principles of quality, trust, and agility and demonstrating adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings reveal that the pandemic accelerated changes in HEIs, necessitating rapid shifts in teaching methods, research priorities, and operational governance. The UI adapted through innovative solutions such as online learning platforms and enhanced stakeholder communication, showcasing resilience in the face of unprecedented challenges. Research delays were offset by the emergence of pandemic-related studies, contributing to societal knowledge and trust in science. The institution also emphasized well-being by supporting students and staff with mental health resources and flexible learning and working arrangements.

The research underscores the increasing relevance of sustainability metrics, mainly through THE impact rankings, to assess universities' contributions to societal goals. UI's steady improvement in these rankings reflects its commitment to embedding sustainability principles across its institutional structure. The emphasis on external partnerships further underscores the role of universities in combating misinformation, fostering public policy development, and addressing societal challenges. In conclusion, this research provides a comprehensive framework for other HEIs to integrate sustainability and navigate crises effectively. By fostering inclusivity, accountability, and innovation, universities can amplify their societal impact and lead the transition to a sustainable future. This research also reaffirms the critical role of higher education in shaping resilient, democratic, and environmentally conscious societies.

The research limitations stem both from the quality of the source material and the potential biases and personal perspectives of the researchers. Analysis by different researchers may result in somewhat different outcomes, leading to inconsistencies in the conclusion. Therefore, it is important that the researchers carrying out the analysis have a clear understanding of the quality of the data sources and of the operation of the institution from where they gather data for the analysis, as was the case in this study.

Further, universities should amplify their societal impact by fostering stronger connections between researchers and external stakeholders, including media, industry, society, and government. Such collaboration can combat misinformation, build trust in science, and inform effective public policies, ensuring universities remain relevant and impactful. To achieve these goals, HEIs must adopt agile strategies that prioritize openness and international collaboration while building internal cultures of quality and trust. By aligning with these principles, universities can become transformative forces, driving sustainable progress and fostering inclusive societies globally. This comprehensive approach ensures universities adapt to current challenges and proactively shape a more sustainable and equitable future.

Future research in this field is encouraged. Based on the findings of this research, or as alternative methods, qualitative research with interviews and/or focus groups with rectors on their experience implementing the SDGs to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they faced during the pandemic could be valuable. Further, exploring THE impact rankings of universities within the Aurora consortium would be interesting.

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