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Integrating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into English Language Programs: A Case Study

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The integration of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into higher education is increasingly recognized as vital to advancing sustainable development worldwide. While Saudi universities have shown a strong institutional commitment to sustainability, there is still limited evidence of how these goals are incorporated at the program level, especially in non-STEM disciplines. This qualitative case study examines how well the SDGs are embedded in the Bachelor of Arts in English Language program at Majmaah University, a national leader in sustainability efforts. Data were gathered through document analysis of program specifications, operational and training plans, and community partnership documents, as well as semi-structured interviews with faculty members. Results reveal that although graduate attributes suggestively align with SDG-related skills such as critical thinking, intercultural communication, and social responsibility, explicit inclusion of the SDGs in learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessments remains scarce. Implementation largely depends on individual faculty efforts rather than on institutional policies, and professional development opportunities focused on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) are notably lacking. The study highlights a clear gap between rhetoric and practice and underscores the potential of language programs to promote sustainability skills. Recommendations are offered to help integrate the SDGs systematically into curricula, training, assessments, and community projects to support Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals.

Keywords: curriculum integration, education for sustainable development (ESD), English language programs, higher education, sustainable development goals (SDGs)

INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address interconnected global challenges such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and climate change. Education—and particularly higher education—is widely recognized as both an explicit SDG (SDG 4: Quality Education) and a cross-cutting enabler for achieving the 2030 Agenda. UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) program emphasizes that higher education must go beyond single courses or extracurricular

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projects and incorporate sustainability competencies throughout curricula, pedagogy, research, and institutional operations (UNESCO, 2021).

Several theoretical frameworks support this call for systemic change. Sterling (2004) conceptualizes ESD as a transformation of learning systems rather than an "add-on," drawing on complex adaptive systems theory. Lozano et al. (2015) propose a "sustainable universities" framework identifying five interdependent dimensions—governance, curriculum, research, campus operations, and community engagement—as pillars for institutional transformation. Empirical surveys applying these frameworks show that institutional commitment alone is insufficient; universities must operationalize SDG targets into course outcomes, assessment, faculty development, and monitoring systems (Lozano et al., 2015; Cebrián & Wals, 2015).

Recent reviews confirm progress but also highlight uneven implementation. For example, a 2023 scoping review by Molina et al. found many examples of SDG-related courses, workshops, and institutional strategies but noted that depth and consistency vary significantly across institutions and disciplines. They also found that integration remains inconsistent rather than systemic (Molina et al., 2023). Newer studies on whole-institution approaches (WIAs) show that institutions that incorporate measurable processes achieve stronger learning outcomes and clearer institutional changes (UNESCO, 2021).

Language, humanities, and arts programs have a specific—though often overlooked—potential to promote sustainability. Ecolinguistics and related methods show how language studies can reveal and transform public discussions that support unsustainable behaviors. English language curricula can serve as a tool for fostering critical environmental literacy, intercultural understanding, and civic engagement (Stibbe, 2015; Goulah, 2017). Incorporating SDG themes into language teaching can enhance both communication skills and sustainability awareness.

Despite global attention, regional and national studies highlight gaps in the Arab world and Saudi Arabia. Multidimensional analyses of Arab universities show varying levels of prioritization of SDGs and call for more systematic curriculum integration and improved monitoring of contributions to the 2030 Agenda (Al-Salmi & Al-Kindy, 2021). Reviews of Saudi universities also recognize promising institutional initiatives but argue that implementation and reporting remain inconsistent limiting the Kingdom's ability to share lessons and scale good practices (Alghamdi & Denman, 2021).

Research Problem

In summary, although many Saudi universities have shown institutional commitment to sustainability through policies, green-campus initiatives, and community programs, there remains limited, systematic evidence of how these commitments have been integrated into programs—such as curricula, explicit learning outcomes, faculty training, assessments, and routine community activities aligned with SDG targets. This gap is significant because program-level integration is the key mechanism through which higher education can produce graduates with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to advance the SDGs in practice.

Context

To investigate this gap, this study uses Majmaah University as a case study. Majmaah University has been an early institutional adopter of sustainability initiatives in the Kingdom. It hosts the Saudi Cifal Center and is the national host of the LEAP-FAST leadership program for sustainability transformation (Majmaah University, 2024). These features make it an important site for studying whether and how institutional expertise is channeled into teaching and program design.

Within Majmaah University, the study focuses on the Bachelor of Arts in English Language for two reasons. First, the researcher's expertise lies in English language education, enabling a detailed and credible curriculum analysis. Second, the English program already includes elements related to sustainability (for example, an ecolinguistics course is listed in the program specifications). The department has clear community engagement structures (such as a community partnership committee) and training plans that focus on research and community activities — all of which make the department a suitable setting for testing whether institutional sustainability initiatives translate into program-level practices (English Language Department, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c).

Research Questions: Accordingly, this study asks:

- *How well are the UN SDGs incorporated into the English Language Department's activities and plans?*

Subsidiary questions explore:

a) How sustainability is reflected in course outcomes and learning activities.

b) How department-level governance and committees align with institutional priorities in teaching practice; and

c) What gaps and opportunities are present for enhancing ESD in English language programs?

By analyzing program specifications, operational plans, training schedules, and community plans alongside a theoretically informed discussion (WIA, ESD, sustainable universities), the study provides empirical evidence on program-level SDG integration within the Saudi context. It gives practical recommendations for departments aiming to incorporate sustainability into curricula, assessment, and community engagement.

Research Aims

Building on the issue outlined in the introduction, this study aims to:

- Evaluate how well the UN SDGs are integrated into the English Language Department's program specifications, operational plans, training activities, and community partnerships at Majmaah University.

- Identify how sustainability is incorporated into course outcomes, learning activities, and departmental governance, including the role of committees such as the Community Partnership Committee.
- Examine the shortages and opportunities to strengthen ESD in Saudi universities with English language programs.
- Provide institutions and stakeholders with evidence-based recommendations on how to integrate the SDGs into language education effectively.

Research Importance and Significance: This research holds great importance for several reasons.

- Although international studies have broadly examined the integration of SDGs in higher education (Lozano et al., 2015; Molina et al., 2023), there is a lack of comprehensive research on how institutional sustainability commitments are translated into program-level practices within Saudi universities, especially in non-STEM disciplines. This study addresses this gap.
- The study broadens the ESD literature into a less explored field—language and social sciences education—by analyzing the interaction of an English language program with the SDGs (Stibbe, 2015; Goulah, 2017).
- The research results will help institutions and the Ministry of Education improve how sustainability is included in curricula, faculty development, and community engagement in line with Vision 2030.
- Although this study focuses on a single English language program at Majmaah University, its importance goes beyond the immediate context. The case reflects a common pattern in higher education, where strong institutional commitments to sustainability are not fully integrated into program-level curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Lozano et al., 2015; Leal Filho et al., 2018). By analyzing this disconnect, the study helps deepen understanding of the structural and pedagogical barriers that limit the effective implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The findings provide valuable insights for universities in similar settings, especially for institutions undergoing systemic reforms and aiming to embed sustainability into academic programs.
- Incorporating SDGs into language classes can help students become more culturally aware, think critically, and be responsible citizens—skills that employers and society increasingly value.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable Development Goals and Higher Education

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda by 193 United Nations member states (United Nations, 2015), higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly been seen not just as beneficiaries of sustainable development but as essential drivers in achieving it.

While SDG 4 explicitly emphasizes quality education, the broader SDG framework views education as a cross-cutting enabler that influences knowledge systems, professional skills, and civic values necessary to accomplish all 17 goals (UNESCO, 2021).

However, the literature highlights a key difference between rhetorical commitment and structural change. Global surveys show that many universities have included sustainability language in their mission statements and strategic plans (Lozano et al., 2015). Yet, fewer institutions have turned these commitments into concrete curriculum reforms, assessment tools, or faculty development programs. This gap suggests that institutional support does not automatically lead to pedagogical change.

Furthermore, the literature highlights variation across different geographical and disciplinary contexts. While universities in Europe, Australia, and North America are increasingly adopting structured SDG mapping processes and sustainability-linked graduate attributes (Leal Filho et al., 2018), their implementation remains inconsistent across regions and fields of study. Often, sustainability efforts focus primarily on STEM and environmental disciplines, while humanities and language programs receive less attention. This disciplinary imbalance raises significant questions about the inclusivity of sustainability efforts in higher education.

Within Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 emphasizes sustainability as a national priority, positioning higher education as a means for economic diversification and social change. However, emerging studies indicate that while institutional sustainability efforts are growing, systematic integration at the program level remains limited (Alghamdi & Denman, 2021). Overall, the literature suggests that the main challenge is not awareness of sustainability but implementing it consistently within curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment frameworks.

Why Higher Education Needs to Teach the SDGs

The case for incorporating the SDGs into higher education goes beyond moral goals or policy matching; it touches on the core purpose of university education. Scholars, however, vary in how they understand this integration. Some see sustainability mainly as a strategic requirement tied to employability, competitiveness, and national growth plans (Leal Filho et al., 2018). Others view it as a transformative educational model that demands epistemological and pedagogical shifts (Sterling, 2004; UNESCO, 2021). This difference is important because it influences how deeply institutions respond.

From a competence-based perspective, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) highlights systems thinking, anticipatory skills, ethical reasoning, intercultural competence, and collaborative problem-solving (Barth et al., 2007). In this view, integrating sustainability enhances graduate qualities and boosts institutional credibility. Universities that align curricula with national strategies—such as Saudi Vision 2030—may also gain reputational and strategic benefits.

However, critical scholars warn against using sustainability merely as a branding or employability tactic. Sterling (2004) argues that sustainability education must involve "second-order change," transforming fundamental beliefs about knowledge and

development rather than just adding new content to existing curricula. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) cautions that isolated sustainability courses or extracurricular programs rarely lead to meaningful learning transformation unless they are integrated throughout the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Empirical evidence supports this concern. Molina et al. (2023) show that universities often introduce sustainability-themed activities without aligning them with learning outcomes or assessment frameworks, resulting in superficial engagement. Barth et al. (2007) also note that when sustainability competencies are not explicitly assessed, students may recognize global challenges but cannot critically address them. These findings indicate that the issue is not just about adding SDG-related topics, but about ensuring a meaningful alignment among objectives, teaching methods, and evaluation (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

In the Saudi context, this debate is especially relevant. Vision 2030 regards higher education as a key driver of sustainable economic and social change. However, if SDG integration stays limited to strategic discussions or extracurricular activities, universities risk graduating students who understand sustainability issues but are not sufficiently equipped to address them. Therefore, integrating the SDGs should be seen not as an optional upgrade, but as a fundamental shift in curriculum design and teaching methods.

Theoretical Frameworks Guiding SDG Integration

The integration of the SDGs into higher education is supported by various theoretical traditions that converge on a key idea: sustainability requires systemic coherence rather than just adding a topic. Instead of viewing sustainability as an additional subject, these frameworks see it as a fundamental shift in educational purpose, design, and practice.

At the institutional level, UNESCO's Whole-Institution Approach (WIA) conceptualizes sustainability as a process that is both vertically and horizontally integrated, covering governance, curriculum, research, campus operations, and community engagement (UNESCO, 2021). WIA emphasizes that effective sustainability reform requires alignment across all institutional structures, preventing fragmentation that occurs when initiatives are isolated within individual departments.

Sterling's (2004) theory of systemic learning enhances this institutional perspective by differentiating between first-order change (surface-level adjustments) and second-order change (epistemological shifts). According to Sterling, integrating sustainability must challenge prevailing assumptions about knowledge, progress, and development. When sustainability is limited to isolated modules or optional activities, reform remains first-order and thus has a restricted impact.

At the curriculum level, Biggs and Tang's (2011) theory of constructive alignment applies these principles pedagogically. Constructive alignment requires clear coherence between learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment methods. In the context of SDG integration, this means that sustainability skills must be clearly defined, taught intentionally, and assessed consistently. Without such alignment, sustainability risks remain conceptually present but educationally ineffective.

Complementing this structural perspective, transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) highlights the cognitive and reflective aspects of sustainability education. Transformative learning emphasizes critical reflection, perspective change, and dialogic engagement—processes essential for developing ethical reasoning and systems thinking. Meanwhile, ecolinguistics (Stibbe, 2015) offers a disciplinary perspective particularly relevant to language programs, showing how discourse shapes environmental and social realities. It suggests that language education can critically analyze narratives that normalize unsustainable practices.

Taken together, these frameworks operate at different but complementary levels. WIA and systemic learning focus on institutional coherence; constructive alignment concentrates on curriculum design; transformative learning promotes cognitive development; and ecolinguistics explores disciplinary application. Their integration offers a multidimensional analytical framework for evaluating whether SDG integration within the BA English Language program is structural, aligned, and transformative—or merely symbolic and fragmented.

Including the Sustainable Development Goals in Language Programmes

Although the discourse on sustainability in higher education has traditionally focused on STEM and business disciplines, emerging research questions the idea that sustainability is mainly a technical or scientific issue. This focus reflects what some scholars call the "technocratic bias" of sustainability education, in which environmental and economic aspects are emphasized while linguistic, cultural, and ethical factors receive comparatively less attention.

Language and humanities programs, however, make unique contributions to SDG integration. Unlike STEM fields, which often emphasize technical solutions, language education focuses on meaning-making, discourse, identity, and intercultural understanding. These aspects are key to several SDGs, including SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Therefore, sustainability in language programs is not secondary but fundamentally relevant.

Ecolinguistics provides a theoretical basis for this claim. Stibbe (2015) contends that language influences ecological awareness by normalizing or questioning ideas about growth, consumption, and human–nature relations. In this view, English language classrooms become spaces for critically examining and reshaping sustainability discourses. Likewise, global education strategies within TESOL highlight intercultural dialogue and ethical engagement with global issues, viewing language learning as a tool for civic development rather than merely a means of developing communicative skills (Goulah, 2017; Cates, 2019).

Despite this potential, empirical evidence indicates that integration within language programs remains limited and often optional. Sustainability themes are frequently introduced through individual texts or isolated assignments rather than being embedded within program learning outcomes or assessment structures. This pattern aligns with

broader trends identified in the ESD literature, in which humanities disciplines are marginalized in sustainability reform (Molina et al., 2023).

The limited integration of systematic SDG principles into language programs raises two key questions. First, does the current emphasis on STEM unintentionally narrow how sustainability is understood in higher education? Second, does the underrepresentation of humanities disciplines weaken the development of ethical reasoning and intercultural skills vital for achieving the SDGs? Addressing these questions involves examining not only whether sustainability topics are included in language curricula but also whether they are effectively integrated with program outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment practices.

Within the Saudi context, where the sustainability discourse is increasingly aligned with national transformation agendas, exploring how the SDGs can be integrated into a BA English program offers an opportunity to broaden the scope of sustainability research. It also helps rebalance the sustainability dialogue by highlighting the cultural and communicative aspects often overshadowed by technical approaches.

Pattern of SDG Integration in Global Higher Education

International evidence indicates that universities take different approaches to incorporating the SDGs, from symbolic support to fundamental transformation. Instead of showing a straight path, these approaches exhibit different levels of structural consistency, leadership dedication, and curriculum harmony.

Large-scale reviews offer a macro-level view of this variation. Lozano et al. (2015) report widespread use of sustainability language in institutional strategies, but there are significantly fewer examples of program-level curriculum reform. Similarly, Molina et al. (2023) find that although sustainability-themed courses and outreach initiatives are more common, comprehensive integration across learning outcomes, pedagogy, and assessment is still relatively rare. These findings suggest that institutional visibility does not necessarily equate to pedagogical depth.

At the institutional case-study level, three broad models of integration can be identified. The first model can be seen as strategic alignment without changing the curriculum, where sustainability is included in strategic plans, annual reports, or research agendas but is not clearly connected to programme-level learning outcomes. This model demonstrates strong symbolic support but limited change in teaching methods.

The second model illustrates partial structural integration, in which universities implement curriculum audits, sustainability hubs, or faculty development programs to foster cross-disciplinary engagement. For example, universities like Gothenburg and Copenhagen have created sustainability mapping systems that connect courses and research to the SDGs. However, even in these instances, integration often varies among faculties and may remain stronger in environmental or technical disciplines.

The third model shows systemic curriculum integration, where sustainability skills are embedded into graduate attributes and assessment systems across various disciplines. The University of Melbourne's revision of graduation requirements and the University

of British Columbia's Sustainability Initiative exemplify this approach by connecting governance, teaching, research, and community engagement within a unified framework. At these institutions, sustainability becomes a core part of the institutional identity rather than an optional initiative.

Despite these promising examples, comparative analyses reveal persistent structural constraints. Barth et al. (2007) argue that when sustainability competencies are not explicitly assessed, integration remains superficial. Cebrián and Wals (2015) further observe that inadequate faculty development often hinders implementation, especially outside STEM fields. Even institutions with advanced sustainability frameworks report inconsistent adoption across departments.

This global evidence thus reveals a consistent implementation paradox: sustainability discourse is becoming more institutionalized, yet program-level coherence remains fragile and discipline-dependent. The literature indicates that successful integration relies not just on strategic commitment but also on aligning governance structures, curriculum design, assessment systems, and professional development in a coordinated way.

SDG Integration in the Arab and Saudi Higher Education Contexts

While global research on SDG integration in higher education has advanced, empirical studies in the Arab region remain relatively limited and uneven. Existing research indicates that sustainability is addressed at the policy level but is not consistently incorporated into curricula and teaching practices.

Comparative analyses show that many Arab universities include the language of the 2030 Agenda in their strategic documents, but their implementation remains underdeveloped. Al-Salmi and Al-Kindy (2021), in one of the few cross-national studies on Arab higher education, report significant variation in how institutions prioritize specific SDGs. Some universities focus on environmental goals, while others emphasize social development; however, systematic curriculum mapping and assessment alignment are mostly missing. This indicates that sustainability integration in the region is fragmented rather than fully embedded in the structure.

When compared to international models of systemic curriculum integration, the regional pattern shows a familiar implementation gap—one that structural and policy conditions may worsen. In many Arab institutions, sustainability initiatives are centralized within research centers or administrative units rather than spread across academic programs. As a result, sustainability remains visible at the institutional level but stays peripheral in classroom practice. This pattern reflects global trends but seems more noticeable in non-STEM disciplines, where empirical investigation is especially limited.

Saudi Arabia presents a unique case within this regional landscape. Vision 2030 emphasizes higher education as a crucial driver of sustainable economic diversification, social reform, and global competitiveness. Universities have responded with green-campus initiatives, sustainability research centers, and community engagement programs (Alghamdi & Denman, 2021). These initiatives show a high level of commitment and increasing policy coherence.

However, national evaluations and emerging scholarship suggest that turning these commitments into program-level curriculum reform remains inconsistent. Most available studies focus on institutional strategies, environmental operations, or student volunteering rather than examining whether SDG competencies are integrated into learning outcomes, assessment systems, or faculty development frameworks. This analytical gap is especially clear in the humanities and language disciplines, which remain largely absent from sustainability research in the Saudi context.

Against this backdrop, Majmaah University stands out as a strategically important case. As an early adopter of sustainability initiatives and host of national leadership programs such as Cifal and LEAP-FAST, the university shows a strong organizational commitment. The key question, therefore, is not whether sustainability is recognized at the institutional level, but whether this recognition effectively translates into program-level curriculum design and teaching practices. Analyzing the BA English Language program in this context allows for a focused look at how institutional sustainability leadership interacts with discipline-specific implementation in a non-STEM field.

Research Gap

Taken together, this literature review highlights three interconnected gaps. First, most research emphasizes institutional policies and campus operations, leaving programme-level integration of the SDGs underexplored. Second, despite clear theoretical and practical reasons for doing so, there is limited empirical work on ESD integration in language and humanities programmes compared to STEM disciplines. Third, within the Arab region and Saudi Arabia in particular, studies remain descriptive and institutional in scope, with few systematic analyses of how sustainability commitments translate into teaching, learning outcomes, and community engagement at the departmental or programme level.

By focusing on the BA English Language program at Majmaah University—an institution that hosts major sustainability initiatives such as Cifal and LEAP-FAST—this study directly addresses these gaps. It examines whether and how institutional expertise in sustainability has been incorporated into curricular, pedagogical, and community-engaged practices within a Saudi English-language program, thus providing context-specific evidence and transferable lessons for higher education policy and practice.

METHOD

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative case-study approach to examine how a Saudi English-language program incorporates—or does not incorporate—the United Nations SDGs into its academic and community initiatives. Case study methodology enables in-depth, context-aware analysis of a specific setting and is well-suited for examining how global agendas are adapted into local educational practices (Yin, 2018).

A qualitative approach was chosen because the goal was not to measure outcomes statistically but to understand the processes, obstacles, and attitudes related to SDG

integration. This aligns with earlier studies on ESD, which often utilize document analysis, curriculum mapping, and faculty interviews to show how sustainability commitments are enacted at the program level (Lozano et al., 2015; Molina et al., 2023).

Choosing a Case

There are two reasons why Majmaah University was chosen as the case institution. First, it is one of the first Saudi universities to demonstrate a clear commitment to sustainability by hosting the Saudi Cifal Center and the national LEAP-FAST initiative for higher education leadership in sustainability. Second, its projects make it an appropriate time to evaluate whether high-level sustainability pledges are being implemented at the program level.

The Bachelor of Arts in English Language program was chosen within the university. The reasoning is twofold: (1) the researcher has expertise in English language education, and (2) language programs offer underexplored yet relevant opportunities for developing sustainability-related skills, including intercultural communication, critical thinking, and civic engagement (Stibbe, 2015; Goulah, 2017).

Sources of Data

The research uses two main categories of data:

Data from documents:

- The program specification (TP-151) outlines the learning outcomes, curriculum structure, and graduate qualities.
- The operational plan (1444) outlines annual goals, activities, and success metrics.
- A training plan demonstrates to staff members how to improve their performance in every aspect.

It's easy to involve people and get to know them when you organize a community service project and work together.

These examples demonstrate how you can apply SDG ideas to support your community, improve your grades, and enhance your work. I learned more about Cifal and LEAP-FAST from university sources, which helped me understand why they are more effective.

Faculty Semi-Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six faculty members from the English Department at Majmaah University. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a common strategy in qualitative research that selects information-rich cases relevant to the research goals (Creswell, 2014). The selection criteria were as follows**:**

- Full-time position in the English Department,
- Direct involvement in teaching undergraduate English courses within the BA program, and

- At least three years of teaching experience in the program.

The selected participants came from various academic ranks and teaching roles, providing a wide range of perspectives on curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment, and institutional practices related to sustainability.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, which ensured consistency across participants while allowing flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted in English.

The interview protocol centered on four key areas:

- Faculty awareness and comprehension of the SDGs,
- Experiences in incorporating sustainability themes into English language instruction,
- Perceived challenges related to curriculum design, assessment practices, training, resources, and
- Institutional support and community partnerships related to sustainability initiatives.

All interviews were conducted with participants' informed consent, audio-recorded, and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Collection and Management

We obtained formal program documentation from the English department and then converted it into searchable text. Semi-structured discussions were conducted to gather interview data. These discussions were transcribed verbatim and anonymized to protect participants' identities. Each participant is identified by role (e.g., Lecturer A, Assistant Professor B). All data were organized using qualitative analysis software (NVivo) for coding and thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

A directed content analysis was conducted (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Codes were initially developed based on the literature on ESD and the WIA (UNESCO, 2021; Lozano et al., 2015). Major categories included curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, professional development, facilities, and community engagement.

The analysis was conducted in three phases:

- Document mapping—detecting clear and implied references to sustainability or SDGs.
- Thematic coding—organizing data from both documents and interviews into preset categories.
- Gap analysis—comparing findings to international benchmarks for SDG integration in higher education.
- Triangulation between documents and interviews enhanced validity by allowing a comparison of institutional plans and faculty perceptions.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

The study's rigor was maintained through strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness.

- Credibility was strengthened by data triangulation, which involved comparing findings from documents and faculty interviews.
- Using a consistent interview protocol and a transparent coding process enhances dependability**.**
- Confirmability was ensured by basing interpretations on participants' accounts and established theoretical frameworks, which reduces researcher bias.
- Transferability was explored by providing a detailed description of the institutional environment and program structure, allowing readers to evaluate how the findings might apply to similar higher education settings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the relevant ethics committee at Majmaah University. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and all participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was kept confidential.

FINDINGS

This study investigated how the BA English Language program at Majmaah University has incorporated the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its academic and operational practices. Data were collected from program-related documents and semi-structured interviews with faculty members. The findings are organized thematically, covering curriculum and learning outcomes, teaching methods, assessment, professional development, resources, and community engagement.

Across all themes, a central pattern becomes clear. Majmaah University is nationally recognized for its leadership in sustainability, especially through hosting the Saudi International Forum for Environmental Leadership (Cifal) and the LEAP-FAST program. However, this leadership mostly appears at the institutional level. At the program level—specifically within the BA English Language program—SDG integration remains limited, fragmented, and heavily reliant on individual faculty efforts. This pattern aligns with findings from international studies that identify a persistent "implementation gap" between institutional sustainability statements and classroom practice (Lozano et al., 2015; Molina et al., 2023).

Programme and Curriculum Learning Outcomes

The programme specification (TP-151) highlights graduate attributes such as critical thinking, intercultural communication, and responsible citizenship, all of which are conceptually aligned with the SDGs. However, the SDGs are not directly referenced, nor are learning outcomes systematically linked to specific sustainability goals.

Consequently, sustainability remains implicit rather than actively integrated into curriculum design.

In contrast, international models—such as those adopted by the University of Gothenburg (Sweden) and the University of Melbourne (Australia)—explicitly incorporate the SDGs into program learning outcomes, making sustainability a key graduate competency (Lozano et al., 2015; Leal Filho et al., 2018). The lack of such alignment in the English program at Majmaah University indicates limited engagement with these global curriculum models.

Faculty perceptions support this point. One participant noted:

> *"I know the SDGs exist, but I have never seen them reflected in our program outcomes. We are encouraged to teach critical thinking and citizenship, but not sustainability concretely." (Lecturer A)*

These findings suggest that, despite institutional support for sustainability, program-level curriculum design has not incorporated the principle of constructive alignment, where learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment are coherently organized to meet sustainability-related goals (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Pedagogical Practices

The Operational Plan (1444) emphasizes student engagement and innovative teaching methods; however, it does not offer guidance on sustainability-oriented pedagogy. Faculty members reported that integrating SDGs into teaching is left to individual discretion rather than being guided by program policy.

As one lecturer explained:

> *"I sometimes use texts about climate change or inequality, but that is my personal choice. There is no departmental guidance or support for doing this."* (Lecturer C)

In contrast, universities in Europe and North America have established support systems—such as sustainability hubs, resource banks, and interdisciplinary teaching programs—to promote the consistent integration of the SDGs. For example, the University of British Columbia's Sustainability Initiative offers structured training, funding, and educational resources that help faculty incorporate sustainability into their teaching and learning (University of British Columbia, 2023).

Faculty members at Majmaah University clearly indicated a need for similar guidance.

We need specific models. For example, how can I effectively incorporate SDG 5 on gender equality into a writing course? Without a clear plan, it remains unclear.

The lack of institutional pedagogical structures restricts the transformative power of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), mirroring Molina et al.'s (2023) observation that sustainability efforts often stay superficial without systemic backing.

Assessment of Sustainability Skills

Assessment practices within the program mainly emphasize language proficiency and academic achievement, lacking mechanisms to assess sustainability-related skills such as ethical reasoning, systems thinking, or intercultural awareness. Faculty members described this as a case of constructive misalignment.

One participant mentioned:

> *"When students write about climate change, I evaluate their grammar and vocabulary, not their ideas or values. There are no guidelines for assessing sustainability learning." (Lecturer A)*

International best practices show that sustainability skills can be assessed through authentic assessments and aligned rubrics. For example, the University of Melbourne integrates sustainability into its graduate attributes and assessment frameworks, ensuring consistency among learning outcomes, teaching methods, and evaluation (University of Melbourne, 2015).

The lack of such coherence at Majmaah University reflects a broader pattern seen in Arab higher education, where sustainability is often mentioned in mission statements but rarely turned into assessment tools (Al-Salmi & Al-Kindy, 2021).

Professional Development and Training

Analysis of the training plan shows a strong focus on technology-enabled learning and traditional teaching skills, with no specific training related to the SDGs or ESD. Faculty interviews consistently identified this as a major obstacle.

As one assistant professor stated:

> *There has been no training on the SDGs at all. Many of us do not know where to start. If the university expects integration, we need structured workshops with practical examples." (Assistant Professor D)*

In contrast, universities like the University of Copenhagen and the University of British Columbia make substantial investments in sustainability-focused professional development to provide faculty with the necessary pedagogical skills (Lozano et al., 2015). The lack of such training at Majmaah University leaves faculty ill-equipped to effectively support the SDGs in their teaching.

Services and Resources

The Community Service Plan encourages student volunteering but does not provide resources specifically for sustainability-focused teaching in the English program. Faculty members reported limited access to teaching materials and institutional support.

One lecturer remarked:

> *"We lack textbooks or materials that connect English learning with sustainability. We often need to create our own resources without institutional support." (Lecturer E)*

This challenge is not unique to Majmaah University. Studies show that sustainability resources in Arab universities are often focused on STEM fields, with humanities programs receiving less support (Alghamdi & Denman, 2021). In contrast, the University of Gothenburg has established a sustainability-labelling system and interdisciplinary ESD programs that incorporate sustainability across all disciplines, including arts and humanities (University of Gothenburg, 2025).

Community Engagement and Partnerships

Although community engagement is emphasized in institutional plans, faculty members reported weak, unsustained partnerships on sustainability.

As one participant noted:

> *"Community engagement is mentioned in the plans, but in practice, there are no long-term partnerships with organizations working on sustainability." (Lecturer F)*

Although the university is prominent through initiatives like Cifal and LEAP-FAST, these activities seem mostly disconnected from the English BA program. As a result, students have few chances to engage with sustainability issues via experiential, community-based learning.

DISCUSSION

This study uncovers a significant misalignment between Majmaah University's institutional sustainability leadership and the integration of the SDGs at the program level within the BA English Language curriculum. While the university shows clear commitment through national initiatives like Cifal and LEAP-FAST, this does not translate into systematic curriculum design, assessment reform, or structured faculty development. This pattern reflects a broader implementation gap documented in sustainability literature (Lozano et al., 2015; Molina et al., 2023).

From Institutional Commitment to Organizational Decoupling

The findings show what Meyer and Rowan (1977) describe as organizational decoupling—the separation between formal institutional commitments and everyday practices. Sustainability is recognized at the institutional level and openly expressed, but it remains mostly implicit within program learning outcomes and teaching structures. Similar patterns have been seen internationally, where sustainability discourse becomes institutionalized without creating curricular coherence.

This phenomenon aligns with Lukman and Glavič's (2007) concept of symbolic sustainability, where sustainability acts as a strategic or reputational marker rather than a transformative educational framework. The Majmaah case, therefore, reflects not a

lack of commitment but a limited vertical integration between institutional governance and academic programs.

The Lack of Constructive Alignment

At the program level, the biggest obstacle to integrating the SDGs meaningfully is the lack of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Although graduate attributes indirectly reflect skills linked to the SDGs—such as critical thinking and civic engagement—these are not clearly mapped to the SDGs or incorporated into assessment criteria.

Without alignment between learning outcomes, teaching activities, and evaluation mechanisms, sustainability remains conceptually present but pedagogically underdeveloped. Faculty members' reliance on personal initiative further reinforces fragmentation, echoing findings from Molina et al. (2023) that sustainability integration often depends on individual motivation rather than institutional design.

The Underused Role of Language Education

The limited incorporation of SDGs into the English BA program also underscores the marginalization of the humanities within sustainability discussions. While much ESD research focuses on STEM fields, language programs are uniquely positioned to foster ethical reasoning, intercultural competence, and critical discourse awareness—skills that are central to several SDGs (Stibbe, 2015; Goulah, 2017).

The findings indicate that this potential remains largely unexploited. Sustainability themes may appear in isolated classroom materials, but they are not fundamentally integrated into program structure. This supports concerns in the literature that sustainability reform often favors technical disciplines while neglecting the cultural and communicative dimensions essential for transformative change.

Implications for Whole-Institution Transformation

UNESCO's Whole-Institution Approach (2021) emphasizes that sustainability must be integrated across governance, curriculum, research, and community engagement. The Majmaah case demonstrates partial horizontal institutional integration but weak vertical integration into academic programs. Sustainability initiatives operate in parallel to curriculum design rather than shaping it.

Sterling's (2004) distinction between first-order and second-order change is helpful here. Current practices mainly reflect first-order adaptation—such as visible initiatives and institutional branding—rather than deeper epistemological shifts in teaching and learning. Achieving the goals of Vision 2030 requires moving beyond symbolic support toward comprehensive curriculum redesign, ongoing professional development, and aligned assessment systems.

Synthesis

Overall, the study confirms that institutional sustainability leadership does not automatically ensure programme-level integration. Theoretical frameworks, including organizational decoupling, constructive alignment, and the Whole-Institution Approach,

collectively explain the observed gap. The findings highlight the need for structural coherence: sustainability must be clearly defined in learning outcomes, implemented through pedagogy, systematically assessed, and supported with faculty development.

Without proper alignment, sustainability risks stay aspirational instead of becoming educationally transformative.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the United Nations SDGs were integrated into the BA English Language program at Majmaah University. This university is recognized as a national leader in sustainability due to initiatives like the Saudi Cifal Center and the LEAP-FAST program. The study used document analysis and faculty interviews, revealing a consistent pattern: despite high institutional goals, practices at the program level remain limited, fragmented, and mostly symbolic.

The graduate traits in the program indirectly align with SDG-related competencies, including critical thinking and civic engagement; however, they are not directly connected to specific objectives. Pedagogy and assessment still lack synchronization, making it difficult for teachers to determine how to incorporate and grade sustainability. It is even more challenging for the program to fully integrate the SDGs because there are not enough training opportunities, resources, or community collaborations.

The study highlights the implications of symbolic sustainability (Lukman & Glavič, 2007), the challenges arising from the gap between institutional commitments and programmatic realities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), and the lack of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011) as well as transformative learning opportunities (Mezirow, 1997). It empirically emphasizes the underexplored potential of language programs to advance sustainability in Saudi Arabia.

If these gaps are not addressed, Majmaah University and all of Saudi Arabia's HEIs might struggle to achieve Vision 2030's goal of producing graduates who are socially responsible, competitive globally, and capable of supporting sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings show that the challenge for the BA English Language program is not resistance to sustainability integration but the lack of structured guidance, alignment mechanisms, and discipline-specific support. Fixing this institutional–curricular mismatch requires coordinated efforts at the program, institutional, and policy levels.

1. Structured SDG Curriculum Mapping

The English Department should perform a systematic curriculum review to identify where SDG-related skills are already implicitly included and where clear alignment is necessary. Each course can be linked to relevant SDGs, especially SDGs 4, 5, 10, and 16, which naturally correspond with language education skills like critical thinking, intercultural communication, and civic engagement.

For instance:

- **Reading courses** may include critical analysis of texts on climate change (SDG 13), gender discourse (SDG 5), or migration and inequality (SDG 10).
- **Writing courses** can include argumentative essays that require students to propose solutions to local sustainability challenges.
- **Speaking courses** might include structured debates on ethical development policies or global justice issues.
- **Research courses** can promote small-scale inquiry projects focused on community sustainability issues.

Such mapping does not need curriculum replacement but deliberate alignment.

2. Constructive Alignment in Assessment

Sustainability skills must be integrated into assessment frameworks. Rubrics should evaluate not only linguistic accuracy but also:

- Depth of critical engagement with global issues.
- Ethical reasoning
- Intercultural awareness
- Evidence-based discussions on sustainability topics

This approach operationalizes constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011), ensuring that sustainability is quantifiable rather than symbolic.

3. Discipline-Specific Faculty Development

Faculty interviews show that instructors favor practical models over abstract sustainability rhetoric. Professional development initiatives should therefore include:

- Workshops showcasing sample lesson plans that incorporate SDGs into language skills instruction.
- Model assessment rubrics incorporating sustainability skills
- Shared teaching resource banks with curated sustainability-related texts suitable for English language learning.
- Peer collaboration sessions for sharing classroom practices

This targeted support would move integration from personal effort to institutional planning.

4. Strengthening Vertical Integration Through Institutional Initiatives

Majmaah University's sustainability leadership, through initiatives like Cifal and LEAP-FAST, should be more systematically incorporated into academic programs. Possible methods include:

- Guest lectures connecting language learning to real sustainability projects.
- Collaborative student projects linked to community initiatives.
- Internships or service-learning programs focused on sustainability themes
- Joint research seminars involving sustainability centers and humanities departments

This vertical integration would operationalize UNESCO's Whole-Institution Approach (2021), ensuring sustainability leadership extends into teaching practices.

5. Policy-Level Implications

At the national level, regulatory and accreditation agencies might consider adding specific SDG-alignment criteria into program accreditation standards. Encouraging all fields — not just STEM and business — to show how they incorporate sustainability would support balanced and inclusive reform.

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