

Special Issue on Sustainable Development Goals and Education: Rethinking Teaching Practices, Curriculum, and Institutional Roles

Guest Editors

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Background

Sustainability has become a defining challenge of our time. Climate change, social inequality, and technological disruption are no longer abstract forces but immediate realities that disrupt lives, economies, and institutions (Barnett-Itzhaki et al., 2025). Education sits at the center of this turbulence. Schools and universities are already affected by heatwaves, flooding, pandemics, and digital disruption, while also carrying the responsibility of equipping learners with the knowledge and competencies needed to address these challenges. These crises damage infrastructure, disrupt continuity for millions of learners, and deepen inequalities, placing education systems on the frontline of sustainability challenges—both as victims of disruption and as crucial drivers of transformation (Wells & Nieuwenhuis, 2017; Crawford & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022).

The international policy agenda has recognized education's centrality to sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) commits to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and to promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all (Nguyen et al., 2025). Target 4.7 specifies that learners should acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including through education for sustainable development (ESD), human rights, gender equality, promotion of peace, and global citizenship. UNESCO's *ESD for 2030* roadmap calls on education systems to integrate sustainability into curriculum, pedagogy, institutional governance, and community engagement (UNESCO, 2020). Yet progress is uneven. Almost half of national curriculum frameworks still omit climate change, and fewer than one in five teachers worldwide feel adequately prepared to teach sustainability. The gap between global ambitions and local realities remains stark (Omazic & Zunk, 2021). Moreover, while the SDGs provide a milestone and an inclusive framework to align social, environmental, and economic dimensions, progress often suffers from cherry-picking and symbolic compliance. Genuine transformation requires integrative, cross-disciplinary efforts rather than narrow or fragmented initiatives (Sinkovics et al., 2022).

Institutional Sustainability: Higher Education as Systems

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are pivotal in shaping sustainable futures. They are centres of knowledge creation, training grounds for future leaders, and organizational actors with significant ecological and social footprints. Universities consume vast energy, manage extensive estates, employ thousands of staff, and serve as cultural and economic anchors in their communities. Their choices on governance, operations, and curriculum therefore reverberate widely (Rodríguez et al., 2025).

Yet the integration of sustainability across HEIs remains fragmented. While many institutions have adopted policies, signed international charters, or launched green campus projects, these often remain symbolic add-ons rather than systemic transformations (Snelson-Powell et al., 2020). Environmental management such as waste, water, and energy has typically taken precedence (Barnett-Itzhaki et al., 2025), while issues of equity, well-being (Sarzhanova & Nurgabdeshev, 2025), and institutional culture receive less attention (Wells & Nieuwenhuis, 2017). The pandemic further exposed vulnerabilities, accelerating the VUCA environment, which influences skill shortages (Fonseca et al., 2024). When

resources were diverted to ensure teaching continuity, many sustainability initiatives were paused or deprioritized. Progress continues to be inconsistent across various regions; certain universities are actively involved in critical pedagogy and participatory outreach initiatives, whereas others face challenges due to weak governance or limited resources (Woods et al., 2022). These disparities could influence the development of a collaborative learning ecosystem (Fonseca & Zegers, 2024; Crawford & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022).

Digital transformation represents both an enabler and a challenge within this landscape (Nurgabdeshev et al., 2025). The pandemic accelerated adoption of online learning platforms, AI tools, and virtual classrooms, while emerging technologies such as virtual and augmented reality and smart campuses promise new ways to enhance learning and reduce environmental footprints (Trevisan et al., 2023). On the one hand, digitalization can support institutional sustainability by broadening access for excluded groups, reducing travel and carbon emissions, and optimizing energy and resource management. Many initiatives emphasize tool adoption over cultural or pedagogical change, while inequalities in internet access, digital literacy, and infrastructure exacerbate existing divides. Unless aligned with governance, pedagogy, and equity goals, digital transformation may reproduce the very inequities sustainability seeks to address (García-Hernández et al., 2023; Weaver et al., 2025).

Institutional sustainability therefore requires a more holistic and integrated strategy. Universities must embed sustainability into long-term planning, governance, and digital infrastructures, linking ecological, social, and technological innovation with equity and inclusivity. Progress depends on moving beyond isolated projects to systemic adaptation, aligning missions with the SDGs, building resilience to crises, and ensuring that digital tools serve as catalysts—rather than substitutes—for genuine cultural and pedagogical transformation (Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2015). Only by treating sustainability as a strategic priority on par with teaching, research, and digital innovation can HEIs fulfil their role as living laboratories of transformation and remain socially relevant in the SDG era (Slager et al., 2020; Moratis & Melissen, 2022; Beamond et al., 2024).

The Scope

This Special Issue seeks to deepen scholarly understanding of how sustainability redefines the ecosystem, responsibilities, and practices of education in the context of the SDGs. We consider sustainability as an integral part of the system, not as a peripheral concern, but as a central force shaping pedagogy, institutions, and business schools. Our aim is to explore how sustainability reshapes the assumptions, responsibilities, and practices of education in the era of the SDGs. We focus especially on two interconnected domains:

- **Institutional sustainability:** how education systems and higher education institutions embed sustainability into governance, organizational culture, operations, and digital infrastructures.
- **Pedagogies of responsibility:** how institutions and pedagogical practices can move beyond symbolic compliance to meaningfully embed the SDGs and prepare responsible leaders.

Although research on sustainability in education has expanded, it often remains fragmented, limited to isolated curriculum reforms, symbolic institutional projects, or digital initiatives that prioritize tools over systemic change. The scope and complexity of sustainability demand more holistic and interdisciplinary approaches.

We welcome contributions at multiple levels of analysis: micro (student learning and pedagogy), meso (institutional governance and strategies), and macro (national and international policy). Comparative and cross-regional studies are particularly encouraged, especially those that shed light on the role of business schools in advancing sustainability.

Exemplary Research Questions

The following questions are illustrative rather than exhaustive. They are intended to guide potential contributions, but authors are encouraged to go beyond them and propose alternative perspectives.

Institutional Sustainability

- How do HEIs embed the SDGs into governance, operations, and organizational culture in ways that go beyond symbolic gestures?
- In what ways can digital infrastructures and smart campuses contribute to institutional sustainability while avoiding new inequalities?
- How do universities measure, evaluate, and communicate the social, ecological, and technological impacts of their sustainability practices?
- What strategies help institutions build resilience so that sustainability initiatives survive crises such as pandemics, political shifts, or financial crisis?

Pedagogies of Responsibility

- How can higher education institutions move beyond rhetoric to genuinely integrate the SDGs into curricula, research, and governance?
- Which pedagogical methods (e.g., simulations, project-based learning, service learning) are most effective in cultivating sustainability competencies?
- How do rankings, accreditation, and faculty incentives shape (or constrain) the adoption of sustainability in higher education?
- In what ways can business education address critiques of Eurocentric or profit-driven models and incorporate diverse, global, and decolonial perspectives on sustainability?

Submission instructions

The full-text manuscripts addressing the special issue's focus should be submitted through the Editorial Park manuscript submission system (<https://www.editorialpark.com/ijopr/login>), which can also be accessed through the website (<https://www.ijopr.com/>). All submissions will undergo the journal's double-blind peer review process. Please see the [Author Guidelines](#) and Submission Preparation Checklist carefully before preparing your manuscript.

We welcome empirical, conceptual, and review papers that rigorously advance understanding of sustainability in education, with particular attention to pedagogy, institutions, and business schools in the era of the SDGs.

All submissions to this special issue will be handled in accordance with the JPR's [Peer Review Process](#) and [Special Issue and Guest Editor Policy](#).

We would like to inform you that manuscripts can be submitted in free format using Microsoft Word. However, we kindly ask that you ensure your submission complies with the APA 7th edition [citation and referencing guidelines](#).

The Guest Editors would welcome contributions up to 9000 words, references and appendices included. Longer manuscripts will need to be approved.

The *Journal of Pedagogical Research* is an open-access journal; while there are no submission fees, authors may be responsible for certain costs related to publishing, and we kindly encourage

prospective contributors to read the journal's [Open Access Policy](#) or to contact the journal directly for further information.

NOTE: When submitting your final manuscript, please select issue type as "special issue" and "**Sustainable Development Goals and Education**".

Deadlines for authors

- Submission deadline: 01 August 2026
- Initial decision notification: 15 August 2026
- Revised manuscript due: 01 September 2026
- Final decision: 20 September 2026
- Publication of the special issue: October 2026

Note: Early submissions may be processed before the final submission deadline. Papers accepted and finalized earlier may be published online first prior to the publication of the complete special issue.

Special Issue Events

To support prospective authors, the Guest Editors will host a **Paper Development Workshop (PDW)** on **22 October 2025** at **Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh**, with simultaneous online participation to ensure international accessibility.

- **Deadline for PDW submissions:** 10 October 2025.
- Authors whose extended abstracts or early drafts are accepted for the workshop will receive developmental feedback from the guest editors and invited senior scholars.
- Participation in the PDW is encouraged but **not a prerequisite** for submission, nor a guarantee of acceptance.

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