

EMBEDDING SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ANALYZING MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS OF VIETNAMESE BUSINESS SCHOOLS

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Abstract: Although sustainability is increasingly reflected in higher education strategies worldwide, little is known about how it is represented in the strategic statements of business schools in emerging higher education contexts such as Vietnam. This study examines sustainability-related concepts in the mission and vision statements of 95 Vietnamese business schools. A content analysis combining descriptive frequency analysis with contextual examination of coded text was conducted using a literature-informed framework of 16 sustainability-related concepts. Sustainability-related language was identified in the strategic statements of 81 institutions (85.3%), with “community”, “responsibility”, and “sustainable development” being the most frequently represented concepts. In contrast, explicit references to environmental issues were relatively rare. The findings indicate that sustainability is widely represented in the strategic discourse of Vietnamese business schools, although the emphasis placed on different sustainability-related concepts is uneven. The study extends research on sustainability in university strategic statements to an under-researched national and institutional context while highlighting the distinction between the strategic representation of sustainability and its implementation in institutional practice.

Keywords: higher education; mission and vision statements; sustainable development; Vietnam

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly recognized as critical drivers of sustainable societal development (Stephens et al., 2008). By leveraging their unique capacities, HEIs can catalyze change by shaping the perspectives and ethical values of future leaders across academia, business, and politics (Findler et al., 2019). They also serve as hubs for disseminating knowledge to students and the broader community, while striving to act as exemplars of sustainable societal practices (Lozano, 2006). The importance of education in advancing sustainable development (SD) was first emphasized in the 1972 Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment (United Nations, 1972). Since then, HEIs and their stakeholders have expressed their commitment to SD through numerous international declarations and charters (Lozano et al., 2013). One notable example is the Talloires Declaration, established in 1990 as the first official statement by university leaders addressing environmental sustainability in higher education. Its widespread adoption marked an important milestone in the growing institutional commitment to sustainability in higher education (Adams et al., 2018).

Mission and vision statements provide an important means through which universities can formally articulate sustainability within their institutional priorities and strategic direction. Early research, however, suggested that sustainability was not yet widely reflected in university strategic statements. For example, Velazquez et al. (2006) observed that, despite growing sustainability initiatives in HEIs, relatively few institutions had incorporated sustainability into

their mission statements. More recent research suggests that sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become increasingly visible in university strategic discourse, although their representation remains uneven across institutional and geographical contexts. Studies of Colombian universities and African business schools, for example, have identified substantial variation in how sustainability-related priorities and individual SDGs are represented in institutional mission and vision statements (Akoto & Akoto, 2026; Bedoya-Dorado et al., 2022). The contemporary question therefore concerns not only whether sustainability appears in strategic statements, but also which sustainability-related priorities institutions emphasize.

In Vietnam, sustainability has gained increasing attention in higher education, although its institutional integration remains uneven (Bui et al., 2024). Yet research on how sustainability is represented in universities' strategic statements remains limited. Business schools are particularly relevant because they educate future managers and leaders whose decisions can influence economic, social, and environmental outcomes. Against this background, this study examines how sustainability is represented in the mission and vision statements of Vietnamese business schools. While sustainability reports, institutional activities, and performance indicators are important for assessing implementation, they fall beyond the scope of this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Mission and vision statements in the HEI context

Mission and vision statements are among the most widely used tools in organizational planning and management. Specifically, organizations use mission statements to align decision-making processes and communicate their purpose and strategic direction to both internal and external stakeholders (Campbell & Yeung, 1991). Vision statements articulate what an institution aspires to achieve in the future (Kopaneva & Sias, 2015). Because mission statements comprehensively reflect an organization's guiding principles, they tend to receive greater scholarly attention than vision statements. A well-crafted mission statement should include four essential components: purpose (explaining the organization's reason for existence), values (articulating its beliefs), standards and behaviors (establishing policies and behavioral norms), and strategy (outlining its approach to achieving goals) (Campbell & Yeung, 1991). In addition, Pearce II (1982) proposed eight core components that enhance the comprehensiveness of mission statements: target customers, core products or services, primary markets, principal technologies, concerns for survival, growth, and profitability, company philosophy, company self-concept, and concern for public image. To ensure effectiveness, mission statements must be clearly communicated so that their principles align with and influence organizational performance.

Mission statements have a long history in higher education, with U.S. universities publishing them as early as the 1930s as a means of demonstrating public accountability (Scott, 2006). Their role has subsequently expanded to quality assurance, with accreditation organizations increasingly requiring HEIs to demonstrate alignment between their stated missions and institutional activities. According to the Higher Learning Commission and AACSB, mission statements in HEIs generally serve two primary purposes: (1) to provide a foundation for the development of strategic goals and plans, and (2) to align institutional activities with core purposes and directions, thereby influencing organizational decision-making (Ireland & Hirc, 1992). Consequently, the implementation of mission statements in HEIs "should lay a foundation for future actions and philosophies underlying those actions" (Velazquez et al., 2006, p. 813), reflecting a principle similar to that observed in profit-oriented organizations. Despite the extensive scholarly attention devoted to mission statements in HEIs, much of the existing research has focused on institutions in the United States, Europe, and other developed regions. For example, Breznik & Law (2019) examined how mission statements differentiate the world's top 250 universities and identified four core dimensions: Educational Philosophies, Strategic

Orientation, Social Responsibility, and Stakeholder Values. Research, education, and students were among the most frequently emphasized values. Similarly, Bayrak (2020) identified substantial variation in the mission statements of universities across five global regions, particularly in how institutions communicated their core values, purposes, and value propositions. Nicolescu & Dominici (2021), analyzing the mission statements of the world's top 150 universities, found excellence to be one of the most consistently recurring themes.

Research in developing and emerging higher education contexts remains comparatively limited. Olusola et al. (2022), for example, examined mission statements from the top 10 African universities listed in the *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* and found strong aspirations toward world-class status and regional leadership in research and education. Studies of East Asian universities have similarly shown that institutional mission statements reflect not only organizational priorities but also broader social, cultural, historical, and governance contexts (Manning, 2021). Research considering both mission and vision statements suggests that these documents can be understood as complementary expressions of institutional strategic orientation. While some studies distinguish between them to compare current institutional purposes with future aspirations, other research has examined them collectively as institutional strategic discourse (e.g., Bedoya-Dorado et al., 2022).

2.2. Mission and vision statements and sustainability

With the growing recognition of the role of HEIs in advancing SD, the integration of sustainability into universities' strategic statements, particularly mission and vision statements, has increasingly attracted scholarly attention. However, findings have varied considerably across regional and institutional contexts. For example, Lee et al. (2013) found that Australian universities' mission statements demonstrated only limited commitment to SD. Davis et al. (2007) examined the mission statements of 16 U.S. universities and highlighted the role of ethical values in institutional missions. More recently, Fernández-Vázquez (2021) analyzed the websites of 80 South American universities and found that 59% of them had designed their websites to communicate environmental sustainability commitments. Nevertheless, the content was generally limited, rendering these digital platforms largely ineffective in fully achieving their intended communicative purposes. Breznik et al. (2021) investigated the mission and vision statements of 93 Slovenian universities, comparing institutions with and without engineering programs. Their findings showed that the terms *development*, *education*, *research*, and *knowledge* appeared most frequently. However, the emphasis on sustainability dimensions differed between the two groups: environmental sustainability was more strongly emphasized in technically oriented institutions, whereas social sustainability was more prominent in non-technical institutions. In another study, Abello-Romero et al. (2023) analyzed the integration of the 17 SDGs into the strategic elements, including mission statements, visions, and strategic goals, of 18 Chilean public universities. The findings revealed that all institutions incorporated at least one SDG into their strategic statements, with "Quality Education" (SDG 4) and "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure" (SDG 9) being the most frequently referenced goals.

Despite this growing body of research, few studies have specifically examined sustainability in the mission and vision statements of business schools, particularly in developing and emerging higher education contexts. This gap is relevant to Vietnam, where higher education has increasingly emphasized institutional autonomy, accountability, and strategic development, while sustainability is also gaining attention as an institutional priority (Phan et al., 2024). While recent research highlights the integration of the SDGs across education, research, community engagement, and governance (Le & Nguyen, 2023), Vietnamese HEIs continue to face policy and institutional challenges in translating these sustainability priorities into practice (Bui et al., 2024). Business schools are of particular importance in this setting because they educate future managers and leaders whose decisions can influence sustainable development (Phan et al., 2024). Against this background, this study examines how sustainability-related priorities are represented in the mission and vision statements of Vietnamese business schools. The two types of statements are

analyzed jointly as complementary forms of institutional strategic discourse, while their implementation in institutional practice falls beyond the scope of the study.

3. Research method

The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) list of Vietnamese universities was used as the sampling frame because it provides an official national source on higher education institutions. Institutions were included if they were Vietnamese HEIs listed by MOET and had an identifiable faculty, school, or equivalent academic unit offering business-related education. Institutions established and managed by international organizations or foreign governments, and those without an identifiable business faculty or school, were excluded. This screening produced a final sample of 95 business schools, including 39 in Hanoi, 22 in Ho Chi Minh City, and 34 in other provinces and cities. Data were collected between September and December 2024. Two research assistants searched official institutional websites and strategy documents to identify mission and vision statements. They also recorded whether each institution maintained a dedicated webpage or website section explicitly addressing sustainability-related issues. Only statements published on official institutional webpages or in official strategy documents and identifiable as mission and/or vision statements were included. For each institution, the available mission and vision texts were compiled into a single institutional record, yielding a corpus of 95 records. The research assistants were responsible only for document identification and retrieval; analytical coding was conducted by the two authors.

Mission and vision statements were analyzed jointly because the study focused on their combined representation of institutional strategic priorities rather than differences between the two document types. The study employed content analysis (Mayring, 2014) combining descriptive frequency analysis with contextual examination of coded text. The institutional record served as the primary unit of analysis, while the coding unit was a sentence or short textual segment containing a sustainability-related concept. Coding was therefore based on meaning in context rather than isolated word occurrence. Broad concepts such as *community*, *responsibility*, *innovation and creativity*, and *international collaboration* were coded only when the surrounding text indicated a sustainability-relevant meaning. A deductive coding framework was developed from previous research on sustainability assessment and sustainability-related institutional discourse in higher education (Lozano & Peattie, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2022; Smith & Alexander, 2013). The initial concepts were operationalized as analytical codes rather than exact keywords. Because most statements were in Vietnamese, English-language concepts drawn from the literature were translated into Vietnamese using conceptual rather than literal equivalence, and synonymous or overlapping expressions were consolidated under the same code. Conceptually redundant terms were removed during codebook development. The resulting framework comprised 16 sustainability-related analytical concepts (Table 1), each accompanied by a definition and coding rule.

Table 1. Key themes identified for analysis

Analytical concept	Broad sustainability orientation	Coding focus
Stakeholders	Cross-cutting/social	Explicit consideration of stakeholder groups and their interests or societal relationships
Green/Sustainable university	Environmental/cross-cutting	Institutional aspiration or identity explicitly associated with environmental or sustainable university development
Innovation and creativity	Economic/developmental	Innovation or creativity linked to sustainable, societal, organizational, or long-term development
Equality	Social	Equal opportunity, inclusion, fairness, or non-discrimination

Education quality	Social/developmental	Educational quality framed in relation to societal development, human capacity, or long-term institutional contribution
Learning society	Social	Contribution to continuous learning and wider societal learning
Lifelong learning	Social	Continued learning and personal/professional development across the life course
International collaboration	Cross-cutting	International cooperation connected to institutional development, societal contribution, or sustainability-related goals
Global citizenship	Social/cross-cutting	Development of globally responsible citizenship, awareness, or participation
Student health	Social	Student health, wellbeing, and quality of life
Community	Social	Contribution to, engagement with, or responsibility toward communities and society
Social justice	Social	Justice, fairness, inclusion, and social equity
Environmental issues	Environmental	Environmental protection, conservation, ecological challenges, or environmental responsibility
Ethics	Social/cross-cutting	Ethical conduct, values, integrity, or socially responsible behavior
Responsibility	Social/cross-cutting	Social, professional, institutional, or environmental responsibility
Sustainable development	Cross-cutting	Explicit reference to sustainable development or sustainability

(Source: Authors)

All institutional records were coded in MAXQDA version 20. Coded occurrences were counted to provide a descriptive overview of the frequency of sustainability-related concepts across the corpus. The textual context of coded segments was then reviewed to confirm that the concepts were used in a sustainability-relevant sense, and selected excerpts were retained to illustrate their expression in institutional statements. The frequency results were interpreted descriptively and were not treated as evidence of institutional sustainability performance or implementation. To enhance coding consistency, the two authors first discussed the code definitions and decision rules and independently sample-coded approximately 10% of the institutional records using a preliminary codebook. The coded segments were compared, and disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached. These discussions were used to clarify ambiguous definitions and refine the coding rules before the agreed framework was applied to the remaining corpus.

4. Findings and Discussion

Table 2 summarizes the frequency of the 16 sustainability-related analytical concepts identified in the mission and vision statements of 95 Vietnamese business schools. Community, responsibility, and sustainable development were the three most frequently coded concepts, with 55, 54, and 47 occurrences, respectively. These concepts are visualized through a word cloud (Figure 1).

Table 2. Frequency of sustainability-related analytical concepts in the mission and vision statements of Vietnamese business schools

No.	Terms	Frequency
1	Community	55
2	Responsibility	54
3	Sustainable Development	47
4	International collaboration	39
5	Innovation & Creativity	37

6	Lifelong learning	17
7	Global citizenship	12
8	Ethics	7
9	Stakeholders	5
10	Equality	5
11	Learning society	5
12	Environmental Issues	5
13	Green/Sustainable Universities	3
14	Education Quality	3
15	Student Health	2
16	Social justice	1
	Total	297

Sustainability-related language was identified in the strategic statements of 81 of the 95 institutions (85.3%). The three institutions with the highest numbers of coded sustainability-related concepts are Van Lang University (12 coded concepts), Hanoi University of Transport (11 coded concepts), and the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (10 coded concepts). For example, Van Lang University emphasizes “educating talents to be the best they can be, to become lifelong learners living up to their full potential,” and seeks to “nurture them to embrace their role as future leaders in their areas of fulfillment.” Similarly, Hanoi University of Transport highlights its “commitment to training, research, and high-quality technology transfer in line with global integration and social responsibility to promote the sustainable development of the transport sector and the country.” Meanwhile, the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City underscores its “commitment to enhancing knowledge creation and dissemination, nurturing young talents in the era of globalization and integration, and pioneering innovation and public service”. These excerpts illustrate that the coded concepts were embedded in broader statements concerning lifelong learning, social responsibility, sustainable development, knowledge creation, innovation, and contributions to society, rather than appearing only as isolated terms.



Figure 1. Word cloud of the 16 sustainability-related analytical concepts in the mission and vision statements of Vietnamese business schools

Explicit references to environmental issues were comparatively rare, with only five coded occurrences, in contrast to the much higher frequencies of *community*, *responsibility*, and *sustainable development*. One possible interpretation is that business schools give greater prominence to the social and economic aspects of their societal role than to explicitly environmental concerns. Business schools are often expected to educate future leaders capable of

generating social and economic value for organizations and their stakeholders (Miotto et al., 2020), while their engagement with the SDGs may remain limited or superficial (Weybrecht, 2022). These perspectives may help explain the limited visibility of environmental concerns in the statements examined, although their frequency should not be interpreted as a measure of institutions' environmental practices or performance.

The prominence of *community*, *responsibility*, and *sustainable development* also differs from patterns reported in other contexts. Chilean public universities, for example, predominantly emphasized "Quality Education" (SDG 4) and "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure" (SDG 9) (Abello-Romero et al., 2023), while Slovenian technical universities emphasized *development*, *education*, *research*, and *knowledge* (Breznik et al., 2021). Fernández-Vázquez (2021) further found that 59% of the South American universities examined used their websites to communicate environmental sustainability commitments. Although these studies differ in sample and analytical approach, they suggest that sustainability-related priorities in university strategic communication vary across contexts. In the present study, only three of the 95 business schools - the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Nguyen Tat Thanh University, and Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology- maintained a dedicated webpage or website section explicitly related to sustainable development, compared with 81 institutions whose mission and vision statements contained sustainability-related language. This contrast suggests that sustainability was more visible in general strategic discourse than through dedicated online communication, although neither provides evidence of actual sustainability practices.

The findings offer implications for university leaders seeking to develop mission and vision statements that reflect sustainability-related priorities. The absence of sustainability-related language in the statements of 14 of the 95 business schools indicates that sustainability is not yet explicitly represented in the strategic discourse of all institutions examined. This finding concerns formal strategic communication and should not be interpreted as evidence that these institutions do not engage in sustainability-related practices. Nevertheless, making sustainability more explicit in mission and vision statements may help institutions communicate their strategic priorities and societal aspirations more clearly. Mission and vision statements should also reflect institutions' distinctive purposes, contexts, capacities, stakeholders, and societal roles (Olusola et al., 2022; Scott, 2006). The sustainability-related language identified in some Vietnamese business schools illustrates how such priorities can be made visible through institutional strategic communication. Universities may therefore benefit from periodically reviewing their mission and vision statements to ensure that they remain responsive to evolving societal and sustainability priorities, while recognizing that strategic statements alone do not demonstrate their implementation in institutional practice.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how sustainability-related priorities are represented in the mission and vision statements of 95 Vietnamese business schools. Sustainability-related language was identified in the statements of 81 institutions (85.3%), with *community*, *responsibility*, and *sustainable development* emerging as the most frequently coded concepts, while explicit references to environmental issues were comparatively rare. These findings extend research on sustainability in university strategic statements to an under-researched national and institutional context and highlight the uneven representation of different sustainability-related priorities. Importantly, the findings reflect formal strategic discourse and should not be interpreted as evidence of sustainability implementation or institutional performance.

Several limitations provide directions for future research. First, because the study adopted a cross-sectional design, analyzing mission and vision statements at a single point in time, it cannot capture changes in institutional strategic priorities over time. Longitudinal research could

examine how sustainability-related language evolves as policy and institutional priorities change. Second, the analysis was limited to formal strategic statements and did not examine whether or how these priorities are translated into practice. Future studies could triangulate mission and vision statements with sustainability reports, institutional policies, or activities to examine the relationship between strategic representation and implementation. Finally, the deductive framework of 16 sustainability-related concepts could be further refined and applied across different institutional, disciplinary, or national contexts. Such research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sustainability priorities are articulated and enacted across higher education settings.

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