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# Assessing the University of Johannesburg's Engagement and Position in Global Sustainable Development Goal Practices

Chidubem Deborah Adamu, Kathija Yassim \*, Chinaza Uleanya \*

Department of Educational Leadership and Management, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg 2006, South Africa; adamuchidubemdeborah@gmail.com (CDA)

\* Correspondence: Kathija Yassim, Email: kyassim@uj.ac.za; Chinaza Uleanya, Email: chinazauleanya@yahoo.com

## ABSTRACT

This study assessed the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) engagement with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by exploring both its practical sustainability initiatives and the Senate's policy discourse on SDG-related matters. Within a qualitative research approach, the study applied the interpretivism paradigm. Six stakeholders, including students, lecturers, and administrative staff, who had participated in an eight-week online sustainability short learning program were purposefully chosen from across UJ's three campuses. The alignment between UJ's operational endeavors and its policy-level debates was examined in the study. Results show UJ's strong commitments to reducing poverty (SDG 1) and improving the quality of education (SDG 4) through programs like interdisciplinary programs, improved mentorship, scholarships for disadvantaged students, and innovative online learning platforms. Nonetheless, a selective focus is evident in Senate-level debates on topics like human rights, gender equity, conflict resolution, and diversity. Discussions frequently stay at the policy level without producing tangible, quantifiable results, and international problems are given precedence over regional African issues. Practical suggestions for UJ and other African universities are included in the study's conclusion. These include expanding the dispute resolution process to encompass regional issues, turning policy discussions about human rights and gender equality into concrete projects, and improving internal communication to increase stakeholder participation. Higher education institutions in Africa may more successfully promote sustainable development and the SDGs by taking a more comprehensive and balanced approach.

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**KEYWORDS:** Africa; development; higher education; leadership; sustainability

## INTRODUCTION

Universities are criticized for failing to address issues that can drive socioeconomic and environmental growth, even when they participate in global sustainable development practices [1]. However, research and development, along with higher education institutions, are like Siamese twins that constantly work together to identify and solve developmental problems [2–4]. Therefore, it is expected of universities to acknowledge societal changes and respond by actively participating in problem-solving [5]. Nevertheless, universities may be facing challenges with engaging in global issues related to sustainable development [6,7]. As a result, it is becoming impractical for most institutions worldwide, including those in Africa, to evaluate the attainment of the 2015 SDGs by 2030. The explanation is not very far-reaching because most colleges say they are involved in SDGs, but sometimes their involvement does not align with SDG-related practices. The level of involvement typically does not support the university community's social and economic growth [8]. As a result, university leaders' position on issues pertaining to the SDGs, like gender equality and inclusion, human rights, poverty, and peaceful conflict resolution, tend to be counterproductive. African university administrators, meanwhile, might be having difficulties defending their stance on SDG-related procedures. The [9,10] claim that the climate change brought on by technological advancements has resulted in worldwide environmental, ecological, and socioeconomic problems that are posing a challenge to humankind's environment. Thus, there is a greater need than ever for the preservation of the forest, human, and aquatic environment for economic development [8,11,12]. Consequently, universities seem to be showing active participation in providing solutions to the global issues [6,13,14]. Thus, this study focuses on critically assessing the achievements and position of the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in engaging in global SDG-related practices. In achieving the aim of the study, attempts will be made to provide answers to the following research questions: Does the UJ participate in achieving the SDGs? What is the position of the UJ on SDG-related matters?

## Literature Review

It is noteworthy that universities in Africa and other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have included sustainable development on their agendas for more than 20 years [15]. For example, the Higher Education Sustainability Community of Practice (HESCoP) of Universities South Africa [16] focuses on 12 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are pertinent to South African HEIs, which include 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, and 17 out of 17. HEI leaders have, however, signed a number of declarations [17] committing to actively participating in the global SDGs through a variety of sustainable activities [10]. Initiatives like the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Higher

Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI), which are backed by the United Nations (UN), have been especially active in promoting the SDGs within tertiary institutions [18]. As a result, it is generally acknowledged that universities are essential to achieving the SDGs. According to [19], HEIs have an innate obligation to improve the sustainability of societies. According to the Sustainable Development Solutions Network [20], the UN SDSN emphasizes that their job consists of four activities: knowledge generation, developing present and future leaders, impact demonstration, and promoting cross-sectoral leadership. By embracing more transdisciplinary approaches, universities can improve the connections between research, education, policy, and practice, which is consistent with the study's emphasis on SDG 4 about high-quality education [15].

However, it has been stated that HEIs must retrain present and future leaders and decision-makers, including university administrators, in order to accomplish the SDG targets [10,21]. Thus, options for professional training and capacity building offer a great deal of promise to enable leadership to meet the SDGs [15]. When addressing multi-stakeholder “wicked” challenges, these kinds of creative approaches frequently have greater success [22]. Since around 12 of the SDGs specifically acknowledge education and research, academic institutions ought to take an active role in achieving these objectives. Furthermore, universities have a much greater role in attaining the SDGs since they can help implement them, start change, and promote social prosperity through research, study programs, and curricula, as well as by changing policies and strategies to better align with the SDGs [1]. Therefore, in order to effectively handle issues brought on by the swift changes in the environment, politics, and cultures—such as globalization, climate change, diversity, and new technology—institutions implementing SDG practices must embrace the participative leadership theory [23,24].

Lowin [25] introduced the theory of participative leadership. It emphasizes how a leader may help stakeholders and subordinates engage in the decision-making process by offering them psychological support [26–29]. According to the notion, employee involvement and participation can lead to an increase in their level of responsibility at work [30]. Traditional autocratic leadership management methods are replaced by the democratic theory [31,32]. According to [33–35], participative leadership, also known as shared influence or joint decision-making, is when a leader consults with their subordinates to resolve a problem and determine the best course of action, and the decision-making process shows that the supervisor has taken into account their viewpoints. According to [36,37], participatory leaders solicit feedback, consult with subordinates, and take into account employee viewpoints. The beneficial effects of participative leadership on work outcomes—more especially, increased and improved organizational commitment [38], voice behavior [39], organizational citizenship behavior [40], and job performance [40]—have been the subject of extensive empirical research in a variety of

cultural and industrial contexts [26,39–41]. Leaders have a significant influence on work events, and stakeholders frequently react emotionally to their actions. Nonetheless, leaders' actions, whether favorable or unfavorable, elicit emotional reactions in followers, which in turn influence their attitudes and actions [42]. Winston and Patterson [43], however, believed that leaders play a crucial role in organizations because they select, prepare, train, and influence employees. Leaders may need to take on various responsibilities during emergencies to overcome specific challenges.

Since the global economy is experiencing rapid environmental and socioeconomic changes, which necessitate the active engagement of HEI leaders in order to provide answers and solve the issues, the participative leadership theory is helpful in the current study. Unfortunately, HEI leaders find it difficult to make timely and effective judgments on their own due to the drastic changes in the global economy. As a result, stakeholders actively participate in decision-making, including staff and students [44,45]. However, the use of contemporary technology has supplanted traditional employment practices, and younger people are more up to date on this innovation than older people. In Africa, the elderly typically hold positions of leadership in the workplace and in the government. HEI leaders must support and encourage staff (who are primarily young) and students (through the Student Union Government (SUG)) to actively participate in university decision-making for sustainable development, particularly in global issues, in addition to research and development [31,46–48]. However, according to Furman, Hill-Berry and Sarid [49], in the quest for HEIs to achieve the SDGs mandates, their leaders need to strive to gain social justice for the stakeholders. According to Jean-Marie et al., and Lewis [49], social justice leaders consistently strive to transform the social inequities among stakeholders in the work environment through enhancing staff capacity, mediating conflicts, and raising the awareness of junior workers that all colleagues at work are equal.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The interpretivism paradigm of qualitative design was utilized in the study. However, the interpretivism paradigm is often considered anti-positivism because it opposes positivism [50]. According to interpretivism, knowledge and truth are based on people's experiences and how they interpret them, making them subjective and culturally and historically situated [51,52]. Bogdan and Biklen [53] state that the central claim of the interpretivist paradigm is that reality is socially constructed, which is why it is sometimes referred to as the constructivist paradigm. In this paradigm, theory does not precede research but follows it, grounding itself in the data provided by the research act. Therefore, when using this paradigm, information is collected and examined in a manner aligned with grounded theory [54]. Researchers who adopt a subjectivist epistemology interpret

their data using their own reasoning and cognitive processing, influenced by their interactions with participants [51]. It is assumed that interactions between the researcher and their subjects involve dialogue, questioning, listening, reading, writing, and recording research data. Rather than focusing on the observer's point of view, every effort is made to understand the subject's perspective. Since researchers cannot completely detach from their personal values and opinions, they will inevitably influence how they gather, evaluate, and analyze evidence [51,55].

The study's sample included six stakeholders: students, lecturers, and administrative personnel from three UJ campuses in Johannesburg, Gauteng Province, South Africa. UJ, one of the three South African universities leading in sustainability awareness and achieving SDGs 3 and 8 between 2018 and 2023 [16], was selected using a non-probability purposive sampling technique. Stakeholders were purposefully chosen after completing an eight-week online self-study Short Learning Programme (SLP) on sustainability covering UJ's SDGs. At the time data was collected, only six stakeholders had fully completed the online course. The rationale for intentionally selecting the small sample size was to ensure depth over breadth by purposively sampling key informants [56]. Students, lecturers, and administrative personnel were chosen for their direct involvement in SDG-related university engagement to provide informed insights [57,58].

To strengthen reliability, triangulation was applied by combining semi-structured interviews with document analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Despite the small participant pool, the methodological rigor, through triangulation and ethical adherence ensures the credibility, reliability, and applicability of the findings in assessing university engagement in SDG-related leadership. The study adhered to strict ethical standards, obtaining institutional ethics approval and ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, in compliance with international research guidelines [59,60].

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (primary data) with the participants to address the study problem and two research questions. The focus was on stakeholders' perceptions of leadership roles in SDG-related university engagement, including students, lecturers, and administrative staff. To overcome language barriers, the researcher and a volunteer research assistant conducted the interviews, allowing participants to respond in their preferred South African languages while presenting questions in clear, concise English. Each participant demonstrated their command of the English language by responding in English. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using Atlas.ti version 22, categorizing responses into themes based on the research questions. In addition to the primary data analysis, an in-depth analysis of institutional policy documents, and supplementary quantitative data of the UJ with contextual reference was conducted to

validate participant responses and triangulate findings. The following institutional documents were reviewed and are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Institutional documents reviewed to assess UJ's engagement in SDG-related practices.

S. No.	Document	Purpose	Reference
1	Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings 2024	This document evaluates the university's global standing in SDG-related performance. UJ ranks 3rd globally for SDG 1 (No Poverty), 6th for SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and 13th for SDG 5 (Gender Equality), showcasing its strong performance in these areas.	Times Higher Education 2024 [61]
2	UJ strategic plan 2035	This document outlines the university's vision to become an international university of choice, firmly rooted in Africa and the global south, actively contributing to a sustainable future.	University of Johannesburg 2023 [62]
3	Annual report 2023	This report provides insights into UJ's financial performance, including allocations towards sustainability initiatives. It reflects the university's commitment to projects related to the SDGs.	University of Johannesburg 2023 [63]
4	2022 Stakeholder sustainability reports	This document highlights UJ's commitment to addressing poverty (SDG 1) and promoting economic growth (SDG 8), reflecting its dedication to sustainable development.	University of Johannesburg 2022 [64]
5	Energy resource waste sustainability plan 2022–2025	This document outlines UJ's strategies for energy management and sustainability across its campuses. It provides data for comparative analysis.	University of Johannesburg 2022 [65]
6	Leadership and climate action sustainability policies	This document outlines UJ's dedication to environmental sustainability, which includes reporting on carbon emissions and setting reduction targets.	University of Johannesburg 2021 [66]

Source: The institutional policy documents and reports from the UJ and the Times Higher Education impact rankings.

### Document Analysis

Critical information regarding the university's operational commitments to SDG-related practices and strategic direction can be found in the institutional documents that were analyzed. The university's external performance and global standing in SDG-related activities can be assessed using the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings as a standard. The long-term sustainability goal is outlined in the Strategic Plan 2035, which ensures alignment with the global SDG targets. The 2023 annual reports provide details about funding allocations, financial commitments, and the university's resource prioritization for sustainability. The university's participation in SDG-related programs is documented in the Sustainability Reports 2022. Accountability in sustainability initiatives is maintained through the definition of governance roles and structures by leadership and climate action policies. Additionally, the Energy Resource Waste Sustainability Plan demonstrates an operational commitment to SDG targets by providing a practical framework for managing

environmental sustainability on campus. This study ensures a comprehensive evaluation of university leadership and engagement in SDG-related practices by cross-referencing these documents and reports with qualitative information gathered from stakeholder interviews. This multi-source validation allows for a deeper understanding of institutional SDG commitments and enhances the credibility of the findings.

## RESULTS

This section focuses on the engagement of UJ in global SDG-related practices. The themes discussed here include participation in achieving SDGs, the effects of the “no poverty” award on stakeholders in integrating sustainability into their lives, the position the institution took on SDG-related matters, and stakeholders’ sustainability-related practices.

### Participation in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals

The stakeholders perceived UJ to have participated in achieving SDGs through scholarship opportunities, partnerships, affordable education, interdisciplinary programs, mentorship programs, virtual learning, and sustainable measures. Both staff and students expressed that UJ participated in achieving SDGs by promoting access to quality education through providing scholarship opportunities to less privileged students.

*“The UJ is actively participating in achieving the SDGs through implementing programs that enhance access to quality education. Our university has been at the forefront of this such as promotion of scholarships for underprivileged students”.* Interview with a UJ Centre for Distance Learning (CDL) Lecturer.

*“I think UJ is participating in achieving the SDGs by offering scholarships for underprivileged students and implementing programs that promote equal access to education”.* Interview with a UJ Diploma Student.

Additionally, the institution promoted the achievement of SDGs through partnership with local schools and organization who focused on education, health, and environmental sustainability. The institution also gave equal right to education by practicing free or affordable education. They also engaged in interdisciplinary education as a way of promoting the achievement of SDGs. According to a lecturer, the institution offered interdisciplinary programs that focused on sustainable development in courses like environmental science and social justice.

*“The university is actively contributing to the SDGs through partnerships with local organizations that focus on education, health, and environmental sustainability”.* Interview with a University of Johannesburg Business School (UJBS) Researcher.

*“Practising equal rights, free or affordable education”.* Interview with a student in Soweto library.

*“The university is contributing to the achievement of the SDGs by offering interdisciplinary programs that focus on sustainable development, such as courses in environmental science and social justice. To enhance access to quality education for all students”.* Interview with an Economics Lecturer.

Mentorship programs were also available in the institution as a strategy in place to promote the achievement of SDGs. A staff in the institution made it known that the institution had mentorship programs aimed at improving access to quality education for all students by connecting students from diverse background with resources and support systems. The institution also had active engagement with their supporters which also helped in promoting access to quality education.

*“To improve access to quality education for all students, we enhanced our mentorship programs, connecting students from diverse backgrounds with resources and support systems, more so as we engaged actively with our supporters and others”.* Interview with a UJBS Researcher.

Virtual learning was also put in place by the institution to promote achievement of SDGs. A staff made it known that the institution was on the fore front in advancing virtual learning during Covid-19 which helped them to reach wider audience and encouraged the culture of using online method in teaching and learning till date. He believed this was a sustainable initiative spearheaded by the institution. A student also opined that the institution had put sustainable measures in place such as back up pot and solar systems.

*“During covid-19 we were on the fore front of advancing online learning platforms that reached a wider audience. This virtual learning was a positive step in sustainability as it brought a culture of use of online methods, which is a sustainability initiative”.* Interview with a UJ CDL Lecturer.

*“Put in place sustainable measures such as back up pots and have more solar systems”.* Interview with a student in Soweto library.

The network below presents the participations of the UJ in achieving SDGs as postulated by the interviewees (Figure 1).





**Figure 1.** Participations of the UJ in achieving SDGs.

*Effects of “No Poverty” award on Stakeholders in Integrating Sustainability in Their Lives*

Most of the interviewees were aware that UJ was awarded number one position for SDG “No poverty,” and that a free SLP are available to everyone related to the SDG. All the staff were aware of this award, while one of the students who was aware was not sure of the reliability of the information.

*“Yes, I am aware that UJ was awarded #1 for SDG No Poverty, and the free SLP has significantly imparted my approach to sustainability”.* Interview with a UJ CDL Lecturer.

*“Yes, I am aware of UJ’s achievement regarding SDG No Poverty and the free SLP”.* Interview with a UJBS Researcher.

*“I heard that but I am not sure about the reliability of that information”.* Interview with a student in Soweto library.

The staff who were aware of the award explained that it affected them in integrating sustainability in their lives by including it in their teaching materials, integrating it in their community engagement, and integrating it in their professional practices. Two of the staff made it known that the award had motivated them to integrate sustainability topics in their teaching materials and providing students with practical examples of how they could contribute to social change and poverty alleviation. One of them added that the award helped him to also integrate sustainability into his teaching methods and community engagement.

*“These programs have motivated me to incorporate sustainability topics into my teaching materials, providing students with practical examples of how they can contribute to social change and poverty alleviation”.* Interview with a UJBS Researcher.

*“It has also provided me with valuable resources and knowledge, which I have integrated into my teaching methods and community engagements”.* Interview with a UJ CDL Lecturer.

The award also helped staff to integrate sustainability principles in their professional practices, for instance, one of the staff mentioned that he was encouraged to incorporate sustainability principle into his professional practices and providing students with insight into how they could make a difference in their community.

*“It has encouraged me to incorporate sustainability principles into my professional practices, providing students with insights into how they can make a difference in their communities”.* Interview with an Economics Lecturer.

Notwithstanding, two of the students made it known that they were not aware of the award. One of them added that he was not aware despite that he believed he was conversant with every happening in the institution.

*“Interestingly, I am not aware of this, yet I pride myself as being in the know to all things happening on campus”.* Interview with a PhD student at JBS.

*“No, I am not aware of it”.* Interview with a UJ Diploma Student.

Summarily, all the staff were aware of the award while most of the students were not aware of it as only one out of the three of them was aware of the award.

### **Position of the Institution on SDG-Related Matters**

The interviewees were interrogated on the position of their institution (i.e., the senate) on SDG-related matters such as peaceful conflict resolution, gender equity and inclusivity, and human rights. Talking about peace and conflict resolution, the staff declared that their senate tabled issues on peaceful conflict resolution and the roles of education in addressing such global issue from time to time. They added that sometimes, the emphasis of the discussion was the importance of education in fostering global peace, understanding and collaboration. They added that the discussion in this direction also focused on the roles of educational institutions in promoting understanding among diverse groups and people from various ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds.

*“In Senate meeting, we have discussed the role of education in peaceful conflict resolution, particularly in addressing global issues”.* Interview with a UJBS Researcher.

*“In Senate discussions, I have sometimes heard conversations about peaceful conflict resolution and emphasis has been made of the importance of education in fostering understanding and collaboration”.* Interview with a UJ CDL Lecturer.

However, one of them pointed out hypocrisy in their approach, he made it known that such discussion only came up whenever there was

conflict of global interest like the conflict between Gaza and Israel, while conflict affecting Africa such as killing of Africans in Sudan, Zire, Niger, etc. were never discussed by the senate.

*“My problem is that such discussions only come up when there has been a conflict in the news that is catching attention like the Gaza conflict. When Africans are being killed in Sudan, Zire, Niger, and elsewhere this is never discussed. This exposes the hypocrisy in our approach as a university to this important issue”.* Interview with a UJBS Researcher.

Furthermore, the interviewees, especially the staff, alluded that the senate usually discussed gender equity and inclusivity with initiatives aimed at creating a supportive environment for staff and students. They added that gender equity and inclusivity was prioritized by the senate, which made them to regularly review and assess their policy in this respect to ensure it reflects their commitment to this course.

*“Gender equality and inclusivity are sometimes discussed, with initiatives aimed at creating a supportive environment for all students and staff”.* Interview with a UJBS Researcher.

*“Gender equality and inclusivity are ongoing priorities, and we regularly assess our policies to ensure they reflect our commitment to these values”.* Interview with an Economics Lecturer.

Also, the staff opined that the senate usually focused their discussion on human right issues ensuring that the institution’s policies reflect her commitment to equity and justice. They added that they focused on how poverty could be addressed through their programs and community engagement. Also, the senate usually talked about how their programs could ensure equitable opportunities for all.

*“We have also addressed human rights issues, focusing on how our programs can help combat poverty and provide equitable opportunities”.* Interview with an Economics Lecturer.

*“We also have had discussions on human rights issues, which have for the most part focused on how we can address poverty and the digital divide through our community engagement programs”.* Interview with a UJ CDL Lecturer.

Table 2 presents the opinions of the interviewees on the position of their senate on SDG-related issues.

**Table 2.** Summary of interview excerpts on SDG-related issues.

Theme	Source	Key Excerpt	Frequency/Context
<b>Gender Equality &amp; Inclusivity</b>	1:11 ¶14 (UJBS Researcher)	“Gender equality and inclusivity are sometimes discussed, with initiatives aimed at creating a supportive environment for all students and staff. Not regularly.”	Irregular, reactive to conflicts.
	2:9 ¶14 (UJ CDL Lecturer)	“Gender equality and inclusivity have been frequently addressed, with an agenda for creating a supportive environment for all.”	Frequent, proactive agenda.
	4:9 ¶14 (Economics Lecturer)	“Gender equality and inclusivity are ongoing priorities, with regular policy assessments to reflect commitment.”	Ongoing, institutional priority.
<b>Peaceful Conflict Resolution</b>	1:10 ¶14 (UJBS Researcher)	Criticizes selective focus: “Discussions only arise during high-profile conflicts (e.g., Gaza), ignoring crises in Sudan, Niger, etc.”	Reactive, inconsistent.
	1:9 ¶14 (UJBS Researcher)	“Senate discussed education’s role in peaceful conflict resolution, particularly global issues.”	Thematic, global focus.
	2:8 ¶14 (UJ CDL Lecturer)	“Occasional Senate conversations emphasize education’s role in fostering understanding and collaboration.”	Sporadic, emphasis on education.
	4:8 ¶14 (Economics Lecturer)	“Explored how institutions can promote understanding among diverse groups through conflict resolution.”	Institutional role highlighted.
<b>Human Rights</b>	4:10 ¶14 (Economics Lecturer)	“Address human rights issues, focusing on combating poverty and equitable opportunities through programs.”	Programmatic, poverty-focused.
	1:12 ¶14 (UJBS Researcher)	“Human rights policies are prioritized only during visible equity/justice crises.”	Reactive, situational.
	2:10 ¶14 (UJ CDL Lecturer)	“Discussions on human rights addressed poverty and the digital divide via community engagement.”	Community-oriented, practical focus.

**Note:** The notation, for example, 1:11 ¶14, refers to the interview citation system used in this study. It is structured as follows: “1:11 ¶14” indicates Participant 1, Page 11 of the interview transcript, and paragraph 14 on that page. Other notations can be explained in the same manner.

### *Stakeholders’ Sustainability Practices*

Talking about their sustainability-related practices, the students who were not privilege to be in the senate talked about their personal practices in relation to sustainability, one of them stated that he shopped locally and supported brands that prioritized sustainability. He added that he checked the label of products he bought to ensure there is recycling logo. He also separated his waste at home.

*“I also try to shop locally and support ethical brands that prioritize sustainability, like the fair brands that are sold in Woolworths as I know that they are sourced ethically. I also check all the labels on any products I buy to see if there is a recycling logo. But I think what I do most importantly is to separate my waste at home in plastic bags as I believe that this contributes to sustainability”.* Interview with a UJ Diploma Student.

Buying second-hand products through online platforms and thrift stores was practiced by another student. He believed this practice reduces waste. He also tried to reduce his carbon footprint by using public

transport instead of personal car. He added that he participated in local clean-up to promote clean environment and mitigate climate change.

*“My personal practices in relation to sustainability include purchasing second-hand goods through online platforms and thrift stores, which helps reduce waste. I also try to reduce my carbon footprint by using public transportation or cycling instead of driving”.* Interview with a UJ Diploma Student.

The third student mentioned that he ensured sustainability by putting papers in recycling bin for future use, switched off light and gadgets when not in use. Additionally, he stated that he did not buy second-hand products online but in shops. Unlike his colleague who purchased second-hand goods online.

*“Don’t litter. Consider the end-results. Put papers in a recycling bin for future use. Switch off lights and plugs when are not used. I do not purchase second hand goods via the internet, but in a shop”.* Interview with a student in Soweto library.

## DISCUSSION

The results provide an accurate assessment of UJ’s contribution to the accomplishment of the SDGs. On one hand, UJ has implemented various sustainability-related programs, such as mentorship programs, interdisciplinary courses on sustainable development, scholarship programs for disadvantaged students, and collaborations with organizations focusing on environmental, health, and education sustainability. Its dedication to innovation and accessibility in education is further demonstrated by its leadership in promoting online learning, especially during the COVID-19 epidemic [6,13,14]. The findings support the claims made by [17,22] that leaders of HEIs have committed to actively contributing to the global SDGs through sustainable projects. The results confirm the conclusions drawn by [19], emphasizing the responsibility of HEIs to enhance the sustainability of societies, as political instability may hinder African universities’ efforts to promote sustainable development. Additionally, the lack of awareness of UJ’s SDG accomplishments, particularly the SDG No Poverty award, suggests potential communication issues within the institution. Most students were unaware of the award, yet every staff member asked was aware of it. This disparity raises questions about the effectiveness of UJ’s sustainability outreach and engagement with its main stakeholders—students—who are crucial to advancing the university’s sustainability agenda. It indicates that sustainability initiatives may not be sufficiently integrated into student participation and institutional culture if students are unaware of significant institutional achievements. Nevertheless, the findings align with the conclusions of [10,21] that HEIs must involve future leaders in university decision-making to meet SDG objectives, and it supports the suggestions of [23,24] for participatory leadership theory. In this study, the

future leaders are the students. The study agrees with [15] that in order for future leaders to achieve the SDGs, they need access to opportunities for professional training and capacity building. [1] encourages academic institutions to actively promote sustainable development through research, study plans, curricula, and policy modifications. However, UJ's inconsistent approach to SDG-related issues raises doubts about the claim that it is a pioneer in sustainability. While the institution has made significant progress in reducing poverty (SDG 1) and promoting quality education (SDG 4), recent research suggests that its discussions on human rights and conflict resolution are selective, with more focus on international conflicts than African ones. This selective involvement weakens the perception of UJ's comprehensive commitment to the SDGs.

Furthermore, the study reveals the hypocrisy of the senate's and UJ leaders' stance on SDG-related issues. For example, the senate of HEIs in Africa did not address killings in African countries but quickly discussed and made decisions on global peaceful conflict resolution like the Gaza-Israel conflict. DiGerio et al. [6] and Beynaghi et al. [7] found that universities may face obstacles in engaging in sustainable development challenges, aligning with this finding. The challenge is consistent with [1,8] findings that despite universities' engagement in SDG practices, they are criticized for neglecting environmental and socioeconomic issues essential for sustainable development. The study shows that to ensure equal educational opportunities, the university senate addresses SDG issues related to human rights, equity, and justice. Despite winning an award for meeting the SDG 4 "no poverty" target, UJ is working hard to achieve the goals of SDG 4 on high-quality education. The study's findings indicate that UJ students who have never served in the Senate can help achieve the SDGs. Through individual and group participation in SDG-related practices like recycling, purchasing used goods from local shops and thrift stores, shopping locally, supporting sustainable brands, recycling papers, conserving energy, recycling at home, and participating in clean-up events, students and staff demonstrate learning outcomes from the UJ-sponsored SLP. This shows that UJ is implementing participative leadership as staff, students, and leaders all contribute to achieving the SDGs. The results support [30,48] in finding that participatory leadership theory enhances employee accountability and involvement. The study is significant to [31,46–48], who suggest that African HEI leaders should encourage staff and students (through the SUG) to actively engage in global SDG issues. The results highlight inconsistencies in the implementation of SDG activities at the UJ, particularly in the areas of human rights, gender equality, inclusion, and peaceful conflict resolution. These discrepancies raise questions about the organization's commitment to a comprehensive and inclusive sustainability program. Firstly, UJ's focus on peaceful conflict resolution appears to be reactive, often responding to international crises that receive significant media attention, while issues within Africa receive less

consideration. This approach not only undermines UJ's identity as an African institution dedicated to regional peace and justice under SDG 16, but also risks perpetuating foreign geopolitical biases. Secondly, feedback from stakeholders suggests that while gender equality and inclusion are acknowledged as priorities, discussions do not always translate into tangible institutional changes. The university's efforts to foster a truly inclusive academic environment in line with SDGs 5 and 10 may be hindered by a lack of proactive and organized strategies. Lastly, UJ's approach to human rights seems to be narrowly focused on addressing the digital divide and poverty, overlooking broader issues such as freedom of speech, labor rights, and discrimination. This limited perspective may weaken the university's contribution to a more comprehensive human rights agenda encompassing SDGs 1 and 16.

## CONCLUSIONS

The assessment paints a complex picture of UJ's engagement with the SDGs. On one hand, UJ actively promotes sustainability by increasing access to high-quality education for disadvantaged students through scholarships, initiating multidisciplinary programs, improving mentorship, and forming alliances with regional organizations in the fields of environmental sustainability, health, and education. Notably, innovations like the deployment of solar energy systems and improvements in online learning during COVID-19 highlight its strong commitment to reducing poverty (SDG 1) and enhancing education (SDG 4).

On the other hand, participant comments highlight important weaknesses in UJ's overall approach to the SDGs. Key topics such as gender equity, human rights, and conflict resolution are often the subject of selective Senate-level debates. While gender equality and inclusion are acknowledged, they often remain at the policy level without leading to concrete, measurable actions. Additionally, global crises receive more attention than regional African ones. Similarly, the university's focus on human rights is limited to addressing the digital divide and poverty, neglecting other crucial issues like freedom of speech and discrimination. This complex picture suggests that while UJ is making impressive progress in some areas, a more comprehensive, balanced, and practical strategy is needed to fully realize its leadership in sustainability.

## Suggestion for Further Study

Since the UJ is putting more effort towards achieving the targets and objectives of SDGs 3, 4, and 8, the study suggests that further research investigate the engagement and achievement of the university in SDGs 5 and 10 on gender equality and reduced inequalities, respectively. Investigating these two SDGs would shed more light on the impact of gender equality, especially for females, inclusivity, and educational opportunities for all on SDG 4 (quality education) in HEIs in South Africa.

## Recommendations

Universities can advance towards a more comprehensive and inclusive sustainability approach that supports leadership claims and ensures increased participation from both staff and students by addressing the following areas. Enhancing universities' credibility and long-term impact in promoting the SDGs will be achieved through a comprehensive, clearly articulated, and student-inclusive approach.

- 1) To enhance visibility and engagement, higher education institutions should incorporate SDG-related updates into student orientations, newsletters, and digital platforms. It is essential to keep faculty, administrative staff, and students regularly informed about the institution's sustainability initiatives and achievements.
- 2) By expanding their curriculum to include sustainability concepts across various subject areas, universities can further embed sustainability into their academic and extracurricular activities. Higher education institutions should also support student-led research projects and sustainability initiatives to cultivate an environment where individuals actively contribute to the implementation of the SDGs.
- 3) To bolster SDG-related initiatives and extend their influence beyond academia, HEIs should strengthen their partnerships and impact assessment by collaborating with businesses, governments, and civil society. Additionally, they must establish robust systems for monitoring and reporting on sustainability impacts to ensure accountability and transparency in achieving SDG targets.
- 4) Universities should ensure that African and global conflicts are given equal consideration in their discussions, transition from policy debates to concrete actions on gender and inclusivity, and broaden their human rights agenda to encompass a wider range of issues to address inconsistencies in HEIs' approach to SDG-related policies. Establishing platforms for staff and students to engage in discussions and contribute to the institutions' SDG-related programs and policies is crucial. Enhancing these areas will enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of the SDGs both within and outside the institutional framework.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset of the study is available from the authors upon reasonable request.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: CU, YK; Methodology: CU, YK; Validation: CU, YK, CDA; Formal Analysis: CDA; Investigation: CU, YK; Resources: CU, YK; Data Curation: CDA; Writing—Original Draft Preparation: CU, YK, CDA; Writing—Review & Editing: CU, YK, CDA; Supervision: CU, YK; Project Administration: CU.



## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflicts of interest.

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