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Core Values Driving Sustainable Transformation in Saudi Arabian Higher Education

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	In higher education, diversity, integrity, and social responsibility serve as foundational core values (CVs), shaping institutional identity, guiding actions, and fostering societal well-being. This study examines how public-sector Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of Saudi Arabia integrate these core values to advance sustainability in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs). Core values mentioned at the HEIs websites were collected and through quantitative and qualitative analysis, common core values were identified and prioritized as high, medium, and low based on their frequency of adoption by HEIs. Excellence and Transparency were observed prioritized by 58% and 54% of HEIs respectively whereas 38% of HEIs prioritized both high priority core values which is a very promising trend. Furthermore, each identified core value was mapped to relevant UN-SDGs highlighting the proactive role for HEIs in achieving these goals through the strong fulfillment of these CVs. This study underscores the significance of core values in guiding the direction, purpose, and operations of HEIs, and their central role in advancing a sustainable future. **Keywords:** Core Values, Sustainable Transformation, Higher Educational Institutions, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), UN-SDGs, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations declared 2020-2030 as the ***Decade of Action*** to accelerate efforts towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals launched in 2015. This is a global commitment to building a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world by 2030, ensuring ***no one is left behind*** [1-2]. Global challenges related to People (disparity, poverty), Planet (environmental degradation, climate change), and Prosperity (peace, and justice) are covered by 17 SDGs adopted as an extension of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) [3]. Saudi Arabia realizing its importance and working with the global community to address these global challenges is officially committed to this agenda in 2015, recognizing HEIs as pivotal stakeholders [4].

Core values are fundamental principles such as integrity, diversity, excellence, innovation, social responsibility, and academic freedom are considered essential for guidance, determining priorities, and aspiration for improvements in behaviors, actions, and decision-making processes in HEIs [5]. CVs play a fundamental role in the well-being of individuals, society, and the environment and imparted to students through the HEIs studied and discussed in several international forums [6]. Academic freedom, autonomy, integrity, independence, inclusiveness, collaboration, and diversity are identified as essential CVs by The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) [7]. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has extended collaboration in higher education through shared CVs of academic freedom and institutional autonomy [8]. Scholars at Risk inherited CVs such as social responsibility, academic freedom, equitable access, institutional autonomy, and accountability for HEIs from ***international human rights law and UNESCO instruments*** [9-10]. CVs including truth-seeking, knowledge sharing, academic freedom, and equity in higher education are highlighted by the OECD [11]. Focusing on justice, equality, dignity, and respect, UN-SDG Goal 4.7 promotes Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development [12]. The Council of European Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) strongly integrates CVs such as human dignity, cultural diversity, democracy, rule of law emphasizing the key role of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, participation of students and staff in governance, and public responsibility [13].

Research Article

The foundation for academic communities, driving the pursuit of knowledge, and shaping societal contributions in HEIs is provided by the CVs [14]. Vision, mission, and goals of HEIs directly influence behaviors and actions based on principles covering globalization, equitable access, technological innovation, social diversity, social responsibility, environmental sustainability, fostering a culture of excellence, integrity, diversity, and engagement [15]. CVs also serve as a framework for decision-making and trust building among students, faculty, and community and HEI leaders must prioritize and align institutional vision, mission, and goals with these values to ensure institutional integrity and long-term impact to ensure justice, critique, care, profession, and community [16-18]. It is observed that CVs such as respect fosters inclusivity and academic success [19], equality strengthens social responsibility [20], and justice promotes tolerance while reducing prejudice [21].

This study aims to examine the historical evolution of Saudi Arabian public-sector HEIs and their inherent alignment with the UN-SDGs (section 2) followed by detailing the methodology for systematic data collection and preprocessing about HEIs CVs (section 3). In section 4, comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analysis is performed to identify prioritized CVs across HEIs which than mapped with relavent UN-SDGs to demonstrate their transformative potential through actionable recommendations. Finally, key findings and conclusive remarkes are given in section 5.

2. ESTABLISHMENT AND GROWTH OF PUBLIC SECTOR UNIVERSITIES OF SAUDI ARABIA

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) came into being in 1932 and holds the title of being the largest country in the Middle East, covering a total land area of,149,690 square kilometers. It ranks as the 40th most populous country globally, with an estimated population exceeding 33 million, representing approximately 0.46% of the world's population. The population density stands at 17 people per square kilometer. The country is divided into 13 regions, with Mecca, Riyadh, and the Eastern region hosting the highest population concentrations [22-25].

In 20th century spanning from 1932-1999, Saudi Arabia inaugurated its first HEI in 1950 namely Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah region, steadily expanding to establish a total of ten HEIs by 1999 [24]. Primarily concentrated in the five densely populated regions of Riyadh, Makkah, Madinah, Eastern Province and Asir covering 70% of the population. During the 21st century from 2000-2025, the kingdom made tremendous progress by adding 19 new HEIs, covering on average one institute each year encompassing the remaining 8 regions. This impressive journey ensured fair access to education for the remaining 30% of the population.

Evidently, Saudi Arabian HEIs proactive alignment with two specific UN-SDGs is remarkable i) equitable access to Quality Education SDG-4 (All 13 regions are covered) and ii) Gendre Equality SDG-5 (28 HEIs provide coeducational opportunities for both genders except for Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) being exclusively for male students [24]). In a recent study [26], six areas where HEIs impact sustainable development either directly or indirectly are identified. We quote an example of Quality Education (SDG-4) from [26], ***"promoting equitable access to SDG-4 creates a skilled workforce, which indirectly boosts economic growth"***. Also, HEIs have a moral responsibility to drive sustainable futures, adopting frameworks from global declarations, partnerships, and charters. This leads to economic growth, innovative societal solutions, environmental protection, fair policies, and cultural diversity [6].

3. METHODOLOGY

We surveyed websites of all 29 public sector HEIs of KSA and found a total of 172 CVs given in **Table 1** as of 25-02-2025 with 65 distinct CVs for 24 HEIs and failed to find CVs of five HEIs namely University of Hail, King Abdulaziz University, Umm al Qura University, Al Jouf University and University of Hafr Al-Batin. Also, weblinks for CVs of each HEI are given in the appendix section (see **Table A1**). For data cleaning and consistency, the following steps are performed a) CVs are standardized by changing all into lowercase letters, b) removing the word "and" between CVs such as Quality and Excellence (an example chosen from King Saud University CVs). We split core values during the data cleaning process to ensure no information is lost and detailed analysis can be carried out. Additionally, following core values are standardized to enable precise mapping to UN SDGs and comparative analysis across HEIs.

Research Article

- Princess Nora bint Abdul Rahman University CVs are defined boradly as GROWTH (Continuous learning, innovation) with subsidiary CVs in parentheses. We considered continuous learning and innovation instead of just growth.
- CV *institutional* replaced with institutionalization (case of Qassim University). CV *work as one team* replaced with teamwork and CV *leading* is replaced with leadership (case of Tabuk University). CV *working in one team spirit* replaced with teamwork (case of Al Baha University).

- Finally, we found two links for CVs of Taibah University. The adopted CVs are chosen as per latest strategic plan of Taibah University.

Table 1. Core values of public sector HEIs of Saudi Arabia

HEIs Name (Short Name), Region	Core Values	Number of CVs
Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University (IMSIU), Riyadh	moderateness, transparency, proactivity, excellence, engagement, sustainability, responsibility	7
King Saud University (KSU), Riyadh	quality, excellence, leadership, teamwork, academic freedom, justice, integrity, transparency, accountability, continuous learning	10
Islamic University of Madinah (IUM), Al Madinah	diversity, integrity, quality, responsibility, creativity	5
King Fahd University for Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), Eastern Province	integrity, inclusiveness, fairness, care, transparency, discipline, passion, creativity	8
Princess Nora bint Abdul Rahman University (PNU), Riyadh	continuous learning, innovation, belonging, sympathy, initiation, excellence, flexibility, responsiveness	8
Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University (IABFU), Eastern Province	loyalty, excellence, teamwork, transparency, diversity, creativity, social responsibility	7
King Faisal University (KFU), Eastern Province	responsible citizenship, integration, innovation, respect, justice, empowerment	6
King Khalid University (KKU), Asir	honesty, seriousness, responsibility, confidence, excellence, quality, openness, transparency, fairness, respect, inclusiveness	11
Taibah University (TaibahU), Al Madinah	sustainability, impact, excellence, belonging, integrity	5
Taif University (TU), Makkah	transparency, teamwork, excellence, belonging, being role models	5
Qassim University (QU), Al Qassim	belonging, justice, honesty, transparency, perfection, innovation, institutionalization	7
King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences (KSAU-HS), Riyadh	ethical behavior, teamwork, accountability, transparency, excellence, social responsibility	6
Jazan University (JazanU), Jazan	citizenship, belonging, responsibility, excellence, capacity building, teamwork	6
Al Baha University (BU), Al Baha	integrity, responsibility, transparency, quality, achievement appreciation, teamwork	6
Najran University (NU), Najran	leadership, responsibility, honesty, transparency, excellence, moderation, creativity, empowerment, affiliation, integrity	10

Research Article

University of Tabuk (UT), Tabuk	responsibility, social responsibility, respect, honesty, transparency, accountability, quality, excellence, creativity, innovation, loyalty, belonging, teamwork, leadership	14
Northern Borders University (NBU), Northern Borders	integrity, community engagement, civic responsibility, accountability, collaboration	5
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU), Riyadh	perfection, fairness, teamwork, transparency, accountability, social responsibility, national identity	7
King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), Makkah	achievement, passion, inspiration, citizenship, diversity, integrity, openness	7
Majmaah University (MU), Riyadh	institutional work, professionalization, transparency, integrity, excellence, creativity, sustainability	7
Shaqra University (SU), Riyadh	governance of institutional practice, continuous learning, teamwork, collaboration, quality, excellence, institutional loyalty	7
Saudi Electronic University (SEU), Riyadh	collaboration, sustainability, innovation, flexibility, quick response	5
University of Bisha (UB), Asir	mastery, responsibility, institutionalization, team spirit, creativity, competitiveness, effectiveness.	7
University of Jeddah (UJ), Makkah	passion, respect, initiative, responsibility, excellence, pride	6

Short name of each HEI adopted in **Table 1** are inherited form [4].

4. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATI VE ANALYSIS

In this section, comprehensive quantitative as well as qualitative analysis is presented. Descriptive statistical analysis is performed for the identification of the most opted CVs by all 24 HEIs. An average of 7.2 CVs is used by HEIs with a minimum of 5 adopted by (IUM, TaibahU, TU, NBU, SEU) and a maximum of 14 by University of Tabuk. 6 out of 24 (25%) of the HEIs adopted more than the average number of CVs (see **Table 1**).

Figure 1. Word Cloud of CVs (colors grouped by frequency) opted by Saudi Arabian HEIs

Research Article

Table 2 provides details on the frequency, adoption rate percentage, and word count for each core value. The CVs are further classified by priority based on adoption rates: high priority for core values adopted by 50% or more of participating HEIs, medium priority for those with adoption rates between 25% and 50%, and low priority for values adopted by 25% HEIs or less. These priority levels are defined by the author for this study, specifically in the context of HEIs in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, CVs word cloud is presented in **Figure 1.** Nine out of total 24 (38%) of HEIs including IMSIU, KSU, IABFU, KKU, TU, KSAU-HS, NU, UT and MU cover both high priority CVs of excellence and transparency which is a very promising trend. University of Tabuk is the only HEI which covers both high priority and all three medium priority CVs except integrity.

Table 2: Identification of common CVs opted by Saudi Arabian HEIs

Frequency/ (Word Count)	Core Values	Percentage Participation of HEIs	Priority
14 (1)	Excellence	58%	High
13 (1)	Transparency	54%	
9 (3)	Responsibility, Teamwork, Integrity	38%	Medium
7 (1)	Creativity	29%	
6 (2)	Quality, Belonging	25%	
5 (2)	Innovation, Accountability	21%	Low
4 (4)	Respect, Honesty, Social Responsibility, Sustainability	17%	
3 (7)	Collaboration, Continous Learning, Diversity, Fairness, Justice, Leadership, Passion	13%	
2 (8)	Citizenship, Empowerment, Flexibility, Inclusiveness, Loyalty, Openness, Institutionalization, Perfection	8%	
1 (35)	Academic Freedom, Achievement, Achievement Appreciation, Affiliation, Being Role Models, Capacity Building, Care, Civic Responsibility, Community Engagement, Competitiveness, Confidence, Discipline, Effectiveness, Ethical Behavior, Governance Of Institutional Practice, Impact, Initiative, Inspiration, Institutional Work, Institutional loyalty, Integration, Initiation, Mastery, Moderateness, Moderation, National Identity, Pride, Proactivity, Professionalization, Quick Response, Responsiveness, Seriousness, Sympathy, Team Spirit	4%	

We now discuss the role of HEIs in terms of adding value utilizing high and medium priority common CVs aligned with UN SDGs given in **Table 3**. Additionally, these alignments are based on the most direct, impactful and relevant connections to ensure that efforts are focused and effective. Eight of the UN SDGs (4-5, 8-9, 12-13, 16-17) are directly related to commonly identified CVs. High-priority CVs of Excellence and Transparency align with several UN-SDGs (covering 4,9,12, and 16-17) with a huge emphasis on promoting quality education, accountable institutions, responsible consumption, and effective partnerships. HEIs must make CVs fundamental into their a) institutional governance strategies; b) teaching and research practices as HEIs are termed as "***agents for change***" must fulfill societal responsibility becoming sustainable campuses [27-31].

Research Article

The CVs adopted by HEIs will impact either directly or indirectly when practiced with full clarity and purpose. We discuss here only one "***equitable access to quality education***". This will i) ensure qualified and trained workforce boosting economic growth, ii) reduce gender disparity, iii) provide resilient infrastructure through innovative research, iv) enable efficient and purposeful utilization of resources resulting into minimized environmental hazards, v) more importantly facilitate join global shared vision through productive collaborative efforts ensuring a more sustainable planet "***leaving on one behind***". Furthermore, this is in true spirit directly aligned with Vision-2030 of Saudi Arabia addressing all key pillars of vibrant society, ambitious nation and thriving economy [32-33].

Table 3. Mapping of CVs to relevant UN-SDGs and demanded HEIs role in achieving them

	Required Proactive Role from HEIs	SD Goals
HEIs must strive for **Excellence**	in education through improved learning outcomes to prepare trained workforce	4
	in research and innovation establishing a culture for sustainable solutions leading to state-of-the-art technologies for resilient infrastructure	9
HEIs must ensure **Transparency**	in institutional governance and decision-making processes	12
	in information sharing about consumption of campus resources	16
	in building trust amongst all stakeholders for effective collaborations and partnerships	17
HEIs have a **Responsibility**	to ensure that all academic programs meet accreditation standards	4
	to provide quality education that is accessible, inclusive, and equitable	5
	to prepare students to qualify scientific mindset and inquisitiveness and attain diversified skills meeting future market demands	8
	to enhance productivity with efficient resource utilization, and minimizing institutional expenses	12
	to reduce negative environmental impacts by practicing sustainable development initiatives	13
HEIs must promote **Teamwork**	culture through cohesive learning atmosphere	4
	to develop both effective and productive collaborations and partnerships mobilizing all sectors covering institutional faculties, HEIs, governmental bodies, industry and academia, and civil society	17
HEIs must uphold **Integrity**	in policies and practices combating gender-based discrimination promoting gender equality	5
	in institutional governance fostering trust and accountability contributing towards peaceful and inclusive learning platforms	16
HEIs must encourage **Creativity**	through curricular changes adapting to sustainability focused teaching and learning practices	4
	through problem (or project) based learning for innovation driven technological advancements	9

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Core values not only guide the vision, mission, and goals of HEIs but also influence the behavior and actions of their members, ensuring that decisions are made with integrity and accountability for the common good. We present now conclusions and recommendations regarding CVs adopted by HEIs of Saudi Arabia.

- All public sector HEIs of Saudi Arabia have defined CVs to strategically execute their vision and mission.
- We failed to find CVs in the case of five public sector HEIs. Publicizing or advertising CVs along with vision and mission statements on the main website page is recommended.
- A total of 172 identified CVs can be categorized as Ethical, Social, Leadership, Inclusiveness, Academic, Collaboration, Performance, Innovation, and Cultural related themes.
- 54% and more of the HEIs (14 out of 24) opted for Excellence and Transparency as CVs and more than 37% of HEIs (9 out of 24) opted for Excellence, Transparency, Responsibility, Teamwork and Integrity as CVs.
- 47% (8 out of 17) of the UN-SDGs consisting of (4-5, 8-9, 12-13 and 16-17) are identified directly related to commonly identified CVs. This trend is very promising in the sense that opted CVs of the HEIs are directly or indirectly sustainably focused.
- HEIs namely (KSU, KFUPM, PNU, KKU, NU and UT) may consider revising their CVs with a target of opting less than the average number of CVs of 7.2 as 10 or more CVs may be difficult to accomplish with true spirit.
- HEIs should consider revising broadly defined core values into direct, universal terms to enhance clarity enabling straightforward alignment with UN SDG targets.
- HEIs of Saudi Arabia are required to play highly proactive role in contributing and leading in alignment with Saudi Vision 2030, practicing CVs in true spirit beyond just mere words advertised on their respective websites.

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APPENDIX:

Table A1: Source link of core values for each HEI (short name is used)

HEI	Core Values Source Link
IMSIU	https://imamu.edu.sa/en/Pages/default.aspx
KSU	https://ksu.edu.sa/en/strategy
IUM	https://iu.edu.sa/university/A01-1
KFUPM	https://jobs.kfupm.edu.sa/about/mission-vision
PNU	https://pnu.edu.sa/en/AboutUniversity/Pages/home.aspx
IABFU	https://www.iau.edu.sa/en/about-us/vision-mission-and-values
KFU	https://www.kfu.edu.sa/en/Departments/StrategicPlans/Documents/KFU_stratigic.pdf
KKU	https://www.kku.edu.sa/en/portfolio/5264
TaibahU	https://www.taibahu.edu.sa/Pages/EN/Sector/SectorPage.aspx?ID=177&PageId=95
TU	https://www.tu.edu.sa/En/University/Pages/20737/Values
QU	https://www.qu.edu.sa/university/vision
KSAU-HS	https://www.ksau-hs.edu.sa/English/About-Us/Pages/MissionVission.aspx

Research Article

JazanU	https://www.jazanu.edu.sa/en/university-history/vision-and-mission
BU	https://bu.edu.sa/about
NU	https://www.nu.edu.sa/en/vision-mission-and-goals
UT	https://www.ut.edu.sa/en/aboutuniversity/Pages/default.aspx
NBU	https://www.nbu.edu.sa/en/about-university/strategic-plan-20-25
PSAU	https://www.psau.edu.sa/en/node/1966
KAUST	https://www.kaust.edu.sa/en/about/vision
MU	https://www.mu.edu.sa/en/general/177741
SU	https://www.su.edu.sa/en/about-us/strategic-plan
SEU	https://seu.edu.sa/en/vision/
UB	https://www.ub.edu.sa/en/Pages/AboutUniversity.aspx#goals
UJ	https://www.uj.edu.sa/en/about-university