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Saudi university environmental sustainability policies: Critical discourse analysis of responsibility frames and institutional voice

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ABSTRACT

Saudi universities increasingly present environmental sustainability as part of institutional strategy, national development, campus management, research, and public responsibility. Yet policy language does more than describe environmental action: it assigns agency, calibrates obligation, and constructs a public voice through which the university appears as guardian, educator, manager, partner, or leader. This article examines those functions through a critical discourse analysis of an expanded Arabic corpus comprising 33 policy-facing texts or independently headed sections from seven Saudi universities. After navigation material and duplicated wording were removed, the corpus contained 1,960 running Arabic words and 119 analyzable clauses or list items. The data were coded for responsibility frame, social actor, modality, institutional voice, and legitimation strategy. All Arabic examples are presented in reader-oriented Romanization followed by English translation. The analysis identifies measurement and accountability, national and global alignment, institutional stewardship, education and research, and resource management as the most frequent primary frames. However, the dominant voice is not uniformly binding. Aspirational constructions such as “the university seeks,” “is keen,” and “aims” occur more often than explicit obligations, deadlines, or sanctions. Stronger passages name committees, units, programme owners, indicators, and reporting procedures; weaker passages foreground effort, leadership, rankings, or awareness while leaving operational responsibility diffuse. The article argues that Saudi university sustainability discourse often produces responsibility without fully specifying accountability. It concludes with a practical model for clearer policy writing that names responsible actors, distinguishes commitment from aspiration, balances individual conduct with institutional duty, and reports progress, limits, and trade-offs in language that campus communities can use.

KEYWORDS: critical discourse analysis; environmental sustainability; higher education; institutional voice; responsibility frames; Saudi universities; Romanized Arabic corpus

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1. Introduction

A university is not only a place where environmental ideas are taught. It is also a dense material organization: classrooms are cooled and lit, laboratories consume water and energy, fleets move people, kitchens produce food waste, procurement systems select materials, and maintenance teams decide whether leaks, heat, shade, and recycling remain abstract concerns or become everyday realities. For a student who sees a tap running in a crowded building, or a cleaner who handles mixed waste without clear instructions, environmental responsibility is experienced through ordinary institutional decisions. The wording of policy matters because it tells these people who is expected to act, what action counts, and whether anyone can be questioned when an announced commitment is not fulfilled.

Saudi universities now speak about sustainability through strategic plans, dedicated portals, committees, annual reports, research centres, rankings, and links to Saudi Vision 2030 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This expanding discourse is significant. It makes environmental work visible and can coordinate actors across campuses. At the same time, visibility is not the same as accountability. A statement that a university “is keen to protect the environment” carries a positive ethical stance, but it does not identify an office, a timetable, a budget, a measurable result, or a remedy if progress stalls. Conversely, a clause that assigns a programme to a named vice-president, requires periodic reporting, and tracks a defined indicator creates a more auditable chain of responsibility.

This difference is linguistic as well as administrative. Agency determines whether the university, a committee, students, technology, or an unnamed process appears to cause change. Modality distinguishes obligation from aspiration: “must,” “will,” “seeks,” and “may” do not make the same promise. Nominalizations such as “implementation,” “measurement,” or “improvement” can organize complex work, but they can also remove the human actor who must perform it. Evaluative terms such as “leading,” “distinguished,” and “sustainable” build institutional identity, while references to Vision 2030, the SDGs, international rankings, and accreditation authorize claims by placing them inside respected national and global frameworks.

The research problem is therefore not whether Saudi universities mention sustainability. They clearly do. The problem is how their policy-facing Arabic discourse distributes environmental responsibility and how its institutional voice moves between commitment, instruction, promotion, and self-description. Existing educational research has generated useful evidence about environmental awareness, sustainable practices, green campuses, quality management, and perceived levels of implementation. Much less attention has been given to the wording through which a university constructs itself as responsible and decides whether environmental work belongs to leadership, administrative units, faculty, students, partners, or everyone in general.

The study asks four questions. First, which responsibility frames organize Saudi university environmental sustainability discourse? Second, how do agency, modality, nominalization, pronouns, and evaluation construct institutional voice? Third, which legitimation strategies make environmental commitments appear necessary, credible, or successful? Fourth, what forms of responsibility and accountability are foregrounded, diluted, or omitted across strategy, committee, sustainability, reporting, and promotional genres?

The article contributes in three ways. Empirically, it offers a multi-university Arabic corpus rather than relying on a single institutional statement. Methodologically, it connects corpus-assisted description with close critical reading and provides Romanized examples that remain accessible to readers who do not read Arabic script. Practically, it translates discourse findings into a policy-writing model. The aim is not to accuse universities of bad faith or to infer environmental performance from words alone. It is to show what different formulations make possible: some invite admiration, some distribute tasks, and a smaller group creates traceable obligations. The sections that follow review the relevant scholarship, define the analytical framework, describe the corpus and coding procedure, present the findings, and develop implications for more accountable and human-centred sustainability communication.

2. Literature Review

Higher education has become a central site for sustainable-development governance because universities combine education, research, operations, procurement, land use, public engagement, and professional formation. International scholarship has consequently moved beyond the idea that sustainability is an optional awareness campaign. It is now examined as a whole-institution challenge involving curriculum, governance, physical infrastructure, organizational culture, reporting, and external partnerships (Lozano et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2020). This wider view is important for discourse analysis: when institutions speak only of awareness while leaving procurement, buildings, energy, water, and accountability unnamed, language narrows the field of responsibility before implementation begins.

The environmental urgency behind this shift is not peripheral to university life. Climate change, rising emissions, water and energy pressure, food insecurity, population growth, and the depletion of natural resources have made environmentally responsible development an institutional necessity. The literature supplied for this article links that urgency to the growth of green investment, the green economy, sustainable buildings, environmentally responsible campuses, and international “green university” classifications. It also stresses the educational role of universities in developing knowledge, values, skills, and an awareness of the relationship between human activity and ecological systems. In this view, environmental education is not merely information about nature; it is preparation for making decisions that protect resources and future living conditions.

The reviewed Arabic scholarship shows that sustainability in higher education has been studied through several recurring routes: surveys of implementation, measurements of environmental awareness and citizenship, evaluations of academic and community programmes, studies of financial sustainability, and proposed models for becoming a green university. Al-Arjani (2025), for example, reported medium levels for both total-quality practices and sustainable-development achievement at King Saud University, while identifying a strong relationship between the two. Al-Balawi (2024) similarly found a medium perceived role for community-service and continuing-education programmes at the University of Tabuk. Al-Shamrani (2024) found medium levels of financial-sustainability practice and difficulty, alongside high perceived importance for planning, transparency, accountability, resource diversification, and campus environment. These findings do not prove weak environmental performance, but they repeatedly expose a distance between recognizing sustainability and embedding it consistently in institutional practice.

A second cluster of studies concentrates on students. Hanafi (2025) and Al-Suwaiket (2022) identified limitations in the role of colleges of education and in students’ environmental citizenship, whereas Al-Furaih (2021) reported stronger awareness in some domains but more moderate participation in voluntary environmental activities. Abd al’Al (2023) found that social-media communication could support attention, understanding, and participation in environmental issues. Taken together, these studies show that awareness is neither automatic nor sufficient. They also raise a responsibility question: when a policy emphasizes that students should conserve resources, volunteer, and change behaviour, does it equally specify what the institution will do about cooling systems, water infrastructure, procurement, waste contracts, laboratory practice, or access to environmental data?

The green-university literature broadens the agenda by connecting sustainability to buildings, campus landscape, energy, water, waste, transport, teaching, research, and global ranking systems. Othman (2022) and Da’bas (2024) treat green transformation as an integrated institutional project rather than a single course or campaign. Yet much of this work remains descriptive, comparative, or prescriptive: it identifies indicators, evaluates perceived availability, or proposes mechanisms. It rarely examines how labels such as “green university,” “sustainable campus,” “environmental leadership,” and “social responsibility” construct institutional reputation, arrange priorities, and make some actors more visible than others. A university can therefore appear environmentally progressive in discourse even when the text provides little information about responsibility chains, implementation dates, or procedures for public scrutiny.

The methodological pattern in the supplied review is equally important. Most cited studies use questionnaires, descriptive surveys, correlational designs, or programme evaluations. These methods answer valuable questions about perception, prevalence, and association, but they do not explain how policy language produces meaning. The central gap is not another estimate of “how much” sustainability exists. It is an account of how Saudi universities define the environmental problem, name or erase responsible actors, calibrate commitment, and construct a voice that may be accountable, advisory, managerial, celebratory, or promotional. The present study therefore moves from asking, “What is the perceived level of sustainability?” to asking, “How is environmental responsibility made linguistically visible, and under what conditions can that language support accountability?”

Critical discourse studies provide tools for this shift. Fairclough (1992, 2003) treats discourse as social practice: textual choices are connected to organizational routines, institutional identities, and unequal capacities to define reality. The discourse-historical approach adds attention to context, intertextuality, and the movement of arguments across national strategies, international frameworks, institutional reports, and local claims (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). In environmental communication, such an approach asks not only whether a text is “green,” but what story of change it tells, who can act within that story, and what costs or conflicts remain outside it (Dryzek, 2013; Stibbe, 2021).

Institutional voice is especially relevant. Organizations speak through a mixture of grammatical forms: the explicit third person (“the university commits”), the inclusive first person (“we work”), impersonal action nouns (“implementation of initiatives”), passive constructions, and quotations from senior leaders. These forms are not interchangeable. An inclusive “we” can create solidarity, but it can also blur distinctions between decision-makers and those expected to comply. A passive construction can focus attention on a process, but it may suppress the actor responsible for delay or failure. Likewise, rankings and awards can provide evidence of recognition while shifting the discourse from ecological outcomes to institutional prestige.

The literature therefore supports a critical but balanced position. Sustainability discourse is not dismissed as public relations, nor is every commitment treated as proof of implementation. Instead, the analysis examines degrees of specification. A policy-facing text becomes more accountable when it identifies an actor, an action, a target, a time horizon, evidence, and a reporting or correction mechanism. It becomes less accountable when responsibility is dispersed across an undefined collective, when intentions substitute for duties, or when achievement language is detached from the material conditions experienced by campus users.

3. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

The study combines critical discourse analysis with four operational lenses: social-actor representation, modality, institutional voice, and legitimation. The framework is deliberately compact. Each concept becomes a coding question rather than a decorative theoretical label.

First, social-actor analysis asks who is activated as an agent and who is backgrounded or excluded (van Leeuwen, 2008). The relevant actors include the university as a corporate body, senior leadership, sustainability units, committees, colleges, facilities departments, faculty, students, employees, contractors, government agencies, international organizations, partners, and the wider community. Explicit activation makes responsibility more traceable. Passivation and nominalization may be justified when the process matters most, but repeated actor deletion can make environmental action appear to happen without decision-makers.

Second, modality captures the strength and type of commitment. Deontic modality encodes obligation or permission; epistemic modality expresses certainty or probability; and dynamic modality presents capacity. In policy-facing Arabic, these meanings are often realized through verbs and formulae rather than direct equivalents of English modal auxiliaries. The analysis distinguishes strong commitment or directive language from intention and aspiration. Romanized forms such as “taltazimu al-jami’a” (“the university commits”), “tahrisu al-jami’a” (“the university is keen”), “tas’al al-jami’a” (“the university seeks”), and “yahdifu al-barnamaj” (“the programme aims”) create different expectations.

Third, institutional voice refers to the patterned persona constructed across texts. Five voice modes were coded: intention or aspiration, task or directive, completed action or achievement, promotional evaluation, and impersonal nominal labelling. These modes can coexist. A sustainability portal may open with aspiration, shift to a committee task list, display completed reports, and end with rankings. The critical question is how that sequence positions the institution: as a promise-maker, regulator, performer, narrator of success, or organizer of procedures.

Fourth, legitimation analysis follows van Leeuwen’s distinction among authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and narrative or exemplary legitimation. Authorization invokes Vision 2030, the SDGs, ministries, accreditation bodies, or ranking systems. Rationalization links action to efficiency, quality, continuity, evidence, or public benefit. Moral evaluation describes sustainability as responsible, necessary, fair, or protective of future generations. Achievement narratives point to reports, projects, rankings, and awards as proof that the institution deserves trust.

Eight primary responsibility frames were used: governance and stewardship; education and research; national and global alignment; measurement and accountability; resource efficiency and infrastructure; participation and partnership; individual awareness and behaviour; and reputation and leadership. A frame was assigned only when a clause organized responsibility around one of these logics. The frame is therefore not a topic word. For example, “water” is a topic; a clause that assigns water-use monitoring to a unit constructs a measurement-and-accountability frame, while a clause asking students to conserve water constructs an individual-behaviour frame.

4. Methodology

The research used a qualitative-dominant, corpus-assisted critical discourse design. “Corpus-assisted” means that systematic counts were used to locate broad patterns, while interpretation remained grounded in complete clauses, headings, and their institutional context (Baker et al., 2008; Mautner, 2009). The design does not infer environmental performance, audience persuasion, or policy compliance from wording alone.

The corpus comprised 33 Arabic policy-facing texts or independently headed sections from seven public Saudi universities: King Saud University, Qassim University, Taibah University, King Khalid University, King Abdulaziz University, Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University, and Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University. Sources included sustainability portals, strategic-plan sections, committee mandates and objectives, sustainability-centre pages, report indexes, environmental-project descriptions, and official institutional announcements. Materials were retrieved from official university domains in July 2026. Where a long webpage contained several clearly titled policy sections, each section was treated as a separate text because it performed a distinct institutional function.

Table 1. Composition of the Arabic policy-facing corpus

University	Texts / sections	Units	Words	Principal genres
King Saud University	6	27	386	Portal, committee mandate, task and objective lists, reports
Qassim University	10	35	640	Sustainability portal, centre, strategy, policy index, curriculum project
Taibah University	7	22	402	Sustainability definition, institutional steps, reports, strategy values
King Khalid University	6	24	381	Vision 2030 strategic programme sections
King Abdulaziz University	2	5	76	Institutional profile and environmental project announcement
Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University	1	3	43	Sustainability ranking and accreditation statements
Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University	1	3	32	Health-promotion accreditation and institutional identity
Total	33	119	1960	Seven universities

The initial collection was broader, but navigation menus, duplicated footer text, generic service links, and isolated sustainability labels without sufficient context were removed. The resulting Arabic micro-corpus contained 1,960 running words and 119 analyzable units. A unit was a complete clause, a sentence, or a self-contained list item that represented an actor, action, evaluation, commitment, or institutional claim. The modest word total reflects the decision to analyze policy-bearing language rather than copy entire websites. The corpus is “expanded” in institutional breadth and genre variation, not statistically representative of every Saudi university.

Texts were included when they met four criteria: they were publicly available on an official university domain; they addressed environmental sustainability, resource management, sustainability governance, environmental education, reporting, or a closely connected institutional practice; they contained enough language to identify agency or evaluation; and they could be attributed to a university, unit, or named programme. Purely technical pages, inaccessible files, duplicated announcements, and English translations were excluded from the Arabic analysis. Formal policies were distinguished from policy-facing communications in the source register so that promotional news was not silently treated as a binding rule.

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each unit was tagged for university, genre, actor, process, and evaluative orientation. Second, one primary responsibility frame was assigned using the codebook described above. Third, each unit was assigned one dominant voice mode. Fourth, close reading examined modality, pronouns, passives, nominalizations, metaphors, parallelism, and legitimation. A 20-unit pilot was used to refine overlapping definitions, especially the boundary between governance and measurement, and between education and individual behaviour. After full coding, every unit was audited against the final category definitions. Because this is a single-researcher pilot, no intercoder coefficient is claimed; transparency, representative evidence, negative cases, and a complete source register are used instead. Independent double coding should be added before journal submission if resources permit.

Arabic excerpts were Romanized after coding so that analysis remained anchored in the source language. The Romanization is functional rather than philological: it preserves key lexical and grammatical contrasts while avoiding specialist symbols that may distract non-Arabist readers. Each quotation was then translated into natural English. Where the Arabic used a nominal clause or an infinitive-like task label, the translation retained that compactness instead of automatically adding “the university will.” This matters because inserting an English subject would conceal the original actor deletion.

The study uses public institutional texts and contains no private or personal data. Nevertheless, source use was handled conservatively: excerpts are short, contextualized, and attributed to the institution rather than to individual employees. The main limitations are the selective corpus, unequal quantities across universities, the inclusion of policy-facing genres alongside formal policy, and the absence of interviews with policy writers or campus users. These limits define the claims: the findings describe recurring linguistic patterns in the sampled discourse, not the environmental quality of the universities or the intentions of individual authors.

5. Findings

The 119 units produced a clear but internally varied map of responsibility. Measurement and accountability was the largest primary frame with 25 units, followed by national and global alignment with 22, governance and stewardship with 20, education and research with 19, and resource efficiency and infrastructure with 15. Participation and partnership accounted for seven units, individual awareness and behaviour for six, and reputation and leadership for five. These counts are descriptive, not measures of importance. A low-frequency frame can be politically significant, and a frequent frame does not prove implementation.

Table 2. Primary responsibility frames

Primary frame	Units	Share
Measurement and accountability	25	21.0%
National and global alignment	22	18.5%
Governance and stewardship	20	16.8%
Education and research	19	16.0%
Resource efficiency and infrastructure	15	12.6%
Participation and partnership	7	5.9%
Individual awareness and behaviour	6	5.0%
Reputation and leadership	5	4.2%

The distribution immediately complicates a simple “green branding” interpretation. Much of the corpus contains operational vocabulary: committees, indicators, measurement, reports, programme ownership, evaluation, resource efficiency, and data. At the same time, the way these elements are voiced often weakens their binding force. The tension between operational detail and aspirational presentation is the central finding.

Genre variation clarified why the same institution could sound more accountable in one place and more promotional in another. Committee and strategy sections favoured task lists, named units, indicators, and reporting chains. Sustainability homepages mixed aspiration with national alignment and broad moral evaluation. News items favoured completed action and visible partnership, while ranking and accreditation items foregrounded achievement. This pattern cautions against judging an institution from a single webpage. It also shows that institutional voice is assembled across genres: a student may encounter an inspiring slogan first, a committee mandate only after several clicks, and a detailed report in a separate archive. Accountability therefore depends not only on wording within a document but also on information architecture. When duties, data, and contact routes are difficult to locate, a technically specific policy may remain socially inaccessible.

5.1 Aspirational stewardship: concern as a public stance

A recurring institutional self-presentation casts the university as a caring steward. King Saud University states: “tahrisu Jami’at al-Malik Sa’ud ‘ala ibraz ihtimamiha bi-l-jawanib al-bi’iyya wa-hifziha li-l-bi’a wa-muharabat al-talawwuth.” Translation: “King Saud University is keen to highlight its concern for environmental matters, its protection of the environment, and its combating of pollution.” The verb “tahrisu” communicates earnest concern. Yet the sentence also contains the metadiscursive verb “ibraz” (“to highlight”), so the object of action is partly environmental protection and partly the visibility of institutional concern.

The same pattern appears in “kama tatmahu ila ibraz dawriha al-banna’ fi khalq bi’a sihhiya” - “it also aspires to highlight its constructive role in creating a healthy environment.” Aspiration humanizes the institution as purposeful and benevolent, but it remains difficult to audit. A reader cannot determine from “aspires” what will change in a lecture hall, laboratory, residence, or shaded walkway. The issue is not that aspiration is empty. Aspirational language can mobilize a community. The issue is that it should be followed by a second layer naming duty, owner, schedule, and evidence.

King Abdulaziz University similarly moves between the corporate third person and the inclusive first person: “tas’a Jami’at al-Malik ‘Abd al-’Aziz li-tawfir bi’a akadimiyya wa-bahthiyya mutamayyiza” - “King Abdulaziz University seeks to provide a distinguished academic and research environment”; then, “na’malu ‘ala ta’ziz al-ibtikar” - “we work to strengthen innovation.” The shift makes the institution sound closer to its audience. However, “we” combines leadership, academics, administrators, technical staff, students, and contractors into one voice, even though their authority and obligations differ sharply.

5.2 From diffuse commitment to named ownership

The strongest responsibility language appears where texts name organizational structures. King Saud University reports: “qamat al-jami’a bi-tashkil lajna da’ima tatawalla kaffat umur al-istidama” - “the university formed a permanent committee that assumes responsibility for all sustainability matters.” The completed verb “qamat” and the explicit committee reduce ambiguity. The accompanying membership list further distributes representation across sustainability management, energy technology, student affairs, research coordination, community relations, projects, planning, faculty, and a student member. This is more than an inclusive slogan; it creates an institutional map.

Qassim University provides an even clearer formulation through “milkiyyat al-istiratijiyya,” or “strategy ownership.” Its strategy explains that programmes were grouped and that “unitat milkiyyat kull barnamaj bi-ahad wukala’ al-jami’a ... li-l-wuduh al-tamm li-milkiyyat al-istiratijiyya wa-l-mas’uliyat al-mutarattiba ‘ala dhalik.” Translation: “ownership of each programme was assigned to one of the university vice-presidents ... to achieve complete clarity regarding ownership of the strategy and the responsibilities resulting from it.” The metaphor of ownership is managerial, but it performs useful discursive work: it converts a collective ambition into an identifiable chain of answerability.

The Sustainable Development Center at Qassim also uses procedural sequencing: “i’dad taqarir dawriyya ... wa-raf’uha li-majlis al-markaz, wa-mutaba’at tanfidhiha ba’d i’timadiha.” Translation: “preparing periodic reports, submitting them to the centre council, and following up their implementation after approval.” Here, reporting is not simply display. It is embedded in an approval-and-follow-up cycle. This is one of the corpus’s strongest accountability formulations because it names the document, receiving body, and subsequent action. Taibah University likewise states that its institutional sustainability unit follows strategic indicators and prepares periodic reports with a sustainability team. The phrase “mutaba’at mu’ashshirat al-khutta al-istiratijiyya ... wa-daman al-tahsin al-mustamirr” - “following the strategic-plan indicators and ensuring continuous improvement” joins measurement to an organizational owner. These examples show that Saudi university discourse already contains the linguistic resources needed for accountable policy. The problem is inconsistency: such specificity is not carried across all topics or genres.

5.3 Responsibility as education, participation, and personal conduct

Education and research form a major responsibility frame. Qassim University states that the SDGs have been integrated into curricula and research “li-daman takhrij jil wa’in bi-qadaya al-istidama” - “to ensure the graduation of a generation aware of sustainability issues.” Its curriculum-greening project describes sustainability as “ruknan asasiyyan fi baramij ta’limiha” - “a fundamental pillar in its educational programmes.” The pillar metaphor gives sustainability structural importance rather than treating it as an optional topic.

Participation is also institutionalized through committees, research-interest registration, surveys, volunteering, and partnerships. These practices can democratize sustainability when participants help define problems and assess solutions. Yet participation discourse can also individualize responsibility. Phrases about raising awareness, developing students’ prudent resource management, or enabling volunteers place visible moral agency on campus members. Only six units were coded primarily as individual awareness or behaviour, but their practical weight is substantial because they address what ordinary people should do.

Consider an illustrative contrast. A poster saying, “Every student should save water,” may be reasonable, but it becomes unfair if taps leak, irrigation is poorly timed, or consumption data are inaccessible. The student can close a tap; only facilities management can redesign the system, contract repairs, and publish building-level use. Human-centred policy therefore requires two connected voices: one that invites responsible conduct and another that accepts institutional duty for the conditions under which conduct occurs. The corpus frequently provides the first voice and sometimes provides the second, but rarely places them in the same sentence or responsibility matrix.

5.4 The techno-managerial promise: indicators, resources, and data

Resource and infrastructure language is most developed in passages about energy, water, buildings, finance, digital systems, and performance measurement. King Saud University lists “mutaba’at qiyas mu’addal istihlak al-jami’a li-l-mawarid ka-l-ma’ wa-l-taqa” - “monitoring the university’s rate of resource consumption, such as water and energy.” The explicit object of measurement is valuable, although the wording does not state a baseline, target, frequency, or public reporting channel.

King Khalid University’s strategy repeatedly links sustainability to efficiency and data. One clause calls for “tamkin ittikhadh al-qararat al-mabniyya ‘ala al-bayanat li-ziyadat fa’iliyyat al-takhtit wa-l-tanfidh” - “enabling data-based decision-making to increase the effectiveness of planning and implementation.” Another seeks integrated and sustainable policies and procedures. This rationalizes sustainability through managerial competence: good environmental and institutional outcomes are expected to follow from accurate data, efficient spending, digital infrastructure, and coordinated processes.

The strength of this frame is that it moves discourse toward observable systems. Its limitation is depoliticization. A dashboard can show electricity use without deciding who bears the cost of retrofitting, which buildings receive investment first, whether occupants can challenge thermal discomfort, or how outsourced workers participate in waste and safety decisions. Technology and data are not neutral substitutes for governance; they are tools whose purposes and access rules must be stated.

Taibah University’s reporting language comes closer to joining the managerial and public dimensions. Its reports are said to document progress, highlight innovation and resource efficiency, and reflect a commitment to transparency, impact measurement, and continuous improvement. This combination is promising, but “transparency” remains an evaluative claim unless reports disclose baselines, missed targets, methodological changes, and corrective action. Reporting only achievements constructs confidence; reporting difficulties constructs institutional learning.

5.5 Modality and the architecture of institutional voice

Voice coding confirms the dominance of non-binding forward orientation. Forty-two of the 119 units were primarily intention or aspiration, using structures equivalent to “is keen,” “seeks,” “aims,” “focuses on,” or “contributes to.” Thirty were compact task or directive formulations, often in lists such as “monitoring consumption,” “providing measurements,” or “strengthening awareness.” Twenty-one narrated completed actions or achievements, fifteen were primarily promotional or evaluative, and eleven were impersonal nominal labels such as “climate-change policies,” “environmental impact,” or “assessment tools.”

Table 3. Dominant institutional voice modes

Voice mode	Units	Share
Intention or aspiration	42	35.3%
Task or directive	30	25.2%
Completed action or achievement	21	17.6%
Promotional or evaluative	15	12.6%
Impersonal nominal label	11	9.2%

The task lists are stronger than vague aspiration because they specify an action. Nevertheless, Arabic list grammar often omits tense, actor, and deadline. “Tarshid istihlak al-mawarid al-tabi’iyya” translates literally as “rationalizing the consumption of natural resources.” It does not say who will rationalize, by when, or against which benchmark. Translating it as “the university will rationalize” would overstate the source. Nominal compression is administratively efficient, but repeated across policy it can create action without an accountable actor.

Completed-action clauses provide the strongest evidence of implementation: a committee was formed, a project was launched, a fish-farm rehabilitation project was opened, reports were issued, and accreditations were obtained. Yet achievement voice has two forms. In operational form, it names a material change and responsible unit, as in King Abdulaziz University's description of the College of Marine Sciences and the Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture as partners in rehabilitating a fish farm. In reputational form, it foregrounds rankings, accreditation, awards, and institutional standing. Both may be true, but only the first directly specifies environmental work.

5.6 Legitimation: nation, necessity, efficiency, and distinction

Authorization is the most pervasive legitimation strategy. Universities connect their actions to Vision 2030, all seventeen SDGs, ministries, national targets, international rankings, accreditation bodies, and the World Health Organization. Such references locate campus sustainability inside recognized public agendas. They also allow institutional texts to borrow authority: a local initiative appears necessary because it contributes to a national transformation or global goal.

Moral evaluation is clearest in Taibah University's statement: "al-tanmiya al-mustadama laysat khiyaran, bal darura li-daman mustaqbal muzdhir li-l-ajyal al-qadima." Translation: "Sustainable development is not an option but a necessity for ensuring a prosperous future for coming generations." The contrastive structure closes debate over whether sustainability matters. Its moral force is strong, but the same closure can conceal legitimate debate about priorities, costs, evidence, and who participates in decisions.

Rationalization appears through efficiency, quality, continuity, competitiveness, and data. Qassim's curriculum-greening project links environmental learning to students' competitiveness in the labour market; King Khalid University links resource governance to operational efficiency; Taibah links reporting to impact measurement and improvement. These arguments make sustainability compatible with institutional performance, which may broaden support. They can also subordinate ecological commitments to reputation, cost control, or market value if environmental limits are not independently articulated.

Achievement and distinction legitimation is especially visible in ranking and accreditation genres. Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University presents its position in a Times sustainability ranking as an institutional achievement, while Princess Nourah University highlights renewed recognition as a health-promoting university. Such claims are useful signals, but rankings select indicators and can encourage communication designed for external comparison. The critical test is whether the same visibility is given to uncompleted work, resource pressures, staff concerns, and the voices of people who live with campus systems daily.

5.7 What is missing: deadlines, remedies, and contestable voice

Across the corpus, explicit actors and indicators are more common than explicit deadlines, allocated budgets, enforcement mechanisms, or consequences for missed targets. Formal obligation is therefore thinner than institutional commitment. Campus communities are frequently represented as beneficiaries, learners, volunteers, or partners, but rarely as rights-bearing participants who can question data, request correction, or influence priority-setting.

There are important counterexamples. Strategy ownership at Qassim names senior programme owners; periodic reporting creates a follow-up chain; Taibah names a sustainability unit and indicators; King Saud University lists a cross-campus committee; and King Khalid University emphasizes results, data, and transparent financial systems. These formulations demonstrate an emerging accountability vocabulary. What remains underdeveloped is the final step: specifying what happens when an indicator deteriorates, a target is missed, or a campus user reports an environmental problem.

6. Discussion

The findings answer the first research question by showing that Saudi university sustainability discourse is organized primarily through measurement and accountability, national alignment, institutional stewardship, education and research, and resource management. This is a more substantial policy vocabulary than a narrow awareness campaign. Universities represent themselves as organizations that teach, measure, coordinate, report, partner, and manage. However, the frames are unevenly connected. Education may be described without operational reform; measurement may be named without targets; and national alignment may be asserted without local accountability.

The genre finding also has a practical implication for publication and governance. Universities should connect their public sustainability narrative to the documents that authorize and monitor it. A homepage claim should link directly to the responsible unit, current plan, indicator definitions, latest report, and method for raising a concern. This creates an intertextual chain in which promotional language can be tested against operational evidence. Without that chain, readers must assemble responsibility from scattered pages, and the institution retains control over which fragments become most visible. For campus users, this is not a minor design issue: discoverability determines whether sustainability is experienced as an accountable service, a distant strategy, or a sequence of celebratory announcements without visible follow-up.

The second research question concerns institutional voice. The dominant voice is benevolent, forward-looking, and managerial. It speaks through “seeking,” “aiming,” “supporting,” “enhancing,” and compact action nouns. This voice is humanly appealing because it avoids punitive language and presents sustainability as collective progress. Its weakness is that it can make every actor supportive while leaving no actor answerable. The institutional “we” is particularly double-edged: it can create solidarity, but it can also hide who controls budgets, contracts, data, and timelines.

The third question concerns legitimation. Vision 2030 and the SDGs provide a common vocabulary that connects universities to national and global purpose. Efficiency, innovation, quality of life, future generations, rankings, and accreditation provide additional reasons to act. These are not merely rhetorical ornaments; they can coordinate priorities and attract resources. Critical analysis nevertheless asks what each reason backgrounds. Efficiency may minimize questions of environmental justice; innovation may imply that technology can solve organizational conflict; ranking may reward visibility; and future-generation language may obscure the present needs of workers and students exposed to heat, poor air, inaccessible transport, or ineffective waste systems.

The fourth question concerns absences. The corpus rarely gives campus users a procedural voice. Students and staff are invited to become aware, volunteer, participate, or cooperate, but texts seldom explain how they can inspect data, challenge a decision, or obtain a response. A genuinely humanized policy should not only tell people to behave responsibly. It should tell them who is responsible for the system, what service standard they can expect, and how their experience will change the policy.

A practical writing model follows from this analysis. Every major environmental commitment should contain six elements: a named owner; a clearly graded modal commitment; a defined action; a time horizon; an indicator and public evidence source; and a review or remedy procedure. For illustration, “the university seeks to reduce water consumption” could be rewritten as: “The Facilities Directorate will publish the baseline, annual reduction target, building-level progress, and corrective plan for high-use sites, while campus users may report leaks through a tracked service channel.” The example is not a proposed numerical target; it demonstrates a responsibility grammar.

A second principle is balance. Individual actions should be paired with institutional obligations. A campaign asking students to sort waste should appear beside commitments on bin placement, collection contracts, contamination monitoring, worker training, and publication of recovery rates. A message about switching off lights should be paired with building controls, maintenance schedules, and thermal-comfort standards. This symmetry prevents sustainability from becoming a moral test imposed on people with limited control over infrastructure.

A third principle is honest institutional voice. Reports should distinguish aspiration, approved commitment, action in progress, completed action, and independently verified outcome. They should report failure and uncertainty as well as success. Such candour does not weaken legitimacy. It can strengthen trust by showing that the university is capable of learning rather than merely displaying achievement. In practical terms, sustainability pages should include a responsibility matrix, definitions for indicators, archived reports, reasons for missed milestones, and contact routes that lead to visible responses.

Finally, universities should retain the creative and hopeful language visible in the corpus. Taibah’s parallel slogan - “ta’lim yubna, wa-bahth yubtakar, wa-mujtama’ yatatawwar” (“education is built, research is innovated, and society develops”) - gives sustainability emotional direction. The goal is not to replace such language with bureaucratic prose. It is to place inspiration above a foundation of named responsibility. A policy can be memorable and measurable; humane and exact; nationally aligned and locally answerable.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how an expanded Arabic corpus of Saudi university policy-facing texts frames environmental responsibility and constructs institutional voice. The analysis found a discourse richer than simple green promotion. It contains committees, reports, strategic ownership, indicators, data, education, resource management, partnerships, and completed projects. It also contains a recurring weakness: responsibility is often expressed through aspiration, task nouns, collective identity, and reputational achievement more clearly than through binding obligations, deadlines, remedies, and rights of scrutiny.

The central conclusion is that the sampled discourse frequently creates responsibility without fully specifying accountability. The university appears as steward, educator, manager, national partner, and leader, while students and staff appear as learners, participants, and responsible users. Stronger texts name the unit that acts, the indicator that is followed, the body that receives a report, and the person who owns a programme. These examples provide a practical route forward.

Future research should extend the corpus to formal policy PDFs from a larger and systematically sampled set of universities, compare Arabic and English versions, and interview policy writers, facilities personnel, academics, students, cleaners, and contractors. Reception research is especially important because institutional intention and lived interpretation may diverge. The present article does not judge environmental performance; it evaluates the linguistic conditions under which performance can be understood and questioned.

Environmental sustainability becomes credible when institutional language helps people act and helps them know who must act next. Saudi universities already possess an ambitious vocabulary of stewardship, innovation, and national purpose. Its publishable and practical development lies in joining that vocabulary to a grammar of ownership, evidence, time, and response.

Table 4. Representative Romanized evidence and analytical function

Source	Romanized excerpt	English translation	Analytical function
KSU	<i>tahrisu Jami'at al-Malik Sa'ud 'ala ibraz ihtimamiha bi-l-jawanib al-bi'iyya.</i>	King Saud University is keen to highlight its concern for environmental matters.	Aspirational stewardship; concern and visibility are fused.
KSU	<i>qamat al-jami'a bi-tashkil lajna da'ima tatawalla kaffat umur al-is-tidama.</i>	The university formed a permanent committee that assumes responsibility for all sustainability matters.	Completed action with a named organizational owner.
KSU	<i>mutaba'at qiyas mu'addal istihlak al-jami'a li-l-mawarid ka-l-ma' wal-taqa.</i>	Monitoring the university's rate of resource consumption, such as water and energy.	Measurement is named, but actor, baseline, and deadline remain implicit.
Qassim	<i>unitat milkiyyat kull barnamaj bi-ahad wukala' al-jami'a.</i>	Ownership of each programme was assigned to one of the university vice-presidents.	Explicit programme ownership and answerability.
Qassim	<i>i'dad taqarir dawriyya ... wa-muta-ba'at tanfidhiha ba'd i'timadiha.</i>	Preparing periodic reports ... and following up their implementation after approval.	Reporting is connected to approval and follow-up.
Taibah	<i>al-tanmiya al-mustadama laysat khiyaran, bal darura.</i>	Sustainable development is not an option but a necessity.	Moral evaluation closes debate over whether action is needed.
KKU	<i>tamkin ittikhadh al-qararat al-mab-niyya 'ala al-bayanat.</i>	Enabling data-based decision-making.	Technocratic rationalization through evidence and efficiency.
KAU	<i>tas'a al-jami'a ... na'malu 'ala ta'ziz al-ibtikar.</i>	The university seeks ... we work to strengthen innovation.	Shift from corporate third person to inclusive first person.

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Declarations

Data availability: The article analyses public institutional webpages. The source register and representative Romanized excerpts are included. A reusable corpus should be archived only after checking institutional copyright, webpage changes, and journal data-sharing requirements.

Ethics: The corpus contains no private or personal data. Institutional texts are quoted briefly for scholarly analysis.

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