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REVIEW ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Constructing environmental responsibility in Saudi University policies: A critical discourse analysis of agency, modality, and accountability**Norah Nasser Saleh Alowayyid^{1*}, Khaled Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim², Hamed Mohammed Ali Doum³ & Aayesha Sagir Khan⁴¹Department of Educational Sciences, College of Education, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia²Department of Psychology, College of Education, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia³Department of curricula in physical education, Faculty of Education Sciences, Ajloun National University (ANU), Jordan⁴Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*Correspondence: N.alowayyid@psau.edu.sa**ABSTRACT**

A university can install solar panels, publish a Sustainable Development Goals report, and still leave basic questions unanswered: Who must act? Whose knowledge shaped the target? How will progress be judged, and what happens if the institution falls short? Environmental sustainability is therefore not only technical or managerial; it is also made governable through language. This article examines how Saudi universities construct environmental responsibility through intertextuality, evaluation, agency, modality, and stakeholder voice. It combines a critical synthesis of Saudi and international scholarship with an exploratory analysis of six English-language institutional texts published by King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, and the University of Tabuk. The framework integrates Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, van Leeuwen's social-actor model, appraisal theory, and an accountability-oriented reading of targets, reporting, and review. References to Saudi Vision 2030 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals connect campus action to authoritative narratives, but alignment can remain ceremonial when it is not translated into actors, resources, indicators, deadlines, and disclosure. Positive evaluation positions universities as leaders and innovators, although evidence ranges from aspiration to quantified outputs and reporting commitments. The institutional pronoun "we" creates solidarity while often concentrating voice at the organizational center. Students, faculty, communities, and partners appear as participants or changemakers, but less often as co-authors with durable decision rights. The article proposes a discursive accountability chain and stakeholder-voice continuum for policies that are measurable, participatory, and open to correction. Constructed examples in Romanized Arabic, with English translations, show how small linguistic choices move a statement from symbolic encouragement to accountable commitment.

KEYWORDS: critical discourse analysis; intertextuality; appraisal; agency; modality; stakeholder voice; environmental sustainability; Saudi universities; accountability

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1. Introduction

A university can appear environmentally ambitious long before its responsibilities become clear. A strategy may celebrate innovation, invoke national transformation, and promise a resilient future, yet say little about who owns a target, which budget supports it, when results will be published, or how students and staff can challenge weak performance. The distance between ambition and obligation is partly organizational, but it is also linguistic. Policy language distributes agency, sets the strength of commitments, identifies legitimate knowledge, and establishes which voices are entitled to define both the environmental problem and the institutional response.

This point matters because environmental responsibility in higher education is no longer confined to isolated activities such as tree planting, recycling campaigns, or energy-saving reminders. It now reaches governance, strategic planning, procurement, buildings, mobility, water, waste, teaching, research, innovation, community engagement, and public reporting. A university is simultaneously a large organization with a material footprint, an educator of future professionals, a producer of knowledge, a local civic actor, and a participant in national development. Its sustainability discourse therefore does more than describe projects. It helps organize relationships among senior leaders, facilities teams, faculty members, students, external partners, regulators, and communities.

The Saudi context gives this question particular urgency. Universities operate within a national transformation narrative in which human-capital development, institutional effectiveness, economic diversification, environmental protection, and quality of life are closely connected. Saudi Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative offer widely recognized frames through which institutions can explain why sustainability matters (Saudi Green Initiative, 2026; Saudi Vision 2030, 2026). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, international rankings, climate conferences, accreditation systems, and reporting frameworks add a global vocabulary of targets, partnerships, impact, and accountability. These texts do not enter university discourse unchanged. They are selected, condensed, combined, and repurposed to authorize local priorities. Studying that process is a study of intertextuality: the way one text speaks through other texts and borrows their authority.

Existing research establishes a policy-practice concern. Essa and Harvey (2022) found limited and often general treatment of education for sustainable development in Saudi policy and media documents. AlAli and Aboud (2024), surveying 275 faculty members, reported limited implementation across academic, research, social, and environmental dimensions. More recently, Alshammari (2025) found high faculty awareness of sustainability issues but much lower participation in sustainability activity and policymaking. These findings do not prove that institutional texts cause implementation gaps. They do, however, make it important to examine whether public discourse supplies the clarity, agency, participation, and answerability needed to narrow those gaps.

Most Saudi higher-education studies have measured perceptions, awareness, leadership roles, or levels of implementation. Such work is valuable because it identifies what institutional actors experience. Yet surveys usually begin after roles and priorities have already been framed. They rarely examine the texts that tell actors what sustainability is, who should perform it, and what counts as evidence. Conversely, discourse studies in the Saudi setting have mainly addressed national policy, media, or broad educational narratives rather than comparative university-level environmental discourse (Almaghlouth, 2022; Essa & Harvey, 2022). This leaves a gap between studies of perceived practice and studies of the language that makes practice intelligible and governable.

This article addresses that gap through an exploratory critical-discourse study of public institutional texts from three Saudi universities. It asks four questions. First, how are national and international sustainability frameworks recontextualized in university discourse? Second, how do evaluative choices position the university, its actions, and its future? Third, which stakeholders are included, activated, consulted, or muted? Fourth, which linguistic and organizational features strengthen or weaken environmental accountability? The purpose is not to rank the selected universities or infer their complete environmental performance from webpages. It is to show what their public texts make visible, what they leave implicit, and how more accountable policy language could be designed.

The article makes three contributions. Conceptually, it brings intertextuality, appraisal, social-actor representation, and accountability into one analytic model. Empirically, it offers a small but grounded comparison of public Saudi university discourse rather than constructing findings that the available source material cannot

support. Practically, it translates discourse analysis into a writing protocol that links each sustainability claim to an actor, action, baseline, target, deadline, resource, indicator, reporting venue, and corrective process. The underlying argument is straightforward: environmental responsibility becomes more credible when the language of aspiration is joined to the grammar of answerability and the institutionalization of stakeholder voice.

2. Environmental Responsibility as a Whole-Institution and Discursive Project

Sustainable development is commonly understood as meeting present needs without undermining future generations' ability to meet their own. In university settings, that broad principle becomes a layered institutional responsibility. At the operational level, it includes energy, water, buildings, transport, procurement, food, biodiversity, emissions, and waste. At the academic level, it includes curriculum, pedagogy, research priorities, laboratories, and innovation. At the civic level, it includes public education, partnerships, knowledge exchange, and service to local communities. At the governance level, it includes policy ownership, budgets, incentives, data systems, risk management, reporting, and review. Treating only one layer as "sustainability" creates a fragmented institution: a green building may sit beside an unchanged curriculum, or an active student club may operate without access to decision-making.

The whole-institution approach responds to this fragmentation. Holst's (2023) systematic review of 104 scientific and professional documents identifies coherence, continuous learning, participation, responsibility, and long-term commitment as central principles. It also connects governance, curriculum, campus operations, community, research, communication, and capacity building. The importance of this approach is not simply that it adds more activities. It asks whether the activities teach the same institutional lesson. A campus that asks students to conserve water while withholding consumption data, for example, sends a different message from one that publishes baselines, explains trade-offs, invites student analysis, and reports whether interventions worked.

Policy discourse is one mechanism through which such coherence is attempted. Policies classify environmental issues, establish relationships among units, and turn broad values into permitted or required conduct. Fairclough (2003) treats discourse as socially constitutive: texts do not neutrally mirror institutions but participate in making knowledge, identities, relations, and practices. A statement such as "the university promotes sustainability" creates a favorable institutional identity but does not yet allocate work. By contrast, "the Facilities Department will publish audited quarterly water-use data against a 2025 baseline" constructs an actor, an action, a timetable, an evidence standard, and an audience entitled to judge the result.

This difference is central to environmental accountability. Responsibility means that an actor is assigned a duty. Answerability means that the actor must explain actions and outcomes. Enforceability means that consequences, correction, or escalation can follow inadequate performance. University sustainability texts often contain the first element and sometimes the second; the third is rarer in public communication. Macheridis and Paulsson (2021) caution that formal accountability can also reproduce hierarchy and convert sustainability into a compliance exercise. The solution is not to abandon indicators or reporting, but to ask who designs them, whose knowledge they represent, and whether they support organizational learning rather than merely upward control.

The discursive perspective therefore avoids two opposite errors. The first is textual idealism: assuming that well-written commitments guarantee environmental performance. The second is textual dismissal: treating language as decorative and irrelevant to operations. Public texts cannot prove whether targets are met, but they shape expectations, coordinate actors, legitimize priorities, attract resources, and define what can be demanded. In that sense, discourse is neither the whole institution nor a superficial layer placed on top of it. It is part of the infrastructure through which institutional environmental responsibility is imagined, distributed, and judged.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Saudi empirical foundations: from environmental awareness to policy accountability

Saudi scholarship positions environmental sustainability within the broader national project of human-capital development, institutional modernization, and long-term resource stewardship associated with Saudi Vision 2030. Within that framing, university environmental responsibility is not reducible to tree planting, conservation campaigns, or isolated waste initiatives. It spans campus operations, curriculum and research,

public engagement, governance, finance, reporting, and the distribution of authority among institutional actors. This expanded conception matters for discourse analysis because it shifts the question from whether a university mentions sustainability to how its policies make sustainability actionable. A policy becomes institutionally consequential when it specifies who is responsible, what resources are available, which outcomes count, how evidence is disclosed, and who may question the result. The literature therefore reinforces the distinction between environmental aspiration and governable commitment: broad value statements can create legitimacy, but they do not by themselves establish agency, obligation, or answerability.

A first cluster of Saudi studies examines environmental learning, awareness, and participation. Al-Ahmadi (2019) used a quasi-experimental design with 53 College of Science students to assess a program combining RAFT writing and the Pictures Worth a Thousand Words strategy. The program produced a medium effect on attitudes toward environmental sustainability, suggesting that pedagogical design can move students beyond passive exposure to structured engagement. Hamouda (2020), studying a participatory design exhibition for preparatory-year female students, similarly found that initial reluctance to participate diminished when faculty members modeled possible projects and when ideas became materially visible. Yet awareness does not automatically become environmental citizenship or durable institutional influence. Al-Furaih's (2021) survey of 303 female university students reported generally adequate awareness across several environmental domains, while participation in university environmental volunteering remained only moderate; insufficient material support and routine procedures were identified as obstacles. Al-Suwait (2022) likewise concluded that environmental citizenship among students in Saudi colleges of education was weak. Read together, these studies reveal a recurring discursive and organizational gap: students may be described as aware, responsible, or enthusiastic while still being positioned mainly as recipients of awareness campaigns rather than as actors who shape priorities, monitor data, or participate in policy review.

A second cluster focuses on leadership, institutional responsibility, and the organizational conditions of a green transition. Al-Hadrami (2020) examined academic leaders at four Saudi universities and found that the perceived role of university leadership in advancing the green economy was moderate, with organizational, administrative, and financial barriers limiting implementation. Al-Sayyid (2021) combined a Delphi panel of 26 experts, a survey of 181 university leaders, and a SOAR-based strategy-building process. The study identified 29 responsibilities for Saudi universities but concluded that existing practice was moderate and tended toward weakness. Al-Shamrani (2024), surveying 128 academic leaders at the University of Tabuk, also reported moderate levels across financial-sustainability practices and their associated difficulties. The recommendations emphasized investment in university resources, risk management, transparency, accountability, and staff participation in financial decision-making. These findings strengthen the case for analyzing modality and agency in policy texts. When organizational barriers are known to be material, a policy that merely states that the university "seeks," "supports," or "encourages" sustainability may leave the responsible unit, budget, timetable, and corrective procedure indeterminate.

A third cluster connects sustainability to quality systems and institution-wide governance. Al-Arjani (2025), drawing on responses from 132 administrative employees at King Saud University, reported moderate implementation of total quality management (mean 3.08) and sustainable development (mean 3.10), alongside a strong perceived relationship between them (mean 3.68). The study's conclusion that leadership support, training, and a participatory organizational culture are strategic conditions for sustainability aligns with international whole-institution research. It also complements AlAli and Aboud's (2024) finding of limited sustainability implementation across academic, research, social, and environmental dimensions and Alshammari's (2025) evidence that high faculty awareness coexisted with much lower participation in sustainability activities and policymaking. The combined pattern is important: universities may possess environmental knowledge and publicly affirm sustainability while lacking the participatory structures, cross-unit coordination, data systems, and reporting routines that convert commitment into institutional practice.

Taken together, the literature falls into four overlapping tendencies: perception-based assessments of implementation; whole-institution and participatory approaches; work on responsibility, indicators, reporting, and accountability; and critical discourse studies of policy and media. Saudi research has concentrated primarily on awareness, leadership perceptions, and reported practice, whereas comparatively little work has examined the policy texts that allocate roles and make some forms of participation or evidence more legitimate than others.

That limitation is methodological as well as substantive. Surveys can show that actors perceive implementation as weak or moderate, but they usually do not explain how policy wording diffuses responsibility, softens obligation, or represents stakeholders as beneficiaries rather than decision-makers. The present study responds by treating intertextuality, evaluation, agency, modality, stakeholder voice, and accountability as connected dimensions. It asks not only whether sustainability is present in institutional discourse, but whether the discourse translates national and global commitments into named actors, measurable actions, public evidence, participatory authority, and procedures for correction.

3.2 Whole-institution approaches and participation

International research argues that durable change requires institutional integration rather than disconnected projects. Holst (2023) conceptualizes the whole-institution approach as an ongoing, participatory learning process. Disterheft et al. (2015) similarly identify participation and education-for-sustainable-development competencies as critical success factors, while warning against purely linear and technical models of change. UNESCO's (2020) roadmap places policy, learning environments, educator capacity, youth, and local action within a connected agenda. Together, these sources move participation from the edge of sustainability to its organizational center.

Participation, however, is an ambiguous word. It may refer to receiving information, attending an event, volunteering, responding to a survey, serving on a committee, co-authoring policy, controlling a budget, or holding leadership to account. These activities involve very different degrees of influence. A policy that says students are "encouraged to participate" includes them symbolically but leaves the institution free to define the agenda and evaluate success. A policy that gives elected student representatives voting rights on a sustainability committee creates a more durable form of voice. Whole-institution scholarship is strongest when it treats participation as ownership across design, decision, implementation, monitoring, and readjustment rather than as attendance alone.

3.3 Measurement, reporting, and the accountability dilemma

Recent sustainability-assessment research emphasizes indicators, data, and reporting. Ankareddy et al. (2025) note large disparities in sustainability reporting and rankings across regions, as well as low participation by universities overall. Basheer et al. (2025) propose a multidimensional assessment framework spanning governance and operations, environmental impact and resource management, economic viability, academic integration, and social responsibility. Their work also foregrounds differences among students, educators, administrators, and experts, demonstrating why a single institutional voice cannot stand in for all stakeholder perspectives.

Measurement is indispensable but politically consequential. Indicators make some outcomes visible and leave others in the background. Publication counts aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals may demonstrate research activity, for instance, but they do not directly measure emissions reduction, community benefit, or the quality of student participation. Rankings can motivate institutional investment and enable comparison, yet they can also encourage attention to what is countable and reputationally valuable. Macheridis and Paulsson (2021) describe a movement from responsabilization, in which academics are given space to interpret sustainability, toward accountabilization, in which formal audit techniques can reassert established hierarchies. A credible framework must therefore combine measurable commitments with reflexive scrutiny of who defines the measure.

3.4 Critical discourse studies and the remaining gap

Critical discourse research demonstrates that the presence of environmental vocabulary is not sufficient evidence of environmental centrality. Tuckerman et al. (2023), combining critical discourse analysis with corpus methods, found that social and environmental paradigms remained secondary to economic themes in United Kingdom innovation policy. Cummings et al. (2020) similarly show how development discourse can privilege particular actors and assumptions while presenting them as practical common sense. These studies encourage attention to absence, hierarchy, and grammatical agency rather than simple keyword frequency.

The remaining gap is specific. Saudi higher-education research has generated useful evidence about perceptions and institutional challenges, while Saudi discourse research has illuminated national and media

narratives. Less attention has been given to how universities themselves publicly write environmental responsibility into being. A comparative focus on intertextuality, evaluation, stakeholder voice, and accountability can reveal whether sustainability discourse merely celebrates alignment or also builds an actionable institutional contract.

4. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

4.1 Fairclough's three-dimensional model

The analysis begins with Fairclough's (2003) distinction among text, discursive practice, and social practice. At the textual level, attention falls on vocabulary, grammar, pronouns, modality, active and passive voice, nominalization, and patterns of evaluation. At the level of discursive practice, the question is how institutional webpages, reports, leadership messages, and strategic statements are produced, circulated, linked, and consumed. At the level of social practice, the texts are situated within Saudi national transformation, higher-education governance, global sustainability agendas, and competition for legitimacy and reputation. The levels are analytically distinct but mutually connected. A grammatical choice such as an agentless passive may reflect a genre convention, an organizational hierarchy, or a strategic preference to promise action without assigning liability.

4.2 Intertextuality and recontextualization

Intertextuality refers to the presence of other texts and voices within a text. It can be explicit, as when a university names Saudi Vision 2030 or the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, or implicit, as when it adopts familiar phrases such as "net zero," "impact," "resilience," or "whole-of-society." Recontextualization describes how such language is moved into a new institutional setting. A global goal may become a research theme, a campus target, a ranking category, or a partnership claim. The analytic question is not only which framework is cited, but what work the citation performs. It may legitimate action through external authority, organize activities into a recognizable structure, signal membership in a global community, or substitute alignment language for local implementation detail.

The analysis distinguishes alignment density from implementation density. Alignment density refers to the frequency and prominence of references to authoritative frameworks, events, rankings, and agendas. Implementation density refers to the concentration of named actors, concrete actions, baselines, targets, dates, resources, indicators, and review mechanisms. A text can score high on both, low on both, or high on one and low on the other. This distinction helps prevent a false choice between dismissing framework references as empty branding and accepting them as proof of institutionalization.

4.3 Evaluation and appraisal

Evaluation is examined through appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) and through modality. Attitude includes judgments of people and institutions, appreciation of projects or outcomes, and affective positioning. Graduation strengthens or softens a claim through words such as "strongly," "steadfast," "leading," "gradual," or "significant." Engagement concerns whether a proposition is presented as certain, open to alternatives, attributed to another voice, or hedged. Modality ranges from obligation and certainty to aspiration and possibility. "Will publish" commits more strongly than "aims to share"; "must reduce" differs from "encourages reduction." Evaluation is not inherently manipulative. Institutions need motivating narratives. The critical issue is whether positive self-description is proportionate to evidence and whether uncertainty, limitation, and failure remain speakable.

4.4 Social actors and stakeholder voice

Van Leeuwen's (2008) social-actor framework supports analysis of inclusion and exclusion, activation and passivation, naming and categorization, specification and generic reference, and personalization and impersonalization. An actor is activated when represented as doing something and passivated when represented as receiving or being affected by action. "Students design the monitoring protocol" activates students; "students are targeted by awareness campaigns" passivates them. Institutional collectives such as "the university," "we," or "the community" can create solidarity but also blur internal differences and decision rights.

Stakeholder voice is treated as more than mention. The analysis uses a five-stage continuum: visibility,

consultation, contribution, co-decision, and challenge. Visibility means a group is named. Consultation means it can express preferences. Contribution means it can supply labor, knowledge, or proposals. Co-decision means it holds a recognized role in setting priorities or approving action. Challenge means it can scrutinize evidence, receive a reasoned response, request correction, or escalate disagreement. The continuum does not imply that every stakeholder should decide every technical matter; it asks whether the text specifies an appropriate and durable relation between voice and authority.

4.5 The discursive accountability chain

To connect linguistic analysis to institutional design, this article reads each commitment through nine linked elements: actor, action, baseline, target, deadline, resource, indicator, disclosure venue, and corrective process. Missing elements do not automatically invalidate a short webpage, since details may appear in linked plans or reports. Their absence nevertheless limits what the page itself allows an audience to know and demand. The framework also distinguishes activity indicators, such as workshops held, from output indicators, such as policies produced; outcome indicators, such as reduced energy use; and impact indicators, such as improved ecological conditions. This chain becomes the practical standard against which aspirational language is interpreted.

Table 1. Integrated critical-discourse coding framework

Dimension	Core question	Evidence	Risk
Intertextuality	Which texts authorize the claim?	Vision 2030, SDGs, rankings, COPs, reports	Alignment replaces translation
Evaluation	How is action valued?	Leader, model, critical, steadfast, measurable	Praise exceeds evidence
Agency	Who acts or disappears?	Voice, named offices, nominalization, institutional ‘we’	Responsibility is diffused
Stakeholder voice	Who can influence or challenge?	Consultation, representation, voting, response	Presence is called participation
Accountability	Can action be judged?	Baseline, target, date, indicator, disclosure, correction	Commitment remains symbolic

5. Method

5.1 Corpus and sampling

The study uses a purposive exploratory corpus of six public English-language texts from three Saudi universities: King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), and the University of Tabuk. The texts were available on official institutional websites and were accessed on July 22, 2026. They include a sustainability landing page, an SDG report announcement, a presidential message, a university sustainability overview, a committee mandate, and a strategic commitment page. The sample was selected to capture different genres and organizational voices rather than to represent all Saudi universities.

English-language pages were chosen for cross-institutional comparability and because they are central to the universities’ international public communication. This choice also creates an important limitation: the analysis does not establish whether Arabic and English versions are equivalent in modality, detail, or stakeholder representation. A later bilingual study should examine policy parity directly. The current corpus is best understood as a window into internationally facing institutional discourse.

Table 2. Exploratory corpus and genre distribution

Institution	Text / genre	Primary function
KAUST	Sustainability landing page	Vision, action areas, alignment, evaluation
KAUST	2024 SDG report announcement	Reporting, institutionalization, student voice
KFUPM	Landing page and presidential message	Identity, partnership, national positioning
KFUPM	University sustainability overview	Integration, outputs, campus action, engagement
KFUPM	Sustainability Committee mandate	Ownership, monitoring, policy, reporting
University of Tabuk	SDG commitment page	Strategy, partnership, accountable resources

5.2 Procedure

Each text was read in four passes. The first pass identified explicit references to national and global frameworks, rankings, conferences, reports, partnerships, and other texts. The second coded evaluation, including positive and negative valuation, intensification, certainty, obligation, aspiration, and institutional self-positioning. The third mapped social actors, asking who was named, who acted, who received action, and who was absent. The fourth applied the discursive accountability chain to commitments involving operations, research, education, reporting, and participation. Comparisons were made within genre as far as possible, but genre effects were retained as part of the interpretation rather than treated as noise.

The analysis is qualitative and does not claim statistical frequency or institutional ranking. It examines what the selected pages publicly foreground at the time of access. It does not verify implementation through interviews, internal records, environmental audits, or longitudinal performance data. Short quoted phrases are used only where their wording is analytically important; the broader account relies on paraphrase. Romanized Arabic examples later in the article are constructed analytical examples, not quotations from the sampled universities. They are included to demonstrate how the same accountability principles can be applied in Arabic-language policy drafting without reproducing Arabic script in this document.

6. Findings

6.1 Intertextuality: alignment as bridge, authority, and possible shelter

Across the corpus, sustainability is rarely presented as a purely local invention. The texts position university activity in relation to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Saudi Vision 2030, national reporting, international conferences, rankings, and partnerships. This intertextual pattern performs valuable coordination. It gives readers a familiar map, connects campus work to public priorities, and signals that environmental responsibility is part of a larger social project. It also provides authority: a commitment appears not merely as one office's preference but as an institutional response to recognized national and global agendas. (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology [KAUST], 2025, 2026; King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals [KFUPM], 2026a, 2026b, 2026c; University of Tabuk, 2026).

KAUST's sustainability landing page offers the most explicitly designed intertextual architecture. Its action areas move from enabling future leaders and improving operations to empowering changemakers, embracing sustainable development, and evaluating progress. National and international frameworks are described as guides for action, and the United Nations goals are made into a navigational structure. The 2024 SDG report announcement further links science, education, operations, outreach, national strategy, international climate forums, and sectoral collaboration. The effect is to recontextualize sustainability as both a scientific mission and an institutional lens rather than a separate program. (KAUST, 2025, 2026).

KFUPM's discourse is more hybrid. It combines the United Nations goals and Vision 2030 with research outputs, citations, patents, impact rankings, campus infrastructure, industrial partnership, and the Voluntary National Review. This is interdiscursivity as much as intertextuality: environmental responsibility is expressed through the languages of research excellence, technological solution, national service, organizational planning, and competitive performance. The university's committee mandate connects local monitoring of emissions, water, and electricity to national reporting, creating a visible route between campus data and a state-level text. (KFUPM, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

The University of Tabuk's commitment page embeds the Sustainable Development Goals and Vision 2030

within five strategic objectives: student experience, community-centered research, partnerships, accountable resource management, and integration of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The page's broad strategic genre gives it high alignment density. It names the frameworks and identifies domains of responsibility, but it provides fewer operational details than KFUPM's committee mandate. This difference should not be read as an overall institutional ranking; it shows how genre affects implementation density. (University of Tabuk, 2026).

Intertextuality becomes problematic only when citation replaces translation. A university may repeatedly state that its work is "aligned" with a framework without specifying which local target changes, which unit acts, or which evidence demonstrates contribution. Alignment is then indexical: it points toward legitimacy without establishing a causal or accountable relation. A stronger text pairs each external reference with a local operational sentence. For example, invoking Sustainable Development Goal 6 should lead to a defined water baseline, reduction target, responsible office, and reporting cycle. The authoritative text then becomes a bridge to practice rather than a shelter from specificity.

6.2 Evaluation: leadership narratives and the evidential burden

The corpus is strongly positive in tone. Universities represent sustainability as critical, transformative, integrated, innovative, and socially beneficial. They position themselves as leaders, models, partners, problem-solvers, and makers of impact. KAUST aspires to be a global model for circular resource use and a scientific leader in environmental protection. KFUPM presents itself as a vital actor in global problem-solving and emphasizes that sustainability is integrated into research, teaching, and operations. The University of Tabuk describes its commitment as steadfast and its future as sustainable and resilient. (KAUST, 2026; KFUPM, 2026a, 2026c; University of Tabuk, 2026).

Such evaluation can mobilize attention and connect sustainability to institutional identity. Yet the evidential burden rises with intensifiers such as "leading," "global," and "significant." KFUPM supplies numbers for SDG-aligned research, patents, rankings, infrastructure, and long-term energy direction. KAUST points to recurring reports, open sharing of assessments, and measurable progress. The University of Tabuk names strategic objectives and reporting links, although its commitment page is less quantified.

Quantification changes rather than ends the critical question. Publications, citations, and patents indicate activity and influence but are not direct measures of emissions, biodiversity, adoption, or community benefit. Rankings aggregate selected indicators. The strongest discourse distinguishes activity, output, outcome, and impact, and it makes missed targets, uncertainty, and corrective action speakable. Candor can demonstrate more mature accountability than uninterrupted celebration. (KAUST, 2025, 2026; KFUPM, 2026a, 2026c).

6.3 Stakeholder voice: from being named to sharing authority

The pronoun "we" creates collective identity and represents sustainability as shared work. In KFUPM's presidential message, the collective expands toward governments, industry, faculty, students, and partners. KAUST likewise speaks as a community nurturing leaders and changemakers. The style can motivate coordination, but "we" is elastic: leaders, students, engineers, and community partners do not hold equal information, budgets, or power. Collective language should therefore be followed by differentiated roles.

Students are the most visible stakeholder group, represented as leaders, innovators, volunteers, club members, and changemakers. KAUST's 2024 report announcement states that student champions' voices were included for the first time, positively widening representation while revealing earlier absence. KFUPM's student Sustainability Club is described as advising leadership on policy and reporting, working with departments, and leading campaigns and outreach. This moves students beyond awareness recipients toward contribution and consultation. (KAUST, 2025; KFUPM, 2026c).

Faculty and staff are activated through teaching, research, implementation, or individual responsibility. Partners are activated through collaboration; communities are often beneficiaries of research, outreach, or resilience. The University of Tabuk names stakeholders and community-centered research but does not specify on the analyzed page how community representatives set priorities or evaluate effects. Across the corpus, institutions frequently speak about stakeholders; fewer passages give them durable authority.

Stakeholder presence therefore differs from stakeholder voice. A testimonial provides visibility, a survey consultation, a proposal contribution, voting membership co-decision, and a response or review process challenge. A mature policy identifies the appropriate level for each group and does not describe low-influence participation as shared governance.

6.4 Agency and accountability: where commitments become governable

The strongest procedural language appears in KFUPM's committee mandate. A named body must develop the annual report, draft policies and projects, propose them for approval, monitor emissions and resource use, seek sponsors, hold events, and contribute to the Voluntary National Review. Not every baseline or deadline is supplied, but the text creates an owner and recurring reporting function. (KFUPM, 2026b).

KAUST also provides answerability signals: performance assessments are presented as openly shared with partners, and recurring reports organize evidence across university functions. What remains less explicit on the analyzed pages is corrective accountability: who verifies claims, how stakeholders respond, and what follows a missed objective. The University of Tabuk places accountable resource management inside its strategy, but its page relies mainly on broad institutional actions without naming subunits, timelines, or indicators. (KAUST, 2025, 2026; University of Tabuk, 2026).

Modality and agency determine what a reader can demand. "The university seeks to reduce waste" expresses direction; "waste will be reduced" suppresses the actor; "the Facilities Department will reduce landfilled waste by 30 percent from the 2025 baseline by December 2028 and publish quarterly data" creates a testable commitment. None guarantees success, but each supports a different level of coordination and scrutiny.

Table 3. Discursive accountability ladder

Level	Typical formulation	Enables	Still missing
1. Symbolic	The university supports sustainability.	Value recognition	Actor, measure, timetable
2. Programmatic	The university will launch initiatives.	Activity and direction	Outcome, owner, review
3. Answerable	A unit will meet a dated target and report.	Coordination and judgment	Independent challenge
4. Participatory	Stakeholders co-design targets and inspect data.	Shared learning	Formal remedy
5. Corrective	Missed targets trigger review and escalation.	Learning and enforceability	Governance capacity

6.5 Constructed Romanized Arabic examples

The following examples are not quotations from the sampled universities. They show how agency, measurement, and stakeholder authority can be made explicit:

1. Agentless aspiration

Romanized Arabic: *Sayatimmu ta'ziz al-wa'y al-bi'i fi al-haram al-jami'i.*

English translation: Environmental awareness will be enhanced across the university campus.

Discursive reading: The passive construction removes the actor and provides no baseline, target, date, or evidence route.

2. Accountable operational commitment

Romanized Arabic: *Taltazimu Idarat al-Marafiq bi-khafd istihlak al-miyah bi-nisbat 20 fi al-mi'ah qabl nihayat 2030, wa-tanshuru al-nata'ij sanawiyyan.*

English translation: The Facilities Department commits to reducing water consumption by 20 percent before the end of 2030 and will publish the results annually.

Discursive reading: The actor, target, deadline, and reporting cycle are explicit; a baseline and verification method should still be added.

3. Low-influence participation

Romanized Arabic: *Yushajja' al-tullab 'ala al-musharakah fi al-mubadarat al-bi'iyyah.*

English translation: Students are encouraged to participate in environmental initiatives.

Discursive reading: Students are visible, but the institution controls the agenda and no decision right is stated.

4. Shared policy formation

Romanized Arabic: *Yusharik mumaththilun ‘an al-tullab wa-a’da’ hay’at al-tadris wa-al-muwazzafin fi wada’ al-khuttah wa-muraja’at mu’ashshiratiha.*

English translation: Representatives of students, faculty, and staff participate in developing the plan and reviewing its indicators.

Discursive reading: Stakeholders are activated in design and review; the policy should also define selection, voting, and response procedures.

7. Discussion

Institutional sustainability discourse at Saudi universities is neither empty rhetoric nor a transparent record of practice. It is a field in which national purpose, global norms, organizational identity, management, and stakeholder relations are negotiated. Three tensions stand out.

First, intertextuality is both bridge and possible shelter. Vision 2030, the SDGs, international forums, and national reporting make university work legible within wider agendas and can support coherence and resources. Yet alignment becomes ceremonial when it does not change governance. The question is whether a reference creates a target, owner, budget, dataset, or review process.

Second, evaluation builds a moral identity. Universities present themselves as leaders, models, innovators, and partners. This can generate commitment, but strong language needs differentiated evidence. Research productivity, operational performance, stakeholder benefit, and ecological outcome should not collapse into one category of “impact.” Credible discourse explains their relationship and acknowledges uncertainty.

Third, visibility is not voice. Students, faculty, staff, partners, and communities are present, and some examples move toward influence. More transformative voice would include co-authorship of priorities, data access, formal representation, published responses, and channels for disagreement.

These tensions clarify the accountability dilemma. Indicators and reporting can help close the awareness-implementation gap, yet audit can narrow sustainability to what management or rankings count. Participatory accountability offers a better direction: commitments remain measurable, but affected stakeholders help design, interpret, and revise them. The patterns are not uniquely Saudi; they occur in higher-education sustainability discourse internationally. The Saudi setting is distinctive in its close coupling of national transformation, internationalization, and expanding institutional reporting.

8. Implications for Policy Writing and Governance

8.1 Pair alignment with local translation

A reference to Vision 2030 or an SDG should be followed by its institutional consequence: campus domain, responsible unit, measurable change, and reporting route. A crosswalk can connect each external commitment to local objectives, budgets, indicators, and evidence.

8.2 Use the nine-part accountability chain

For each material commitment, specify actor, action, baseline, target, deadline, resource, indicator, disclosure venue, and corrective process. Not every sentence needs all nine elements, but the policy package should. A target without an owner is hard to manage; an owner without resources may be blamed for an impossible task; disclosure without correction produces transparency without consequence.

8.3 Separate activity, output, outcome, and impact

Report workshops, courses, publications, patents, and campaigns accurately as activities or outputs. Environmental outcomes require measures such as energy and water use, waste diversion, emissions, habitat condition, or verified behavior change. Impact claims should explain their causal pathway and limits of attribution.

8.4 Institutionalize stakeholder voice

State how representatives are selected, what information they receive, which decisions they influence, and how leadership responds. Student and staff participation should extend into target-setting and monitoring

where appropriate. Community partners should help define problems that outreach or research claims to solve. Minutes, response-to-feedback documents, and dissent notes make participation visible.

8.5 Balance affirmation with candor

Sustainability communication needs hope and recognition of progress, but also language for incomplete data, trade-offs, missed targets, and lessons. Reports should distinguish verified results from projections and disclose methodological changes. A concise account of what did not progress as planned can strengthen credibility.

8.6 Protect parity across language versions

Arabic and English policy versions should preserve the same actor, modality, metric, deadline, and review mechanism. Translation should not make one version binding and the other aspirational. A bilingual parity check can compare every commitment before publication.

8.7 Build an accessible evidence hub

Public pages should connect claims to plans, datasets, methods, committee membership, annual reports, and corrective actions. Archived versions are essential because webpages change. Readers should be able to move from a global goal to a university target, from the target to data, and from the data to a governance response.

9. Limitations and Future Research

This study is exploratory. Six webpages from three institutions cannot represent Saudi higher education, and the genres differ. A committee mandate naturally contains more procedure than a landing page. The analysis therefore compares tendencies rather than scores.

The corpus is limited to English public communication and does not test Arabic-language parity, internal policy, budgets, audits, or implementation. Future research should build a larger bilingual corpus, compare public and internal genres, interview policy authors and stakeholders, and connect discourse with environmental data over time.

Participatory discourse analysis would be especially valuable. Students, facilities staff, faculty, leaders, and community partners could independently assess statements for clarity, agency, fairness, and credibility, then discuss differences as co-interpreters of the language that governs them.

10. Conclusion

University environmental sustainability is material, found in meters, buildings, laboratories, procurement, ecosystems, curricula, and budgets. It is also discursive, found in the words that name problems, assign action, celebrate success, and decide who may speak. The sampled texts position sustainability within national transformation and global responsibility through Vision 2030, the SDGs, leadership evaluation, and stakeholder language.

The analysis shows why these resources require design. Alignment can be meaningful without being operational. Positive evaluation can motivate while exceeding evidence. The collective “we” can invite solidarity while obscuring power. Stakeholders can be visible without voice, and reporting can create answerability without correction.

A credible policy joins aspiration to an accountability chain: who acts, what changes, against which baseline, by when, with what resources, measured how, reported where, and corrected through which process. It also states how students, faculty, staff, partners, and communities shape those choices and challenge results. With these elements, sustainability language becomes a public architecture through which a university can learn, be judged, and improve.

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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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