

Research Article

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# Analysing Namibia's Higher Education Institutions (HEI) status-quo in realizing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

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## Abstract

As stated in the SADC Education for Sustainable Development Regional Strategic Framework 2022-2030, the “*Higher Education Institutions in SADC should promote sustainable development (SD)*”. Thus, the Namibian Higher Education Institutions are of no exception from this task. Besides, Namibia's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are essential for promoting values, knowledge, and skills that promote sustainable development; as the focus of the world community has turned to sustainability in education. Therefore, this article aims to examine the current state of the Namibia's Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) in realizing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and to give an overview of the status quo of the institutions. The study further examines how HEIs' policies, practices, and curricula relate to the principles of ESD, probing into issues such as institutional capability, resource constraints, and curriculum gaps. Additionally, the paper pinpoints successful initiatives and best practices that are already being implemented to advance sustainability within Namibian HEIs. The goal of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is to increase people's ability to make decisions and choices that supports sustainable development on an individuals, community and society level. Thus, the author employed a qualitative method approach to examine in detail the extent to which HEI has implemented ESD. The author identified three (3) HEI's namely The International University of Management (IUM), University of Namibia (UNAM) and Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST). Based on qualitative data, the analysis offers a thorough understanding of how Namibian higher education is supporting both national and international sustainability objectives. Even though there has been a lot of progress, the results indicate that more funding for ESD-related initiatives, improved inter-institutional cooperation, and better policy frameworks are still required. Several

## Keywords

*Education for Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development, Higher Education Institutions, Namibia*

suggestions are made to help Namibia's higher education system meet its sustainable development goals. Due to the small sample size, the study's findings cannot be generalized, however they can benefit other academic institutions and add to the body of knowledge regarding ESD in higher education. Thus, sharing insights from different contexts is essential.

## **Introduction**

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is widely recognized as an integral element of Agenda 2030, in particular Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which is considered to be a key enabler of all the other SDGs (UNESCO, 2020, p.3). UNESCO has been the lead United Nations agency on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) since the United Nations Decade of Education (2005-2014) (UNESCO, 2020, p.3). Similarly, SADC ESD Regional Strategic Framework aligns with the UNESCO ESD for 2030 framework and supports the wider Sustainable Development Goals and Africa's Agenda 2063 commitments to sustainable development and education. According to Niemczyk, (2022) in her paper stated that in 2002 the UN 2005-2014 Decade of Education for Sustainable Development is geared in recognizing the importance of Sustainable Development (SD) and its implementation in education and other social sectors. The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) provides an opportunity for Namibia to develop and implement an education system and programme, which develop values that promote viable, alternative approaches to sustainable development (ESD Strategy 2009-2014, p.1). This decade highlights the importance of bridging the gap between academics and community demands and the necessity of implementing sustainability in higher education in a way that benefits both the biosphere and society as a whole (Cortese & McDonough, 2003 as cited by Kanyimba et al., 2014).

According to the SADC/ESD Regional Strategic Framework 2022-2030 alluded that the initiative seeks to reaffirm education as a common good and to support a transformative orientation to education. The program acknowledges that

education must be transformed in order to produce futures that are just, peaceful, and sustainable. As stated in the SADC Education for Sustainable Development Regional Strategic Framework 2022-2030, "*the Higher Education Institutions in SADC should promote sustainable development (SD)*". Thus, the Namibian Higher Education Institutions are of no exception from this task. The expectation of the regional framework is to guide SADC Member States to integrate ESD into their education systems.

The goal of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is to increase people's ability to make decisions and choices that supports sustainable development on an individuals, community and society level (SADC ESD Regional Strategic Framework 2022-2030). Similarly, Sulaiman, (2019) stated that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a dynamic concept that includes a new vision of education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources. Additionally, Shava et al., (2023) asserts that Education for Sustainable Development is more than teaching courses relevant to sustainable development; but it is also about participatory, transformative learning processes that increases agency for change.

As stated in the Namibia's ESD Strategy 2009-2014, p. 13, the education system has integrated aspects of Environmental Education (EE), Population Education (POPED), Human Rights and Democracy Education, Entrepreneurship, HIV and AIDS and Sexuality Education in most subjects as a response to teaching about these cross-cutting issues, curriculum revisions for Namibia have also incorporated sustainable development concerns as emerging issues. These include HIV and AIDS, environment, gender, governance, drugs and substance abuse, disaster

and risk management preparedness and corruption (ESD Strategy 2009-2014, p.13). According to Namibia's EE and ESD policy, (2019, p.16) stated that EE and ESD issues shall be required to mainstream into planning systems, policy and practice, school management, teaching and research, and community service. The higher education institutions should develop programmes and courses on EE and ESD and incorporate environmental sustainability issues of importance to Namibia in their curricula (EE and ESD policy, 2019).

Several authors have deliberated and concurred that education or Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) plays a critical role in ensuring that sustainable development is achieved. According (Azeiteiro et al., 2015) stated that Higher education has a vital role to play in ensuring that this ambitious agenda is delivered. Additionally, Leal-Filho, (2011) asserts that there has been consensus for a long time that HEIs might play a prominent role in the transformation toward a more sustainable world. Higher Education Institutions in Africa in particular have a fundamental role to play towards Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Academic dialogue about ESD in HEIs has only recently gained momentum (Daniels et al., 2023). However, in most developing countries, ESD is only starting to gain academic momentum (Solera & Laya, 2017).

Higher education institutions have a unique potential to encourage, synthesis and integration of different types of knowledge and to enhance the application of knowledge to social change (Cockalo et al., 2015). Despite this, it has been widely observed by academics that implementation of sustainability in HEIs has been slower than needed (Lozano et al., 2013; Aktas, 2015; Howlett et al., 2016; Berchin et al., 2021 as cited by Mokski et al., 2022).

The first part provided the context of the study, the second part zooms into the interferences in implementing ESD in higher education and the paper ends with the five key priority areas of SADC Strategic Framework on ESD that will

strengthen the implementation of ESD in Higher Education Institutions.

### **Interferences' in implementing ESD in higher education**

Committing to the UN's SDGs and incorporating sustainability related terms into vision and mission statements does not ensure sustainable academic activities (Niemczyk, 2022). Several authors have highlighted on the barriers of higher education institutions in implementing ESD. According to Farinha et al. (2020, p. 466) stated that, one of the barriers is the lack of holistic vision and integrated approaches towards innovation and sustainability. A holistic vision calls for declaring ESD a priority within policy and mandates, providing training to staff, and promoting sustainability-related research and collaborative work between disciplines and various education stakeholders (Farinha et al. 2020, p. 466).

According to, Daniel et al., (2023) stated that there is a lack of SD policies in the majority of the sampled South African HEIs. However, most higher education institutions in Brazil and South Africa have environmental sustainability and sustainable environmental management policies in place (Daniels et al., 2023). Similarly, Shava et al., (2023) pointed out that the lack of institutional ESD policy or strategy on ESD made it difficult for HEI to achieve ESD in Zimbabwe. According to. Daniels et al., (2023) indicated that poor implementation of ESD-related policies may negatively impact the curricula and research outputs of HEIs. The curriculum of HEIs does not fully include and, in some cases, disregards information about sustainability (Avila et al., 2017). Likewise, Shava et al., (2023) in their study highlighted several barriers such as lack of capacity to implement ESD, the absence of ESD related courses in higher learning institutions, lack of coordinated institutional activities to address sustainability issues, lack of awareness about ESD across disciplines and misunderstandings or misconceptions of what ESD means among academics. Correspondingly, Daniels et al., (2023) stated that in Brazil and South Africa

universities lacks understanding in SD and ESD. According to Kanyimba et al., (2014) in their study conducted at the university of Namibia, Namibia University of Science and Technology (Polytechnic of Namibia, then) highlighted on the barriers to the implementation of Education for Sustainable Development in Namibian HEI. The findings of their study have shown that ESD is hampered by dispositional, situational and institutional barriers. Thus, all lecturers must embrace ecosystem-oriented pedagogy as a conceptual framework to guide the implementation of ESD (Kanyimba et al., 2014). The strength of ESD will come through diverse disciplinary contributions woven together to accomplish a shared vision of sustainability (Kanyimba et al., 2014).

**The five key priority areas emphasized by SADC Strategic Framework on ESD that will strengthen the implementation of ESD, are as follows:**

1. Advocate for the integration of ESD into existing policy, regulatory and operational frameworks through multi-sector approaches, coordination and leadership.
2. Strengthen sustainable development through capacity building, training and continuing professional development in formal, non-formal and informal learning settings.
3. Forge partnerships and networks to promote sustainable sharing of ESD resources in support of the active engagement of youth and communities in ESD practice and action for change.
4. Promote research and development of ESD at a national and regional level and strengthen regional knowledge management, monitoring and evaluation.
5. Connect Education for Sustainable Development to 21st century skills, jobs and a sustain- able economy

The key priority areas serve as a guide in implementing ESD which HEI's should bring to effect. These priority areas on sustainability are accessible to universities to help universities understand and incorporate SD in their education activities and practices. According to, Awuzie & Emuze, (2017) asserted that adopting a strategy to achieve sustainability does not imply implementing the strategy. Similarly, Novo-Corti et al., (2018) as cited by Daniels et al., (2023) indicated that there are concrete operational steps that HEIs can follow to implement ESD through research.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to ascertain the extent to which HEI have implemented education for SD in Namibia and to give a concise, impartial, reliable analysis on the status-quo of Namibia's higher education institutions in realizing education for sustainable development. Through document analysis the paper aims to find out to what extent ESD has been implemented in higher education institutions in Namibia [SD curriculum integration].

**Materials and Methods**

The article focused on analyzing Namibia's Higher Education Institution status-quo in realizing Education for Sustainable Development. Thus, the author employed a qualitative method approach to examine in detail the extent to which HEI has implemented ESD. This is so, to benchmark against the SDG's performance in Namibia in relation to the set target to be fully realized in 2030 and the EE and ESD Namibian policy. Adopting a qualitative method approach makes the results more reliable and strengthens the validity of the conclusions made.

Primary and secondary data was sourced from desk reviews, previous studies, content analyses of several documentary materials from UNESCO, United Nations and SADC's policies, official policy documents on higher education and Namibia's Higher Education Institutions websites. The author started off by gathering, studying and critically analyzing the present-day literature; key information collected was from existing

documents on integrating Education for Sustainable Development in HEI's in Namibia. Similarly, relevant literature and documents were selected based on their publication date 2011-2024, relevant to the research topic, and credibility of the sources.

The author presented in detail the information gathered to reveal an authentic results and findings. The author identified three (3) HEI's namely The International University of Management (IUM), University of Namibia (UNAM) and Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST). It is important to note that the sample size of the institutions under study is small and context-specific; therefore, interpreted data are not meant to be generalized but rather informative, as it is expected with qualitative research designs. The results have potential to be relevant for various stakeholders interested or engaged in ESD.

## Findings and Discussions

The author has extensively analyzed three Namibian universities'; The International University of Management (IUM), University of Namibia (UNAM) and Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST); in realizing education for sustainable development. The data revealed that the importance of education for sustainable development has resonated well by the institutions as it is reflected in the increasing number of academic programs for sustainability. After a thorough analysis of the university's documents and websites, the author presents the following as per universities position in relation to education for sustainability.

According to the (Namibia Qualifications Authority, 2024), Namibia has a total of seventy-one (71) HEIs, divided into, two (2) public universities, sixty-nine (69) private higher institutions, comprising of private technical institutes and technological colleges. In this article the author examined the two (2) public universities (UNAM and NUST) and one (1) private university; The International University of Management (IUM).

According to the data; IUM's Faculty of Environment and Sustainable Tourism, part of its mission statements vows to "*to educate the public on the importance of natural resources management, environmental sustainability and conservation practices*" and "*to create a platform for productive and innovative collaborations amongst scholars of different disciplines in pursuing excellent multi-disciplinary research in environmental related field and sustainable development*" (IUM, 2024). Thus, the findings revealed that, about two years ago the university introduced and offers programs in sustainability such as Sustainable Ocean and Aquaculture Management, Sustainable Water Resources Management, Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation and Water Management for Development (IUM, 2024); which is also in alignment with the Namibia's ESD Strategy 2009-2014, which requires higher education institutions to offer sustainable development programs in the university's curriculum.

Furthermore, according to the findings, the University of Namibia's vision statement read as follows and I quote "*to be a sustainable international hub of excellence in higher education, training, research and innovation by 2030*" (UNAM,2024). Thus, with their vision in place, it has established programs such as agriculture, fisheries sciences and natural sciences among others. However, findings further revealed that NUST has similar programs such as environmental health sciences, natural resources, agriculture, transportation and human nutrition. The above various programmes offered by the universities are in alignment with Namibia's ESD strategy and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals that aims to tackle climate change and to preserve oceans and forests as well as maintain peace and prosperity for people and the planet. As outlined by the universities' websites the three universities have established overall goals for sustainable development in various faculties. According to the, Namibia University of Science and Technology, (2024), the university has implemented environmental sustainability practices such as saving electricity and reducing carbon footprint. This practice is done by

students, by filling a form in pledging to be a responsible citizen towards environmental sustainability. Upon further scrutiny, the findings revealed that the three universities have sustainable initiatives such as cleaning campaign and sustainable partnerships as cross-cutting factors. The International University of Management (IUM) is the only university among the three that offers HIV/AIDS program (IUM websites, 2024). The HIV/AIDS is one of the cross-cutting factors that intersects with multiple SDGs, highlighting the interconnectedness of health, education, gender equality, social justice, and global cooperation in achieving sustainable development. The efforts to combat HIV/AIDS contribute to progress across various dimensions of sustainable development. Education is one of the crucial sectors in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS through awareness, prevention programs, and addressing stigma. It is observed that the three universities appear to be third-generation universities, which considers education and research tools to address national challenges to achieve Sustainable Development.

In achieving sustainable development, the three universities under study hosts conferences on sustainable development themes, which provides a platform for academics, industry experts, and policymakers to join forces to tackle environmental, economic and social sustainability issues in coming up with innovative solutions. Examples are of recent research conferences held in October 2024 by IUM; the theme was on “*Fostering innovation for transformative sustainable development*” while UNAM’s theme was on “*Resilient systems for Sustainable Economic Transformation*”. By encouraging multidisciplinary discourse universities are significantly contributing to global agenda for a more sustainable future. According to, Farinha & Caeiro, (2018); Fehlner, (2019) as cited by Daniels & Niemczyk, (2023) research on SD has the potential to contribute to sustainability through innovation and new technologies, which also maximize productivity, economic growth, consumption methods, and citizens’ living standards.

Based on the implementation of the academic sustainability programs, it is clear that the Namibian Higher Education institutions is willing to contribute to sustainable development and strengthening the quality and relevance of education. All of the universities studied had a clear strategic direction that takes Sustainable Development into consideration. According to Hueske and Aggestam Pontoppidan, 2021; Velazquez et al., (2006) as cited by Elmassah (2021) stated that Higher education institutions (HEIs) must focus on several areas at once, such as outreach, governance, education, research, and campus operations, in order to achieve sustainable development.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

The article concludes by stating that Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is widely recognized as an integral element of Agenda 2030, in particular Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which is considered to be a key enabler of all the other SDGs (UNESCO, 2020, p.3). According to the SADC/ESD Regional Strategic Framework 2022-2030 alluded that the initiative seeks to reaffirm education as a common good and to support a transformative orientation to education. The goal of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is to increase people’s ability to make decisions and choices that supports sustainable development on an individuals, community and society level (SADC ESD Regional Strategic Framework 2022-2030).

As per the findings, HEI in Namibia offer programs that develops student’s leadership skills in the context of sustainability. It is found that the universities have established clear policies and goals that aligns with sustainability goals. It is also noted that only certain environmental programs are embedded with sustainability principles.

Thus, the issue discussed in this paper is one that shows how HEI is inculcating ESD in their curriculum. However, there are tools missing to

fully realize ESD at these universities. The author recommends that the universities adopt governance structures such as sustainability committees or offices to oversee and coordinate sustainability efforts across the university as well to engage in international partnerships and networks to share knowledge, resources, and best practices in sustainability education. Additionally, the universities should embed sustainability concepts and practices across all disciplines, and not just environmental studies, to ensure that all students, regardless of their major, gain a strong understanding of sustainable development principles. Lastly, the universities (IUM and UNAM in particular) should develop study abroad and exchange programs and focus on sustainability to expose students to global perspectives and practices. Learning increases through the interaction with others as well as self-reflection.

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