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## The Route towards Sustainability of Thai University Leaders

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### Abstract

Leaders, policymakers, and academics who apply to execute sustainable development policies and other activities within their organizations are known as sustainability leadership. It includes techniques, strategies, and systemic solutions for dealing with problems and driving institutional policies towards a sustainable structured organization. Universities play a crucial role in fostering sustainable development. However, at the university level, there is a lack of study on sustainable leadership. This study examined the notion of sustainable leadership using literature and empirical evidence. This study aimed to understand the featured characteristics of sustainable leaders in Thai universities and the major difficulties they encountered. Based on a purposive sampling strategy, an online questionnaire survey of fifty leaders from eight universities in Thailand was used in the research study. The data were collected and analyzed by using descriptive statistics. The respondents defined their leadership styles and typical qualities. In terms of competencies, respondents chose the capacity to innovate, think long-term, and handle complexity from a pre-defined list of alternatives. Besides, interdisciplinarity and understanding of organizational contexts, global concerns, and dilemmas were identified. Investments in education for sustainable development (ESD), sustainable procurement, and sustainable reporting were also addressed. Some of the difficulties in adopting sustainable leadership included a lack of enthusiasm, knowledge, tools, and resources. The findings could shed the light on sets of metrics that were developed and they will be implemented in the future to help leaders of universities streamline their performances of sustainability.

*Keywords: sustainable, leadership, universities, characteristics, difficulties*

### Introduction

Educational providers produce both virtuous and undesirable externalities as they create and distribute their value to many communities. Undesirable effects are likely to have an impact on the economics, society, and environmental systems (Knez et al., 2022; Mai et al., 2022; Nash et al., 2022), impeding the process of attaining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Aras et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2022)

In this context, universities see themselves playing an essential role in sustainable development as a result of abundant initiatives: strengthening roles of institutional leadership in encouraging SDGs, adjusting and transmitting their actions, paying more attention to their educational system and top-level management administrators as well as promoting the improvement of next-generation leaders maintaining significant posts in NGOs, business, government sectors (Ashari et al., 2022; Iqbal & Piwovar-Sulej, 2022; Khan et al., 2022).

Sustainable leaders must become change agents, taking into account the demands of current and future generations and supporting professionals who are skilled and conscious of SDGs (Aras et al., 2022; Ashari et al., 2022).

The entire university system should be directed on educating students to be able to escort various sorts of organizations in an accountable manner towards patterns of sustainability (Ayuso et al., 2022; Fanea-Ivanovici & Baber, 2022; Gaitán-Angulo et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, in addition to the terms provided by Canton-Mayo et al., 2021, sustainable leadership is investigated from a theoretical standpoint of how different leadership approaches can be linked to sustainable development. As a result, sustainable leadership might be characterized as a blend of many leadership techniques in a specific milieu (Gamage et al., 2022; Sen et al., 2022).

Academic and sustainable leadership are primarily concerned with an organization's or an individual's practical ability and taking actions has a significant impact on an organization's outcomes (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021). Sustainable leadership is especially crucial when a system or organization's condition must be modified, which inevitably produces uncertainty (Iqbal & Piwovar-Sulej, 2022).

When it comes to leadership and sustainable development, where the goal is to strike an equilibrium between social and economic objectives, a novice perspective on leadership emerges (Khan et al., 2022). This new perspective on leadership contradicts long-held beliefs, such as the notion that top-level management teams fulfill a certain job, understand, and decide the best practice of act (Ashari et al., 2022). Sustainable leadership is considered to provide present and prospective advantages while enhancing the qualities of every stakeholder and leads to a distinct perspective on leadership (Timothy & Agbenyega, 2022; Vergauwe et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022) that assumes that: 1) sustainability is difficult in the sense that it is connected to a paradigm that cannot be minimized to controllable bits, 2) sustainable leaders can be anyone who chooses to become responsible, and 3) the function of a sustainable leader entails co-generation and knowledge.

To manage and support all of these difficulties and demands, universities require leadership to build plans with a vision for the future and link important areas, including stakeholders through coaching processes, inspiring people, and making communities stronger through adaptability (Aras et al., 2022; Iqbal & Piwovar-Sulej, 2022; Wright et al., 2022). As a result, leaders must comprehend and be aware of the many externalities of their actions on the systems and surroundings with which they engage (McMahon, 2020).

Aside from the growth of sustainable leadership perceptions mentioned above, the literature trends highlight on the relevance of leaders in top-level management teams and the role of universities in contributing to sustainable development.

However, the literature has not yet completely addressed the existing reality of leaders and top-level management representatives from eight universities in Thailand. The objective of the study was to gather information through a survey from university professionals about their points of view and perspectives on sustainable leadership. This resulted in recommendations for how the challenges noted may be handled.

As a result, the four subsequent components were developed to help achieve this goal: the literature review on the leadership of sustainability at the university level is discussed. The further section discusses the utilized methods for achieving the aim of the study. Following that, the research findings and discussion of this study were divided into three categories: analysis of sample and engagement to educational sustainability, self-assessment and requisites for sustainable leadership, and difficulties encountered for sustainable leadership. Lastly, the summary section concludes the key results, consequences, and suggested future research studies.

## Review of the Literature

### Sustainable Leadership at Universities

Humans are pushing social and environmental systems well beyond their viability. As a result, there is a widely recognized need to seek sustainable development, which entails recognizing the needs (Menon & Suresh, 2022; Moldovan, 2022) to achieve the aspirations of the present generation including the demands of future generations. The ideals of balance and care should underpin sustainable development (Wright et al., 2022).

There are numerous conflicts in the route of seeking sustainable management, in which attempting to attain sustainability in a certain firm may sacrifice other aims (McMahon, 2020). One of these conflicts stems from the fact that businesses generate negative externalities (McMahon, 2020) and must manage them to develop and seize long-term value for their various stakeholders (Ashari et al., 2022).

When virtuous external factors are desired and vicious external ones must be decreased, the debate on sustainable leadership at the corporate level becomes critical (Khan et al., 2022). Following this, the UN launched a few organizational programs to encourage SDGs activities. The UN exists to link corporate strategy to SDGs through the use of a recently established tool called the SDGs Compass (Holmes et al., 2022; Menon & Suresh, 2022).

All of these activities have an impact on the sustainability of organizations, society, and communities (Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022). The initiatives provide a fantastic chance to involve varied university players and emphasize on the difficulties that nowadays society faces, while also producing critical achievements toward sustainability (Iqbal & Piwovar-Sulej, 2022; Menon & Suresh, 2022; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022).

Aside from UN programs and the professionals' arguments on the role of leadership of an organization, there is a thread that emphasizes individual sustainable leadership. Menon & Suresh (2022) addressed this issue by developing a model of sustainable leadership, which takes into account three dimensions: leadership context, the individual as a leader, and leadership's actions.

It is well understood that sustainable leaders may produce vigorous externalities in the market and within organizations (Canton-Mayo et al., 2021). Students that embrace a sustainable culture now may become tomorrow's sustainable leaders (Bapoo et al., 2022; Naderi et al., 2022; Santangelo et al., 2021). They may help businesses navigate an adaptive learning process towards a further sustainable phase that can cope with a certain complex between social, economic, and environmental factors (Khan et al., 2022). To address vicious sustainable difficulties, these leaders must have systems of sustainable thinking abilities and be able to think beyond the horizon (Moldovan, 2022).

Building student leadership and empowerment should be viewed not only from a university viewpoint, but also from a situational one. In this regard, three aspects of sustainable leadership growth are deliberated: the leaders' viewpoints, actions, and settings (Aras et al., 2022; Holmes et al., 2022; Menon & Suresh, 2022).

Aside from the inter-relation between the management team and university leaders (Mohamed Jais et al., 2021; Zulfqar et al., 2021), the development of sustainability of university students to be leaders should be considered as well. The literature has a propensity to investigate how sustainable leadership happens both in university teams and from the students' perspectives. Empowering university students to possess sustainability from the bottom up is definitely required (Liu et al., 2021; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021).

Individually, the leader's style includes inclusiveness, vision, creativity, and altruism would bring about sustainable leadership practices (Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022; Zulfqar et al., 2021). There is also a large body of scholarly research investigating whether employees earn abilities, attitudes, knowledge, and values that activate them to involve in sustainable leadership (Mohamed Jais et al., 2021).

It is critical to acquire leadership skills to improve a leader's performance. This entails developing specific skills and competencies that will be required of the leader during the job (Canton-Mayo et al., 2021). In the literature, there are certain approaches for leadership development, including multilateral and mutual feedback, professional coaching and mentorship, and widespread networking. However, because these strategies have not yet been extensively experimentally evaluated, their efficacy cannot be entirely confirmed (Moldovan, 2022).

Aside from a leader's attributes and the leader-follower relationship. Another important factor determining whether or not sustainable leadership will be successful is the context. Menon & Suresh (2022) added to this paradigm at this point, stating that sustainable leadership must address both the internal and external dimensions.

It is essential to remark that universities are viewed as organizational leaders for a drive to promote sustainability as universities can lead to the long-term advancement of the regional sector and can be seen as essential educational organizations capable of dealing with challenges, educating future leaders, and developing long-term solutions (Khan et al., 2022). The SDGs in university operations reflect the requirements to highlight not only just instruction and research, but building a new dimension for sustainability. It has a positive impact on communities, whether through students, the adjacent locality, employees, and academics (Ashari et al., 2022).

The involvement of universities with sustainability is a source of difficulties, and it can be motivated by the institution's goal of permitting a new organizational arrangement and action emphasized (Holmes et al., 2022) by its top-management team. Universities aim to incorporate sustainability in a variety of other ways. They develop philosophies, sign declarations, incorporate sustainability into their courses, and modify their missions and operational administration of the university (Liu et al., 2021; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021).

However, whether the university takes action in research, teaching, or management, successful implementation faces substantial challenges. These impediments include overcrowded curricula, instructors' disregard for sustainability, employees' lack of awareness about sustainability, and the institution's lack of direction and dedication (Holmes et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2022).

Furthermore, universities are still facing obstacles to the sustainability of education such as the legal independence of research and instruction, the scarcity of recognition for sustainable development, a craving for change, and sufficient societal pressure (Liu et al., 2021; Moldovan, 2022; Zulfqar et al., 2021).

## Methodology

The research study aimed to collect information about perspectives and options on sustainable leadership from an internationally recognized group of university professionals. To this, recommendations on the ways to handle difficulties were identified. For this purpose, two major research questions are suggested. 1) what are the major characteristics sustainable leaders possess to perform sustainable practice? 2) what are the major difficulties sustainable leaders encountered?

### Sample

To gain a foundation for the discussion of sustainable leadership, fifty questionnaire surveys were conducted to collect rich information from experienced respondents, which were drawn by the purposive sampling method.

The sample constituted educational and institutional leaders, top-level management administrators such as Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Deans, Deputy Deans, and Heads of Departments from eight universities in Thailand (Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University, Kasetsart University, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (KMITL), Bangkok University, University of Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC), Rangsit University, Sripatum University).

#### Procedure

The questionnaire survey comprised three main sections (background and sustainable engagement of the university, position of university leaders, desired characteristics, and difficulties). A set of questions was used to assess significant factors of sustainable leadership in Thai universities, which are a literature novelty. Items of indicators of the questionnaire survey are based upon the model of sustainable leadership by Menon & Suresh (2022). The questionnaires were initially used by the university staff of the author to ensure that the questions were thorough, clear, understandable, and relevant.

#### Data Collection and Analysis

The complete Google forms of the questionnaire surveys were distributed to educational coworkers in top-level management positions in eight universities. The time of response was approximately 7-9 minutes, and total responses of 50 were received during January 2022-March 2022. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the research findings.

### Findings

The research study aims to gather information about perspectives and options on sustainable leadership from an internationally recognized group of university professionals.

This section reports on the findings and a survey discussion from university top-level decision-makers. The research findings are classified into three different categories: analysis of sample and engagement to educational sustainability, self-assessment and requisites for sustainable leadership, and difficulties encountered for sustainable leadership. The findings also provide deep insight into how university representatives of top-level management evaluate sustainable leadership. This serves as the foundation for drawing conclusions and making recommendations.

#### 1. Analysis of Sample and Engagement to Educational Sustainability

The survey was answered by 50 leaders from eight universities in Thailand (Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University, Kasetsart University, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (KMITL), Bangkok University, University of Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC), Rangsit University, Sripatum University). Thammasat University shows the greatest number of respondents.

Because this is a purposive sampling method, the findings provided in this section reflect just the information from this sample. After all, 50 leaders participated in the survey, which is a really good result given the field's general access constraints and the top-level management representatives in particular. Although these findings are significant in and of themselves, their applicability to other institutions is restricted.

With regard to their experience, it revealed that 48% of the samples maintain a place of leadership for more than 6 years, 22% for 4-6 years, 25% for 1-3 years, and 5% for less than a year.

For the sample analyzed, most universities engage to sustainability; that is, 41% to some extent, and 41% to a great extent. Sustainability is a fundamental concern for 15% of the universities. Nevertheless, universities with no engagement to sustainability account for 3%.

#### 2. Self-Assessment and Requisites for Sustainable Leadership

While questioned about their styles as sustainable leaders, 67% of the respondents revealed that sustainability is inclusiveness, visionary (42%), creativity (35%), altruism (16%), and radical (2%). The sum of percentages is greater than 100% as individual respondents can attribute up to two approaches. Being an inclusive leader entails working collaboratively and synergistically. It promotes a sense of belonging, as well as a high-quality learning environment.

In terms of respondents' perceptions of their typical characteristics of sustainable leadership, 61% of the respondents identify as systematic thinkers, while 35% of them identify as enquiring/open-minded. Besides, care and morality account for the same percentage, whereas 24% of the respondents notify visionary and courage, and 20% is for self-awareness. According to Menon & Suresh (2022), the characteristics that received the most

responses are the capability to comprehend the interconnectivity and interdependence of the entire system suggesting a particular modification that might have an impact on the entire system.

Respondents also indicated the primarily required competencies of a sustainable leader. 65% notifies difficulties and innovation, 55% is for complexity management, 42 % goes to long-run thinkers, 33% accounts for communication, and 3% identify exercise judgment. The most frequently indicated competencies involve the term difficulties, which may be one of the reasons respondents chose it—the acknowledgment of sustainability as a challenge for universities. Furthermore, sustainability leaders must overcome obstacles, seek possible solutions, and think beyond the horizon.

Concerning the knowledge that sustainable leaders should possess, 65% goes to interdisciplinary connectivity. 45% of respondents identify organization administration, 43% report global difficulties, 21% go to "change and possibilities", and 23% account for "varied attitudes of stakeholders".

Regarding verifications to enhance sustainability, 72% of respondents reported that they make a decision mutually, solely (25%), votes of the majority (2%), and customized decisions (1%) respectively.

### 3. Difficulties Encountered for Sustainable Leadership

With regard to difficulties encountered by university leaders, it found that there is a lack of funding (85%), lack of university support (55%), lack of interest from the university administration (53%), lack of sustainable expertise (46%), lack of resources (30%), and other elements (3%).

To cope with these difficulties and revive appropriate sustainable leadership, five major actions are identified by the respondents as follows: 1) engagement of high administration, 2) proactive communication, 3) collaborative partnership, 4) behavioral modifications and education, and 5) financial support and investment

## Discussion

Although engagement of high administration is significantly stated in various studies on sustainability in universities (Holmes et al., 2022; Mohamed Hashim et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2022), it is vital to emphasize that this is insufficient for universities to accomplish practical achievements. The emphasis must be on holistic approaches (McMahon, 2020).

One of the universities' duties is to engage with society, emphasizing the value of collaborative relationships and projects with local communities (Ashari et al., 2022).

Furthermore, universities can influence a diverse variety of stakeholders utilizing online communications to disseminate sustainable initiatives (Leyshon, 2021; Prasad, 2021) as well as the outcomes of appropriate sustainable leadership (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021).

Some of the actions concern behavioral modifications and education. Sustainability knowledge and the desire to result in organizational sustainability activities are critical for achieving good results (Liu et al., 2021). It necessitates ongoing efforts and participation from the many players of universities, particularly to embed sustainability in university culture (Canton-Mayo et al., 2021)

Plus, the importance of financial support is also considered to be one of the main solutions for sustainable leadership. More financial support and suitable action plans are definitely required. Constant and substantial investment in sustainable education for top-level management and administration is also pivotal (Boeske & Murray, 2022; Somlai, 2022; Swarnakar et al., 2022).

## Conclusion and further research

Several tendencies emerge from this research study. To begin, the majority of the sustainable leaders surveyed define their universities as "inclusiveness" implying that only a handful of them see themselves as "radical". This conclusion, in this way, reveals that coordinating and participatory styles of work are outstanding. Furthermore, when it comes to senior management competencies, the major ones that a sustainable leader should have are "difficulties and innovation", "complexity management", and "long-run thinkers"

These are also intriguing research results because these abilities do engage and inspire employees. Furthermore, it is clear from the responses that sustainable leaders should possess "interdisciplinary connectivity," a competency fostering others' motivation.

Due to its exploratory nature and purposive sampling, this study does not try for generalizable results in terms of its applications for theoretical and practical approaches. The sample, however, could be used to derive conclusions. For example, it adds to the literature on sustainable leadership by investigating the key contribution of senior administrators to attain organizational goals towards more sustainable practices.

Furthermore, the study indicates that several Thai universities are increasingly and seriously taking the development of sustainable leadership. It also demonstrates the benefits of critical sustainable leadership conversations, which could necessitate research and instruction.

There are some limitations to this study. In the first place, approaching a larger quantity of respondents in the online questionnaires survey would have increased the vigorousness of the study, specifically, it would have allowed for a greater range of attitudes and opinions.

Still, the normal challenges in involving top-level management administrators in comparable investigations have been noted here as well. While there is no perfect sample size, the fact that 50 leaders from eight universities were engaged, including representatives from both public and private universities, representing that it caters for an ample picture of how university leaders perceive sustainable development.

Ideas for further research are the following: first, a better understanding of various educational leadership in the context of the improvement of sustainability enhances the effort. Therefore, the investigation into the relationships between university members for sustainable growth could be invaluable.

Second, the context in which universities are embedded is a significant variable to consider. The subject of how well universities manage themselves when faced with courses of changes in their external circumstances, and how this is reflected in sustainable leadership practices could be investigated.

Besides, the critical insight of quantitative and qualitative research is definitely needed to help develop a strong theoretical framework to cope with the complex inherent in sustainable leadership of universities.

Last but not least, longitudinal studies may help understand how various factors change over time, demonstrating the progress of sustainable leadership practices in universities.

## Recommendations

With regard to practical measures applied by universities to improve their performance on sustainable leadership, the recommendations are as follows:

1) universities must embed the combination of sustainability matters through a stronger concrete activity: the improvement of sustainability action plans and strategies which top-level administrators can better relate to all staff, leading to the holistic and sustainable practices of institutions.

2) universities must identify how leaders can encourage the potential of their organizations' workforce to support sustainable development. There are few leadership-oriented training efforts designed to improve awareness of both academic and non-academic workers, therefore such an endeavor could help take this crucial field ahead.

3) universities must have a stronger emphasis on practical features of governance, with better incorporation of governance matters into university life.

4) universities must have a larger emphasis on the contributions of leaders to the achievement of sustainable development goals: the current levels of sustainability, as well as progress towards their achievement.

5) universities must leverage additional financial support and investment in sustainability administration to reinforce institutions, stakeholders, interrelation partnerships, and communities.

Once suitably contemplated and implemented, sustainable leadership can not only improve how an institution engages in sustainable development, but can also reinforce the value of educational institutions, promoting an organization in determining the finest ways to correspond to challenges at local, regional, and international levels.

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