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Sustainability Priorities in Canadian University
Sustainability Documents**

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Environment, Not Social or Governance, Oh My: Sustainability Priorities in Canadian University Sustainability Documents

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Abstract:
Design/methodology/approach: Comparing sustainability policies with the overarching goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals through the approach of narrative policy analysis, this research explores the priorities present and what patterns emerge in these priorities.
Purpose: Universities are significant in their sustainability action not just for the education that they provide, but how they operate as mini cities, with massive environmental footprints, meaning that, their sustainability direction matters. As a result, this research investigates the priorities present in university sustainability policy documents from 33 Canadian universities.
Findings: Findings include that across Canada, planet related sustainability priorities, particularly those focused on cities, climate action and consumption are the most present, while people and prosperity elements of sustainability often fall outside the scope of these policies. Some regional variation emerges in key areas such as energy and climate action, and size also sees a correlation to prioritization of specific areas of sustainability such as waste.
Originality/value: This research will be of interest to researchers in the emerging field of sustainability in higher education, practitioners and administrators in university sustainability and policy makers looking to understand sustainability prioritization shape the future of nuanced sustainability directions.

Introduction
Internationally universities are important actors in driving sustainability action and in contributing to sustainability change. Universities are significant through their education given their role as teachers and researchers for the next generation of sustainability (Van Eeden, Eloff & Dippenaar, 2021). They also contribute a significant carbon footprint in their own right, which can vary from tens to hundreds of thousands of tonnes of CO2 each, depending on size, (see Huising & Aron, 2023; University of Waterloo, 2023), which is significant even when measured per capita or size (Helmerts, Chang & Dauwels, 2021). In recent years, there has been a growth in interest in sustainability particularly in higher education. Across Canada, universities are promoting increased sustainability focuses, with institutional action around operational changes, supporting climate research and increasing their sustainability focused education offerings

(Universities Canada, 2023). University sustainability actions are guided by their overall sustainability direction documents which guide their work.

This research builds from calls for future research on the need to understand the shape that sustainability takes at universities (Bauer et al., 2018; Weisser, 2017) and previous work investigating the content of Canadian universities sustainability policies, recognizing a need to update this work (Vaughter et al., 2016). In this research, university sustainability documents are understood as proportionate to, and therefore a suitable proxy for, universities' overall direction on sustainability, which will inherently shape their action. As such, the guiding research question is as follows: What priorities are present in university sustainability guiding documents across Canada and what patterns exist in their prioritization?

This research conducted an evaluation of university sustainability documents from across Canada to understand what universities are stating as their priorities with regards to sustainability. The intention of this study is not to encapsulate all the sustainability priorities present at universities, for example, those embodied in departmental or student council documents, but rather to take a high-level look at the goals set by the entire university as a starting point for future work into sustainability at Canadian universities. This work represents an important cross-Canada comparison on the priorities of university sustainability policies and provides important context on the variation in sustainability priorities by size and geography. Findings include that across Canada, planet related sustainability priorities are the most present in university documents, while people and prosperity elements of sustainability often fall outside the scope of these policies. Some regional variation emerges in key areas such as energy and climate action, and size also sees a correlation to prioritization of specific areas of sustainability that are particularly prominent such as waste. These findings are significant to understand how universities are shaping their sustainability direction and to support policy makers and practitioners to interrogate their own universities' priorities and to guide their university towards meaningful planning and prioritization.

Theoretical framework

Legitimization:

This research recognizes that, for there to be substantial uptake of sustainability actions, the priorities must be viewed as legitimate. This work is based in legitimization theory, which focuses on the impact of various drivers on the outcomes in policy and practice (Hengst et al., 2020). This research investigates only the former, but legitimization plays an important role in framing what form the policy takes. For the purposes of this research legitimacy is understood as the assumption that actions are desirable and appropriate in the constructed norms and beliefs of the institution (Hengst et al., 2020). In particular, in legitimization, the ways that new approaches to sustainability are viewed as legitimate from specific drivers, is crucial for their longevity and successful implementation.

While there has been wider focus on the legitimization of broader strategy documents in organizations that have provided valuable framing of the process of creating these documents (Suddaby et al., 2017), there is a recognition that the legitimization of the creation of sustainability strategies are even more tenuous and complex. In particular, in the creation of a sustainability strategy document, the challenges for legitimization are compounded by the fact that sustainability strategies are often released beside an existing overall, or mainstream strategy document, which may not be up to date with the new sustainability focus. In this way then, Hengst et al. (2020) refer to a process of coupling or decoupling across strategies, where

coupling refers to co-enactment of the sustainability strategy with the mainstream strategy in focus and action and decoupling refers to areas of disconnect between the strategies (Hahn et al., 2016). Oftentimes, decoupling is evident when sustainability is focused on meeting requirements from legislators and external actors, resulting in symbolic and abstract commitments which are impossible to be acted upon (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Crilly et al., 2016).

Debates in legitimization tend to start from a relatively wide acknowledgement that organizations are better positioned to formulate strategy than execute on it, and therefore the challenge of sustainability strategy creation and legitimization remains unique (Engert & Baumgartner, 2016). Key debates around legitimization tend to focus on the timing and process of legitimization. For example, some research has recognized that legitimization is an iterative process that begins during the planning stages and exists across levels, therefore perceptions of legitimacy can shift over time as the strategies (de)couple and also see varying levels of adherence (Huy et al., 2014). Therefore, the literature has debated whether sustainability strategies on their own can be legitimate if separate from organizational strategy documents or whether there remains a space for legitimization within the creation of university sustainability strategies (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Crilly et al., 2016).

Perhaps more importantly than debates however, in this context of legitimization, studies of universities sustainability strategies have often not paid significant attention to the various actors in their communities and their interests in sustainability, making application of legitimization in strategy creation particularly relevant. Universities are often accused of leaving creation of sustainability direction to the top levels of their institution, which they have been criticized for making insufficient efforts to engage with community members harming their legitimacy (Sanchez-Carrillo et al., 2021). While legitimization can occur after the fact through things like university reporting on sustainability (González-Torre & Suárez-Serrano, 2020), understanding how the drivers contribute to legitimization in sustainability university strategy creation is significant.

This research takes from the legitimization framework the need to explore how internal strategies (mis)align with existing priorities in the need to legitimize sustainability and therefore understand how priorities were either adopted or shifted to align with existing internal university priorities such as academic and budgetary considerations.

Literature

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a widely used and understood term that explores the push of organizations to contribute to the sustainability of not just their own business, but the broader sustainability of their practices for their employees and communities (Carroll, 2015). CSR in the context of universities are particularly relevant given the immense pressure from external actors to behave responsibly, which makes them unique testing grounds for the exploration and implementation of CSR principles in the implementation of sustainability (Howells et al., 2014; Baker-Shelley et al., 2017) CSR is seen as a push back to the idea that organizations exist solely for the purposes of expanding their own best interest, and instead argues that social and environmental obligations are within the scope of organizational considerations. CSR argues that businesses should strive to create value for all, and not just those with a vested financial interest (Freeman et al., 2010). Even among scholars who advocate for organizations to adopt CSR practices, the motivations vary. For example, some note that CSR has become a crucial component of a risk management strategy, as an improved reputation

reduces an organizations exposure to reputational and market risks (Isaksson et al., 2014). Meanwhile, others contend that CSR should be integrated solely for ethical reasons, and that implementation for strategic gains conflicts with the objectives of CSR and that CSR action should focus solely on increasing social benefit (Barnett et al., 2020). With CSR becoming widely implemented by even the most controversial organizations (see for example the Tobacco industry; Aqueveque et al., 2018), scholars have begun to recognize that CSR adoptions in organizations are not just tools for organizations to advertise their impact, but rather opportunities for organizations to improve their reputation and reduce their risk, thereby increasing their competitive advantage relative to their peers (Aqueveque et al., 2018; Conte et al., 2023).

As organizations have a wide-ranging influence, they consequently have many stakeholders, including employees, customers, government, and the broader community, who they should be responsive and accountable to (Schaltegger et al., 2019). CSR has evolved to be based on the so-called 'triple bottom line' of sustainability, where organizations balance internal governance and economic, as well as external environmental and social factors in their operations, so that organizations can operate in their overall best interest while still contributing to the betterment of their society and environment. In this ways CSR is closely linked to modern understandings of sustainability as related to Environmental, Social and Governmental (ESG) factors. Despite its relatively wide appeal, the CSR literature notes conflicting motivations for organizations to integrate CSR within their policies and strategy discussed below.

While CSR has seen wide uptake across sectors, and is prevalent amongst public and semi-public organizations, CSR is particularly important in the context of universities, due to the role they play as not just for-profit agencies, but key organizations in shaping societal thinking through teaching and research (Kozioł-Nadolna & Beyer, 2021). Where all organizations have multiple internal and external stakeholders, this is doubly true of universities, often with connections to governments, students, faculty, and with the purpose of teaching the next generation of leaders and providing research to shape policy directions. For universities then, CSR as an idea provide an important area for future research on the intentions of their CSR activities as modelled in their sustainability strategy. CSR then can be seen as a transformational perspective for organizations to take, and the challenges of aligning motivations with meaningful policy creation creates issues for legitimization of policies and practices.

CSR in the form sustainability policies specifically has received some academic attention, noting that organizations in various sectors 'cherry-pick' SDGs to align with, therefore making sustainability documents more limited in scope on particular sustainability aspects (Galpin et al., 2015). This is partially because, in producing their policies, organizations face various internal (such as employees) and external pressures (such as customers) which shape their foci differently (Rodrigues & Franco, 2019; Sanchez-Planelles, et al, 2020; Thaher & Jaaron, 2022). For example, existing research has noted that priorities often vary across sectors, with for example for profit sectors focusing less on social goals (Ike et al., 2019) and government focused on the economic aspects of sustainability (Forestier & Kim, 2020). Other international studies across various sectors have pointed to the fact that economic and climate goals are the most oft-cited SDGs in sustainability documents, with more specific goals such as life below water and hunger receiving the fewest mentions attention (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2022; Mhlanga et al., 2018; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018).

Methodology

The overall timeline and order of the methodology is described in Figure 1 below, with more discussion and elaboration following.

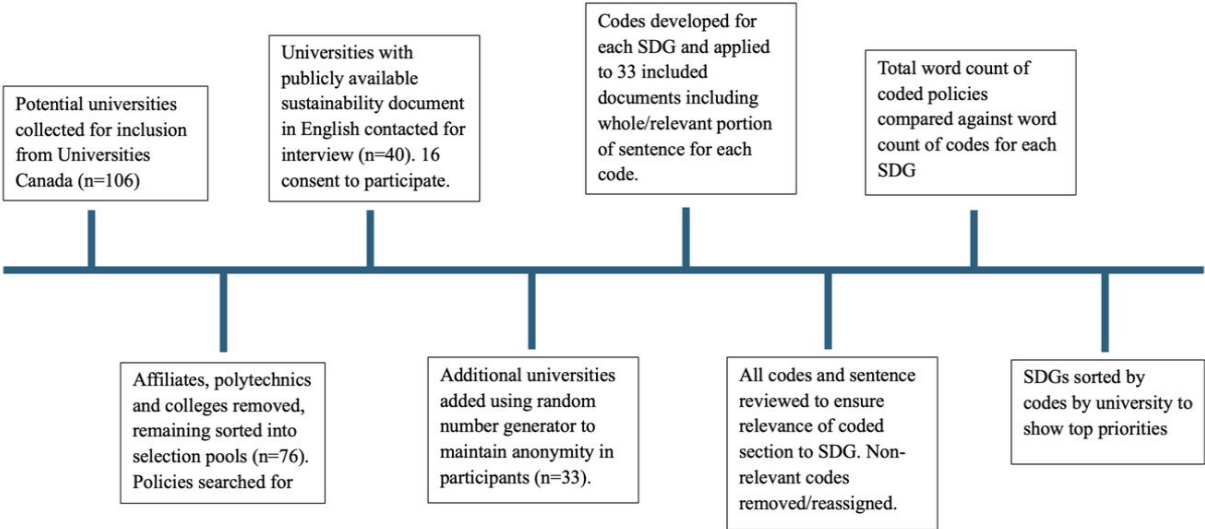


Figure 1: Methodology process timeline

Participant Selection:

Participant selection began with a complete list of higher education institutions that belong to Universities Canada (n=106) (Universities Canada, n.d.). Affiliate institutions and polytechnics or colleges were removed from the sample as was Western University due to a conflict of interest, leaving a selection of 76 universities.

Next, universities were categorized using the Maclean’s University Ranking to determine their categorizations of Medical/Doctoral, Comprehensive and Primarily Undergraduate (Maclean’s Education, n.d.). These categories serve as a rough proxy for size and operations of the universities, with Primarily Undergraduate universities being the smallest and Medical/Doctoral being the largest. Participants were then sorted by province, resulting in 30 possible selection pools show in Figure 2.

		Maclean's Categorization: Medical Doctoral			
Province	British Columbia	British Columbia			
	Alberta	Alberta	Calgary		
	Saskatchewan	Saskatchewan			
	Manitoba	Manitoba			
	Ontario	McMaster	Ottawa	Queens	Toronto
	Quebec	Laval	McGill	Montreal	Sherbrooke
	New Brunswick				
	Nova Scotia	Dalhousie			
Prince Edward Island					
Newfoundland					

Province	Maclean's Categorization: Comprehensive							
	British Columbia	Simon Fraser	Victoria					
	Alberta							
	Saskatchewan	Regina						
	Manitoba							
	Ontario	Brock	Carleton	Guelph	Toronto Metropolitan	Waterloo	Windsor	Wilfrid Laurier
		York						
			Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC)	Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)	Université du Québec à Rimouski (UQAR)	Université du Québec en Abitibi- Témiscamingue (UQAT)	Université du Québec en Outaouais	Université TÉLUQ
	Quebec	Concordia						
	New Brunswick	New Brunswick						
	Nova Scotia							
	Prince Edward Island							
	Newfoundland	Memorial						

		Maclean's Categorization: Primarily Undergraduate						
Province	British Columbia	UNBC	Capilano	Emily Carr	Fraser Valley	Kwantlen	Royal Roads	Thompson Rivers
		Trinity Western	University of Fraser Valley	Vancouver Island				
	Alberta	Athabasca	Concordia university of Edmonton	The Kings University	Lethbridge	MacEwan	Mt Royal	St Mary's
	Saskatchewan							
	Manitoba	Brandon	Canadian Mennonite	Saint-Boniface	St Paul's	Winnipeg		
	Ontario	Algoma Sudbury	Lakehead Trent	Laurentian	Nipissing	Ontario College of Art and Design	Ontario Tech	Royal Military College
	Quebec	Bishops						
	New Brunswick	Moncton	Mount Allison	St Thomas				
	Nova Scotia	Acadia St Mary's	Cape Breton	Kings' college	Mt St Vincent	Nova Scotia College of Art and Design	Sainte-Anne	St Francis Xavier
	Prince Edward Island	Prince Edward Island						
	Newfoundland							

Figure 2: University sorting pools according to Maclean's categorization

Once universities were sorted into selection pools, the author began pulling the documents for universities that had consented to participate in an earlier study on the drivers of sustainability policies (n=16) (Dickson, 2025). To maintain anonymity in the participants for this study and expand the sample of included policies, the author randomly selected additional university policies to code using a random number generator with the aim being to code a minimum of two policies per selection pool regardless of how many universities chose to participate in an interview. Once the university was randomly selected, the author searched for the universities' policy or strategy document on Google and their sustainability webpage. If one was not found the search was stopped the university was 'dropped'. The author then returned to the same 'pool' and randomly selected another university in that category to repeat this process until all universities in a selected pool were exhausted. This resulted in coding 33 universities sustainability documents.

Inclusion Criteria

Policy documents had to be publicly available in English. Given that capital 'P' enforceable Policies often include the least detail on the university's direction this research included the document which included the greatest depth on the overall university sustainability direction. While oftentimes university sustainability is guided by various documents, included in this study is the document that gives the largest overall interpretation of the university's

sustainability priorities. This prioritized inclusion of strategy and planning documents, but also recognizes that some smaller universities have not been developed a larger Plan and instead represent their priorities in a smaller Policy. This meant that in cases where a university had both documents, the larger Strategy or Plan document was included in place of a Policy. This approach did exclude policies from individual departments or operations units, but was appropriate given the focus on the overall university approach to sustainability. Importantly, these documents needed to be official university plan or strategy documents, meaning that websites which mentioned sustainability or reports were not included. In the end for each included university, there was one sustainability related document. The included documents ranged in publication dates from May 2014 (in the form of a 20-year plan) to May 2024, with the vast majority published in the last 5 years. All documents were active and in force when the research was conducted. Importantly, in interviews with a subset of the included institutions (Dickson, 2025), Directors of Sustainability (or equivalent) were asked if there were other aspects of sustainability that were considered ‘unwritten’ which had updated their priorities since publication of the reviewed policy. They responded unanimously that the reviewed policy was still the guiding document, even if they felt it was in need of updating.

Data Analysis

Once sustainability documents were collected from all participant universities, the coding of the policies took place in two steps following a thematic coding analysis. Thematic analysis is defined as “a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about and of making sense of those commonalities” (Braun & Clarke, 2012; p. 57). In the first step an inductive approach was used to derive codes from the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognizing that the SDGs are not reflective of all sustainability goals, and that universities did not necessarily develop their policies in line with these goals, the SDGs are used as a proxy for sustainability. Codes were developed by reading from the United Nations and SDGs webpages, including the overall description, challenges, and targets. For each SDG, terms which served as descriptors of the goal, or synonyms were included as a code. Where possible, the smallest possible ‘root’ of the term was used to ensure accuracy in collection, with ** indicating that additional possible endings for these codes were expected. For example, for SDG 1 code \$2**, this includes those which mentioned \$2/day or \$2.50/day as the minimum threshold for extreme poverty. Codes can be found in Table 1 below.

I base the policy analysis stage of this research on the theory of narrative policy analysis (Roe, 1994; Schlauffer, 2022; Van Eeten, 2017). In particular, this research takes a macro-level view of narrative policy analysis, where the author examined the overarching narrative present in institutional contexts (Shanahan et al., 2017). To do this, universities are situated in the broader context of sustainability narratives beyond their own boundaries, and see universities sustainability policies as, at least in part, a narrative about their role in sustainability. As such, use the SDGs are used as a widely recognized framework for comparison and use key terms to focus on the narrative universities are presenting as their priorities. This approach seeks to understand how policy is constructed, especially in complex situations, and the implications of policy decision making on the narratives that are told in the policy produced. Given the complexity of the nature of policy making in the ever-shifting domain of sustainability, and the use of narrative policy analysis particularly in environmental policy analysis (Schlauffer, 2022) understanding how narratives are told and written into policy by universities is significant. Narrative policy analysis also focuses on the positionality of the actor producing the policy as

part of the context of the narrative therein (Schlaufer, 2022). By incorporating an analysis which determines the percentage of policy focused on each area of sustainability, this analysis will allow for an understanding of the narratives of policy integration to determine how institutions integrate sustainability priorities into their policy. Past research using a narrative policy approach have focused on the narratives of solutions from civil society organizations (Schlaufer, 2022) or the reporting of complexity and polarization amongst small businesses (Wapshott et al., 2024) and this work informs this research.

SDG	Codes
1: No Poverty	Poverty; \$2**; Vulnerable
2: Zero Hunger	Hung*; Food*; Nutritio*; Agricultur*; Farm; Domesticated Animals; Cultivated Plants; Rural; Diet
3: Good Health and Well-being	Health*; Well*Being; Immuniz*; Vaccin* Disease; Illness; Pregnan*; Reproducti*; Maternal; Birth; Mortality; Epidemic; Pandemic; Newborn; Substance Abuse; Drugs; Alcohol; Accident; Tobacco; Hazard
4: Quality Education	Education*; School; Learn*; Numeracy; Literacy; Vocational; University; Childhood Development; Scholarships; Teach*; Course; Student
5: Gender Equality	Gender; Wom*; Girl*; Represent*; Sexual/Reproductive Health/Violence; Domestic Work; Inequalit*; Child Marriage; Marriage; Female Genital Mutilation; Discriminat*; Traffic*
6: Clean Water and Sanitation	Water; Sanita*; Drink; Wash*; Hyg*; Drought;
7: Affordable and Clean Energy	Energy; Electric*; Reliable; Carbon; Coal; Oil; Gas; Fossil Fuels; Renew*; Power;
8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	Work*; Employ*; Economic; Income; Unemploy*; Job; GDP; Labour; Slavery
9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Industr*; Infrastructure; Innovat*; Manufactur*; Broadband; Mobile; Transport (internal); Irrigation; Information/Communication Tech*; Credit; Value Chain; Market; Operation
10: Reduced Inequalities	Inequalit*; Income; Sex*; Age; Disabilit*; Race; Class; Ethnicity; Religion; Opportunit*; Discriminat*; Representat*; Migrat*; Mobility; Foreign (Direct) Investment; Accessibil*
11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Cit*; Settlement; Slum; Transport (city/public); Urban; Road; Street; Public Space; Hous*; Heritage; Buildings; Residence
12: Responsible Consumption and Production	Consum*; Produc*; Waste; Businesses; Reduc*; Reuse; Recycl*; Prevent; Procur*; Operation
13: Climate Action	Climate; Environment*; Green House Gas; Global Warming; 1.5 Degrees; Emissions; Natural Disaster; UNFCCC
14: Life Below Water	Ocean; Sea; Marine; Water; Coast; Fish*;
15: Life on Land	Land; Terrestrial; Forest; Desert; Biodiversity; Species; Wildlife; Zoonotic; Mountains; Drylands; Poaching;

16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Peace; Societ*; Justice; Institutions; Displace*; Conflict; Politics; Violen*; Crime; Exploit*; Torture; Abuse; Law; Arm; Corruption;
17: Partnership for the Goals	Partner*; Support; Capacity; Trade; Finance; Systemic Issues; Accountab*

Table 1: Codes used as search terms to determine policy prioritization by word count

Following this first step in the analysis, the qualitative analysis software NVivo was used to code policies following an deductive coding approach. Each code from Table 1 was searched in the collected policy document for each university. If a code was found, the code was then read in context to ensure that it was relevant to the SDG being searched (for example, if the term energy was found, and the sentence read ‘we have a renewed energy to tackle sustainability challenges’, this was skipped and not coded to SDG 7). Codes were also reviewed at the end of the coding to ensure they were relevant to the theme. After confirming relevance, the entire sentence, sentences or portion of the sentence which was connected to the SDG was coded to the relevant code. If the code was the heading for a specific section, then the section that was relevant to that SDG was coded. Recognizing that some of these codes could be relevant to multiple potential SDGs (for example vulnerability could refer to No Poverty, Gender Equality, or even vulnerability of Clean Energy production), terms were only coded for the SDG which they pulled from. Importantly however, the numerous codes included for each SDG mitigated the possibility of missing codes. For example if a sentence read that a university focused on ‘maintenance of their vulnerable infrastructure to ensure access to clean energy’, even though the term vulnerable was included, it would not be coded to No Poverty, but instead would be coded to Clean and Affordable Energy, as a code from this SDG was included. At the end of coding, all 33 documents had sections of it, sometimes overlapping, that were coded to the SDGs. Some parts of the document would not have any SDG coded at all, for example high level goals for their work.

This resulted in a total word count committed to each SDG from each university based on the associated codes. This SDG word count was then compared to the overall word count of the whole document to determine the overall focus of specific sustainability goals in relation to the overall policy and compare within policies as a percentage of the total word count. To be clear, any individual word in any given policy could be coded to multiple SDGs if relevant, or no SDG at all, and so in theory, the total word count of all combined SDGs could be higher than the total word count of the document (ie >100%, though this was only true of one university), though no individual SDG word count could exceed the total word count. Alternatively, it could be less than 100%, because some sentences could have no SDG assigned. The top sustainability priorities by word count are shown in Table 2 in findings. This step allowed for the emphasis of various sustainability priorities to be considered in relation to each other and the entire policy. Due to the various competing priorities of universities, it was not expected that any one university would have only one sustainability priority, nor was it expected that any university would include focus on all aspects of sustainability as represented by the SDGs. An example of the breakdown of SDG codes for one Ontario University is provided below as Figure 4 for illustrative purposes.

Once this stage of policy analysis was complete, to confirm the findings of the research priorities, for each participant, university archives were searched for senate documents, press

releases and students or local news coverage from the time of the policy release as well as material on the university sustainability website that mentioned university's focuses in order to confirm the priorities. These documents were scanned with informal notes made. There was also the opportunity in the interview for a subset of universities that participated in a related study (Dickson, 2025) to either highlight additional focus areas over the ones mentioned, or state how they did incorporate the SDGs that were seen as underrepresented in their priorities. These fail safes allowed for coverage of the policy from the time of its release to be reviewed to ensure accuracy in the understanding of the sustainability policy documents. In no situation did the determination on the priorities change as a result of these reviews.

In understanding the broad trends that these SDGs resulted in, this research uses the '5Ps' that the UN uses to sort the SDGs: planet, people, prosperity, peace and partnerships. While there is no broadly accepted sorting of the SDGs, and each SDG is ultimately associated with multiple areas, for sorting, the author loosely followed Lekagul et al.'s (2022) sorting of the SDGs according to the 5 Ps principles, with people SDGs 1-6 being poverty, hunger, health, education, equality and water, prosperity SDGs 7-10 being energy, economic growth, industry and inequalities, planet SDGs 11-15 being cities, consumption, climate life below water and on land, and peace and partnerships being SDGs 16 and 17 respectively.

Results

The full results are reported in Table 2 and should be read horizontally, with university results being compared to each other within the university, rather than compared for competitive purposes to other universities. Based on feedback from universities, due to varying sizes of documents and foci, word counts and percentages are removed to compare priorities, rather than word count on specific sustainability areas. Results within universities which are outlined in gold demonstrate a tie in word count (though this only happened in cases where there was no mention of an SDG).

University	Province	Category	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Calgary	A	M	4: Quality Education	17: Partnership for the Goals	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	3: Good Health and Well-being	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	10: Reduced Inequalities	13: Climate Action	2: Zero Hunger	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	5: Gender Equality	1: No Poverty	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	14: Life Below Water	15: Life on Land
Lethbridge	A	U	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	15: Life on Land	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	17: Partnership for the Goals	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	10: Reduced Inequalities	13: Climate Action	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	14: Life Below Water	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	4: Quality Education	5: Gender Equality
Macewan	A	U	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	4: Quality Education	10: Reduced Inequalities	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	13: Climate Action	3: Good Health and Well-being	17: Partnership for the Goals	2: Zero Hunger	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	15: Life on Land	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	14: Life Below Water
Simon Fraser	BC	C	17: Partnership for the Goals	13: Climate Action	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	10: Reduced Inequalities	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	4: Quality Education	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	5: Gender Equality	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	14: Life Below Water	15: Life on Land	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	6: Clean Water and Sanitation
Victoria	BC	C	13: Climate Action	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	4: Quality Education	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	17: Partnership for the Goals	15: Life on Land	14: Life Below Water	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	3: Good Health and Well-being	10: Reduced Inequalities	2: Zero Hunger	5: Gender Equality	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	1: No Poverty	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
British Columbia	BC	M	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	17: Partnership for the Goals	13: Climate Action	4: Quality Education	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	14: Life Below Water	10: Reduced Inequalities	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	15: Life on Land	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
Capilano	BC	U	13: Climate Action	4: Quality Education	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	5: Gender Equality	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	10: Reduced Inequalities	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	14: Life Below Water	15: Life on Land	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	17: Partnership for the Goals

Kwantlen	BC	U	13: Climate Action	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	10: Reduced Inequalities	4: Quality Education	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	2: Zero Hunger	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	17: Partnership for the Goals	15: Life on Land	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	14: Life Below Water	3: Good Health and Well-being	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	5: Gender Equality	1: No Poverty
Royal Roads	BC	U	13: Climate Action	17: Partnership for the Goals	4: Quality Education	10: Reduced Inequalities	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	15: Life on Land	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	3: Good Health and Well-being	1: No Poverty	14: Life Below Water	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	2: Zero Hunger	5: Gender Equality
Manitoba	M	M	4: Quality Education	13: Climate Action	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	10: Reduced Inequalities	17: Partnership for the Goals	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	2: Zero Hunger	15: Life on Land	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	3: Good Health and Well-being	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	14: Life Below Water
Winnipeg	M	U	4: Quality Education	10: Reduced Inequalities	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	13: Climate Action	17: Partnership for the Goals	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	2: Zero Hunger	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	3: Good Health and Well-being	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	14: Life Below Water	15: Life on Land
New Brunswick	NB	C	13: Climate Action	4: Quality Education	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	2: Zero Hunger	17: Partnership for the Goals	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	15: Life on Land	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	10: Reduced Inequalities	3: Good Health and Well-being	5: Gender Equality	14: Life Below Water	1: No Poverty
Mount Allison	NB	U	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	13: Climate Action	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	2: Zero Hunger	17: Partnership for the Goals	3: Good Health and Well-being	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	4: Quality Education	15: Life on Land	14: Life Below Water	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	10: Reduced Inequalities
St Thomas	NB	U	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	4: Quality Education	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	13: Climate Action	15: Life on Land	17: Partnership for the Goals	2: Zero Hunger	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	1: No Poverty	3: Good Health and Well-being	5: Gender Equality	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	10: Reduced Inequalities	14: Life Below Water	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
Dalhousie	NS	M	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	13: Climate Action	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	2: Zero Hunger	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	15: Life on Land	10: Reduced Inequalities	4: Quality Education	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	17: Partnership for the Goals	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	3: Good Health and Well-being	14: Life Below Water	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality

Cape Breton	NS	U	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	13: Climate Action	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	17: Partnership for the Goals	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	4: Quality Education	5: Gender Equality	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	10: Reduced Inequalities	14: Life Below Water	15: Life on Land	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
Mt St. Vincent	NS	U	4: Quality Education	15: Life on Land	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	17: Partnership for the Goals	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	10: Reduced Inequalities	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	5: Gender Equality	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	13: Climate Action	14: Life Below Water
Careton	O	C	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	17: Partnership for the Goals	13: Climate Action	4: Quality Education	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	2: Zero Hunger	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	15: Life on Land	10: Reduced Inequalities	3: Good Health and Well-being	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	14: Life Below Water	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality
Laurier	O	C	17: Partnership for the Goals	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	13: Climate Action	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	10: Reduced Inequalities	4: Quality Education	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	2: Zero Hunger	15: Life on Land	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	3: Good Health and Well-being	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	14: Life Below Water
York	O	C	4: Quality Education	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	10: Reduced Inequalities	13: Climate Action	17: Partnership for the Goals	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	3: Good Health and Well-being	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	2: Zero Hunger	14: Life Below Water	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	15: Life on Land
MacMaster	O	M	4: Quality Education	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	17: Partnership for the Goals	10: Reduced Inequalities	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	13: Climate Action	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	3: Good Health and Well-being	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	15: Life on Land	2: Zero Hunger	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	14: Life Below Water	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality
Queens	O	M	13: Climate Action	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	4: Quality Education	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	17: Partnership for the Goals	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	15: Life on Land	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	14: Life Below Water	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	10: Reduced Inequalities	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
Waterloo	O	M	13: Climate Action	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	4: Quality Education	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	17: Partnership for the Goals	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	2: Zero Hunger	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	15: Life on Land	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	3: Good Health and Well-being	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	10: Reduced Inequalities	14: Life Below Water
Trent	O	U	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	13: Climate Action	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	4: Quality Education	17: Partnership for the Goals	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	15: Life on Land	10: Reduced Inequalities	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	2: Zero Hunger	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	1: No Poverty	3: Good Health and Well-being	5: Gender Equality	14: Life Below Water

Lakehead	O	U	10: Reduced Inequalities	4: Quality Education	2: Zero Hunger	17: Partnership for the Goals	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	13: Climate Action	15: Life on Land	14: Life Below Water	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	3: Good Health and Well-being	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality
Ontario College of Art and Design University	O	U	13: Climate Action	3: Good Health and Well-being	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	17: Partnership for the Goals	10: Reduced Inequalities	4: Quality Education	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	15: Life on Land	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	5: Gender Equality	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	14: Life Below Water
Prince Edward Island	PEI	U	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	4: Quality Education	10: Reduced Inequalities	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	5: Gender Equality	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	13: Climate Action	14: Life Below Water	15: Life on Land	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	17: Partnership for the Goals
Concordia	Q	C	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	4: Quality Education	13: Climate Action	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	17: Partnership for the Goals	2: Zero Hunger	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	10: Reduced Inequalities	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	3: Good Health and Well-being	15: Life on Land	1: No Poverty	14: Life Below Water	5: Gender Equality
McGill	Q	M	13: Climate Action	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	10: Reduced Inequalities	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	17: Partnership for the Goals	2: Zero Hunger	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	3: Good Health and Well-being	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	15: Life on Land	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	14: Life Below Water	4: Quality Education
Laval	Q	M	4: Quality Education	13: Climate Action	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	17: Partnership for the Goals	3: Good Health and Well-being	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	2: Zero Hunger	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	15: Life on Land	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	10: Reduced Inequalities	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	14: Life Below Water
Bishops	Q	U	4: Quality Education	13: Climate Action	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	10: Reduced Inequalities	17: Partnership for the Goals	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	3: Good Health and Well-being	2: Zero Hunger	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	14: Life Below Water	15: Life on Land	6: Clean Water and Sanitation
Regina	S	C	13: Climate Action	4: Quality Education	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	15: Life on Land	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	17: Partnership for the Goals	10: Reduced Inequalities	3: Good Health and Well-being	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	14: Life Below Water	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	5: Gender Equality
Saskatchewan	S	M	4: Quality Education	13: Climate Action	17: Partnership for the Goals	10: Reduced Inequalities	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	14: Life Below Water	1: No Poverty	5: Gender Equality	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	15: Life on Land

Figure 3: SDG priorities determined by word count sorted by Canadian university

	1: No Poverty	2: Zero Hunger	3: Good Health and Well-being	4: Quality Education	5: Gender Equality	6: Clean Water and Sanitation	7: Affordable and Clean Energy	8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	10: Reduced Inequalities	11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	12: Responsible Consumption and Production	13: Climate Action	14: Life Below Water	15: Life on Land	16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	17: Partnership for the Goals
SDG																	
Word Count by SDG	0	551	60	677	0	27	267	68	511	1435	381	525	227	165	179	81	538
Unique terms coded within that SDG	0	13	9	45	0	6	7	8	16	25	21	26	17	7	8	5	18

Figure 4: Example coding for one Ontario university by word count and unique terms

Policy Analysis: Sustainability Priorities

Results from across Canada

Results from across Canada show that the Canadian higher education sustainability landscape is dominated by environmentally focused sustainability priorities. The most common coded key search terms were climate, energy and environment. More importantly though, when the terms were sorted by the SDG, used as a proxy for the type of sustainability they were referencing, the most common sustainability priority to be represented in the five highest represented sustainability areas was planet, in particular focused on cities, general climate action and consumption. This was then followed closely by education, responsible consumption and production, industry, innovation and infrastructure and sustainable cities and communities. The full break down of the most common 'high priority' SDGs is represented in Figure 1 below. Alternatively, people and priorities SDGs were the least significant priorities of universities across Canada, with gender equality being a bottom five priority of ever included university, followed closely by no poverty, life below water, decent work and economic growth, and good health and well-being. The full break down of the most common 'low priority' SDGs is represented in Figure 6 below.

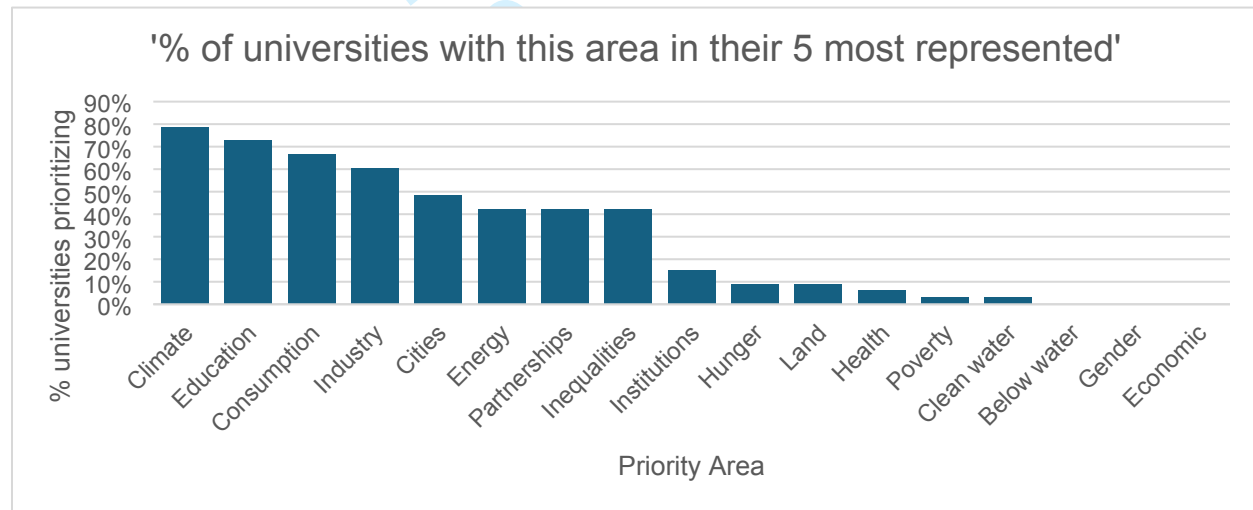


Figure 5: Percentage of Canadian universities with an SDG represented as one of their 5 most discussed by word count

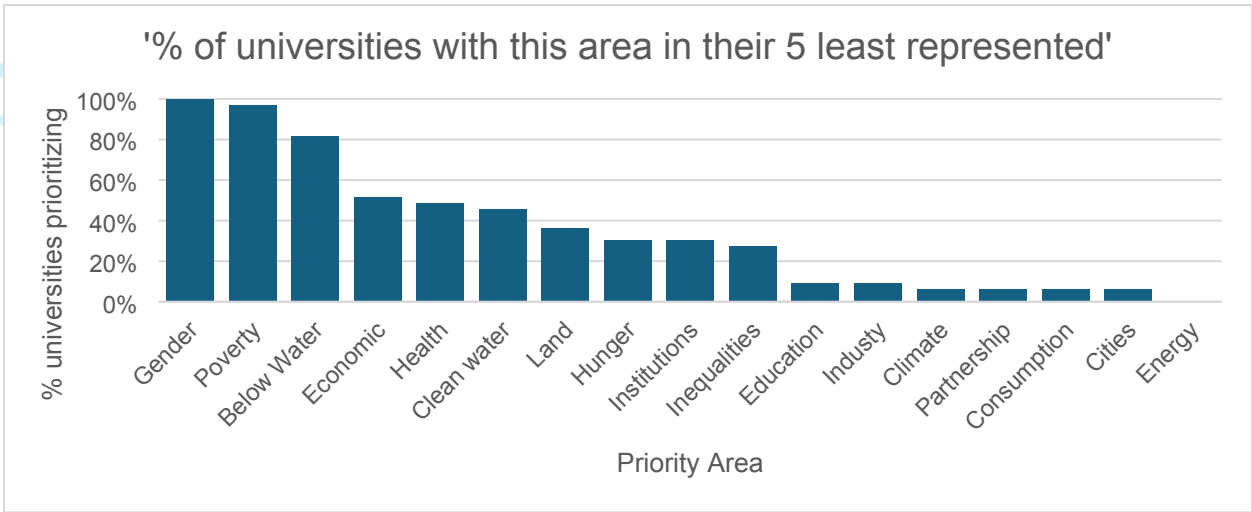


Figure 6: Percentage of Canadian universities with an SDG represented as one of their 5 (or tied) least discussed by word count

Discussion & Implications

Difference by university categorization:

While mostly there was general consensus among the priority areas among the size of universities included, specifically with areas like education and climate seeing consistently strong representation across the categories, there was some small differences in prioritization by size. Perhaps counter to their size and categorizing feature, medical doctoral universities do not see health feature as a top three priority in any of their sustainability policies, and it only features in one university’s top five priorities. While this was low in general across the universities included, that universities which are characterized by a medical school did not focus on health in their sustainability strategy is notable and explained later in interviews. For the primarily undergraduate universities included, consumption was overrepresented as a priority compared to the rest of Canada, seeing inclusion as a top five priority in 80% (n=12) of universities, compared with the average across Canada of 66%. This is also at least partially attributable to the overlap with the number of maritime universities represented in this sample but also a result of the fact that a focus on waste reduction and things like recycling is relatively easy compared with other more complex issue areas, and therefore manageable for smaller undergraduate universities. While these universities are still recognizing their role in sustainability action through a CSR perspective (Schaltegger et al., 2019; Koziol-Nadolna & Beyer, 2021), their appears to be shaped by their size.

Difference by Region:

While results were relatively consistent across Canada, some differences did emerge by geography which are discussed in more detail in context with interview responses in the discussion. While climate is a top represented SDG in Canada, in the province of British Columbia, it is ubiquitous with all universities coded in BC having climate as one of their top three most represented. This is the only SDG that is unanimously represented in the top three in any region. In the prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, Inequalities are a larger focus in the top five most represented SDGs than in Canada, or any other region, with 57% of prairie universities (n=4) including this in their top five, compared to 42% of the

universities across Canada including inequalities in their top five. This is largely due a large focus in the policies on indigenous populations and indigenization of both practices and curriculum. As recent research noted, such priorities were driven by a mix of provincial legislation as well as student population, for example, having a higher indigenous student population, which drove this focus (Dickson, 2025). Where the prairie regions see higher than normal focus on inequality, they see far less representation of energy in their top five most common SDGs. Where energy is a top five priority of 44% (n=14) of universities across Canada, this is a top five priority of only 14% (n=1) university in the prairie region. In the maritime region of Canada, responsible consumption is a more commonly represented in than in the rest of Canada. Among the seven maritime universities, consumption is represented as a top five sustainability priority of every university, compared with 66% of the national average.

While Canadian universities generally prioritize environment related SDGs consistent with other sectors (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2022; Mhlanga et al., 2018; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018), geographic location and other internal drivers served as key reasons for prioritization of specific other SDGs such as food and inequalities. This runs contrary to some of the research in other areas such as for profit and government policy evaluations which see economic goals ranked more highly, and shows a need for more research in this area of semi-public organizations (Ike et al., 2019; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2022). This is likely because, while universities recognize the non-planet priorities to be important, they are often delegated to other areas of the university, though they are increasingly being recognized as important to sustainability offices (Dickson, 2025). This finding of regional influences is consistent with research on universities in the context of responsible investment and shows a unique trend in higher education that might not be as prevalent in other contexts (Ramani et al., 2022). Conversely a lack of legislation can also result in relatively minimal focus on specific aspects of sustainability. For example, while waste was relatively highly prioritized across Canada, it is underrepresented by maritime universities. This prioritization as a result of legislation in some regions might be evidence of decoupling (Huy et al., 2014), but as research on drivers notes, one administrator at a maritime university noted that their lack of infrastructure in their municipality for recycling and composting meant that they and many of their peers did not prioritize waste as heavily (Dickson, 2025). Additionally, community led priorities may be impacting the priorities here. As the aforementioned research found, regional priorities, such as provincial education campaigns like waste focused education in Ontario, make this area a priority to students, which is then reflected in policy (Dickson, 2025), and there is likely impact on other areas priorities as well, such as for example oil and gas influences driving energy priorities in the Canadian prairies (Ramani et al., 2022). This regional impact might be an effort to legitimize their sustainability practice in the eyes of their community members by aligning the sustainability actions with the interest of their community and targeting the differential priorities of their stakeholders (Sanchez-Carrillo et al., 2021). Importantly such an example is not necessarily the result of a lack of innovation, and in many cases, universities are ahead of their provincial or municipal requirements. Rather, this finding points to the fact that, in some cases, the lack of available infrastructure can mean that universities in specific provinces or regions are unable to match the top priorities of their peers from across the country.

SDG Priorities Across Canada

Importantly, within the specific SDGs noted in the coding of the policy documents, specific areas of focus were particularly common, meaning that within some priority areas,

particular ‘micro’ priorities emerged. For example, under SDG 12 Responsible Production and Consumption, Waste was by far the most common term mentioned, almost three times more frequently than the next most common term Procurement, again aligning with a focus on consumption in other sectors (Mhlanga et al., 2018; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018). Similar patterns existed with other SDGs, such as SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, with operations representing over a third of the total codes and SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities seeing buildings and transportation representing over 80% of their total codes.

SDGs that fall under the more ‘people’ or social focused goals than the ‘planet’ focused goals were far less frequently represented in universities top five most prevalent SDGs, which aligned universities with previous research on the lack of social SDG prioritization in policies (Forestier & Kim, 2020) with gender, poverty, health and hunger being in the top five most prevalent sustainability codes of less than three universities each. This was also the case with the most specific planet related SDGs, Life on Land and Life Below Water not featuring at all in the majority of sustainability guiding documents.

These trends continued with many of these SDGs being among the least represented overall. Gender (n=33), Poverty (n=32) and Life Below Water (n=27) were almost exclusively represented in the five least represented SDGs or tied for the least represented, with these not being represented in many cases. The only SDG to not feature as one of the five least prevalent at any university was energy.

The strong focus on many of the environmental aspects such as energy and waste also point to the fact that in many cases, universities remain focused on the operational aspects of sustainability, at least at the top level (Vaughter et al., 2016). While other areas such the social aspects are often left out of sustainability policies recent research has found that such expansive definitions are seen as an important growth opportunity for future policies bringing together sustainability and adjacent offices such as Equity, however their delegation to other offices has limited cooperation (Dickson, 2025). Some of the continued focus on environmentally focused areas of sustainability could be in search of legitimizing them in the eyes of various stakeholders as universities look to make their sustainability policies align with their other priorities (Hengst et al., 2020). Broadly, universities appear to recognize the accountability that they have as large actors in sustainability, however to this point, their role is relatively minimal (Schaltegger et al., 2019; Koziol-Nadolna & Beyer, 2021). Given the significant role that universities play in sustainability decisions in Canada and more widely, these results have significant implications for thinking about both what aspects of sustainability are prioritized within universities and also how the drivers differ in this unique semi-public environment.

Conclusion

This research presents some of the earliest results of its kind focusing on the sustainability priorities present in the Canadian higher education context. While some past work has explored sustainability integration in smaller studies, there remained a dearth of research focused on the unique context of Canadian universities. As such, this research gives important context and background to the field of sustainability governance in the Canadian semi-public sector, and provides a starting point for future work in this area.

Significant findings note that across Canada, planet SDGs, in particular focused on cities, general climate action and consumption are prioritized in university sustainability documents, with other areas seen as falling outside of the scope of many universities’ sustainability offices’ actions. This was consistent across the country, with small regional variations in areas such as

energy and waste seeing lower prioritization in regions explained by lack of regional focus. This research serves as an important jumping off point for future research on sustainability prioritization at universities, as well as opportunities for universities to interrogate their own sustainability foci within sustainability documents.

Limitations of this study include its relatively small sample size by being limited to just universities in Canada. This results in a relatively small 'n' sample that means that statistical analyses were not possible. Importantly as well, this research only included those universities that currently have a codified sustainability direction and therefore does not explore the process or discussions around whether a sustainability policy document should even be written to create the sustainability direction and the various drivers that would contribute to this decision. Furthermore, as this research only included universities overall sustainability policy document, it is not positioned to comment on the entirety of sustainability priorities within universities from department groups, student groups, or similar, but rather is limited to commenting on the overall, high-level priorities set at an institutional level.

Future research is warranted to advance sustainability in higher education research in three areas. First, recognizing the nuanced ways in which sustainability priorities are set by different groups at universities, additional research should be done with a similar sample of Canadian universities to explore the similarities and differences between priorities set by the whole university and other groups, for example department specific sustainability policies, or student union sustainability documents. Second, research taking this work international to compare how universities of similar sizes not just within countries, but beyond countries are influenced by similar drivers would be a valuable extension and provide important comparative context. Third, given that the policies need at some point to be implemented, future research should explore the alignment of the policies with the implementation of universities sustainability actions.

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