

## For a better world or higher ranking? Investigating Hong Kong universities' efforts in promoting sustainability

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### Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

### Abstract

The integration of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into Hong Kong higher education is a growing trend, with universities leveraging their autonomy for bottom-up sustainability initiatives. The Hong Kong Sustainable Campus Consortium (HKSCC), established by eight University Grants Committee (UGC) funded universities' devoted faculty and staff members, has fostered collaboration in sharing best practices for green campuses and promoting sustainability education. However, the shift of agency in sustainability efforts from staff-led towards university-led SDG strategies signifies a move to align with university ranking criteria, reflecting a commercialization of sustainability efforts. This raises concerns about the genuine commitment to SDGs as universities may prioritize superficial ranking improvements over substantive contributions to sustainable development. For meaningful progress, universities must holistically embed sustainability across research, education, and public service, fostering an environment conducive to sustainability education and practices.

### Full paper

The integration of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into university governance, teaching and learning, and public services has become widespread in Hong Kong's higher education sector. The high-level institutional autonomy allows for a bottom-up approach in eight University Grants Committee (UGC) funded universities' sustainability initiatives. Additionally, the tradition of collaboration among these universities enables collective action to promote sustainability. In 2010, eight institutions established the Hong Kong Sustainable Campus Consortium (HKSCC) to share their sustainability efforts. HKSCC was created by passionate faculty and staff members of eight universities, and it has no administrative powers over institutions. Initially, HKSCC's focus was on creating "green campuses" to demonstrate universities' efforts in environmental protection. Gradually, HKSCC expanded its role to promote sustainability education both within and beyond the campuses (Xiong & Mok, 2020). Hong Kong universities' sustainability initiatives are inspired by sustainability accounting from the business world, with a goal to showcase their social responsibility in promoting environmental sustainability and contributing to solving complex social issues (Park & Savelyeva, 2022). Because of its excellent performance, HKSCC has received recognition within and outside eight UGC-funded universities. Within the campuses, HKSCC has received the trust of the senior management in leading sustainability-related activities and initiatives. Outside the universities, HKSCC has been playing a significant consultative role in sharing good sustainability practices with UGC and the Hong Kong

government. Moreover, HKSCC began to generate funds from projects sponsored by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, which has further ensured the sustainable development of the consortium itself (HKSCC, 2021).

HKSCC is a manifestation of the academic activism in climate change by eight universities' devoted faculty and staff members. Initially, HKSCC was a sharing platform that exchanged good practices on green campuses. However, it has now evolved into a significant organization that leads sustainability events and education in Hong Kong higher education. However, with the increasingly important focus on SDGs in higher education, HKSCC has been treated as a significant way for the universities to prove their efforts in sustainability. Consequently, some UGC-funded universities began to subtly take over the lead in sustainability efforts by creating university-wide SDG strategies covering all aspects of institutional operations.

If we explore the reasons behind the shift of agency for sustainability efforts from faculty and staff members to the university level, it is not hard to notice the pragmatic reason that is closely related to university rankings. This trend reflects the commercialisation of higher education due to the growing influence of neoliberalism in the sector. While social responsibility was the primary concern in the early stages of Hong Kong universities' sustainability initiatives, the emergence of rankings such as *THE* University Impact Rankings and QS sustainability ranking has led some UGC-funded universities to prioritise sustainability efforts that align with the ranking criteria with significant financial and human capital investment. As a result, the university has become the dominant agent in the sustainability efforts, which has shifted the primary focus from contributing to achieving SDGs to superficially meeting the criteria of SDGs-related rankings. In some cases, universities have used sustainability efforts solely as a tool to improve their rankings (i.e., adding SDGs logos into course syllabi), without actually making significant contributions towards sustainable development.

Higher education can play a vital role in sustainability-related activism, primarily due to its function in "public service". However, if universities focus only on short-term or cost-effective results for their investments in sustainability efforts, it raises questions about their actual commitment to creating a better world or whether they are just aiming for higher ranks in major league tables. To truly lead in sustainability efforts, universities must integrate sustainability into every aspect of their operations, including research, teaching and learning, and social services. Moreover, they need to create favourable conditions for students and faculty members to learn, teach, and practice sustainability.

## References

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