Information Management and Business Review (ISSN 2220-3796)
Vol. 17, No. 3(S), pp. 172-183, 2025

Steering Through Multi-Level Contradictions: Paradoxical Leadership in the Sustainability Transition of Malaysian Higher Education

Ashman Shahrudin Bin Khairuddin
School of Business & Management, University of Technology Sarawak, Sibu, Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: ashman.shahrudin@uts.edu.my, ashmankhairuddin@gmail.com

Abstract: Sustainability leaders in Malaysian higher education navigate paradoxes embedded in institutional efforts to implement sustainability agendas. By drawing on comparative case studies of two public and two private universities, it reveals how leaders confront multi-level tensions ranging from macro-level policy ambitions to individual-level ethical dilemmas. These tensions include national policy ambitions versus limited support, organizational growth imperatives versus environmental commitments, and individual ethics versus pragmatic workload demands. Using semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and limited observation, this study investigates how these tensions are nested and cascading in nature: contradictions at one level intensify dilemmas at another. Leaders adopted dynamic strategies (e.g. symbolic gestures, temporal and spatial separation, and integrative reframing) to cope with or manage paradoxes. Notably, public and private universities differed in these tensions and the dominant logic driving responses: Public institutions leaned toward symbolic and compliance strategies due to bureaucratic constraints, while Private institutions pursued integration framed within market imperatives. The findings contribute to paradox theory by illustrating how sustainability tensions are experienced and managed across institutional levels. The study also offers practical insights into developing leadership capabilities, aligning HRM systems with sustainability goals, and fostering multi-level coherence in sustainability governance. These insights are especially pertinent for universities seeking to advance meaningful sustainability transformations amid persistent structural and ideological contradictions.

Keywords: *Sustainability Leader; Higher Education; Malaysia; Paradox Theory; Comparative Case Study*

1. Introduction

Universities and other learning institutions are likely to play a significant role in advancing sustainable development, but they often face competing pressures that make this role inherently paradoxical. Higher education institutions are simultaneously "knowledge centers" and organizational actors, subjected to financial, political, and societal demands. The Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint 2015–2025 embeds sustainability principles into the national strategy by calling on universities to develop graduates with fitting sustainability values, knowledge, and skills. Universities are urged to serve as living spaces for sustainable solutions and to inculcate social and environmentally responsible behaviors in students. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency requires undergraduate programs to integrate competencies related to global sustainability. In line with these mandates, many Malaysian universities-public and private alike-launched green campus initiatives, sustainability centers and curriculum reforms.

Nonetheless, implementation lags aspiration. Research on Malaysian higher education finds that despite widespread adoption of sustainability policies (e.g., participation in sustainability-oriented rankings), institutions encounter numerous challenges in practice (Muhiddin et al., 2023; Isa et al., 2021). Some of the challenges include limited funding for sustainability projects, a lack of training and awareness among faculty, and weak incentives for long-term transformation. Another study reported that Malaysian academics' readiness to teach and pursue sustainable education is hampered by a lack of knowledge, time, and motivation, alongside insufficient institutional support (Yang et al., 2024). Therefore, university leaders operate in an environment where they are expected to "do more with less" – championing sustainability agendas without proportionate increases in resources. These circumstances give rise to paradoxical tensions. A paradox refers to "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously" and persist over time, creating an ongoing dynamic that cannot be resolved by simple trade-offs (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Unlike a linear problem that can be solved sequentially, paradoxes require stakeholders to pursue dual goals at once – an often-uncomfortable balancing act. In the context of university sustainability, leaders find themselves pulled between opposing demands. For instance, a university might want to invest in solar panels, extensive community outreach, or comprehensive sustainability education, but concurrently face pressure to cut costs, maximize

student enrollment, and boost global rankings. The result is a set of enduring tensions: should the university prioritize "planet" or "profit"? Is its mission to serve the "public good" or to compete in the education market? These questions encapsulate paradoxes of purpose and performance.

Public universities in Malaysia are expected to uphold national development goals and community well-being, yet government funding mechanisms and KPI regimes emphasize research output and financial self-sufficiency. Private universities, on the other hand, are encouraged by policymakers to innovate and contribute to social outcomes, even as they receive no government bailouts and must survive on tuition revenue and market appeal. This creates what one Ministry official described as a "be altruistic but also survive on your own dime" mandate — a macro-level paradox echoed in institutional strategy and daily decision-making. Understanding how university leaders navigate these tensions is both theoretically and practically significant. Organizational theory suggests that embracing a "both/and" mindset (acknowledging and working through paradoxes) is crucial for sustainability, as opposed to an "either/or" approach that forces trade-offs. Yet, empirical studies in the higher education context remain limited. Much of the literature on sustainability in universities focuses on what universities should do (e.g., curriculum changes, campus greening) rather than how internal actors manage the conflicting demands involved (the process of change). Moreover, studies often examine a single level – for instance, analyzing sustainability policies at the institutional level, or surveying student attitudes at the individual level – without connecting these multiple levels.

This study addresses these gaps by examining sustainability leadership through a multi-level paradox lens. We focus on Malaysian higher education as a critical context: Malaysia is a nation actively pursuing sustainable development goals and urging educational reforms, yet it also contends with pressures of a developing economy and an evolving higher education landscape.

2. Literature Review

Sustainability and Paradox in Higher Education

Sustainability and Paradox in Higher Education Universities are positioned as frontrunners in sustainability transitions, integrating environmental and social responsibilities into their traditional missions of teaching, research, operations, and community engagement (Kemp & Scoffham, 2022). Accordingly, sustainable practices aiming to balance economic, social, and environmental values have gathered significant scholarly interest (Sitong, 2022). Sustainable leadership requires creating an organizational culture and strategic practices that support long-term sustainability goals without compromising academic excellence or financial stability (Lewis et al., 2014; Leal Filho et al., 2009). However, research highlights that many organizational actors still demonstrate limited awareness or capability regarding sustainable leadership practices due to insufficient training and exposure (Vesudevan et al., 2025). Empirical studies have also shown that targeted capacity-building initiatives significantly enhance university actors' understanding and engagement in sustainability (Umar et al., 2025).

The incorporation of sustainability into higher education implicates dealing with multiple conflicting demands; due to universities' complex roles as educational institutions and market actors (Blanco-Portela et al., 2017).
Existing literature conceptualizes these inherent conflicts as paradoxes—persistent tensions involving contradictory yet interdependent objectives that must be managed concurrently rather than resolved through trade-offs (Schaefer, 2019). Scholars like Hahn et al. (2015) and Van der Byl and Slawinski (2015) argue that sustainability management should move beyond an "either/or" mindset — toward a "both/and" approach, actively engaging with paradoxes to foster integrative solutions.

Empirical studies further demonstrate how paradoxes manifest in specific institutional contexts. One prevalent example is the "academic vs. commercial mission" paradox. Studies show that universities often experience identity tensions between upholding traditional scholarly values and navigating increasingly competitive market dynamics (Spinrad et al., 2022; Besharov & Smith, 2014). Quantitative research by Clarke and Crane (2018); as well as Kleinman (2010) indicates that universities prioritizing commercial imperatives may exhibit measurable improvements in short-term financial performance, but risk undermining long-term sustainability objectives and academic integrity. Qualitative studies similarly recorded how university leaders reconcile these conflicting priorities daily, often feeling compelled to balance immediate market-driven demands with their

institution's social and educational missions (Christiansen et al., 2024; Hardman, 2023). Another significant paradox highlighted in the literature is the tension between short-term performance pressures and long-term sustainability investments (Luo et al., 2020); as organizations recognize that sustainability projects (e.g. infrastructure retrofits, curricular integration) generate potential benefits, but face immediate financial, or resource limitations that make such initiatives challenging (Jay, 2013). Empirical qualitative evidence from recent case studies (de Villiers et al., 2025) reveals how faculty members navigate these temporal tensions through practices like incremental changes and symbolic compliance — leading to incomplete, or superficial sustainability results.

Systemic Multi-Level Paradoxes

The literature has increasingly emphasized the systemic nature of sustainability paradoxes across macro (external policy), meso (organizational strategy), and micro (individual actor) levels (Carmine & De Marchi, 2023; Schad et al., 2016). For instance, macro-level government mandates require universities to pursue ambitious sustainability goals without allocating sufficient resources, creating "policy vs. resources" tensions that cascade downward, impacting organizational strategy and HRM practices (Smith & Besharov, 2019). At the organizational level, universities wrestle with balancing conflicting strategic priorities-such as aligning social and environmental sustainability with financial imperatives-which in turn generate contradictions at the functional (HRM) and individual employees (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

The encounter between paradox theory and sustainability has been explored through various conceptual lenses. Some studies apply paradox thinking to specific organizational functions, while others examine tensions across multiple dimensions of sustainability. With particular reference to the HR function (to be discussed in more detail later in this chapter). Ehnert (2009) applies a paradox perspective to people management and highlights several key contradictions — identify an efficiency–responsibility paradox (pursuing economic performance goals while maintaining social responsibility), a consumption–reproduction paradox (deploying employees to meet immediate objectives while sustaining their long-term well-being and capacity), and a present–future paradox (addressing current workforce needs versus investing in future human resources).

Recent qualitative research by Bohunovsky et al. (2023) empirically supports these theoretical propositions, highlighting how university leaders navigate these multi-level paradoxes through strategies such as acceptance, compartmentalization, and integration. Their findings underscore that leaders often employ dynamic equilibrium strategies—actively balancing competing tensions over time rather than permanently resolving them (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This multi-level perspective, therefore, provides a comprehensive understanding of why university sustainability initiatives may falter or flourish in practice.

Contextual Differences: Public vs. Private

Institutional and contextual variances significantly influence the manifestation and navigation of sustainability paradoxes. Public universities normally face bureaucratic hurdles, resource limitations, and pressures to align closely with national sustainability goals-experiencing pronounced "mandate vs. means" paradoxes (Bohunovsky et al., 2023; Milosevic et al., 2023). Conversely, private universities, driven by market competition and branding imperatives, encounter intense "mission vs. market" tensions-often resorting to symbolic sustainability actions to improve reputational appeal (Quaresma et al., 2024).

Public institutions, constrained by regulation and financial limitations, resort to incremental and defensive responses, by negotiating tensions through pragmatic compromises and incremental adaptations (Abo-Khalil, 2024). Private universities frequently leverage sustainability initiatives as marketing tools, employing strategies such as externally visible symbolic compliance combined with internal resource prioritization (Sutawaidjaya et al., 2024; Castro-Gómez et al., 2024). By reproducing these understandings, this study strengthens the theoretical foundation of paradox management within university sustainability transitions. Moreover, it highlights the importance of empirical evidence in demonstrating the tangible impacts of paradox navigation in institutional sustainability settings.

3. Methodology

Research Design

To explore the complex ways in which sustainability leaders navigate multi-level paradoxes, this study adopted a qualitative multi-level comparative case study design. This method is fitting for this inquiry because it enables an in-depth exploration of contemporary phenomena within their real-life context and facilitates the generation of processual and contextual insights (Avery et al., 2011; Yin, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989). I selected four case studies, each centered on sustainability leaders at a Malaysian higher education institution (through sustainability-oriented rankings), with two cases representing public universities and two representing private universities. Using multiple cases with contrasting institutional types follows a theoretical replication logic: I anticipated that all cases would exhibit the phenomenon of interest (paradoxical sustainability tensions), reinforcing the general theoretical pattern, while differences between public and private contexts would illuminate how context influences paradox navigation. This design thus allows both common themes to emerge and contextual nuances to be examined.

Each "case" in our study is defined as the experience of a sustainability leader implementing sustainability initiatives in their university, analyzed across multiple levels (macro, organizational, HRM, individual). While the leader is the focal point, we also consider their institutional environment and stakeholder interactions as part of the case. All four leaders held roles that involve steering sustainability or related change programs at their institution (e.g., Director of Sustainability Office, Deputy Vice Chancellor for Sustainability or Community Engagement, or equivalent positions). To preserve anonymity, we assign pseudonyms: Public Uni A and Public Uni B for the public university cases, and Private Uni C and Private Uni D for the private university cases. The selected public universities are large, comprehensive institutions (each with >20,000 students) with established reputations and significant government funding; the private universities are mid-sized to large (5,000–15,000 students) and among the leading private institutions in Malaysia, known for innovative programs. This selection aimed for diversity in the institutional context while ensuring that each leader had a clear sustainability mandate.

The primary objective of this study is to explore how university leaders in Malaysia interpret and manage sustainability-related paradoxes across macro, organizational, HRM functional, and individual levels. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do university leaders perceive sustainability-related paradoxes at different institutional levels?
- What strategies do university leaders employ to manage these paradoxical tensions?
- How do contextual differences between public and private universities influence paradox management?

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to identify senior leaders explicitly responsible for driving sustainability initiatives in their respective institutions. Selection criteria included individuals holding formal roles associated with sustainability, such as Director of Sustainability, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Sustainability, or equivalent positions. Institutions were chosen based on their recognized commitment to sustainability and contrasting institutional contexts (public vs. private).

Access to participants was negotiated through formal requests to institutional gatekeepers and direct outreach. Initial participants were asked to recommend additional informants, thus employing snowball sampling to include a broader range of stakeholder perspectives. The final sample included four sustainability leaders and an additional 14 stakeholders (senior administrators, middle managers, academics, operational staff, and external representatives). Challenges in recruitment included scheduling constraints and limited access to certain senior officials. Two potential participants declined participation due to time constraints, necessitating additional snowball sampling to maintain diversity in perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, complemented by limited direct observations and document analysis to enhance data triangulation. Each primary sustainability leader participated in two in-depth interviews (approximately 90 minutes each), conducted either face-to-face or via

video conferencing over a period of six months. Interviews explored participants' interpretations of sustainability paradoxes, management strategies, and contextual influences.

Additional shorter interviews (30–60 minutes) with other institutional stakeholders provided complementary insights and validation of findings. Limited direct observations were conducted at sustainability-related meetings and events in two institutions, providing contextual depth. Institutional documents such as strategic plans, sustainability policies, annual reports, and public communications were systematically reviewed to corroborate interview findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method. This method was selected for its suitability in identifying patterns across a complex, multi-case dataset while allowing the researcher to remain grounded in the contextual richness of each university setting. The process was iterative and interpretive, moving between inductive coding based on participants' narratives and deductive reflection guided by paradox theory and sustainability literature:

In the first phase, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised. Transcripts were read multiple times to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Initial codes were generated using NVivo software, capturing descriptive elements such as "conflicting KPIs," "symbolic action," or "policy disillusionment." These were clustered under preliminary categories such as "macro tensions," "HR contradictions," and "emotional responses." The second phase involved a process of axial coding to identify relationships between initial codes, especially in how tensions unfolded across institutional levels. For example, codes related to "funding cuts" at the macro level were frequently linked to "coping strategies" or "symbolic sustainability" at the individual level. This informed the construction of a matrix that traced the movement and amplification of paradoxes across macro, meso, HRM, and micro layers.

To ensure analytic rigour, triangulation was employed using official documents, strategic plans, HRM reports, and external communications from each institution. These materials were cross-referenced with interview data to validate participants' accounts and enhance interpretive credibility. In one case, internal HR documents confirmed that sustainability KPIs had indeed been introduced but carried little performance weight—validating staff frustrations expressed during interviews.

Thematic categories were then finalised around recurring patterns of nested paradoxes, strategic responses, contextual contrasts between public and private institutions, and framing mechanisms. Each theme was refined to reflect conceptual clarity and empirical coherence. Reflexive memos were maintained throughout to track the researcher's interpretive decisions and emerging insights.

Finally, cross-case analysis enabled comparative interpretation. While each university presented unique circumstances, commonalities were identified in how sustainability paradoxes cascaded across levels and how leaders navigated these tensions. This multi-level lens, combined with thematic coding, allowed the study to develop a nuanced understanding of paradox dynamics in higher education sustainability leadership. The integration of theory-driven coding with empirical grounding helped ensure that the analysis was both contextually rich and analytically rigorous. This analytic approach aligned with the study's aim to explore how university leaders interpret and respond to sustainability paradoxes across institutional levels, offering new insights into the lived realities of paradox navigation in Malaysian higher education.

4. Findings

The findings will present within-case analyses of the four university cases, highlighting the key paradoxical challenges and responses at each level (macro, organizational, HRM, individual) for each organization. Then, it will provide a cross-case comparison by drawing out patterns, and contrasts between public vs. private institutions.

Case 1: Public Uni A

At the macro level, Dr. Arif operated within an environment marked by significant expectations for

sustainability alongside stark resource constraints. He described a paradox whereby national policymakers advocate sustainability initiatives, yet do not allocate adequate funding. He asserted:

"Every speech by the government praises and pushes universities for undertaking sustainability… but when budget time comes, there's no allocated fund for it."

Official budget documents confirmed these funding limitations, revealing significant cuts to sustainability-related expenditures despite high-level policy commitments. Additionally, national research performance metrics favored indexed publications, clashing with community-focused sustainability projects. As Dr. Arif clarified exemplifying tensions between local community engagement and institutional recognition:

"If we organize a community project that isn't easily publishable, it doesn't count much toward our performance metrics".

At the organizational level, Public Uni A faced tensions between its public service undertaking, and internal financial pressures to generate income through market-driven initiatives. Dr. Arif highlighted this as an ongoing struggle: *"There's always back and forth between doing the 'sustainable thing' and doing the economically feasible thing."* Strategic planning documents established these contradictions, outlining ambitious sustainability objectives alongside aggressive revenue generation targets. Moreover, leadership changes exacerbated this tension, causing disruptions to the sustainability program continuity. Dr. Arif further explained the difficulty in maintaining momentum:

"We had momentum with our urban farming project, but after the leadership change, attention shifted elsewhere, and I had to re-justify the project again."

At the HRM department, institutional reward systems remained inconsistent or misaligned with sustainability objectives. Formal appraisal criteria underlined traditional academic outputs, significantly undervaluing sustainability-related contributions. One of the faculty members frankly expressed her frustration:

"I love working on the campus recycling campaign and community collaborations, but end of the day, my tenure depends on publishing in journals."

HR policy documents verified this emphasis; detailing appraisal systems predominantly focused on research productivity metrics. Furthermore, the university's well-being initiatives, designed to promote a supportive culture, experienced limited participation due to conflicting signals from middle management prioritizing efficiency over employee wellness.

Individually, employees at Public Uni A grappled with the tension between deep personal commitment to sustainability and the practical realities of institutional constraints. The employees employed various strategies to cope, such as symbolic compliance — small, visible actions like tree-planting events designed to maintain visibility for sustainability initiatives without significant institutional investment. Reflecting on faculty disillusionment, one of the respondents stated, *"I fear the most committed people will get disheartened. We risk losing champions."* This statement underlines a significant individual-level paradox between idealistic values vs. practical career demands.

Case 2: Public Uni B

At the institutional level, Public Uni B was initially given governmental support for an experimental sustainable campus initiative but faced the abrupt withdrawal of funding following political shifts. Policy documents and government communications verified these inconsistencies, documenting the termination of funds after initial support. Prof. Beatrice described her difficulty of sustaining commitments amidst policy volatility — exemplifying a paradox of policy consistency vs. institutional continuity. Furthermore, strict regulations delayed sustainability initiatives requiring external partnerships — demonstrating a tension between public accountability vs. institutional flexibility.

Organizationally, sustainability efforts in the university were confronted by entrenched departmental

autonomy, and a compliance-driven culture. Prof. Beatrice described resistance from departments that are unwilling to adapt operations without guaranteed resources, noting specifically the facilities department's reluctance to implement recycling initiatives:

"They basically told me: we'll recycle when you find the budget to pay for extra bins and pickup. The university is already struggling financially, as it is"

The statement was corroborated with internal meeting minutes, stating departmental challenges, documenting repeated delays and hesitations due to budgetary concerns. This illustrates the paradoxical tensions of decentralized decision-making, and centralized sustainability goals.

At the HRM level, integrating sustainability in performance metrics produced mixed results. Sustainability-related KPIs were treated superficially, resulting in tokenistic actions. Prof. Beatrice commented on the subsequent staff cynicism, where sustainability activities were reduced to *"tick-box"* exercises. According to a staff survey, it revealed dissatisfaction because of the superficial nature of these initiatives. Training sessions to improve sustainability awareness were viewed as secondary distractions, rather than integral professional development opportunities — revealing tensions between immediate operational duties vs. long-term capacity building.

Individually, the employees experienced role conflict given their multiple roles and responsibilities. The majority of respondents admitted initial unaccustomedness with sustainability but developed a real passion through experience. Nonetheless, feelings of isolation have arisen from being the singular voice for advocating sustainability at senior meetings. One of the sustainability administrators said:

"At times, I felt like the only one speaking about sustainability in meetings. It was indeed isolating, but I reminded myself that even small steps matter. Celebrating little wins kept me going, even if big changes were slower to come."

In this statement, the respondent managed these tensions by celebrating incremental achievements and accepting gradual institutional change as a realistic approach.

Case 3: Private Uni C

At the institutional level, Private Uni C faced tensions stemming from sustainability initiatives that are driven by reputational motives. Strategic branding documents revealed deliberate selections to highlight sustainability initiatives for external recognition and competitive differentiation. Ms. Cahaya highlighted symbolic commitments made for external recognition without corresponding with internal resource support — capturing the paradox of authenticity vs. reputational ambition. She further elaborated:

"When we talk about sustainability at the strategic level, it always turns into a marketing exercise. I've been in meetings where we spend more time discussing how our initiatives will look on the website, than what the university actually achieves. We'd announce bold green pledges, without any budget to back them up, and that creates a disconnect among top managers. As someone who cares about this work, it was hard to realise that our authenticity is at risk."

The statement of making "bold green pledges without any budget to back them up" highlights the paradox of promoting sustainability to enhance reputation, while failing to allocate the resources needed for substantive action. This tension resonates with the macro-level finding that Private Uni C's sustainability agenda was driven by reputational motives, rather than real transformation.

Within the organization, Ms. Cahaya navigated significant mission vs. margin paradoxical tensions. Despite widely integrating sustainability into academic programs, financial viability and student recruitment imperatives took precedence. Internal correspondence indicated that sustainability measures were subordinated to marketing and enrolment objectives. She recounted scenarios where sustainability efforts, such as energy-saving measures were compromised due to concerns about student satisfaction and the university's market position. She further elaborated:

"The university says sustainability matters and even built it into our performance reviews, but in practice, research outputs and student recruitment numbers still carry the most weight. I remember proposing an energy-saving measure and being told it might make classrooms slightly warmer, which could affect the student experience."

At the HR department, although formal incorporation of sustainability criteria into performance assessments, traditional academic metrics remained dominant in actual promotion and compensation. Staff felt undervalued for their sustainability contributions, highlighting discrepancies between institutional rhetoric and practical incentives. Formal HR policy documents confirmed these discrepancies — outlining broad appraisal criteria that nonetheless heavily favoured traditional research outputs (e.g. only 2.5% towards green contributions).

Independently, the respondents balanced their background as a sustainability advocate, with institutional business constraints, developing a "bilingual", or both/and approach to communicate effectively across both domains (sustainability and market-driven domains). Although occasionally experiencing disillusionment from stalled sustainability initiatives, employees found motivation in small successes, mainly through student enthusiasm and participation.

Case 4: Private Uni D

At the macro level, Private Uni D experienced tensions occurring from corporate directives mandating rapid sustainability improvements without adequate funds. Corporate sustainability frameworks explicitly outlined ambitious targets without corresponding resource allocation, further exemplifying these tensions. Mr. Devon described situations where locally and internationally imposed sustainability targets were superficially addressed due to insufficient funding or planning time — exemplifying an efficiency vs. substance paradox.

Within the strategic or corporate sphere, the institutional expansion has caused the sidelining of sustainability concerns. Mr. Devon noted how sustainability considerations (e.g. environmentally friendly infrastructure) were deprioritized in favour of speedy facility development. Internal planning documents validated these priorities, highlighting skin-tight timelines, and rushed construction schedules that omitted substantial sustainability features.

At the HRM level, Private Uni D's efforts to institutionalize sustainability faced limitations due to structural immaturity and competing operational pressures. Mr. Devon initiated the inclusion of sustainability-related responsibilities into select job descriptions and KPIs, such as assigning departments to oversee events like Sustainability Week. However, HR records indicated that these additions were inconsistently applied and weakly enforced. Some department heads acknowledged the inclusion of sustainability goals but deprioritized them in favour of more urgent revenue or enrolment KPIs. As one internal HR respondent noted:

"Sustainability indicators have been introduced but remain largely symbolic until supported by clear performance weighting or resource allocation. At the moment, as I have explained, we have other priorities in mind"

This created a classic priority paradox of commitment without operational follow-through.

Individually, the respondents experienced deep personal commitment to sustainability, but lacked institutional recognition, role clarity, or support. Mr. Devon was appointed informally as Sustainability Coordinator, yet he received no additional compensation or authority. His faculty workload remained unchanged, forcing him to juggle academic duties with sustainability tasks. Internal email correspondence, and task logs exposed extensive self-initiated efforts, including grant applications and inter-departmental coordination, conducted outside official work hours. To navigate this tension, Mr. Dev adopted a pragmatic and relational approach, leveraging informal networks, student enthusiasm, and symbolic acts (e.g. hosting tree-planting ceremonies during corporate visits) to raise visibility. He employed humour and long-term framing — referring to himself as the *"Head Green Officer with no income"*— to normalize the sustainability paradoxes and maintain morale. Although receiving inadequate institutional backing, he remained committed to spearheading cultural change.

Discussion

This study provides empirical validation for the nested and systemic nature of sustainability paradoxes in higher education, affirming theoretical claims by Carmine & De Marchi (2023), and Schad et al. (2016)

regarding the interconnection of paradoxes across institutional levels. The cases illustrate how macro-level contradictions (e.g., sustainable policy and ambition vs. funding constraints) cascade through organizational strategies, HR practices, and individual experiences. For instance, policy-level tensions in Public Uni A and B (e.g., national mandates for sustainability without corresponding budgetary support) translated into organizational dilemmas and eventually created individual strain among leaders and faculty. On the other hand, Private Uni C and D experienced a prominent paradox in sustainable policies vs. marketing commitments that also cascaded downwards. Thus, these paradoxes were not isolated; they formed reinforcing loops as misalignments at one level exacerbated contradictions at other levels. This was particularly evident when organizational reward systems misaligned with sustainability priorities — demotivating individuals despite formal institutional commitments. Moreover, the persistence of paradox across levels required leaders to respond not only to immediate dilemmas but also to long-term structural misalignments, highlighting the enduring nature of these tensions.

Across the four cases, sustainability leaders adopted a range of paradox management/navigation strategies that align with Smith and Lewis's (2011) dynamic equilibrium model. These included:

- Integration strategies were evident — leaders sought to reconcile competing objectives by reframing tensions as complementary. Ms Cahaya at Private Uni C linked sustainability to student recruitment goals, thus aligning environmental efforts with marketing.
- Separation strategies were evident — spatial or temporal separation of conflicting goals. Mr. Devon at Private Uni D manages low-budget pilot projects, insulated from mainstream operations to test feasibility, before requesting formal institutional support.
- Acceptance strategies were evident — leaders acknowledged unresolved contradictions and focused on symbolic compliance or incremental progress. Prof. Beatrice at Public Uni B adopted this stance when state-level support was rescinded mid-project.

These strategies were not mutually exclusive; rather, leaders/managers adopted them contingent on the context, resources, and institutional culture. Furthermore, their effectiveness is mixed (e.g. integration strategies were more impactful when supported by leadership or aligned with incentives, while separation often risked marginalising sustainability as a peripheral concern). The data reveal important contextual differences in how public and private universities experience and respond to sustainability paradoxes. These differences reflect institutional logics — public service logic in public universities vs. market logic in private universities — and formed the nature, intensity, and framing of paradoxes.

Table 1: Key Differences in Sustainability Paradoxes: Public vs. Private Universities

Dimension	Public Universities (Uni A & B)	Private Universities (Uni C & D)
Macro Paradox	Policy mandates vs. lack of funding	Branding commitments vs. limited investment
Organizational Tension	Mission vs. financial sustainability	Mission vs. market growth
HRM Paradox	Standardised civil service KPIs vs. sustainability engagement	Flexible KPIs but weak enforcement of sustainability indicators
Individual Tension	Passion vs. burnout in rigid bureaucracy	Passion vs. instrumentalization under market pressures
Navigation Strategy	Symbolic compliance, defensive adaptation	Integration, compartmentalised pilots

Table 1 reviews the patterns observed across institutional types. Public universities grappled more with bureaucratic constraints, rigid HR systems, and discontinuous leadership. Sustainability initiatives were often undermined by erratic policy support and fixed-term appointments — as leaders in these settings tended to rely on defensive or compliance-based strategies. In contrast, private universities, while having greater flexibility, experienced sharper paradoxes between sustainability values vs. commercial imperatives — as their leaders leaned more toward entrepreneurial and integrative approaches but faced resistance from market-

driven boards or profit-centred authority.

Another contribution of this study is the identification of strategic framing as a cognitive and relational tool for navigating paradox. Leaders shifted their communication depending on the audience, purpose, and institutional priorities, tailoring their narratives to resonate with differing stakeholder logics. Such framing practices demonstrate the importance of leadership agility. By using translation, symbolism, and humour, leaders engaged in strategic sense-giving that helped manage institutional identity tensions, reduce resistance, and maintain momentum in contexts of ambiguity or constraint. Moreover, these framings helped manage institutional identity tensions, reduce resistance, and maintain momentum in contexts of ambiguity or constraint. The strategic framings evident in this study are explained below:

- Translational framing was adopted to connect sustainability to dominant institutional imperatives, thus enhancing its legitimacy and relevance. Dr. Arif at Public Uni A framed sustainability initiatives in terms of global university rankings, and cost efficiency to gain support from colleagues. By doing so, he reframed environmental projects not as idealistic ambitions, but as mechanisms for institutional advancement. This framing allowed him to position sustainability as contributing to both reputational capital and operational savings — creating a shared value narrative that aligned otherwise contradictory objectives.
- Symbolic framing was especially evident in public institutions when deeper structural changes were not feasible. Leaders often used public campaigns, green pledges, or highly visible events as symbolic gestures of commitment. Prof. Beatrice at Public Uni B, leveraged Earth Day activities and internal policy signings as ways to retain momentum and show action after the discontinuation of national sustainability funding —even when resources were lacking. Although these actions may not produce systemic change, symbolic framing played a role in preserving stakeholder engagement and institutional morale during times of constraint.
- Humour and relational framing emerged most clearly in the private cases, particularly Private Uni D. Mr. Devon often referred to himself humorously as the "Chief Green Officer with no income." He used self-deprecating humour to disarm resistance and build relationships. This strategy served a dual purpose: it acknowledged the institutional contradictions without directly confronting them, and it created a more human, relatable image of leadership. In contexts where authority was limited and sustainability was not yet embedded, humour helped regularize the paradox, and reduced defensiveness among colleagues.

5. Conclusion

Attaining holistic sustainability in higher education is a journey full of paradoxes. The study has shown that sustainability leaders in universities must steer through multi-level currents of tension: from the heights of policy and institutional mission down to the depths of personal conviction and everyday practice. Public and private universities, though differing in context, ultimately face the “both/and” challenge of integrating economic, social, and environmental goals into the fabric of academe. The four leaders studied did not resolve these paradoxes once and for all — instead learned to navigate them, employing strategies of acceptance, compromise, and innovation to keep progress moving forward without upsetting their institutions’ other commitments. The findings from these Malaysian universities tell us that sustainability tensions, added with a creative and resilient mindset, can transform seemingly intractable contradictions into manageable dualities.

This study offers several important contributions to both academic theory and institutional practice in the field of sustainability leadership. From a theoretical standpoint, the study extends paradox theory by applying it within the relatively underexplored context of higher education, particularly in a non-Western and multi-institutional setting. While most extant literature focuses on corporate organisations, our research demonstrates how paradoxes unfold in academic institutions characterised by unique governance models, competing missions, and diverse stakeholder expectations. The concept of systemic paradoxes is especially pertinent in universities, where macro-level policies, meso-level strategies, HRM systems, and micro-level behaviours are tightly interwoven. Our findings deepen Smith and Lewis’s (2011) dynamic equilibrium model by showing how paradoxes cascade and compound across levels, producing feedback loops that can either reinforce institutional inertia or, when managed well, stimulate innovation and engagement.

Practically, the study highlights the urgent need for multi-level alignment in sustainability management or navigation. Sustainability initiatives stall or remain symbolic because of misalignments between national policies, institutional strategies, HR practices, and individual incentives. Policymakers must consider how funding structures, performance audits, and regulatory mandates shape organisational behaviour in often contradictory ways. University administrators, meanwhile, must bridge top-down vision with bottom-up capacity — ensuring that sustainability commitments are resourced, rewarded, and routinised.

A key implication is the centrality of leadership development. Effective sustainability leadership requires more than technical knowledge—it demands emotional resilience, adaptive capacity, and political acuity. Training programmes should therefore include modules on paradox navigation, stakeholder management, and organisational change in complex settings. Institutions should also consider mentoring and peer learning models that allow sustainability champions to share strategies and support each other through the emotional demands of their roles. Furthermore, HRM systems must evolve to embed sustainability as a core performance domain rather than an ancillary interest. Current evaluation frameworks often marginalise sustainability work, discouraging staff from meaningful engagement. This study reveals the importance of embedding sustainability into promotion criteria, workload models, and professional development pathways. Institutions should audit their HR practices for misalignments and develop balanced scorecards or customised KPIs that reward long-term, integrative contributions. Finally, the study points to the value of cross-sectoral and cross-institutional learning. Public universities, despite bureaucratic limitations, often exhibit strong mission-driven values and community engagement traditions. Private universities, while facing market pressures, may have greater operational agility and entrepreneurial cultures. Collaboration across these institutional types could foster hybrid models that balance integrity with innovation. National platforms or consortia could play a vital role in facilitating such exchanges, sharing best practices and advocating collectively for enabling policy environments.

References

Abo-Khalil, A. G. (2024). Integrating sustainability into higher education challenges and opportunities for universities worldwide. Heliyon, 10(9).

Avery, A., Cresswell, K., Crowe, S., Huby, G., Robertson, A., & Sheikh, A. (2011). The case study approach. BMC Medical Research Methodology, 11(1), 100-108.

Besharov, M. L., & Smith, W. K. (2014). Multiple institutional logics in organizations: Explaining their varied nature and implications. Academy of Management Review, 39(3), 364–381.

Blanco-Portela, N., Benayas, J., Pertierra, L. R., & Lozano, R. (2017). Towards the integration of sustainability in Higher Education Institutions: A review of drivers of and barriers to organizational change and their comparison against those found in companies. Journal of Cleaner Production, 166, 563-578.

Bohunovsky, L., Radinger-Peer, V., Zint, M., and Penker, M. (2023). Change agents under tension: a paradox approach to strategies for transforming higher education toward sustainability. International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education, 24(9), 372-392.

Van der Byl, C. A., & Slawinski, N. (2015). Embracing tensions in corporate sustainability: A review of research from win–wins and trade-offs to paradoxes and beyond. Organization & Environment, 28(1), 54–79.

Carmine, S., & De Marchi, V. (2023). Reviewing paradox theory in corporate sustainability toward a systems perspective. Journal of Business Ethics, 184(1), 139-158.

Castro-Gómez, J., Sánchez-Torres, J. A., & Ortiz-Rendón, P. A. (2024). Influence of sustainability in the positioning of the university brand: Study in universities in Medellín-Colombia. Heliyon, 10(9).

Christiansen, S.H., Du, X. and Guerra, A.O.P.D.C., 2024. Middle Management Leadership Experiences of a Mission-Driven Innovation University Strategy. Education Sciences, 14(6), 609.

Clarke, T., & Crane, A. (2018). Cross-sector partnerships for systemic change: Systematized literature review and agenda for further research. Journal of Business Ethics, 150(2), 303–313.

Ehnert, I. (2009). Conceptual model for sustainable HRM and a paradox framework. In Sustainable Human Resource Management: A conceptual and exploratory analysis from a paradox perspective (pp. 163-181). Heidelberg: Physica-Verlag HD.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. Academy of Management Review, 14(4), 532-550.

Hahn, T., Pinkse, J., Preuss, L. and Figge, F. (2015). Tensions in corporate sustainability: Towards an integrative

framework. Journal of Business Ethics, 127(2), 297-316.

Hardman, J. C. (2023). Transformational leadership strategies in US public universities. Pepperdine University.

Isa, H. M., Sedhu, D. S., Lop, N. S., Rashid, K., Nor, O. M., & Iffahd, M. (2021). Strategies, challenges and solutions towards the implementation of a green campus in UiTM Perak. Planning Malaysia, 19.

Jay, J. (2013). Navigating paradox as a mechanism of change and innovation in hybrid organizations. Academy of Management Journal, 56(1), 137–159.

Jarzabkowski, P., Lê, J. K., & Van de Ven, A. H. (2013). Responding to competing strategic demands: How organizing, belonging, and performing paradoxes coevolve. Strategic Organization, 11(3), 245–280.

Kemp, N., & Scoffham, S. (2022). The paradox model: towards a conceptual framework for engaging with sustainability in higher education. International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education, 23(1), 4-16.

Kleinman, I.L., 2010. Academic capitalism and the community college (Doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama Libraries).

Luo, B.N., Tang, Y., Chen, E.W., Li, S. and Luo, D., 2020. Corporate sustainability paradox management: A systematic review and future agenda. Frontiers in Psychology, 11, 579272.

Milosevic, I., Bass, A. E., & Schulte, B. (2023). The interplay of conflicting and complementary institutional logics in sustainability practices. Management International Review, 63(3), 469-506.

Muhiddin, A. A. M., Isa, H. M., Sakip, S. R. M., Nor, O. M., & Sedhu, D. S. (2023). Green campus implementation in the Malaysian public universities: Challenges and solutions. *Planning Malaysia*, *21*.

Quaresma, M. L., Villalobos, C., Rojas-Murphy, A., & Molina-Salas, F. (2024). Institutional Ethos of Less Selective Massive Private Universities in Chile: Organizational Identities in a Competitive and Marketized University System. Education Sciences, 14(8), 903.

Schad, J., Lewis, M.W., Raisch, S., and Smith, W.K. (2016). Paradox research in management science: Looking back to move forward. Academy of Management Annals, 10(1), 5-64

Schaefer, S.M. (2019). Willful managerial ignorance, symbolic work and decoupling: A socio-phenomenological study of 'managing creativity'. Organization Studies, 40(9), 387-1407

Sitong, M.C., (2022). Investigating tensions in sustainability in Chinese and New Zealand business partnerships: An empirical analysis. In Leadership and China (pp. 89-119). Routledge.

Smith, W.K. and Besharov, M.L. (2019). Bowing before dual gods: How structured flexibility sustains organizational hybridity. Administrative Science Quarterly, 64(1), 1-44.

Smith, W. K., & Lewis, M. W. (2011). Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium model of organizing. Academy of Management Review, 36(2), 381-403.

Spinrad, M. L., Relles, S. R., & Watson, D. L. (2022). Not in the greater good: Academic capitalism and faculty labor in higher education. Education Sciences, 12(12), 912.

Sutawaidjaya, A. H., Yusuf, M., & Hamdi, E. (2024). Building Sustainability in Higher Education through Green Management and Innovation: A Case Study of Private Universities in Jakarta. Journal of Eco Humanism, 3(6), 1034-1047.

Umar, S. B., Ahmad, J., Mohd Bukhori, M. A. B., Ali, K. A. M., & Hussain, W. M. H. W. (2025). Transforming Higher-Education-Institutes: Impact of Change Management on Sustainable Performance Through Transformational Leadership and Knowledge Management. Sustainability, 17(6), 2445.

Vesudevan, M., Abdullah, Z., Vasudevan, A., & Qin, P. (2025). Integrating sustainable leadership in Malaysian higher education: Effective strategies for implementation and impact. Multidisciplinary Reviews, 8(4), 2025115-2025115.

De Villiers, C., Dimes, R. and Molinari, M., 2025. The role of sustainability awards in institutionalizing sustainability: Case study evidence. The British Accounting Review, p.101735.

Yang, W., Chinedu, C. C., Chen, W., Saleem, A., Ogunniran, M. O., Ñacato Estrella, D. R., & Vaca Barahona, B. (2024). Building capacity for sustainability education: An analysis of vocational teachers' knowledge, readiness, and self-efficacy. Sustainability, 16(9), 3535.

Yin, R. K. (2009). Case study research: Design and methods (Vol. 5). sage.