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Sustainability for Regions

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CASE OF THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION AT EASTERN CAPE UNIVERSITY, SOUTH AFRICA**Ntando Elliot Mpahla***Walter Sisulu University, South Africa**E-mail: nmpahla@wsu.ac.za**Received 15 March 2026; accepted 10 June 2026; published 30 June 2026*

Abstract. This study explored leadership strategies that enhance sustainability competence among education students at a selected university in the Eastern Cape. The study used a qualitative research methodology. Using a purposive sampling strategy, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 educational leaders. Document analysis from institutional policies and sustainability initiatives also formed part of the data collection. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes related to effective leadership practices, challenges, and opportunities for fostering sustainability competence. Findings revealed that academic leaders play a critical role in embedding sustainability into the curriculum and promoting a culture of sustainability among students. Participants emphasised the importance of collaborative leadership and highlighted the need for ongoing professional development in sustainability practices. Barriers identified included insufficient resources and varying levels of staff commitment. The study concludes that implementing inclusive and participatory leadership strategies is essential for developing sustainability competence in future educators. Recommendations included providing targeted professional development opportunities, enhancing collaboration between departments, and leveraging community partnerships to support sustainability initiatives. This research contributes to the knowledge base by offering insights into the role of educational leadership in advancing sustainability in higher education. It emphasises the need for educational leaders to adopt transformative leadership practices aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals. Transformative leadership shapes a more sustainable educational environment and prepares students to address future sustainability challenges effectively.

Keywords: education; leadership; sustainability; development; barriers

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development has become a central objective for higher education, prompting universities to integrate sustainability principles into their missions, curricula, research, and community engagement (Aung & Hallinger, 2022). In this context, educational leadership within faculties of education is pivotal for shaping pre-service and in-service teacher education that can catalyse sustainable practices in schools and communities (Salajegheh et al., 2020; Aung & Hallinger, 2022). This study therefore focuses on how leadership structures, governance, and faculty development converge to embed education for sustainable development (ESD) and sustainable development goals (SDG)-aligned outcomes within teacher education programs in the Eastern Cape region (Hatmansyah et al., 2021; François, 2022; Razak & Sanusi, 2023; Alharthi, 2024).

The Eastern Cape offers a compelling setting to explore how faculties of education respond to sustainability mandates amid resource and context-specific constraints. Prior work highlights that effective sustainability leadership requires aligning institutional missions with sustainability goals, fostering shared vision, and enabling distributed leadership across academic and administrative domains Aung & Hallinger (2022). However, evidence on concrete leadership practices, capacity-building for sustainability, and the translation of SDG commitments into teacher education curricula at Eastern Cape institutions remains limited. This notion underscores the need for empirical inquiry that attends to local governance, professional development, and cultural factors (Hatmansyah et al., 2021).

Guided by a synthesis of leadership for sustainability in higher education and the particularities of teacher education, this study aims to map current leadership practices related to sustainability within the Faculty of Education at the Eastern Cape University. The study also sought to analyse how educational leadership supports or constrains the integration of sustainable development into pre-service and in-service teacher education. Lastly, the study identified opportunities to strengthen capacity for sustainable leadership and practice within the faculty. By integrating theoretical insights with local governance and practice, the research contributes to understanding how educational leadership can drive sustainable development in a regional African university context (Aung & Hallinger, 2022; Yue et al., 2021; Uygur et al., 2020; Razak & Sanusi, 2023).

2. Literature Review

Sustainability leadership in higher education emphasises embedding sustainable values into the governance, administration and teaching, with an explicit aim to influence broader societal resilience (Aung & Hallinger, 2022). A scoping review framework identifies the central proposition that leadership must reorient institutional practices toward SDGs and long-term stewardship rather than short-term gains (Aung & Hallinger, 2022). This body of work argues that sustainability leadership operates through reframing institutional purpose and mobilising stakeholders, with implications for performance indicators, governance, and culture (Aung & Hallinger, 2022).

From this perspective, related higher education scholarship reinforces that leaders must cultivate an organisational climate that supports sustainability integration across domains (policy, teaching, research, operations). This also notes that leadership development should be designed to deepen the density of sustainability leadership across the university (Aung & Hallinger, 2022; Awodiji et al., 2023). Variants of sustainability leadership theory emphasise distributed leadership and stakeholder collaboration as mechanisms to sustain change and embed education and sustainable development (ESD) in institutional routines (Aung & Hallinger, 2022).

One significant aspect is that principal and teacher leadership preparation are repeatedly identified as pivotal levers for implementing ESD within school systems. In higher education, this translates to preparing educational leaders who can model and institutionalise ESD across faculties and teacher education programs (Adams et al., 2020; Francois, 2022; Aung & Hallinger, 2022). Adams et al. (2020) examine ESD in Malaysia, where indicators suggest that principal leadership preparation programs can contribute to high-performing school leadership when designed with competency standards and diverse development modalities. This understanding has implications for university-based educational leadership faculties tasked with preparing principals who can lead ESD-inclined schools (Adams et al., 2020; Barong & Musico, 2024). While focused on Malaysia, the study underscores the transferability of design features, such as competency-based standards, field experiences, and opportunities for leadership practice. These are elements relevant to the Eastern Cape University's Faculty of Education, aiming to promote sustainable development through leadership preparation (Adams et al., 2020).

Within universities, leadership development for sustainability should emphasise both instructional leadership for ESD and transformational leadership to facilitate change in school-university partnerships and curriculum reform (Francois, 2022; Aung & Hallinger, 2022). In looking further, the Namibian ESD study highlights how ESD acts as a catalyst for transformational leadership among school principals, implying that university-led professional

development can empower principals to enact sustainability-oriented transformations at scale (Kanyimba et al., 2015). Taken together, the contexts of Malaysia and Namibia suggest that Faculty of Education leaders in the Eastern Cape should prioritise capacity-building programs that blend instructional leadership for ESD with transformational opportunities for emerging and practising leaders.

Out of this context, instructional leadership remains central to integrating sustainability into teaching and learning. The stated view holds that the principal perspectives on sustainability education underscore the essential role of principals' instructional leadership in implementing education for sustainability. The notion, therefore, aligns three classic instructional leadership dimensions, such as mission, program and climate, with ESD goals (Francois, 2022). Similarly, García-Martínez et al. (2020) posit that principal trajectories emphasise the need to balance pedagogical leadership with managerial demands, highlighting the contextual nature of instructional leadership and its impact on school improvement and sustainability outcomes.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership has the potential to catalyse ESD by expanding shared responsibility, communication, and change management capabilities among principals (Kanyimba et al., 2015). This stance argues that transformational and distributed leadership facilitate the cultural and organisational shifts required for sustainable development in education (Aung & Hallinger, 2022). In sum, leadership within the Faculty of Education should cultivate instructional leadership competencies that specifically advance sustainability literacy, curriculum integration, and learning environments conducive to SDG-aligned teaching and assessment, while also fostering transformational and distributed leadership to support systemic, cross-campus, and cross-sector sustainability initiatives (García-Martínez et al., 2020; Francois, 2022; Aung & Hallinger, 2022).

Partnerships, Policy, and Governance: University–District/School Collaboration and SDG Realisation

Among the ESD aspects are partnership, policy and governance. In this context, effective leadership coordination at the university level is essential for cultivating sustainable, long-term partnerships that advance leadership development and sustainability outcomes (Coleman & Reames, 2018). Notably, the Eastern Cape political and governance landscape provides context for policy implementation challenges. Kota et al. (2018) describe governance dynamics in the Eastern Cape's education sector, illustrating how institutional instability, political interference, and financial governance issues have historically impeded performance and oversight of resources. For a Faculty of Education aiming to promote SD through leadership, these governance realities imply a need for resilient leadership preparation, governance literacy, and policy-alignment strategies that account for local political economy factors. Collectively, this argument underpins the view that strong leadership development, governance literacy, and policy alignment are essential to promoting sustainable development within Eastern Cape higher education.

Contextual Considerations: Eastern Cape, South Africa, and Related Implications

Provincial governance of education in the Eastern Cape is characterised by political and administrative complexities that influence resource distribution, accountability, and leadership stability. These realities necessitate leadership development programs within the Faculty of Education that explicitly address governance competencies, stakeholder engagement, and change management in resource-constrained, dynamic policy contexts (Kota et al., 2018). This notion emphasises that transformative leadership for sustainability in developing contexts requires adaptability to local conditions, culturally responsive leadership, and explicit attention to equity, access, and inclusion. This means that leadership models emphasising collaboration, shared vision, and professional learning communities are most effective when tailored to local contexts and policy environments (Kanyimba et al., 2015; García-Martínez et al., 2020; Huong, 2020; Karoli & Upadhyaya, 2024).

For the Eastern Cape setting, Adams et al. (2020), Francois (2022), Aung & Hallinger (2022) suggest that it is best to design and implement leadership preparation programs for the Faculty of Education that integrate

sustainability content with practical leadership experiences, including school partnerships and field-based projects aligned with SDGs. This should be followed by building capacity for distributed and transformational leadership within the faculty and in partner schools/districts to sustain ESD initiatives beyond individual champions (Aung & Hallinger, 2022). Lastly, the setting should develop governance- and policy-aware leadership training that addresses the Eastern Cape's governance context, resource constraints, and accountability structures to ensure feasible and durable sustainability programs (Kota et al., 2018).

The synthesis emphasises the convergence of instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership as vehicles for embedding sustainability within teacher education and university leadership in the Eastern Cape context. The literature suggests that leadership development in faculties of education should be designed to cultivate capabilities for curriculum integration of sustainability, partnerships with schools/districts, and governance-savvy change management, all within the local policy and governance environment of the Eastern Cape (Kota et al., 2018), (Kanyimba et al., 2015; Adams et al., 2020; García-Martínez et al., 2020; Francois, 2022; Aung & Hallinger, 2022). Where sources present competing emphases (e.g., instructional vs. transformational leadership), the review acknowledges context-dependent applicability and suggests integrated leadership development models that combine these modalities to achieve durable sustainability outcomes in higher education and partner schools (García-Martínez et al., 2020; Francois, 2022; Aung & Hallinger, 2022). The references also highlight the importance of partnerships, both for leadership development and for implementing ESD at scale, while recognising governance and policy constraints characteristic of the Eastern Cape context (Coleman & Reames, 2018; Kota et al., 2018).

However, the literature reveals recurring gaps in leadership development that fail to contextualise sustainability content with governance, policy, and local resource realities in the Eastern Cape. More than this situation, there is a need for integrated leadership models that operationalise ESD through instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership in university–district partnerships. There is also limited attention to integrating SDG curriculum and building capacity in teacher-education faculties within the Eastern Cape. All these gaps justify the study's aim to design leadership preparation and capacity-building programs that are governance-aware, integrative across instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership, and oriented toward integrating the SDGs into the curriculum in the Eastern Cape.

3. Research Methodology

The study explored how educational leadership within the Faculty of Education at an Eastern Cape university can promote sustainable development in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals and local development needs. A rigorous qualitative methodology was employed to capture the meanings, processes, and contextual factors that shape leadership practices and SD outcomes. The approach draws on interpretivist epistemology and a case-study design to illuminate how leadership enactment, policy, and organisational culture influence sustainable development in a specific university context (Kagola & Khau, 2021; Ziduli & Buka, 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024).

Research Paradigm

Interpretivism served as the philosophical lens for this qualitative study. The aim was to describe what interpretivism entails in the context of this study. Also, how it guides research design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, and how it relates to the study's theoretical frame and context (Kamara, 2021; Lopes & Vieira, 2021; Mankayi & Cheteni, 2021; Aung & Hallinger, 2022; Olawale et al., 2022; Filho et al., 2023; Filho et al., 2022; Nqabeni et al., 2024).

The paradigm also allowed for reality to be constructed through social meanings as shaped by participants' perspectives and social contexts. In other words, the interpretivist stance posits multiple, contextual realities rather

than a single objective truth, with knowledge co-constructed through interaction between researcher and participants (Nqabeni et al., 2024; (Kamara, 2021; Aung & Hallinger, 2022).

In the Eastern Cape university setting, leadership practices and SD-promoting activities are understood through the meanings leaders, academics, students, and staff assign to those practices, rather than being measured as universal constants (Aung & Hallinger, 2022). This stance led to knowledge generation through understanding lived experiences, social interactions, and cultural norms.

Research Design

A single-site case study was adopted in this study. The essence of adopting a case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of leadership processes and SD outcomes within the Eastern Cape university setting (Nqabeni et al., 2024). The rationale for choosing an Eastern Cape university was to align it with regional scholarship on social transformation and SD in higher education institutions (HEIs), and to capture local governance practices, community engagement, and resource constraints that shape SD efforts (Ziduli & Buka, 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024).

Population and Sampling Strategy

The population for this study comprised leaders from the faculty of education. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who are knowledgeable about educational leadership and SD initiatives within the Faculty of Education. The participants included one (01) Executive Dean, one (01) Deputy Executive Dean, six (06) Heads of Departments and four (04) Senior Lecturers. The number of 12 selected leadership actors and participants was guided by data saturation. This sampling approach draws on prior qualitative designs that used purposive sampling to gain depth of insight into leadership and SD practices in similar contexts (Ziduli & Buka, 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024).

Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The mere purpose was to elicit perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of leadership practices and SD promotion from educational leaders in the faculty of education. An interview guide was informed by the theoretical framework (transformative leadership and SD in HEIs) and prior studies on leadership and SD. Questions explore leadership actions, decision-making, stakeholder engagement, resource allocation, policy alignment with SDGs, measurement of SD progress, challenges, and opportunities. Interviews were conducted in person and via video conference. An audio recording with consent was arranged, and the conversation was transcribed verbatim. A special arrangement was made with the participants to conduct interviews. This arrangement was meant to avoid distraction from their daily work schedule.

The documents analysed comprised sources from Official strategy documents, SD action plans, annual reports, policy briefs, minutes from leadership meetings, curricula related to SD, and internal communications. These documents enabled the researcher to triangulate interview data with formal policies and actual practices; to trace alignment between stated SD goals and enacted leadership. This also helped to build a coherent understanding of leadership roles in SD promotion. In fact, documents are themselves social texts that reflect and shape meaning-making within the university context (Filho et al., 2022; Filho et al., 2023; Nqabeni et al., 2024).

Data Analysis

Data was analysed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible, theory-neutral method for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data. In this study, thematic analysis provided a rigorous, transparent approach to foreground leaders' experiences, perceptions, and practices, while allowing the researcher to surface context-specific factors that shape SD work in the setting under study (Vaughter et al., 2022; Nqabeni et al., 2024; Matandela, Chisale & Matahela, 2025). Through thematic

analysis, the researcher began with open coding to capture salient ideas from the data, then incorporated codes derived from established leadership-for-sustainability literatures to situate findings within broader discourses, while preserving data-grounded meanings from the Eastern Cape context. Such a stance allowed to describe the leadership practices that exist and to interpret how these practices enable or constrain SD progression, including contextual drivers such as the policy environment, resource constraints, and organisational culture (Vaughter et al., 2022; Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023).

The researcher then began by immersing in the qualitative data to understand its breadth, depth, and context. This involved reading and rereading transcripts and documents to become deeply acquainted with the content, tone, and nuances before formal coding begins. Data was coded. Codes were clustered into themes and subthemes, including leadership and governance, resource mobilisation, stakeholder engagement, curriculum alignment with the SDGs, and indicators of SD progress. These themes were checked against data and data types, such as interviews and documents, to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.

4. Results of the Study

The study identified that educational leadership within the Faculty of Education plays a multifaceted role in promoting SD, encompassing strategic vision, governance, capacity building, and curricular alignment. Participants articulated SD as a strategic priority and worked to embed SD aims into program objectives, governance processes, and professional development activities. This pattern aligns with broader scholarship that stresses strategic leadership, governance, and capacity building as central to SD integration in higher education (Arshad, 2019; Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023).

Distributed and relational leadership emerge as salient leadership forms. Participants describe sharing leadership across units, fostering collaboration, and creating structures that enable faculty participation in SD initiatives. This resonates with the understanding that effective SD in HEIs often requires both top-down support and bottom-up, distributed leadership arrangements that empower staff and academics (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023; Mahere, 2024).

Faculty development and capacity-building activities underpin sustainable SD progress. Participants describe professional development, communities of practice, and mentorship as mechanisms to build faculty capability to teach and research SD-related content. This aligns with literature emphasising capacity building as a critical lever for SD in HEIs (Arshad, 2019; Vaughter et al., 2022; Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023).

Tensions and negotiation between strategic intent and institutional realities are evident. While there is a clear push from leadership to advance SD, practitioners confront competing priorities, limited resources, and varying levels of readiness across departments. Such tensions are widely reported in the HE leadership literature as influential in SD uptake and as requiring adaptive leadership strategies (Adhikari & Shrestha, 2023).

With interviews serving as primary data sources, participants described how SD is positioned as a strategic priority, and how SD aims are embedded into program objectives, governance processes, and professional development activities, and how leadership actions translate into daily practice. This supports the claim that educational leadership in the Faculty of Education performs a multifaceted role in advancing SD. These narratives constitute primary data about leadership cognition, actions, and perceived barriers and opportunities. It is from this perspective that primary data underscore the importance of partnerships, policy alignment, and governance literacy in Eastern Cape contexts.

Documents also served as primary sources that corroborate or augment interview statements. The documents analysed revealed how SD is operationalised in governance, curriculum planning, and capacity-building.

5. Interpretation of results

The results depict educational leadership in the Faculty of Education as a multifaceted driver of sustainable development (SD) in higher education, operating through strategic vision, governance, capacity building, and curricular alignment. This interpretation aligns with a body of scholarship that identifies strategic leadership, governance, and capacity building as central mechanisms for integrating SD into HEIs. The results also highlight distributed and relational leadership as salient, spanning top-down support and bottom-up mobilisation, which is consistent with evidence that SD implementation in HEIs benefits from both centralised endorsement and distributed leadership arrangements. Notably, SD uptake is frequently constrained by resource limitations, departmental readiness, and competing priorities, necessitating adaptive leadership approaches.

6. Discussion

The study examined how faculty leadership, curricular decisions, and leadership practices influence the integration of sustainability principles into teacher education, research, and community engagement. The discussion situates the findings within broader debates on transformative leadership, institutional change for sustainability, and the role of higher education in advancing sustainable development goals (SDGs) in South Africa's Eastern Cape. The synthesis draws on parallels from related literature on leadership, sustainability in higher education, and regional transformation to interpret the implications for policy, practice, and future research (Matser et al., 2022; Nqabeni et al., 2024; Sims et al., 2025).

The discussion highlights that proactive educational leadership at the faculty level is essential to embed sustainable development concepts into curricula, pedagogy, and assessment. It notes that leadership commitment, strategic alignment with SDGs, and capacity-building for staff and students are crucial enablers. These observations align with evidence that leadership and governance structures significantly shape the adoption of sustainability in higher education curricula and practices (Matser et al., 2022). The narrative emphasises that without sustained leadership attention, sustainability initiatives risk fragmentation rather than institutionalisation (Matser et al., 2022).

The study also situates curriculum and pedagogy as vehicles for sustainability. This study argues that curricular reform within the faculty of education should foreground SDG-relevant competencies, including environmentally responsible teaching, community-based learning, and interdisciplinary problem-solving. The argument resonates with literature calling for the reintegration of liberal arts, practical engagement, and transformative learning to prepare teachers for sustainability challenges (Pevnaya et al., 2019; Matser et al., 2022). The discussion therefore notes that meaningful progress requires alignment among curriculum, teaching practice, and assessment methods to embed sustainability outcomes in pre-service educator education (Matser et al., 2022).

In the context of transformative leadership and social responsibility, the discussion frames leadership as a vehicle for social transformation, aligning with the literature on transformative learning and responsible management education. It argues that leadership within the faculty should foster inclusive practices, equity, and social accountability. The nuances acknowledge that achieving genuine transformation requires deliberate, evidence-based strategies rather than aspirational rhetoric, given the historical and socio-economic context of the Eastern Cape (Nqabeni et al., 2024).

As for policy, governance, and systemic conditions, the discussion notes that broader higher education policy reforms, funding arrangements, and institutional restructuring in South Africa influence how sustainable leadership is enacted locally. It references national and regional transformations as context for why leadership must actively navigate governance complexities to sustain SDG-aligned initiatives (Magadana, 2023). It also

acknowledges potential tensions between rapid policy shifts and the pace required to engrain sustainable leadership culture within the faculty (Wotshela, 2020; Magadana, 2023).

7. Conclusion

Educational leadership within the Faculty of Education at Eastern Cape University has the potential to catalyse durable, sustainable development by turning strategic commitments into everyday practice. This is possible through transformative governance, a strong academic core, and sustained university-community partnerships. The convergence of regional necessity and coherent leadership creates a virtuous cycle. Leaders design and fund sustainability-infused teacher education, teachers enact SD in classrooms and communities, and communities experience tangible development benefits. When leadership consistently champions this integration, the Eastern Cape can become a living laboratory where higher education advances sustainability as both a scholarly enterprise and a societal contract.

What is novel about the obtained results is that the study provides contextually grounded evidence from the Eastern Cape demonstrating how a Faculty of Education can operationalise SD through an integrated leadership model. This is underpinned by capacity-building, curricular alignment, and governance-policy alignment, all within a developing country university setting. The study extends and contextualises existing scholarship by offering a localised blueprint that synthesises instructional, transformational, and distributed leadership with explicit attention to governance literacy and school–university partnerships, addressing a gap in region-specific implementation guidance for SD in higher education.

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