

STRATEGIC INTEGRATION OF USR AND SDGs IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES OF PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The integration of University Social Responsibility (USR) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has become an important strategy for higher education institutions (HEIs) aiming to strengthen their social impact and long term sustainability. This study explores a road map for private sector universities of Pakistan by comparing initiatives of European universities for integration of USR and SDGs in their strategic plans. Using a qualitative research approach, it investigates how teachers, curriculum design, research environment, economic value, institutional facilities and administrative support; can lead to attain USR & UN SDGs integration. The results indicate from sample size of 58 private universities of Pakistan; only 48% are displaying their intent for USR principles and 21% SDGs are incorporated in their strategic plans. On the contrary, 85% European universities have adopted USR principles and 60% of them have documented framework for UN SDGs. Data were collected from strategic documents of universities, websites and through personal interviews of VCs & Rectors. Furthermore, the findings suggest that aligning institutional strategies with USR and SDGs; strengthen institutional credibility and support broader sustainability outcomes. Overall, this study is an addition to the existing literature by providing a way forward; how private universities of Pakistan can integrate USR and SDGs into their core functions, ultimately contributing towards academia and societal development aligned with global agenda.

KEYWORDS: Strategic planning, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), University Social Responsibility (USR), United Nations Global Compact (UNGC)



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1. Introduction

University Social Responsibility distinguishes the concept from the classic corporate social responsibility (CSR) framework; the former incorporates the sustainability aspects into educational activities including teaching, research and community engagement. Hence, in its

implementation, the approach is aligned with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) (UNESCO, 2015) for meaningful contribution to achieve sustainable outcomes. From a theoretical perspective, USR is compatible with Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, as the theory stresses the need to balance the interests of all groups affected by organizational decisions. Moreover, it is also compatible with Carroll's (1991) CSR model; which integrates the four types of responsibilities which are; economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has developed a more comprehensive concept of University Social Responsibility (USR), which underscores ethical, social and environmental responsibilities of universities in the framework of HEIs (Vasilescu et al., 2010; Latif, 2018, AH Soofi et al., 2025). The introduction of 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN-SDGs) in 2015 gave this vast change even more momentum. In the current landscape, higher education institutions (HEIs) have become most important drivers of sustainable development through teaching, research and community involvement. (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2017). Given this context, earlier integrative perspectives on CSR, initiated by Drucker (1984) and advanced by Porter & Kramer (2006, 2011); continue to serve as foundational pillars, especially in conceptualizing social and environmental challenges as opportunities for innovation and value creation. From this viewpoint, tackling societal issues is not merely a normative obligation but also a strategic pathway for a cohesive institutional and societal impact through innovation (Chesbrough, 2003; Schmitz et al., 2019).

In higher education, this integrative logic is increasingly reflected in the alignment of USR strategies with SDGs implementation, where universities are expected to act as knowledge hubs within triple helix ecosystems; UIG (university, industry & government) that foster sustainable and inclusive development (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Leal Filho et al., 2019). In the context of private universities in developing countries such as Pakistan, this alignment becomes particularly significant, as institutions are expected to demonstrate social relevance, sustainability and innovation capacity in swiftly changing socio-economic environments (Ahmad et al., 2021; Abbas & Dawood, 2022). Consequently, USR driven engagement with SDGs is increasingly viewed not merely as compliance; but as a strategic mechanism for institutional diversity, capacity-building and long term societal impact.

Thus, the conception of USR has been considered as an advance evolution of CSR models and besides Brdulak's (2006) also reflects main aspects of USR to fulfil the needs of the higher

education sector. A university is a distinctive social institution; which is similar to other organizations and it is increasingly expected to adopt a social responsible strategy that responds to the expectations of both internal and external stakeholders. Over the past decades, social responsibility has become an integral component of worldwide higher education systems (Vasilescu et al., 2010; Nejati et al., 2011; Jasiczak et al., 2011) and it is now widely recognized as a key element in discussions on competitiveness, sustainability and institutional legitimacy in a globalized context (De la Poza et al., 2021). In this regard, Social Responsibility in higher education is increasingly aligned with the broader concept of University Social Responsibility (USR), which emphasizes universities ethical obligation to contribute to societal and sustainable development outcomes (Latif, 2018; Huang et al., 2020).

From a policy perspective, the European Commission (2011) defines social responsibility as the responsibility of organizations for their impacts on society, requiring the integration of social, environmental and ethical considerations into core strategic framework. This comprehension closely associates social responsibility with sustainable development, despite both concepts retains their unique theoretical foundations (Moon, 2007; Lozano et al., 2015); Yet, both frameworks agree that long-term value creation should be based on balanced economic, social and environmental outcomes, especially through stakeholder's associations built on trust. Sustainable development gained significant momentum in the institutions in the form of agenda 21, just after the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, as worldwide environmental & developmental action plan (UNCED; UN, 1992). This agenda emphasized rising inequalities, poverty and environmental degradation as consistent worldwide challenges demands synchronized global responses. The evolution of this agenda into 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs further strengthened the role of universities as strategic knowledge institutions contributing to sustainable transformation through education, research and community engagement (UNESCO, 2017; Leal Filho et al., 2019). Against this backdrop, the integration of USR and SDGs represents a strategic pathway for universities to produce economic, social and environmental benefits mutually, while strengthening their societal impact and sustainability (Abbas & Dawood, 2022; Raza et al., 2023).

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (UNCED, 1992) and its associated framework, particularly agenda 21(section 31, 35 & 36) accentuate the critical role of educational institutions; especially universities in advancing the principles of sustainable

development. Specific provisions highlight the contribution of the scientific and technological advanced community, the role of science for sustainability, the importance of education and public awareness & training; all of which position universities as central actors in promoting sustainability transitions (UN, 1992). These requirements mutually underscore that universities are not only knowledge providers but also a major actor of sustainable societal change.

This viewpoint was supplemented by global action plan (GAP) on education for sustainable development (ESD) (UNESCO, 2013), which suggests that scientific mechanism, economic agendas and policy outlines; alone are inadequate to achieve sustainable development goals. On the contrary, it clarifies the necessity of transformative changes in values, attitudes and behaviours to make interactive human society and environment. As per the report of Brundtland (1987), sustainable development needs such an educational system; that promote knowledge, technological skills and moral standards essential for today's needs without conceding future requirements for the generations to come.

The concept of socially responsible university arises as an institution that dynamically involves internal and external stakeholders (students, staff, academic leaders and communities) to support sustainable development goals. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are key contributors to make societal transformation through research, teaching and community involvement (Giuffr  & Ratto, 2014; Lozano et al., 2015). Universities are becoming more important in shaping mindsets that are focused on sustainability and encouraging development in the overall society. This makes them significant players in implementing the SDGs through University Social Responsibility (USR) frameworks.

2. Literature Review

Universities inclined towards social responsibility (SR) strategy increasingly rely on globally recognized frameworks and standards that guide organizational sustainability and accountability practices. These include ISO 26000, AA1000, SA8000 standards and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) for nonfinancial reporting; all of which provide structured approaches for embedding social, environmental and ethical considerations into operational framework of the universities. In addition, several global initiatives support the institutionalization of responsible practices; such as the OECD guidelines for Multi-national Enterprises, the Caux Round Table Principles and the United Nations Global Compact. Within higher education; key frameworks include the Talloires Declaration, the Erfurt Declaration on University Autonomy (1996) and the

Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), which collectively reinforce the role of HEIs in promoting sustainability embedded governance and education (PRME, 2007; UNESCO, 2017).

Empirical evidence of literature suggests; the implementation of University Social Responsibility (USR) represents a major shift in traditional academic practices of universities, e.g research on Latin American universities shows that USR goes against the norm by making ethical, social and environmental issues a part of a university's main functions (Vallaey's et al., 2022). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) describes that higher education is very important for giving people the tools they need to live in a way that is best for the environment and align with sustainable development goals (UNEP, 2020). So, socially responsible universities should not only impart knowledge, but also come up with practical ways to solve long-lasting problems in society and the environment. It will lower their ecological footprints and improve the health of society as a whole.

For this agenda it is imperative to incorporate sustainable development principles into teaching, research & institutional operations and to actively engage students and staff for the cause; thereafter, institutional transformation and innovation driven by addressing sustainability challenges (Chambers & Walker, 2016). This is in direct alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which present a comprehensive and holistic global framework for areas such as poverty alleviation, quality education, climate change, sustainable consumption and robust institutions (United Nations, 2015). Thus, universities are expected to embed SDGs in curriculum, research agendas and community engagement activities to enhance their societal impact and contribute meaningfully to sustainable development transitions (Leal Filho et al., 2021).

The adoption in 2015 by the United Nations of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development, composed of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, presents major challenges to the global universities in its implementation. Despite growing recognition of their role as key actors in sustainable development, higher education institutions (HEIs) often face structural, organizational and strategic barriers to make operational SDGs integration. The Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) identifies following four essential enablers for SDGs implementation in universities:-

- a. Awareness raising involves cumulative understanding amongst stakeholders about strategic issues related to sustainability and social responsibility in the universities.
- b. Strengthened partnerships focus on building collaborative relationships among universities, industries, public institutions and communities to achieve development goals.
- c. Advocacy for supportive policy environments emphasizes engaging policymakers to cultivate and implement guidelines that promote sustainable and responsible practices.
- d. Advancement in trans-disciplinary approaches encourages the integration of knowledge across different academic disciplines and external segments beyond academia to address intricate societal challenges efficiently.

Empirical studies shows that the integration of Social Responsibility (SR) and Sustainable Development (SD) into university strategic planning is still in evolving stage. Nardo et al. (2021), analyzes strategic plans of major Italian universities; found that most institutions assign relatively low priority to SR principles, with only a small percentage up to 20%; however, demonstrate robust alignment with SDGs in their strategic documents. This suggests that while awareness is growing, the embedding of sustainability principles in institutional strategy remains uneven. Unibility also points out that universities might use either USR or SDG frameworks, or they might see them as separate but not fully integrated approaches. This also make sustainability implementation very patchy. (UNIBILITY, 2017).

Many well-known researchers opine that making University Social Responsibility (USR) a part of higher education is a challenge that institutions face all the time. The social aspect of universities has become more important over time, but putting USR into core functions like teaching, research, governance and community engagement is still a challenge because of both operational and conceptual barriers (Larrán Jorge & Andrades Peña, 2017). For real implementation to happen, institutions need to be committed for the long term, which should be reflected in mission statements, strategic plans, operational procedures and reporting systems (Wigmore-Álvarez & Ruiz Lozano, 2012). Recent studies underscore the necessity of integrating SDGs alignment into university missions and executing it in partnership with stakeholders to guarantee significant impact (Fauzi et al., 2023; Cuesta-Claros et al., 2022). However, progress measured is very slow; because it demands leadership commitment, especially from senior management and faculty, which is essential for promoting sustainability transformation in universities (Findler, 2021; Sanches et al., 2022).

The concept of University Social Responsibility (USR) is closely linked with the conceptual domain of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), yet both differ in purpose but validate all organizations accountable to society (Lo et al., 2017; Bin Jawain et al., 2020). The origins of SR and sustainability in higher education can be traced to landmark initiatives of Talloires Declaration (1990), this initiative called for universities to integrate environmental and sustainability paradigms into teaching, research, day-to-day operations and community engagement. Although more than 900 institutions have signed the USR declaration globally, its implementation varies significantly across regions. There is inadequate representation from some developing countries like Pakistan.

Researchers have critically inquired into integrating SDGs and USR into university strategic planning. So the extent to which the strategic plans of universities mostly in developed and developing countries align with SDGs and USR principles; being examined in this study. An issue being relatively underexplored in developing countries, offering valuable insight into the role of institutional maturity and policy environments in integrating sustainability. The present study adds to the literature by exploring how higher education institutions integrate SDGs and USR objectives in their strategies for necessary implementation in the context of private universities of Pakistan.

2.1 USR & SDGs in Private Universities of Pakistan

University Social Responsibility (USR) in developed countries has gained formal recognition since 2015, when the University Social Responsibility Declaration was introduced as a voluntary framework encouraging higher education institutions to integrate sustainability and social responsibility into their missions (Engert et al., 2016; Florez-Parra, et al., 2024). In Poland; the initiative was developed by the Ministerial Team for Sustainable Development (MTSD); comprising representatives from academia, government, industry, traders and representatives of civil society (Domański, 2017). Since then more than 180 universities of Poland have signed the declarations by 2024, reflecting a widening commitment of universities to USR principles (Niemczyk et al, 2020).

This Declaration provides a comprehensive framework for universities; both public and private to embed sustainable governance, ethical standards and social engagement into their institutional structures. Its core commitments can be grouped into four interrelated dimensions; which are as under:-

- a. It emphasizes ethical governance and institutional integrity, encouraging adherence to principles such as transparency, accountability, objectivity and academic independence.
- b. It focuses on the development of socially responsible education and human capital, promoting curriculum that nurture civic engagement, equality, diversity, tolerance and social sensitivity among students as future leaders of the society.
- c. It emphasizes the importance of research and innovation for societal impact and encourages universities to develop interdisciplinary and collaborative research to tackle complex social, economic and environmental challenges in collaboration with public and private stakeholders.
- d. It highlights the importance of institutional sustainability and stakeholder's management, including environmental aspects, transparent communication, performance measurement tools and active interaction with internal and external stakeholders.

These dimensions reflect a transition to positioning universities as proactive actors of sustainable development, in which governance, teaching, research and community engagement are consistent with broader objectives of society. The present model demonstrates how USR could be used as a strategic model to embed sustainability principles in HEIs and provides adequate insights for comparative analysis in the context of private universities of Pakistan.

The University Social Responsibility (USR) shows a strong alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), highlighting the role of the universities as active contributors to sustainable development. This alignment is visible across many dimensions of the SDGs.

First of all, USR is strongly connected to SDG 4 (Quality Education) in terms of ethical academic values, curriculum enrichment, inter-generational knowledge transfer and responsible teaching practices, especially in terms of shaping socially responsible graduates. Secondly, it contributes to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) & SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by promoting diversity, inclusion, alike opportunity and respect for human rights in academic communities. Thirdly, environmental sustainability is embedded in relation to SDGs 13, 14 and 15, as USR inspires universities to reduce the ecological footprint of their activities and to promote environmental accountability in institutional operations. Moreover, USR is linked to wider socio-economic development objectives such as SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and SDG

12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). These are reflected in commitments to socially responsive education, research for societal impact and innovative driven collaboration with all stakeholders. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on partnerships and collaboration openly relates to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) and promotes sustained engagement amid universities, government, industry and civil society.

Overall, the USR reinforce core academic values specific to higher education institutions, while collectively supporting a holistic sustainable university model. However, effective implementation of USR requires a context sensitive strategic approach, tailored to institutional characteristics such as size, governance structure, disciplinary focus and sociocultural environment. This necessitates a clearly articulated university mission, vision and value system, which serve as fundamental elements for embedding social responsibility into institutional strategy (Filek, 2021; Ch, S.N, 2025). In this regard, universities increasingly aim to integrate their academic groups around shared principles of responsibility, trust and sustainability; thereby fostering long term, collaborative partnership with external stakeholders and strengthening their societal impact.

Research on higher educational strategies and University Social Responsibility (USR) in Pakistan is a point of concern, although interest in this area has gradually increased. Available studies highlight that both HEIs strategic planning and social responsibility practices have not been widely explored as dominant research themes. Despite this growing body of work, a notable gap exists; explicit integration of University Social Responsibility within HEI strategic frameworks merits attention of all stakeholders of private sector universities. Nevertheless, some scholars have observed an increasing influence of external stakeholders on university functioning (Geryk, 2016), as well as a gradual incorporation of social responsibility principles into quality assurance systems (Piasecka, 2015; Geryk, 2012). Empirical findings also reveal differences in the degree of formalization and maturity of USR related activities across universities, showing no consistent adherence to standardized sustainability approaches (Cichowicz & Nowak, 2019).

2.2 Global Sustainability Framework and Relevance to Higher Education Institutions

The United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) is considered the world's largest intended initiative to promote responsible and sustainable organizational practices. It was established in year 2000 under the auspices of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the initiative was

built on the premise that global economic systems require a collective underpinning of ethical values to function sustainably (Rasche & Waddock, 2014). It provides a collaborative platform through which organizations engage with governments, civil society and all other stakeholders to address key sustainability challenges, including human rights protection, labour standard operating procedures (SOPs), environmental stewardship and anticorruption measures (UNGC, 2023).

Over the time, UNGC has expanded meaningfully, now involving more than 23,000 participating entities globally, including trade corporations, NGOs, public institutions and academic bodies. The annexation of universities reflects the growing recognition of higher education institutions (HEIs) as strategic actors in advancing sustainability through education, research and institutional governance.

Ten universal principles have been well established for the universities that guide sustainability into HEIs operations (Meseguer-Sánchez, 2020). These principles are implemented through voluntary commitment mechanisms, stakeholder dialogue, organizational learning and periodic reporting; thereby promoting continuous improvement in sustainability performance (Voegtlin & Pless, 2014, SN Ch, NH, et al, 2025). Within higher education, these principles gradually being used as reference points for aligning institutional policies with global and regional sustainability prospects.

A comparative interpretation shows a strong conceptual alignment between the UNGC principles and the University Social Responsibility (USR) framework. Shared emphases include ethical governance, respect for human rights, non-discrimination, transparency and stakeholder's engagement. Environmental sustainability principles within the UNGC also match closely with university's commitments to reduce ecological impact and promote sustainable research and innovative practices.

Nevertheless, certain labour specific moralities within the UNGC framework are less directly applicable to universities due to their non-industrial operational structure. Despite this, overall alignment between UNGC and USR frameworks highlights a broader conjunction between inclusive sustainability standards and higher education institutions (HEIs) governance models. This convergence reinforces the increasingly strategic role of universities as contributors to global sustainability transitions and responsible development agendas. Principle number 10 of the UN Global Compact (UNGC) is primarily addressed to business actors and relates to anti-

corruption, but is also very much relevant to higher education institutions (HEIs); when considering the issue of ethical governance. In the university context, this principle is closely related to commitments to integrity, transparency and accountability, as reflected in the framework of University Social Responsibility (USR), mainly related to ethical conduct, institutional transparency and responsible management practices.

The comparison of the SDGs, UNGC principles and USR is generally aimed at highlighting their conceptual convergence and the mutually reinforcing nature of all frameworks (Jastrzębska, et al., 2019). Although the UNGC was initially designed for business organizations, its normative base goes well beyond the corporate sector and its application extends to the university sector as a major actor in society, with a role in education, research and community development. Universities are increasingly recognized as legitimate participants in global sustainability governance frameworks.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative multi-stage research design to facilitate a systematic and structured investigation of the integration of University Social Responsibility (USR) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in higher education institutions (HEIs). The research process was organized in a sequence starting with formulation of research objectives and proceeding to analysis, interpretation and discussion of findings. The empirical analysis was based on documentary data collected from official university websites & personal interviews; primarily focusing on publicly available strategic plans, VCs & Rector's intent and institutional policy documents on the USR & SDGs. The study was guided by following four research questions as under:-

- a. Does strategic plan exist in the university in a documented form?
- b. Does University reflect USR framework in its day to day functioning?
- c. Whether sustainable development principles are integrated into the strategic plan of University at a considerable level?
- d. Does there any integrated framework available for USR & SDGs?

Data collection followed a structured keyword search strategy using combinations such as the full university name along with term "strategy". Moreover, additional searches were conducted using institutional websites, internal search tools and external search engines to ensure complete

document retrieval. VCs & Rectors were interviewed for the final assessment of USR & SDGs implementation in the environment of HEIs. The data analysis was conducted through expert qualitative assessment, with individual coding and cross validation to ensure reliability & consistency. In ambiguous cases, discrepancies were fixed through group consultation of senior professors of Shah Abdul Latif University to improve reliability.

Numerous limitations were identified during the research process. The main limitation was the lack of access to institutional documents, since some universities restricted access to strategic documents or stored them on internal platforms which were not updated frequently. In such cases, priority was given to interviews of senior administration & management officials as they were more up to date and accurate in providing requisite information. Regardless of these limitations, the methodological approach offered a strong framework for examining the degree to which USR and SDG principles are embedded within the strategic planning of higher education in various private sector universities of Pakistan.

4. Results and Discussions

For the purpose of this study, 58 private sector universities of Pakistan were selected on the basis of visibility of strategic documentation and institutional engagement with sustainability related frameworks. These institutions were selected from the higher education commission (HEC) database university websites. (HEC Pakistan, 2026). The selected sample of the study affords a significant representation of universities with different levels of strategic development and USR awareness.

In this study, an outdated strategy was considered to be equivalent to the absence of a formal strategic document, which resulted in the exclusion of a small number of cases from the analysis. Of the institutions analyzed, about 52% had strategic plans available to the public, while the remaining institutions either did not have updated documents or were not made available for access, even through interviews. The content analysis showed that only 48% of the universities include elements of University Social Responsibility (USR) in one way or another in their strategic frameworks and about 21% of them explicitly state the principles of sustainable development in their planning documents. However, the extent of integration varied, with a number of institutions making these themes as broad statements rather than structured strategic priorities. In a more detailed analysis using 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 4 (Quality Education) is the most cited goal, appearing in approximately one-sixth of the

universities; indicating a duplication of the basic educational mission. The second most referred area is SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) which shows the growing emphasis on innovation, employability and university-industry linkages in Pakistan's higher education institutions. Other SDGs were only occasionally mentioned, often in isolation rather than as integrated strategic frameworks. Some goals related to marine ecosystems (SDG 14) were entirely absent, reflecting their irrelevance for inland setups. More detailed analysis reveals that universities integrating sustainability tend to work on two to four (2-4) SDGs simultaneously, suggesting a selective rather than inclusive approach to SDGs application. A very small number of universities had a broader configuration with more than five SDGs in their strategic frameworks.

Furthermore, only a limited number of universities (three universities) had developed dedicated sustainability focused strategies and compiled in a form of booklets. USR and these initiatives were initiated in year 2021s, showing that the formal institutionalization of USR in Pakistan's private higher education sector is still in its early stages. However, several universities do supplement their strategic planning with sustainability reports, CSR-related publications and sustainability initiatives; indicating a gradual but fragmented development of institutional responsibility mechanism. Overall, the findings indicate that awareness of USR and SDGs is growing within Pakistani private universities, their systematic integration into strategic planning remains limited and uneven; highlighting the need for robust institutional commitment and vibrant policy alignment.

4.1 European Vs Pakistani Universities

The findings from European universities affiliated with the UN Global Compact provide a useful benchmark for understanding; how University Social Responsibility (USR) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are being embedded within their higher education strategic frameworks. Overall, the evidence suggests that many European universities have moved beyond symbolic commitment and are gradually applying sustainability into formal strategic planning. As a matter of fact; 85% European universities have adopted USR principles and 60% UN SDGs have been mentioned in documented framework of universities and applied subsequently (Vlatka Škokić et al, 2025). However, this integration remains irregular, with variation in the complexity, arrangement and inclusiveness of USR & SDG integration across countries and institutions.

While some universities exhibit mature, multi domain SDG strategies; however, many reflect partial or fragmented commitment, mostly in transforming global sustainability agendas into operational institutional priorities.

A strategic insight from the European context is the dominance of SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) in university strategies. This indicates that universities are well inclined to SDGs; which are aligned with their traditional academic missions and institutional performance indicators. Conversely, environmental SDGs and larger goals of social transformation are less embedded, implying that the integration of sustainability is selective rather than holistic. In addition, the existence of dedicated USR policies in a considerable number of institutions reflects a core strategy, while sustainability is not only referred but also incorporated into routine governance frameworks (Wing-Hung et al, 2017).

In the light of these findings, the similarities and gaps in private universities of Pakistan are obvious for analysis. Like their European counterparts, Pakistani private universities are showing growing awareness of sustainability and social responsibility, often reflected in mission statements and quality assurance frameworks to SDGs. Nevertheless, there is some way to go regarding formalization and strategic depth in such initiatives. Moreover, Sustainability and USR are usually found in the form of discourses rather than established planning parameters, indicating an early stage of integration.

Furthermore, European universities show a coherent link between their strategies and SDGs, while Pakistani private universities tend to concentrate on selected goals; mostly SDG number 4. Such selective approach is due to resource limitations and inconsistent planning structure. Other differences are in governance and managerial capabilities. Many European universities, often involved in UNGC inclusive sustainability initiatives, possess stronger recognized frameworks, dedicated sustainability offices and more regular reporting mechanism. In contrast, Pakistani private universities generally do not have standardized USR structures and sustainability initiatives are often contingent on discrete leadership commitment rather than embedded institutional systems; which limits continuity, scalability and impactful effect. Despite these differences; there are important lessons for Pakistan sector universities in the European experience are as under:-

- a. Meaningful integration of USR & SDG requires not only awareness but also institutionalization through strict strategies, committed units and quantifiable indicators.
- b. Embedding sustainability goals into the core academic functions while slowly scaling into a dedicated SDGs framework.
- c. Strategic leadership, policy coherence and stakeholder's commitment in driving long term sustainability transformation in higher education sector.

Finally, the comparative perspective suggests that Pakistani private universities are at an emerging stage of USR and SDG integration, whereas; many European universities are moving toward consolidation and maturity (Ławicka et al, 2016). To bridge this gap, we need stronger strategic alignment, resilient policy framework and greater institutional commitment to sustainability for governance, teaching and research. This study therefore contributes by emphasizing not only the present status of integration but also the strategic way-forward; through which Pakistani private universities can move towards more comprehensive and impactful commitment with the global sustainability agenda.

4.2 Discussion

Comparative analysis of university strategic documents demonstrates similarities and relative differences in integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and University Social Responsibility (USR) in higher education systems. In the European context, the percentage of universities in Poland and in other European countries demonstrating the existence of formal strategic plans is quite obvious (Piotrowska-Piątek et al, 2015). This means that the institutional requirements and the regulatory frameworks are of great importance in the formalization of the strategic planning.

In both instances, the most prioritized goals are SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). However, universities often conceptualize SDG 4 in a partial sense, primarily in terms of lifelong learning, inclusivity and equal access, rather than through the lens of the integration of educational transformation. This selective orientation towards SDGs is in-line with earlier studies which indicate that universities tend to prioritize goals that are aligned with their core academic missions, while progressively incorporating broader sustainability dimensions (Alexandremorinchasse, 2020).

The findings also indicate an increasing institutional awareness of environmental sustainability, mainly in relation to climate action and resources efficiency. On the other hand, the integration

of environmental SDGs remains irregular, replicating a broader global pattern in which sustainability is adopted in a papers only. Similarly, trends have been identified that universities often engage selectively with SDGs depending on institutional capacity, disciplinary application and strategic priorities.

A key challenge identified in the literature is that the effective implementation of SDGs and USR is not merely a strategic exercise but a multi-domain transformation process. This includes alterations in institutional governance, academic philosophy and stakeholder's engagement mechanisms. Otherwise, sustainability remains largely declarations rather than operational agenda. In this regard, raising awareness among internal stakeholders including academic staff and students; appears as a critical factor for effective implementation (Lulewicz-Sas et al, 2023). Evidence suggests that while USR related activities may exist within institutions; but awareness and understanding among key stakeholders usually remains limited, which weakens the overall impact.

Empirical studies also show that barriers to actual USR implementation include inadequate knowledge, weak internal communication and limited enthusiasm for commitment in sustainability initiatives. Although teaching staff regularly incorporate sustainability themes into coursework, a significant proportion of students and doctoral researchers remain unfamiliar with the conceptual foundations of USR. This gap between institutional intent and stakeholder awareness clearly indicates disconnect between commitments and experience of the academia. Importantly, research shows that simply having formal strategies and high level of declarations alone are not enough to get significant results of USR and SDGs. Instead, it demands continuous monitoring of verified data and institutional eager to translate strategic resolve into concrete effects. Moreover, use of digital platforms and social media connected with participatory approaches not only creates awareness but also ensure practical implication among students and stakeholders.

Overall, this study underscores that both European and Pakistani higher education systems are gradually integrating sustainability into their strategic frameworks; however, the level of effectiveness & execution fluctuates considerably. European universities usually exhibit relatively advanced level of structural integration, whereas universities in emerging economies; such as private sector universities of Pakistan generally remain at earlier stages of integration among USR & SDGs. This underpins the need for solid strategic alignment, enhanced

stakeholder's awareness and robust implementation mechanism to ensure USR & SDGs commitments convert into tangible and evident impact.

5. Conclusions

The growing role of universities positions them as key strategic actors in advancing both social responsibility and sustainable development in modern society. Their function extends beyond traditional teaching and research to encompass accountability, active stakeholder's engagement and meaningful contribution to societal transformation. However, existing literature suggests that the integration of sustainability indicators and USR principles into higher education strategies remains very limited and inconsistent (Leal Filho et al., 2019; Ch et al., 2025); which highlights a persistent gap in research and implementation.

In this context, universities are anticipated to increasingly act according to principles of legality, transparency, accountability and continuous stakeholder dialogues. These expectations are part of a broader shift in governance in higher education institutions, where institutional legitimacy is explicitly tied to social impact and responsible conduct. This means universities are now not only assessed on their academic performance, but also on their contribution to sustainable development and the well-being of society. The findings of this study confirm that the integration of USR and SDG frameworks into strategic university planning is increasing, especially in institutions committed with global sustainability initiatives. Evidence from Pakistan and European universities shows that newer strategic documents are more likely to contain references to social responsibility and sustainability goals, suggesting a continuous institutional normalization of these concepts. In this context, those universities adopt well defined USR-oriented strategies can enhance their competitive advantage, improve stakeholder's trust and achieve greater alignment with societal needs and market demands.

Moreover, the integration of sustainability principles into university strategy can enhance institutional performance along with organizational reputation in global scenarios; it also make better working environment and enhance attractions to the prospective students. This is very much consistent with the broader understanding of socially responsible universities always achieve long term institutional sustainability and stakeholder's gratification. However, the translation of strategic intent into operational way-out remains a critical challenge, as the formal adoption of sustainability frameworks does not assure effective implementation & pronounced outcomes.

Comparative evidence from European and Pakistani contexts further highlights a recurrent gap between strategic commitment and actual performance in implementing 2030 agenda of sustainable development. However, despite being widely referred strategic documents containing SDGs; their integration into teaching, research and operational activities remains erratic. This enhance the need for resilient institutional mechanism, policy backing and monitoring system for implementation.

The study also points out number of practical and methodological limitations, especially in terms of restricted access to institutional documents, inconsistency between official documents & university websites and in some of the cases limited transparency. Despite these constraints, the adopted methodological approach offers a robust framework for integration of USR & SDGs in higher education strategic planning across diverse institutional contexts.

Finally, the existing literature also highlights that sustainable transformation in universities requires systemic change, governmental support, policy direction and alignment of strategic planning linked with operational execution. It is also increasingly recognized that universities play a central role in addressing global challenges of inequality, poverty and climate change; especially in the post-pandemic era where vulnerabilities have increased.

Future research should move beyond document based analysis and focus on evaluating implementation mechanism and impact of USR & SDG strategies in global universities with enhanced scope of research. This would lead to deeper insights into the sustainability integration and bridge the existing gap with policy parameters.

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Consent for Human Participants. All participants were briefed about parameters and scope of the study prior to their views.

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