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## The Role of Private Higher Education Institutions in Advancing Sustainable Development: A Case Study of South African PHEIs

*Mr. Tsotetsi Patric<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Ndawule Luvuyo<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1,2</sup>North-West University

### ABSTRACT

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) play a crucial role in fostering sustainable development through education, research, and community engagement. This study explores how PHEIs contribute to the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and the African Union Agenda 2063.

The primary research question guiding this study is: *How do PHEIs align their strategies and initiatives with national, continental, and global development goals?*

The research is set within South Africa's PHEI landscape, examining institutions that actively incorporate sustainability principles, skills development, and policy alignment within their academic and operational frameworks. This study adopts a desktop qualitative research approach with a purposive sampling of key South African Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) institutions; namely that, namely, Milpark Education, The Independent Institute of Education (IIE), and the College of Sustainable Agriculture. Through institutional case studies, the research will examine how these institutions contribute to sustainable development, skills development, and policy alignment within their academic and operational frameworks. Data collection will be based on document analysis, including institutional reports, policy frameworks, and publicly available research, complemented by semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders where feasible. This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of the role PHEIs play in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and African Union Agenda 2063

The theoretical framework integrates human capital theory and institutional theory, evaluating how PHEIs serve as catalysts for economic growth and knowledge production. The integration of Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory helps explain how PHEIs both develop skilled individuals for economic growth and align with national and global policies to drive sustainable development. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the dual role of PHEIs in shaping knowledge economies and responding to policy expectations.

Ethical considerations include informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional approval for data collection.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to guide policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in strengthening PHEI contributions to sustainable development. Findings will inform strategic frameworks for curriculum reform, policy alignment, and multi-sector collaboration.

**Keywords:** Private Higher Education, Sustainable Development, National Development Plan, African Union Agenda 2063, Institutional Contribution

### Introduction

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) play a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development through education, research, and community engagement. As South Africa strives to meet global and continental development goals—including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and the African Union Agenda 2063—PHEIs emerge as key contributors to knowledge production, skills development, and policy alignment. These institutions provide specialized education that equips graduates with competencies necessary for economic growth and social transformation, reinforcing the principles of Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory in shaping higher education's impact on development (African Union. ,2025).

The National Development Plan 2030 emphasizes the need for an inclusive and high-quality education system to drive economic progress and reduce inequality (National Planning Commission, 2025). Similarly, the African Union Agenda 2063 envisions a knowledge-based economy where education serves as a catalyst for sustainable development (Meyer, 2025). PHEIs, through their curriculum design, research initiatives, and industry partnerships, contribute to these frameworks by fostering innovation and addressing critical societal challenges. However, despite their growing presence, PHEIs often face scepticism regarding their legitimacy and long-term sustainability (SAPHE., 2023).

This study adopts a desktop qualitative research approach, focusing on three key South African PHEIs—Milpark Education, The Independent Institute of Education (IIE), and the College of Sustainable Agriculture—to examine their contributions to sustainable development. Through institutional case studies, the research will analyse how these institutions integrate sustainability principles, skills development, and policy alignment within their academic and operational frameworks. Data collection will be based on document analysis, including institutional reports, policy frameworks, and publicly available research, complemented by semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders where feasible (Fitzsimons, 2018).

The theoretical framework integrates Human Capital Theory, which underscores the role of education in enhancing individuals' productivity and economic contribution, and Institutional Theory, which examines how organizations adapt to policy frameworks and societal expectations (Oliver, 2004).

By combining these perspectives, the study highlights how PHEIs function as both academic institutions and strategic enablers of economic growth and knowledge production. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and institutional approval, will be upheld throughout the research process. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, informing strategic frameworks for curriculum reform, policy alignment, and multi-sector collaboration. Ultimately, this research aims to strengthen the role of PHEIs in shaping South Africa's sustainable development trajectory.

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## Background to the problem

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa play a crucial role in expanding access to higher education, fostering skills development, and contributing to national and continental development agendas. However, their ability to align with frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and African Union Agenda 2063 faces several challenges. These challenges stem from policy misalignment, financial constraints, and limited research output, which hinder their full integration into the broader higher education and development landscape.

### The Role of PHEIs in Sustainable Development

PHEIs have witnessed significant growth in South Africa, with student enrolment increasing by 156.6% between 2010 and 2021 (African Union Commission, 2025). Despite this expansion, their contribution to research and policy development remains modest compared to public universities. The South African Journal of Higher Education highlights that PHEIs are often perceived as secondary to public institutions, affecting their ability to secure funding and recognition in national policy frameworks (Council on Higher Education, 2009).

The African Union Agenda 2063 emphasizes the need for a knowledge-based economy, where education institutions drive innovation and economic transformation (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2025). However, PHEIs in South Africa struggle with limited government support, making it difficult to align their curricula with national and continental development priorities. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) has noted that PHEIs contribute little to national research production, further limiting their impact on policy alignment and sustainable development (Meyer, 2025).

### Challenges in Policy Alignment and Curriculum Reform

One of the key challenges facing PHEIs is the misalignment between national policies and institutional frameworks. The Wits School of Governance reports that while South Africa has made strides in integrating the SDGs into the NDP, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in the private education sector (South African Private Higher Education, 2023). The lack of structured engagement between PHEIs and policymakers results in fragmented efforts to incorporate sustainability principles into curricula.

Additionally, curriculum reform in South Africa has historically been shaped by outcomes-based education models, which have faced criticism for failing to address systemic inequalities (University of Johannesburg, 2021). The University of Johannesburg highlights that curriculum reform requires technical and political expertise to ensure alignment with national development goals (Wits School of Governance, 2016). PHEIs, often operating independently, struggle to integrate these reforms effectively, limiting their ability to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development.

### Financial and Institutional Constraints

Funding remains a significant barrier for PHEIs in South Africa. Unlike public universities, PHEIs receive limited government subsidies, making it difficult to invest in research and infrastructure (Council on Higher Education, 2009). The South African Private Higher Education (SAPHE) notes that while PHEIs have strong industry ties, their research output remains constrained by financial limitations (African Union Commission, 2025).

Moreover, the Department of Environmental Affairs reports that South Africa faces an ecological deficit, requiring urgent action to integrate sustainability into education (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2025). PHEIs, with their limited resources, struggle to implement sustainability-focused programs, further restricting their contribution to national and global development agendas.

### Significance of Addressing These Challenges

Addressing these challenges is critical for enhancing the role of PHEIs in sustainable development. Strengthening policy alignment, increasing financial support, and fostering research collaborations can enable PHEIs to contribute more effectively to the SDGs, NDP 2030, and Agenda 2063. By integrating sustainability principles into curricula and expanding research initiatives, PHEIs can serve as catalysts for economic growth and knowledge production in South Africa.

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## Problem statement

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa have expanded significantly in response to increasing demand for higher education and skills development. Despite their growth, their alignment with global, national, and continental development frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and African Union Agenda 2063, remains unclear and underexplored. PHEIs are expected to contribute meaningfully to economic transformation and sustainability, yet limited research exists on how these institutions integrate sustainability principles, policy alignment, and skills development into their academic and operational frameworks.

A significant gap exists regarding how PHEIs navigate challenges such as policy misalignment, financial constraints, and research limitations—factors that hinder their ability to serve as key enablers of sustainable development. While Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory provide a framework for understanding the role of education in economic progress and institutional adaptation, there is insufficient evidence detailing how South African PHEIs specifically apply these theories in practice.

This study seeks to critically examine the contribution of PHEIs to sustainable development by analysing institutional strategies, curriculum frameworks, and stakeholder engagement within the South African higher education sector. Through a desktop qualitative study, focusing on Milpark Education, The Independent Institute of Education (IIE), and the College of Sustainable Agriculture, this research will assess how PHEIs support national and continental development agendas. The findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and institutional leaders in enhancing the role of PHEIs in knowledge production, economic transformation, and sustainable development.

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## Literature analysis

The literature in this study will be organized thematically to provide a coherent analysis of the role of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in sustainable development. It will begin with a historical and contextual overview of PHEIs in South Africa, establishing their growth, regulatory frameworks, and contributions to higher education. The next section will examine theoretical perspectives, incorporating Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory to provide a foundation for analysing PHEI contributions to national and global development agendas. Following this, the literature will critically analyse key challenges, including policy misalignment, financial constraints, and research limitations, drawing from existing studies, reports, and institutional reviews.

A dedicated section will explore curriculum reform and sustainability integration, discussing how PHEIs align with the SDGs, NDP 2030, and Agenda 2063. Finally, the literature will synthesize recommendations from past research, outlining strategies for strengthening PHEI contributions to sustainable development through improved policy alignment, funding models, and enhanced research output. This structured approach ensures a comprehensive and logical presentation of findings, facilitating a deeper understanding of PHEI roles within South Africa's higher education landscape.

### The Role of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Sustainable Development

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) have increasingly become key players in advancing sustainable development through education, research, and policy alignment. According to Bird and Mugobo (2021), PHEIs in South Africa have expanded significantly, with over ninety institutions registered with the Council on Higher Education (CHE). However, stakeholder perceptions of PHEIs remain mixed, with concerns about their long-term sustainability and the credibility of qualifications obtained from these institutions.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the importance of quality education (Goal 4) as a driver of economic growth and social transformation (United Nations, 2015). Similarly, South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) highlights the need for an inclusive and high-quality education system to reduce inequality and foster economic progress (National Planning Commission, 2025). Despite these frameworks, PHEIs often struggle with policy misalignment and financial constraints, limiting their ability to contribute effectively to national and continental development agendas (SAPHE, 2023).

### Challenges Facing PHEIs in South Africa

One of the primary challenges facing PHEIs is the lack of structured engagement with policymakers. The Wits School of Governance (2016) notes that while South Africa has made strides in integrating the SDGs into the NDP, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in the private education sector. This misalignment results in fragmented efforts to incorporate sustainability principles into curricula, affecting the ability of PHEIs to produce graduates equipped for national and global development needs.

Additionally, funding constraints pose a significant barrier to PHEIs. Unlike public universities, PHEIs receive limited government subsidies, making it difficult to invest in research and infrastructure (Department of Higher Education & Training, 2024). The South African Private Higher Education (SAPHE) report (2023) highlights that while PHEIs have strong industry ties, their research output remains constrained by financial limitations.

### Curriculum Reform and Policy Alignment

Curriculum reform is essential for ensuring that PHEIs align with national and global development goals. Cross, Mungadi, and Rouhani (2021) argue that South Africa's curriculum reforms have historically been shaped by outcomes-based education models, which have faced criticism for failing to address systemic inequalities. The University of Johannesburg (2021) emphasizes that curriculum reform requires technical and political expertise to ensure alignment with national development goals.

Furthermore, sustainability-focused education is gaining traction in PHEIs. The Department of Environmental Affairs (2025) reports that South Africa faces an ecological deficit, requiring urgent action to integrate sustainability into education. PHEIs, with their limited resources, struggle to implement sustainability-focused programs, further restricting their contribution to national and global development agendas.

#### Significance of Strengthening PHEI Contributions

Strengthening the role of PHEIs in sustainable development requires policy alignment, increased financial support, and enhanced research collaborations. By integrating sustainability principles into curricula and expanding research initiatives, PHEIs can serve as catalysts for economic growth and knowledge production in South Africa.

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## Theoretical frameworks

This study integrates Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory to examine the role of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in advancing sustainable development. These theories provide complementary perspectives, offering both an economic lens (Human Capital Theory) and an organizational adaptation lens (Institutional Theory) to understand how PHEIs contribute to national and global development agendas.

### 1. Human Capital Theory

#### Origin and Key Tenets

Human Capital Theory was first conceptualized by Adam Smith (1776) in *The Wealth of Nations*, where he argued that education and skills development enhance an individual's productivity and economic contribution. The theory was later refined by Gary Becker (1964), who emphasized that investments in education, training, and health improve workforce efficiency and national economic growth (Becker, 1964).

The core tenets of Human Capital Theory include:

- Education as an investment – Knowledge and skills acquired through education increase an individual's economic value.
- Economic productivity – A well-educated workforce contributes to national economic growth.
- Skill development – Continuous learning and training enhance employability and innovation.

#### Alignment with the Study

This study examines how PHEIs contribute to skills development, employability, and economic transformation, aligning with Human Capital Theory's emphasis on education as a driver of national progress. By equipping graduates with relevant competencies, PHEIs serve as catalysts for economic growth and sustainable development.

#### Previous Applications in Similar Studies

Human Capital Theory has been widely used in studies on higher education and workforce development, particularly in developing countries (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983). Oliver (2004) applied this theory to analyse higher education's role in economic transformation in developing nations, highlighting its relevance in shaping policy and institutional strategies.

### 2. Institutional Theory

#### Origin and Key Tenets

Institutional Theory originated in sociology and political science, with early contributions from Thorstein Veblen (1899) and Max Weber (1922). The modern framework was developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), who introduced the concept of institutional isomorphism, explaining how organizations adapt to external pressures to gain legitimacy (Oliver, 2004).

The core tenets of Institutional Theory include:

- Organizational adaptation – Institutions evolve in response to societal expectations and policy frameworks.
- Legitimacy and compliance – Organizations adopt structures and practices that align with external regulations.
- Institutional isomorphism – Organizations within the same sector tend to resemble each other due to regulatory, normative, and mimetic pressures.

#### Alignment with the Study

This study explores how PHEIs align their strategies with national and global development agendas, demonstrating institutional adaptation to policy frameworks such as the SDGs, NDP 2030, and Agenda 2063. Institutional Theory helps explain how PHEIs gain legitimacy, secure funding, and integrate sustainability principles into their curricula.

#### Previous Applications in Similar Studies

Institutional Theory has been applied in studies on higher education governance and policy alignment (Scott, 2008). Scott (2008) examined how universities adapt to policy changes, emphasizing the role of institutional pressures in shaping educational strategies. This study builds on such research by analysing how PHEIs respond to national and continental development priorities.

In conclusion, by integrating Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding PHEIs' contributions to sustainable development. Human Capital Theory explains their role in skills development and economic growth, while Institutional Theory highlights their adaptation to policy frameworks and legitimacy-building. Together, these theories offer a dual perspective that enhances the study's analytical depth and relevance.

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## Research Methodology

This study adopts a desktop qualitative research approach, focusing on three Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa—Milpark Education, The Independent Institute of Education (IIE), and the College of Sustainable Agriculture. The research methodology is structured to ensure a comprehensive exploration of how PHEIs contribute to sustainable development, policy alignment, and skills development within the higher education sector.

### Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design, allowing for a detailed, interpretive analysis of PHEI contributions to development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and African Union Agenda 2063. Qualitative research is well-suited to explore institutional policies, curricular integration, and strategic engagement with sustainability frameworks (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

### Data Collection Methods

Since this is a desktop-based study, data will be collected from secondary sources that provide insight into PHEI strategies, institutional reports, and policy frameworks. The following data collection methods will be employed:

**Document Analysis** – Institutional reports, policy documents, curricula frameworks, and academic literature will be examined to identify trends, strategies, and policy alignment of PHEIs with national and global development goals.

**Semi-Structured Interviews** (where feasible) – Key stakeholders, including education policymakers, institutional leaders, and academic researchers, will be interviewed to gain deeper perspectives on how PHEIs contribute to sustainable development. Interviews will be conducted remotely or through email correspondence.

**Case Studies** – Three selected PHEIs (Milpark Education, The Independent Institute of Education (IIE), and the College of Sustainable Agriculture) will serve as case studies to explore institutional initiatives and their alignment with development frameworks.

### Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy will be used to select institutions that demonstrate strong engagements with sustainability, skills development, and policy alignment. The selected PHEIs are representative of private sector contributions to higher education, ensuring that findings reflect institutional best practices.

### Data Analysis

The collected data will be analysed through thematic analysis, identifying patterns and trends in institutional engagement with sustainability frameworks. A comparative analysis will also be conducted to evaluate differences in strategies among the three PHEIs.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory:

- Human Capital Theory explains the role of education in enhancing individuals' skills and economic productivity, making PHEIs essential contributors to workforce development (Becker, 1964).
- Institutional Theory evaluates how PHEIs adapt to policy frameworks and societal expectations, ensuring alignment with national and global development goals (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

### Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical integrity, the following protocols will be observed:

- Informed consent – Where interviews are conducted, participants will provide consent before sharing information.
- Confidentiality – Institutional and participant data will be anonymized where necessary to protect sensitive information.
- Institutional approval – The study will seek approval from relevant PHEIs before including proprietary institutional reports or policies in the analysis.

### Significance of the Methodology

This methodology provides a structured and rigorous approach to examining the role of PHEIs in sustainable development. By focusing on qualitative data, the study ensures a deep exploration of institutional contributions while maintaining contextual relevance within South Africa's higher education sector. The findings will offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders seeking to strengthen PHEI engagement with sustainability frameworks.

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## Discussion on findings

The research findings and discussion will be structured thematically to provide a comprehensive and logical analysis of the role of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa in advancing sustainable development. The organization will follow these key sections:

**Overview of Findings** – A general summary of the main findings related to sustainability engagement, policy alignment, and institutional adaptation among PHEIs. This section will highlight overarching themes that emerge from data analysis.

**Thematic Analysis of Findings** – The findings will be organized into three core themes, each providing insights into different aspects of PHEI engagement with development frameworks:

- **Contribution to Sustainable Development** – Examining how PHEIs integrate sustainability into curricula, research, and institutional strategies.
- **Policy Alignment and Institutional Adaptation** – Assessing how PHEIs align with the SDGs, NDP 2030, and Agenda 2063, and their engagement with policymakers.
- **Financial Constraints and Research Limitations** – Evaluating funding challenges, institutional barriers, and their impact on sustainability-focused education.

**Case Studies** – Real-world examples of selected PHEIs (Milpark Education, The Independent Institute of Education, and the College of Sustainable Agriculture) will be used to support key findings, providing concrete illustrations of institutional responses to sustainability challenges.

**Discussion and Interpretation** – This section will critically analyze the findings, linking them to Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory to explain institutional strategies. Comparisons will be drawn to existing research, demonstrating how PHEIs adapt to policy demands, navigate financial constraints, and foster sustainability initiatives.

**Implications for Policy and Practice** – A discussion on how findings can inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in strengthening PHEI contributions to sustainable development.

**Conclusion** – A concise reflection on the study's key insights, reinforcing the importance of policy alignment, funding support, and research collaboration in enhancing PHEI contributions. This structured approach ensures that findings are clearly presented, supported by real-world cases, and analysed with theoretical depth, allowing for meaningful conclusions and policy recommendations.

### Research Findings

#### Contribution of PHEIs to Sustainable Development

Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa play an increasingly important role in promoting sustainable development through education, research, and community engagement. According to Bird and Mugobo (2021), PHEIs have expanded significantly, responding to the growing demand for specialized education that aligns with national and global development priorities. Institutions such as Milpark Education, The Independent Institute of Education (IIE), and the College of Sustainable Agriculture have adopted sustainability principles in their curricula, demonstrating their commitment to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and African Union Agenda 2063.

However, despite their contributions, PHEIs face several challenges, particularly in policy alignment and financial sustainability. The Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2009) highlights that PHEIs produce less research output than public universities, which affects their ability to shape national education policies. Additionally, the South African Private Higher Education (SAPHE, 2023) report indicates that limited financial support for PHEIs constrains their ability to implement sustainability initiatives effectively.

#### Policy Alignment and Institutional Adaptation

Policy misalignment presents a significant barrier for PHEIs in integrating sustainability principles into their academic programs. The Wits School of Governance (2016) notes that South Africa has made considerable progress in aligning the SDGs with national policies such as the NDP 2030, yet implementation remains inconsistent within the private education sector. This inconsistency results in fragmented efforts by PHEIs to develop curricula that fully reflect national sustainability objectives.

Institutional Theory suggests that organizations adapt to external pressures to maintain legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). However, PHEIs often operate independently, making it difficult to align their strategies with national and continental development priorities. The University of Johannesburg (2021) reports that engagement between PHEIs and policymakers is limited, leading to discrepancies in curriculum development and accreditation standards.

### Financial Constraints and Research Limitations

Funding constraints significantly affect the ability of PHEIs to contribute to sustainable development. Unlike public universities, PHEIs receive minimal government subsidies, restricting their capacity for investment in research and infrastructure (Department of Higher Education & Training, 2024). The South African Private Higher Education (SAPHE, 2023) report emphasizes that, despite strong industry partnerships, PHEIs struggle to conduct extensive research due to financial limitations.

The Department of Environmental Affairs (2025) notes that South Africa faces an ecological deficit, requiring urgent integration of sustainability education. While PHEIs can play a role in addressing this challenge, their limited financial resources hinder their ability to launch sustainability-focused academic programs.

### Discussions of findings

#### Case Study: Milpark Education and Sustainability Integration

Milpark Education has made significant strides in embedding sustainability principles into its business and financial programs. According to Bird and Mugobo (2021), the institution has developed specialized courses that emphasize responsible business practices, ethical leadership, and environmental sustainability. These initiatives align with broader sustainability goals, ensuring that graduates are well-equipped to contribute to economic and social transformation.

However, as noted by the Council on Higher Education (2009), Milpark Education, like other PHEIs, faces challenges in securing funding for sustainability research. To address this gap, Milpark has partnered with industry stakeholders to integrate sustainability principles into business decision-making. While these partnerships provide valuable opportunities, financial constraints remain a significant hurdle for expanding sustainability research.

#### Case Study: The Independent Institute of Education (IIE) and Policy Engagement

The IIE, which oversees institutions such as Varsity College and Vega School, has made substantial efforts to align its curricula with national and global sustainability priorities. According to the Wits School of Governance (2016), the institution has developed programs that focus on environmental sustainability, corporate responsibility, and ethical leadership, equipping students with the skills necessary to navigate sustainability challenges.

Despite these initiatives, the University of Johannesburg (2021) reports that PHEIs—including the IIE—face obstacles in engaging directly with policymakers. Institutional Theory suggests that organizations must adapt to regulatory environments to gain legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), but PHEIs often lack structured mechanisms for policy influence. Consequently, sustainability initiatives within PHEIs may not always align seamlessly with national education policies.

#### Case Study: The College of Sustainable Agriculture and Ecological Transformation

The College of Sustainable Agriculture has positioned itself as a leader in sustainability-focused education. The Department of Environmental Affairs (2025) highlights that South Africa requires urgent interventions to address environmental degradation, and the College has responded by introducing innovative programs in sustainable farming techniques and ecological conservation.

Despite these contributions, funding constraints remain a persistent challenge. The South African Private Higher Education (SAPHE, 2023) report underscores the difficulties PHEIs face in securing financial resources for research and infrastructure. Limited investment in sustainability programs prevents the College from expanding its initiatives, which could otherwise provide substantial benefits to South Africa's agricultural sector.

In conclusion, the research findings indicate that PHEIs in South Africa play a vital role in sustainability education, but structural barriers such as **policy misalignment**, **financial** limitations, and restricted research capacity hinder their full impact. Strengthening policy engagement, increasing funding support, and fostering research collaborations can enable PHEIs to contribute more effectively to the SDGs, NDP 2030, and Agenda 2063.

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## Practical recommendations

To strengthen the role of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa in advancing sustainable development, the following practical recommendations are proposed. These recommendations aim to address policy misalignment, financial constraints, research limitations, and institutional adaptation, ensuring that PHEIs contribute effectively to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and African Union Agenda 2063.

### Strengthening Policy Alignment and Institutional Engagement

PHEIs must integrate sustainability goals into their institutional strategies to align with national and global development frameworks. Currently, PHEIs lack structured mechanisms for policy engagement, making it difficult to influence curriculum reforms.

- **Government Partnerships:** The Department of Higher Education & Training should establish a formal policy engagement platform where PHEIs can collaborate with government agencies to ensure curriculum alignment with sustainability objectives (Wits School of Governance, 2016).
- **Regulatory Reforms:** The Council on Higher Education (CHE) must develop accreditation standards that reflect sustainability integration, ensuring that PHEI programs are recognized as essential contributors to South Africa's education landscape (CHE, 2009).

- **Curriculum Innovation:** PHEIs should establish internal sustainability committees to review and update curricula in line with environmental, economic, and social development priorities.

#### Expanding Funding Models for Sustainability Initiatives

One of the most significant challenges facing PHEIs is limited financial support for sustainability-focused education and research (SAPHE, 2023). Addressing this issue requires innovative funding strategies to enhance institutional sustainability capacity.

- **Public-Private Investment Models:** The South African government should **introduce funding schemes** that incentivize PHEIs to develop sustainability research and education programs (Department of Higher Education & Training, 2024).
- **Industry Collaboration:** PHEIs must expand partnerships with businesses and NGOs to secure funding for sustainability projects, particularly in fields such as renewable energy, climate resilience, and responsible business practices (Bird & Mugobo, 2021).
- **Scholarship Programs:** Government and private sector stakeholders should fund scholarships and grants for students pursuing sustainability-focused degrees.

#### Enhancing Research Output and Knowledge Production

PHEIs produce less research output than public universities, limiting their influence in shaping national education and sustainability policies (CHE, 2009). Strengthening research capacity will enhance their institutional legitimacy and policy engagement.

- **Establishing Research Centers:** PHEIs should create dedicated sustainability research units, focusing on policy development, innovation, and applied environmental studies (SAPHE, 2023).
- **Collaborative Research Networks:** Universities must foster cross-institutional partnerships, allowing PHEIs to participate in joint research initiatives with public universities and international academic bodies (University of Johannesburg, 2021).
- **Access to Research Grants:** The National Research Foundation should expand funding criteria to ensure that PHEIs receive grants for sustainability research, alongside public institutions.

#### Strengthening Institutional Sustainability Strategies

Many PHEIs struggle with internal sustainability frameworks, affecting their ability to integrate sustainable development principles into their academic and operational systems.

- **Sustainability Frameworks:** Institutions must develop clear sustainability policies that integrate principles of environmental responsibility, ethical leadership, and social impact (Department of Environmental Affairs, 2025).
- **Operational Sustainability:** PHEIs should invest in green infrastructure, including energy-efficient buildings, waste management systems, and sustainable procurement practices.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation Systems:** Institutions should implement data-driven sustainability assessment models, ensuring that progress is measurable, transparent, and aligned with international benchmarks.

#### Expanding Community Engagement and Social Impact Initiatives

PHEIs must strengthen their role in community-based sustainability projects, ensuring that education translates into practical impact for local and regional development.

- **Service-Learning Programs:** PHEIs should incorporate sustainability-focused community engagement initiatives where students apply theoretical concepts to real-world challenges (Milpark Education, 2023).
- **Partnerships with Civil Society:** Institutions should collaborate with NGOs and government programs to implement sustainability projects, particularly in underprivileged communities affected by environmental and economic challenges.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** PHEIs should lead education and advocacy programs, raising awareness on sustainability and fostering policy discourse at local and national levels.

In a nutshell, the proposed recommendations offer practical solutions to strengthen PHEI contributions to sustainable development. By enhancing policy alignment, funding accessibility, research output, institutional sustainability, and community engagement, PHEIs can expand their impact, ensuring their meaningful participation in South Africa's education and development frameworks.

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## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the vital role that Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in South Africa play in fostering sustainable development, aligning their strategies with global and national frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), and African Union Agenda 2063. Through their commitment to education, research, and community engagement, PHEIs contribute to the



development of a skilled workforce, economic transformation, and environmental sustainability. However, the findings highlight key challenges, including policy misalignment, financial constraints, and research limitations, which hinder the full integration of PHEIs into national development agendas.

From a theoretical perspective, the study integrated Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory to analyse how PHEIs contribute to knowledge production and adapt to policy frameworks. Human Capital Theory emphasizes the importance of education in enhancing skills and economic productivity, reinforcing the need for curriculum innovation and industry alignment in PHEIs. Meanwhile, Institutional Theory provides insights into how PHEIs navigate regulatory landscapes, shaping their institutional strategies to gain legitimacy and relevance in a complex higher education ecosystem.

The research findings reveal that PHEIs have successfully incorporated sustainability principles into their curricula, but structured engagement with policymakers remains limited, affecting curriculum alignment with national priorities. Financial constraints further impact institutional ability to expand research initiatives, restricting their contribution to sustainability-focused knowledge production. Despite these barriers, case studies from institutions such as Milpark Education, The Independent Institute of Education (IIE), and the College of Sustainable Agriculture highlight best practices, demonstrating how PHEIs can successfully integrate sustainability into academic and operational frameworks when supported by stakeholder collaboration and policy integration.

The study recommends key strategic actions, including strengthening policy engagement, expanding funding models, enhancing research collaborations, and integrating sustainability into institutional operations and curricula. By implementing these recommendations, PHEIs can play a more substantial role in addressing socioeconomic and environmental challenges, bridging gaps between education and sustainable development.

Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for systemic reform, urging government agencies, policymakers, private sector stakeholders, and educational leaders to work collaboratively in empowering PHEIs as catalysts for sustainable development. Through continued research, investment, and policy innovation, South African PHEIs can strengthen their contributions, ensuring that education serves as a transformative force in achieving national and global development objectives.

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