The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a Global Policy Framework in Higher Education

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Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, Maryna Lakhno, candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science declare herewith that the present thesis is my own work, based on my research. The thesis contains no materials previously written and published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference and notes. For those parts of the work which are based on joint research, disclosure of the respective contribution of the authors is made. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 11 July 2024

Statement of inclusion of joint work

I, Maryna Lakhno, confirm that Chapter 2 is based on the paper "Intermediary organizations and their role in advancing the SDGs in higher education", published at *Policy Reviews in Higher Education* journal which was written in collaboration with Professor Luis Ortiz-Gervasi. Professor Ortiz-Gervasi wrote several parts corresponding to the Catalan system of higher education; he edited different versions of the paper; he helped me contact the interviewees from which the main empirical evidence was drawn and he attended one of the interviews. Professor Ortiz-Gervasi also contributed to the necessary amendments for the final publication of the paper. Maryna Lakhno did most of the work of analysing the empirical evidence, writing the main theoretical argument and writing and analysing the core of the empirical evidence, as it should correspond to a 1st author. The authors endorse this statement with their signatures below.

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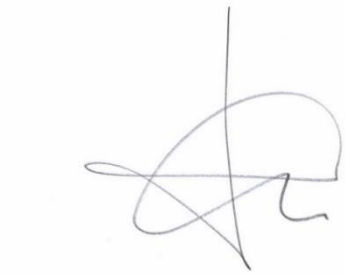

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Abstract

The concept of sustainability has been a prominent topic of discussion in higher education since the early 1990s. The advent of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 triggered extensive practical initiatives with regard to sustainability in higher education and the adoption of sustainability policies has become a pervasive feature of academic institutions, public authorities, and intermediary organisations globally. The SDGs represent an intriguing phenomenon for research in the field of higher education. The present dissertation posits that they constitute a global policy framework for higher education. Despite not being primarily designed for higher education institutions (HEIs), the SDGs have been used as reference points in policies pursued with varying degree of effectiveness in numerous HEIs worldwide, irrespective of their geographical location, structure, autonomy status, etc. It is remarkable how the SDGs, a global policy framework that is in essence very broad and abstract, and also non-binding, has managed to impact local higher education contexts. This dissertation addresses this puzzle by first defining a policy framework and then examining its local implementation through intermediary actors, as well as its manifestation through sustainability reporting. The core of this dissertation is comprised of three published peer-reviewed papers (two single-authored and one co-authored), which aim to address the puzzling nature of the SDGs as a global policy framework in higher education.

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Summary

This summary provides a brief overview of the dissertation.

The dissertation consists of four related studies in public policy and higher education: three articles (two single-authored and one co-authored) and a book chapter exploring the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a global public policy framework for higher education. The three articles are published in double-blind peer-review journals, are available in open access and can be downloaded via the links provided at the start of the respective chapters of the dissertation. The book chapter, "Universities: local agents of global changes. The United Nations sustainable development goals (2015–2030) as a global policy framework for higher education" (Lakhno, 2023a), forms a substantial part of the Introduction and is not presented as a separate chapter.

Introduction: The introduction sets up the main parameters of the research presented in the dissertation. It specifies the research questions and how they are addressed. The Introduction is largely based on a published book chapter entitled "Universities: local agents of global changes: The United Nations sustainable development goals (2015–2030) as a global policy framework for higher education."

The Introduction thematizes two key questions: firstly, whether the SDGs can be considered a global policy framework within higher education, and, secondly, the ways in which they are integrated and manifest in higher education practices. Addressing these questions is what gives unity and consistence to the dissertation throughout its chapters. These questions are discussed and addressed in the Introduction itself and, in even more details, in the three published journal articles, which form the three substantive chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter 1, "What Is a Policy Framework? An Attempt at Conceptualization" published in *Social Studies*, theorizes the concept of "policy framework" and thus contributes to the broader field of

public policy in a theoretical and methodological order, beyond just studying the SDGs. This was a necessary phase of my doctoral research. My main research question was whether (and also how) the SDGs act as a global policy framework for higher education. It was quite surprising to discover that although the concept of "policy framework" is broadly used in public policy, it had not been theorized and precisely defined in the literature, leaving unclear what it entails exactly. Despite its frequent use by international organizations, such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN), by governmental agencies and NGOs, "policy framework" did not receive systematic attention in terms of conceptualization. This study (Chapter 1), published in *Social Studies* journal (Lakhno, 2023b), is a novel research that aims to close this gap and conceptualize the term, using on the conceptualisation model developed by Sartori (1970) and based on extensive empirical material from the field of public policy. The article provides a clear definition of "policy framework" that can be universally applied across different policy sectors and geographies, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding and operationalisation in both public policy theory and practice. Moreover, adding to the theoretical and methodological contributions of this paper, a taxonomy of policy frameworks is presented. This taxonomy helped significantly to complete and clarify the theoretical background for my dissertation research.

Chapter 2, "Intermediary Organizations and their Role in Advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030) in Higher Education," co-authored with Luis Ortiz-Gervasi, was published in *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*. It looks at the ways of practical translation of the SDGs as a global policy framework in local higher education contexts. This paper addresses a key aspect of the how the SDGs work in practice in higher education, more precisely how intermediary organizations facilitate the inclusion of the SDGs in the local context, in this case in the higher education system of Catalonia. The paper shows how, despite their non-compulsory nature, the SDGs became popular and even "trendy" in higher education. The process

tracing method, combined with qualitative text analysis of the interviews were used in this study to examine this phenomenon. A significant finding is that higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide invest significant institutional resources to work within the policy prescriptions inspired by the SDGs, although there are no legally building obligations associated (HEIs are not legally required to implement the SDGs). The paper shows that the active involvement of intermediary organizations can make a real difference in this regard, contributing to the acceptance and implementation of SGDs-inspired policies by individual HEIs, even in conditions of high levels of institutional autonomy of these institutions and low levels of government funding dedicated to sustainability policies and their promotion.

Chapter 3 of this dissertation, "Green or Green-washed? Examining Sustainability Reporting in Higher Education," published by *Higher Education Quarterly*, looks at the sustainability reports of the top 50 UK universities. This paper examines the SDGs as a global policy framework in action, with a particular emphasis on how universities communicate their successes and shortcomings in this context. The research points out to the lack of binding standards regarding sustainability reporting and the tendency to present predominantly positive picture, often avoiding critical self-reflection. The study evaluates sustainability reports across five different modalities proposed by McCowan (2019): education, knowledge production, public debate, service delivery, and campus space. While many HEIs place strong emphasis on environmental aspects, especially related to the topic of green campus, other modalities are less frequently addressed. This paper concludes that for sustainability reporting to be effective, it needs to present a balanced view on sustainability activities, incorporating space for critical reflection and inclusive analysis.

Conclusions: In the concluding section, I provide a summary of the most important findings from the four papers and their interrelationships. In essence, they are as follows: Chapter 1 sets the theoretical basis for the dissertation. By providing a definition of policy frameworks, it helps to conceptualise the phenomenon of the SDGs in higher education. Chapter 2 discusses the relevance

of intermediaries in sustainability transitions on the regional level, explaining how the SDGs, as a global policy framework, can be transferred to the local higher education contexts. Chapter 3 shows how sustainability policies are communicated by HEIs, showcasing the tendency to avoid critical policy evaluation and all-encompassing understanding of sustainable development. In the Conclusions, I also discuss the limitations of the dissertation and potential avenues for future research.

Overall, the questions of this dissertation are relevant in a theoretical, methodological and practical (policy) order for the following reasons:

- The theoretical significance of this dissertation: Chapter 1 contributes to the conceptualisation of policy frameworks. Chapter 2 develops further the theory of intermediary organisations.
- Methodological significance: Chapter 1 contributes to the ongoing debate surrounding the methodological aspects of concept formation, building upon the existing literature based on the logic of Sartori (1970) and his subsequent followers. Chapter 2 contributes to the methodological discussions regarding process tracing. Chapter 3 presents a novel text analysis method, which combines AI-based analysis, thematic analysis and AI-based sentiment analysis.
- Policy relevance: Chapter 2 contributes practical and policy recommendation for contexts where there is a high degree of institutional autonomy in higher education and a lower degree of funding for social responsibility policies. The findings of the research indicate that intermediary organisations can be beneficial in the localisation of global policy frameworks, particularly in the context of higher education, where limited funding and indirect top-down pressure regarding sustainability policies may pose challenges. Chapter 3 proposes practical guidance to HEIs on how to report on their sustainability activities. A more self-critical approach and the inclusion of all higher education modalities in

sustainability reports may assist HEIs in maintaining objectivity when evaluating their sustainability achievements, potentially leading to a more comprehensive implementation of the SDGs.

Introduction: Lakhno, M. Universities: local agents of global changes: The United Nations sustainable development goals (2015–2030) as a global policy framework for higher education. In *Sustainability in Public Procurement, Corporate Law and Higher Education* (pp. 282-297). Routledge.

Chapter 1: Lakhno, M. (2023). What Is a Policy Framework? An Attempt at Conceptualization. *Sociální studia/Social Studies*, *20*(1), 89-111.

Chapter 2: Lakhno, M. and Luis Ortiz-Gervasi (2024). Intermediary Organizations and their Role in Advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030) in *Higher Education for Policy Reviews in Higher Education* (forthcoming).

Chapter 3: Lakhno, M. (2024). Green or green-washed? Examining sustainability reporting in higher education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, e12513.

Introduction

This PhD thesis posits that the UN SDGs represent a global policy framework for in higher education. Nowadays, numerous HEIs worldwide adopt sustainability policies and include sustainability elements in their core activities (McCowan, 2019). From a legal perspective, there is nothing in the SDGs that legally obliges higher education institutions (HEIs) to act. Yet, it is puzzling reality, despite the absence of legal requirements, many HEIs worldwide, from New Zealand to Mexico, voluntarily decide to engage with the SDGs. Sometimes, HEIs alter their institutional strategies and behaviours in fundamental ways in pursuit of the SDGs, even when this requires significant financial and organizational efforts on their behalf. This sustainability shift, however, is a convoluted task for the higher education sector (Tilbury, 2004, 2011).

Firstly, as with any non-mandatory policies, the SDGs can lead to a variety of institutional responses, which can range from a comprehensive, whole-institution approach (Mcmillin & Dyball, 2009) with the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders (Kohl et al., 2021) to those who are slower to adopt, namely, latecomers, or even merely engage as "window dressers." Structurally, the SDGs include 169 targets and 232 indicators (*The SDGs*, 2015). Examples of these 17 goals are eradication of worldwide poverty, hunger, and gender discrimination, combatting climate change, and promoting economic growth at the same time. This managerial-like blueprint includes goals and indicators that apply to all member states of the United Nations, regardless of their geographical position or economic development. The goals allow a direct measurement of progress and, at the same time, are designed to address the limitations of international agreements that often yield little impact (Tollefson & Gilbert, 2012). On the other hand, one might also argue that this managerial perspective might be lacking context-sensitive analysis since the numbers and statistical analyses are not always the true and only signs of sustainable development.

Secondly, the SDGs are ambitious, broad-ranging and non-compulsory, which presents a challenge in transferring them from the global level to the local context. The goals envisage a range of comprehensive solutions that go beyond a simple "narration" of problems and call for immediate action, even disruption of ways of thinking and policies in every sector (Kurz, 2020). However, the SDGs themselves give no specific instructions for implementation and offer only a "holistic, global, partnership-based, global-local binomial" vision, instead of direct imperatives (Vilalta et al., 2020). This makes their implementation challenging at all levels – locally, regionally, and globally.

The three chapters of this dissertation tackle the following main questions:

To what extent can the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) be considered a global policy framework in higher education? If the answer is in the affirmative: *How this global policy framework can be transferred to the local context of higher education, particularly in regions where the availability of funding for the implementation of sustainable development policies is limited*? Once the framework is established: *To what extent HEIs engage with sustainable development policies comprehensively and beyond window dressing?*

Chapter 1 addresses the necessity of conceptualisation in the field of public policy scholarship and attempts to conceptualise the term policy framework. In fact, it serves as a basis for the dissertation as it sets the theoretical and methodological foundations for considering the SDGs as a global policy framework: what does it mean that the SDGs are a policy framework; how to study policy frameworks? The paper contributes to the theoretical scholarships in the field of public policy and more broadly to the debates about research methodologies in the social sciences. Chapter 2 addresses the question of the translation of global policies (anchored around the SDGs in this case) at the local levels, by analysing the Catalan higher education system as an example of successful implementation of the SDGs on the level of a region or autonomous community in Spain. Chapter 3 zooms in further, beyond the regional level, addressing the question of the degrees of implementation of sustainability policies at the level of individual universities, looking into the practice of sustainability reporting at 50 top UK universities.

Overall, the research in this dissertation combines three perspectives: conceptual, meso-level (policy translation) and institutional level within individual HEIs. The overarching question it seeks to address is whether and how the SDGs function as a global policy framework for higher education. This dissertation aims to scrutinizes whether the SDGs serve as a guiding global policy framework in higher education; if so, how they are adapted to local contexts in the absence of any substantial legal pressures; and, when translated, how far are these beyond mere branding exercises. To address these questions, this dissertation employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative methods – including process tracing, concept formation and text analysis – with descriptive statistics.

The SDGs are a relatively new policy occurrence in higher education research. Most studies on this subject look exclusively at separate, individual, and selected aspects of the SDGs; they do not raise the question about the reality and potency of the SDGs as a global policy framework. Some of the major thematic avenues in the SDGs' research in higher education are represented by sustainability in higher education curriculum (Pallant et al., 2020; Tasdemir & Gazo, 2020; Weiss et al., 2021; Willats et al., 2018), sustainable development in academic research (Salvia et al., 2019), knowledge economy, and brokerage (Richards-Kennedy & St Brice, 2018), green campus (Anthony Jnr, 2020; da Silva et al., 2022; Gui et al., 2021), sustainability reports (De la Poza et al., 2021), monitoring progress, surveys, partnerships of governments and communities (El-Jardali et al., 2018), and obstacles to the SDGs' implementation (Aleixo et al., 2018). One of the major reasons for the variety of focus areas within the field may be the undoubtable complexity of the SDGs. Complexity may explain why the conceptual framing of the SDGs appears to be overly broad or loosely defined. This is problematic at the level of policymakers (at the intergovernmental organizations – IGOs), and as at the level of HEIs. Failure to understand the relevance of the Agenda 2030 in higher education may lead to dangerous outcomes, such as misinterpreting, or completely missing altogether, the potency of the SDGs as a global policy framework. As previously mentioned, there

is a wide range of topics relating to the SDGs that have attracted the attention of researchers. As a result, we can explicitly ascertain another gap in the literature, in terms of "the whole institution approach" and, with this, the need for more research, "with a holistic perspective that considers the impacts of all core elements [that] would be a fruitful addition to the many in-depth [single] case studies available" (Findler et al., 2019, p. 32). The whole institution approach refers to the research into HEIs that considers, or includes, all layers, namely, higher education modalities (McCowan, 2019), without concentrating on a single stream, for example, curriculum. Indeed, this is one of the ambitions of this thesis, as it considers the SDGs as a unified policy framework in higher education that has the potential to influence all five modalities of higher education, namely education, knowledge production, public debate, service provision, and embodiment (McCowan, 2019).

Overall, this dissertation contributes to the sustainability literature in higher education, as it explores theoretical foundations of the SDGs by defining them as a global policy framework in higher education. Further, this study provides examinations of the regional (Catalonia) and national (UK) cases of higher education systems engaging with the SDGs. Each paper looks at different angles of sustainable development in higher education, examining the SDGs from three angles: conceptual (by conceptualizing policy frameworks and the SDGs as a global policy framework in higher education), mechanism-based explanation for global policy translation to local contexts (by examining the role of intermediary organizations in voluntary transitions), and in terms of the potential for in-depth implementation vs dangers of "window dressing (by providing an analysis of sustainability reports).

Chapter 1 **What Is a Policy Framework? An Attempt at Conceptualization**

Published in Social Studies (2023b)

Single authored

Abstract

The term "policy framework" is frequently used. Surprisingly, however, there are no definitions for it; nor have there been any systematic attempts to conceptualize or clarify what a policy framework is. The fact that in spite of its ubiquitous use the term is not defined might signify that its meaning is considered self-evident. In reality, however, as we will show in this article, this is not the case – far from it. Even if it were, the place of the term "policy framework" in the public policy vocabulary and as a concept in the cognitive universe of public policy is too important to dispense with the task of defining it explicitly. The present article outlines a rationale for the conceptualization of the term and an approach towards achieving it. The main justification for attempting a definition of the concept is the need for cognitive hygiene. Methodologically, this research is inspired by the thinking of Sartori (1970) and scholarship surrounding his ideas on concept formation. Indeed, the paper does not aim to "reinvent the wheel" in public policy but strives to extract the meaning of "policy framework" from already existing definitions, implicit if not explicit, and, in this way, to systematize pre-existing scholarship by providing empirical references to current policy frameworks across thematic fields.

Keywords: policy framework, conceptualization, policy studies

1.1 Introduction

The process of thinking inevitably begins with a qualitative (natural) language, no matter at which shore we shall subsequently land.

(Sartori, 1970, p. 1038)

The term "policy framework" is frequently used. Referring to my personal research story, I would like to highlight that it has been extensively employed in the context of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the area of higher education. Surprisingly, there are no definitions for it; nor have there been any systematic attempts to conceptualize what a policy framework is. Indeed, we can note a plurality of empirical manifestations of policy frameworks. It can be observed that policy frameworks set up broad parameters and delimitations, in terms of principles, values, operational and managerial objectives, and modalities, for broader policy endeavours and initiatives outside the organization that produces that framework, or for regulating some internal aspects of the work and operations of that organization. Thus, policy frameworks may be used in institutional settings (for example, they can regulate internal rules and practices) and also for larger policy endeavours (when they exceed institutional borders and have a wider significance). This is a very important distinction in the understanding and definition of a policy framework. For instance, a sustainability framework in a given university is an example of an institutional policy framework; it is developed by that university to organize, even regulate, its own work and policies. In contrast, the SDGs are adopted by the United Nations, but they are not to regulate the internal work of the UN; they are indeed a global policy framework, informing a myriad of other policies and policy frameworks outside the UN.

One might argue that policy processes are multifaceted and dynamic and that having any kind of definition might become an obstacle in some ways – for example, it may lead to losing flexibility in policy-making, and, as a result, promoting less innovative thinking. On the one hand, policy-making is an iterative process that often requires revisiting and adjusting policies on the basis of their outcomes. A flexible conception of a policy framework allows for this adaptability. On the

other hand, having a flexible concept does not imply that the concept itself is empty. Coming back to the SDGs, it might be hard to achieve the 17 Global Goals by 2030. One of the reasons is the lack of a standard model that can be utilized across contexts. Of course, by providing a definition for policy frameworks, we cannot fully resolve all global problems, but we can certainly contribute towards effective, systematic, and transparent policy-making. Further, referring to a clear concept can be beneficial in terms of improving the clarity of communication, as having a definition would provide the basis for a shared understanding of policy frameworks by various stakeholders, in academia and beyond. The present article outlines a rationale for the conceptualization of the term "policy framework" and an approach towards achieving it (Collier & Gerring, 2009; Gerring, 1999; Maggetti et al., 2013; Mair, 2008; Sartori, 1970).

The fact that in spite of its ubiquitous use the term is not defined might signify that its meaning is considered self-evident. In reality, however, as we will show in this article, this is not the case – far from it. Even if it were, the place of the term "policy framework" in the public policy vocabulary and as a concept in the cognitive universe of policy analysis is too important to dispense with the task of defining it explicitly. One can encounter numerous examples of broad, international or national policy frameworks in documents from international organizations such as the OECD, WHO, EU, UN, and from governments and NGOs worldwide. Policy frameworks are also mentioned on the institutional level, as applied to universities, financial institutions, security agencies, and trade organizations, etc. Whenever the term is used in such documents, its meaning is taken for granted or the matter of its definition is simply ignored. In a nutshell, the term is there as a label, but it is not defined, and its meaning as a concept is not clarified.

Similarly, scholarly literature mentions policy frameworks, but such academic papers tend to proceed to the "empirical core" of the matter without any particular attention to defining or characterizing the concept itself. A typical example in this context is an article by Woolcock (1998), who uses the term "policy framework" very centrally in the title, but not in the body of the text.

There are also some exceptions, but these are not conceptualization papers, and only mention what is understood to be a policy framework in a specific context. Here, then, a question arises: Can we label something as a policy framework without knowing what policy frameworks are?

The main justification for the attempt to define "policy framework" in this paper is the need for cognitive hygiene. Indeed, concepts are "the fundamental building-blocks for any description of reality" (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Sartori, 1970). Thus, without these "blocks", one is not able to de/construct theories in a way that fully coincides with the questions asked. The aim of this article is to demystify the concept of policy framework, by means of a comprehensive review of existing literature, the application of methodologies from comparative politics and references to policy studies, and the development of a detailed taxonomy. The article seeks to provide a clear, practical definition of "policy framework" that can be universally applied across different sectors and geographic spheres, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding and application in both policy theory and practice.

1.2 Policy Frameworks in the Literature

Not only in the sphere of applied policy, but also within the broader realm of scholarly enquiry, there is very little said about the concept of a policy framework. To demonstrate this gap, we conducted a systematic literature review prior to our attempt at conceptualization (Snyder, 2019). This research followed a systematic and transparent method that is possible to replicate if required.

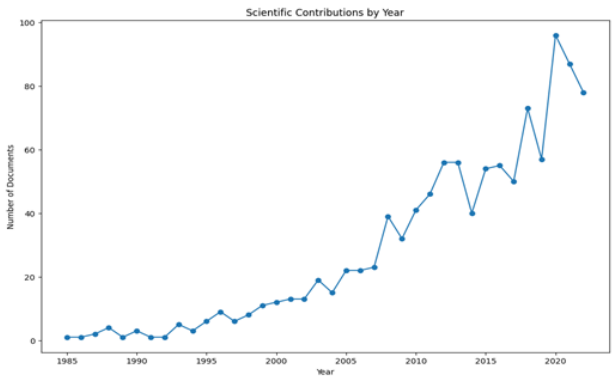
Our systematic literature review was based on search results from the scientific databases Scopus and Web of Science. Both were selected because of their comprehensiveness and their coverage of a wide range of topics, which are not necessarily limited to the field of policy. This choice allowed for a broad search across diverse disciplines, thus gathering evidence on policy frameworks on the broadest scale. However, Scopus included significantly more results (1,096 vs 478). The documents

from Web of Science were included in the Scopus search; therefore, Scopus was used as the main reference.

The search strategy was to concentrate on the specific concept "policy framework" in the titles of publications. The keyword yielded 1,096 documents. This approach has its limitations because of its strict exclusion approach; yet, having "policy framework" in title meant that all documents were focused on this very specific phenomenon. The results of the search included only documents written in English, further limited to finalized publications in the timeframe 1965-2023. Types of documents included articles, book chapters, conference papers, reviews, notes, editorials, books, and letters. The next step included the screening and selection of potential articles based on whether or not they explicitly conceptualized the term "policy framework". This screening process was a critical step in systematic literature reviews, as it ensured that only the most relevant articles were included in the review.

Analysis of the results demonstrated an obvious gap in research when it comes to conceptualizing policy frameworks, even despite rapidly growing interest in the topic. Figure 1 shows the number of research documents with the term "policy framework" in the title published since 1985. As such publications reached almost 100 per year, it is clear that the concept of the policy framework has become a part of scholarly debate across various fields.

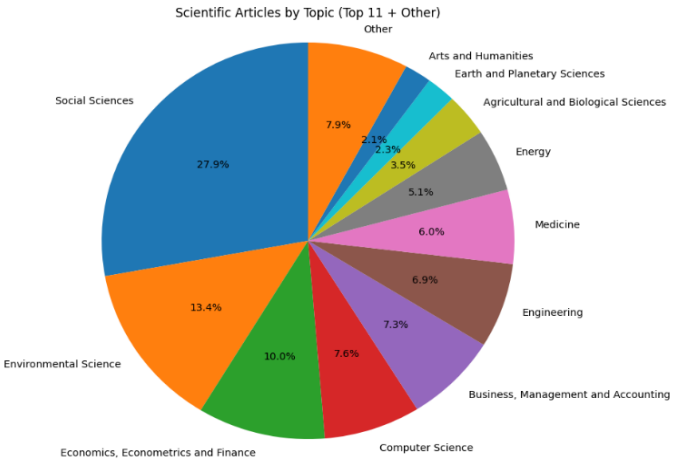
Figure 1 Policy frameworks in the literature (1985-2022)



(Source: Scopus)

The concept of the "policy framework" has not only found its way into academic literature but has also become integral to numerous disciplines. The breadth of disciplines engaging with policy frameworks in their scholarly work is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Policy frameworks across disciplines



(Source: Scopus)

As can be seen, the majority of publications belong to social sciences (27.9 %), followed by environmental sciences (13.4 %), and economics (10 %). Also, other fields, such as engineering, computer science and business, employ the concept. However, the mentioning of policy frameworks does not imply specific discussion of their meaning, as only 7 publications attempted to briefly explain what a policy framework actually is. These are quite limited in their explanations and frequently offer only a couple of sentences regarding policy frameworks per se, as their main focus is on different policy frameworks and not specifically on their definitions. Some papers, such as that by Modiba (2022), for example, view policy frameworks as regulatory entities that are "used by large organizations such as corporate or educational institutions, or governments to notify workers about whose endorsement is required to create new policies, what law must be followed when developing new policies, how policies should be interconnected and imposed and what high-

level or long-term aims that new policies should attempt to maintain" (p. 53). While comprehensive, this definition could be critiqued for its specificity to large organizations, which might limit its applicability in some contexts. It may not fully encapsulate the use of policy frameworks in smaller organizations, non-profits, or community groups, for example. Several other authors have understood policy frameworks as providing logic for policy makers (Wallner, 2013), establishing a "set of steps, procedures, principles, values and standards" (Heleta, 2023, p. 3), or, more generally, referring to "policy goals, programs, instruments, such as funding priorities and support mechanisms" (Vihemäki et al., 2019, p. 314). Some authors, like Depledge (2013, p. 371), considered policy frameworks to be more flexible texts, which required constant evaluation. Similarly, Agarwala (2022, p. 2) mentioned that policy frameworks are more general documents. A very flexible definition by Birch (2016, p. 3) also mentioned the broad applicability of policy frameworks, which could be "policy priorities, analysis, funding, schemes, initiatives and directives, and implementation modes that cut across policy-making, ensuring that policies are compatible and complementary."

In general, explanations of what is considered to be a policy framework largely overlap in their understanding of policy frameworks as guiding structures for policy creation and implementation. On the other hand, the extent of their flexibility and dynamism is less clear. Some studies emphasize procedural aspects and regulatory rules, others focus on strategic aspects, while yet others underline the importance of flexibility and adaptability. The different subject areas also influence the results, suggesting that any attempt to conceptualize policy frameworks may need to be tailored to the specificities of the policy area in question. Overall, this variation in definitions could indicate a need for a more universally applicable, yet adaptable, definition of a policy framework.

1.3 Conceptualization: Methodological Insights

This article intends to contribute to policy scholarship by conceptualizing the notion of the "policy framework" as well by attempting a taxonomy of the term. The paper does not aim to "reinvent

the wheel" but strives to extract the meaning of "policy framework" from already existing definitions, implicit if not explicit, and, in this way, to systematize pre-existing scholarship by providing empirical references to current policy frameworks across thematic fields.

This paper takes its inspiration from Sartori (1970), who is often taken as a foundational figure with respect to theoretical thinking in comparative politics, due to his significant contributions to the conceptualization and classification of political systems. His approach to conceptual clarity, known as the "ladder of abstraction", has been instrumental across disciplines. The decision to base this effort towards conceptualization on his approach stems from understanding policy frameworks as parts of a multidisciplinary domain. Further, the principles that Sartori provides are of methodological value for this research as they facilitate a structured process of conceptualization.

1.4 Conceptualizing Policy Frameworks

The following part attempts to work with the concept of policy framework using some central questions of conceptualization literature which were inspired by the logic of Sartori (1970). These questions include the need for conceptualization, its semantic aspects and positioning on the ladder of abstraction, the need for the development of a taxonomy of policy frameworks, and, finally, the conceptualization itself as well as its evaluation. Indeed, this paper provides a definition of the policy framework, but its main goal is to provide a clarification of the concept, which is the main direction of this part.

1.4.1 Why Do We Need to Conceptualize?

One of the first steps in any research is the conceptual question: "What is it that I am researching?" (Mair, 2008, p. 180). Following the logic of Sartori, concepts are defined as "data containers" with a "fact-gathering validity" (1970, pp. 62–63). Sartori's main advice to the researcher is to ask the question of "What is it?" before elaborating the question of "How much?" (cited in Collier and Gerring 2009, p. 4). The idea that the researcher needs to conceptualize the terms prior to

measurement or qualitative analysis is ubiquitous in the literature (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Mair, 2008). Indeed, it is "impossible to conduct [research] without using concepts. It is impossible even to conceptualize a topic, as the term suggests... Any significant work on a subject will involve reconceptualization of that subject" (Gerring, 1999, p. 359). Advancing in theory-formation or theory-testing is unfeasible without clearly defined concepts.

On the other hand, there are also instances when measurement can be prioritized for pragmatic reasons, such as the existence of time constraints or an interest in new data generation (Maggetti et al., 2013). Moreover, "the preference for either conceptual analysis or measurement may be the result of the maturity of the field – we expect new, emerging fields to be mostly dedicated to conceptual work" (Maggetti et al., 2013, p. 5). Thus, in the case of policy frameworks, one needs to prioritize conceptualization over measurement, largely due to the lack of previous scholarship in the area.

Conceptualization is a holistic process that involves working with properties and attributes (intension), "the events, circumstances or phenomena to be covered" (extension), and the label itself, which is the embodiment of both (Buller & Gamble, 2002, p. 6). There are a number of methodological and contextual challenges that may be involved in the process; these could range from a plurality of pre-existing conceptualizations and their diversity to a lack of such conceptualizations or their limited validity.

First of all, there are numerous empirical manifestations of policy frameworks as well as references to them in scholarly literature. Perhaps taken for granted, considered to be semantically obvious, or even mundane, the label has travelled across a variety of academic disciplines and policy areas without there being wider awareness of its meaning. Having no clear concept might lead to extremes where anything can be called a policy framework without proper consideration. Questions, such as "Where do we draw the borderlines between a policy framework and a policy or other manifestations?" or "Why do we call this document a policy framework and not something

else?" might lead to further confusion and misinterpretation. Indeed, there are numerous attempts to conceptualize policies, but why are there none with respect to policy frameworks?

If we were to consider the question "What is it that I am researching?" (Mair, 2008, p. 180), we also have to define the research area. In our case, we are searching for the term that is used in the domain of public policy but is not restricted to it; thus, it also encompasses private policies. One can find policy frameworks that are introduced by financial institutions, universities, intra-governmental organizations, NGOs, IT companies, and so on.

1.4.2 Semantic Components of Policy Frameworks

If we were to look at the structural components, the basic element of a policy framework is a policy itself. The concept of a policy is known for its contested definitions. For instance, Dye (1972, p. 2) provides a very broad and abstract conceptualization, which states that a policy is "whatever governments choose to do or not to do." Yet not all policies require governmental decisions to be implemented, since not all policies belong to the realm of public policy. For instance, a private firm that decides to adopt a gender equality and non-discrimination policy is free to do so, without consulting governmental representatives. However, the choice aspect of Dye's definition can be regarded as a useful link to non-governmental policies. Indeed, institutions, whether public or private, have to decide whether or not they adopt a policy.

A more detailed way of conceptualizing a policy can be found in the definition by Jenkins (1978, p. 15), who sees it as "a set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation." In a nutshell, it is a set of interrelated decision-making steps leading to the adoption of a policy. These "steps" are performed by various "powerful" stakeholders, who have to compromise in terms of goals selection and their instrumentalization.

Moreover, a policy exhibits basic components, such as goals, objectives, settings (context) and instruments (Cashore & Howlett, 2007), which are also present in policy frameworks. Following the argument of Howlett and Cashore (2014, p. 9), policy making "evolve[s] around the process of articulating and matching up policy goals with preferred policy means at all three of the abstract (general or conceptual), program (concrete) and on-the-ground (settings) levels". Taking the empirical example of waste reduction in the operations of a higher education institution, policy making processes include abstract aims, such as contributing to the global fight against climate change, as well as conceptual means (better waste management), objectives (the reduction of waste), mechanisms (the improvement of waste management facilities, informational campaigns), and contextual setting and the calibrations of tools (the reduction of waste by 50 % by 2030 by implementing better waste management strategies and by promoting increased awareness) (Howlett & Cashore, 2014).

The link between a policy and a policy framework is present beyond its "label". Indeed, policy frameworks are similar to policies in their goal-oriented nature as well as in their documented/ written form. However, a policy is not identical to a policy framework, since the latter refers to a set of statements that might not be interrelated. A policy framework is not necessarily limited to one area of application or one institution. It provides the bigger picture – it guides the policy-making process itself, ensuring that individual policies are consistent with each other and aligned with the organization's or government's overall objectives. If we were to provide a metaphorical example, a policy can be represented by a brick, whereas a policy framework will be more like a wall of bricks, which form a construction that stabilizes the "house".

The second element of a concept is a framework. From the semantic point of view, a framework can be understood from two angles. Firstly, it is defined as a term that represents "a system of rules, ideas, or beliefs that is used to plan or decide something" (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). In this way, it can refer to an institutional or policy framework. On the other hand, it also has a

geometric component, which denotes a "basic structure that supports something such as a vehicle or building and gives it its shape" (*Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*, 2024). In other words, a framework helps to organize and unite separate policies into one coherent "organism".

In the context of institutions, Ostrom (2011, p. 8) mentioned three key concepts, namely theories, models, and frameworks. In Ostrom's view, the study of institutions hinges on three levels of theoretical analysis, and each level offers varying degrees of specificity pertaining to a particular problem. Frameworks are considered to be the most general forms of analysis, which provide a general structure and meta-theoretical language for identifying universal elements and generating relevant questions. Theories focus on specific elements and assumptions in order to diagnose, explain, and predict phenomena, while models make precise assumptions in order to derive accurate predictions based on a specific theory. This understanding of frameworks helps us to gain an insight into their breadth and structure-generating features.

From the point of view of policy research, frameworks are frequently referred to in the process of policy analysis. These policy frameworks – Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (Kingdon, 2014), Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier & Jenkins-smith, 1993), and Baumgartner and Jones' Punctuated Equilibrium Framework (Balla et al., 2015) – are well-established and often referenced within the field. However, the primary focus of this paper transcends these specific analytical tools. Instead, it seeks to delve into the conceptualization of policy frameworks, positioning them as integral entities within the policy-making process.

1.4.3 Ladder of Abstraction

One of the central methodological questions in concept formation literature asks whether the researcher should choose dichotomies when formulating concepts or look beyond binary classifications. In some cases, the scholar may refer to Sartori's negative identification (1970, p.

1042), which works on the basis of antonymous dichotomies (for instance, a married person is not single). However, this might lead to further difficulties, as it is not guaranteed that we encounter exclusively and fully binary concepts in the process of research. Specifically, what if there are more "shadows" of the concept than just polar opposites?

If we follow the logic of Sartori (1970) we should look for its antonyms. First of all, a policy framework is not the same as a policy; nor is it the same as other related concepts, such as a strategy, a law, or an initiative. Yet, as we can see, such a negative identification approach is rather a blunt instrument. Nevertheless, it might be useful in the initial stages of intellectual inquiry, such as conceptual mapping – that is, though it may appear vague, it can still be a useful tool for "narrowing down" and approaching the concept from a more analytical perspective.

Furthermore, not every concept can be compared with another, partially because they might have different scopes. Sartori (1970) offers a solution, which he calls the ladder of abstraction. In his ladder, Sartori proposes three levels: low-level (narrow-gauge theory), medium-level (middle range theory), and high-level categories (global theory) (1970, p. 1044). In the logic of Sartori, the higher the concept is on the ladder, the more all-encompassing it is. In order to move from one level to another on the ladder of abstraction, there is a need to unpack the meaning of the core components of the concept, namely its extension and intension (Maggetti et al., 2013, p. 9). Intension refers to the features or properties of concepts, whereas extension includes the cases covered by a concept (Maggetti et al., 2013, p. 9). In Sartori's understanding, the concepts of medium-level categories have their extension and intension in balance; the highest-level concepts are characterized by greater levels of extension and minimal intentions; and the lowest-level concepts represent the opposite situation, which means they exhibit minimum extension and maximum intention (p. 1044). Thus, concepts of the lowest level are very specific and can be applied only to a limited number of cases, which change once we move up the ladder.

Sartori's paper evoked further conceptual discussions and reformulations in the literature. For instance, Mair (2008) provides further explanation of Sartori's logic, calling extension denotation/ the range of cases, and extension connotation/ "the number of attributes or properties" (p. 187). Similarly, Gerring (1999, pp. 357–358) expands the Sartori's approach by calling for triangulation in concept formation, which should include a "proper alignment" between "a) the events or phenomena to be defined; b) the properties of the attributes that define them; c) the label covering both a and b".

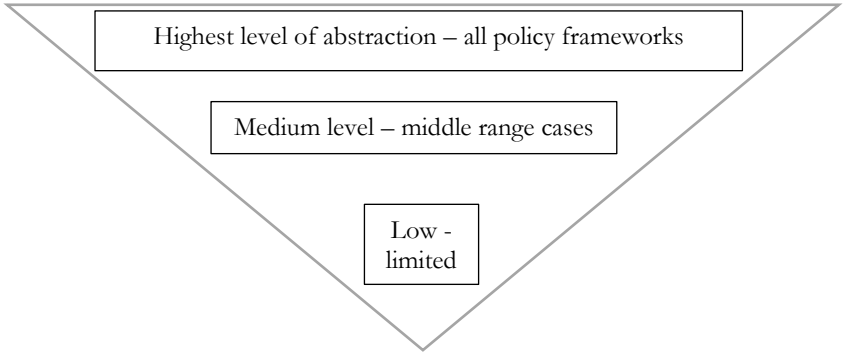
Even though it remains influential in concept formation scholarship, the idea of the ladder of abstraction was later questioned and refined by other scholars, since some concepts do not fully fit into the categorization (Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Goertz, 2012; Mair, 2008). This was the case of Collier and Levitsky (1997), who argued that it was impossible to apply the strictest forms of the ladder of abstraction to their research, which showed that the characteristics of post-Cold war democracies were dissimilar to the "conventional" contemporary understanding and definitions of democracy. Thus, post-Cold war democracies had no clear-cut position on the ladder. As a solution, Collier and Levitsky (1997) introduced the category of diminished subtypes, which was proposed through defining democracy with the help of adjectives. This allowed a move away from the purely vertical understanding of concepts and added horizontal "side" deviations. Similarly, Goertz (2012) supported continuity in the process of concept formation by calling on scholars to include grey zones between ideal types.

In addition, Collier and Adcock (1999, p. 562) called for the adoption of a "pragmatic approach which recognizes that concepts, definitions, and operationalization may evolve with changes in the goals and context of research", yet by no means did the authors advocate conceptual anarchy. By offering an alternative understanding of concept formation, the authors revised Sartori's classical argument for "cut-off points" and that "formation stands prior to quantification" (Sartori, 1970,

p. 1038) in definitions. Indeed, Collier and Adcock (1999) acknowledge the role of dichotomies, but, at the same time highlight their changing nature (p. 545).

If we were to position the concept of a policy framework on Sartori's ladder of abstraction (1970), we might be justified in placing different "shades" of it on each level. The following sub-section will attempt to deconstruct the ladder of abstraction on the basis of empirical observations. The visual below provides a short summary of the abstraction, and the discussion afterwards explains its main components.

Figure 3 Sartori's (1970) ladder of abstraction



First of all, policy frameworks can be situated at the very top of the ladder of abstraction. In this way, if we think about the label "policy framework" in general, we might imagine a wide range of cases which are, indeed, policy frameworks. Here, we need the most minimalistic definition that can be applied to any policy framework, regardless of its geographical relation, scope, area, and other features. The highest level of abstraction includes the broadest number of cases and the greatest level of extension; conversely, it includes the most minimal level of intension.

Next, policy frameworks might also include medium-range concepts. These are more limited in terms of empirical cases and much more balanced in their proportions of extension and intension. An empirical example could be the SDGs policy framework that originated from the United Nations in 2015 but travelled far beyond UN walls. There are thousands of "SDGs-inspired" policy

frameworks that range from local adaptations to global or trans- national frameworks. Here, we can think about the example of an SDGs policy framework on the level of an international organization. For instance, the OECD has its own institutional response to the UN SDG policy framework, namely "Better Policies for 2030" (*OECD and the Sustainable Development Goals*, n.d.), which uses elements of the SDGs and incorporates them into the strategies and priorities of the OECD. There are also other examples relating to EU institutions, the World Bank, and the G7. Thus, the middle part of the ladder of abstraction includes a more focused and specific group of policy frameworks, yet it is still less specific than lower-level policy frameworks.

Finally, the policy framework concept might also appear on the lowest level of Sartori's ladder of abstraction, i.e. in a form which is the most specific and limited. Its intension is at a maximum, while its extension is, by contrast, very limited. In this case, we can think about an institutional policy framework which has its own distinctive attributes. For instance, the SDG policy framework at the level of a higher education institution. Here, we are faced with a level of narrow-gauge applicability. Thus, it is not advisable to limit ourselves to the lowest levels of abstraction in scholarly attempts at conceptualization, since this could limit our understanding of a concept. Further, it can be misleading and exclusive, and might even cause conceptual chaos.

In spite of its apparent usefulness, however, the idea of the ladder of abstraction is, as mentioned previously, widely debated in the literature, since it is far from universal and has its significant drawbacks (Collier & Adcock, 1999; Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Goertz, 2012; Mair, 2008). If we were to apply criticism to the concept of a policy framework, we might also face certain empirical examples that do not fit neatly onto the ladder of abstraction. For instance, what about examples of policy frameworks that are of a "hybrid nature", such as the Policy and Procedure Framework of the University of Southern Queensland? Its characteristics might not be fully identical with policy frameworks at other universities; therefore, the rules of the ladder might not be applicable in this case. Whether or not we can call it a diminished type (Collier & Levitsky, 1997) can be

decided only after careful analysis of this particular case, which is not the main goal of this paper. However, it is worth noting that the ladder of abstraction might not be the only way to understand concepts.

Overall, the ladder of abstraction serves its function well in the context of policy frameworks. It helps us to recognize the variety of possible policy frameworks that are situated at all three levels. In order to overcome the limitations of the lowest levels, this article aims to conceptualize the term that is positioned in the uppermost part of the triangle (Figure 3). Therefore, this leads us to the need for a brief and minimalistic definition that will enable us to find the unifying features that are present in the whole construction.

1.4.4 Typologies or Taxonomies?

Typologies are understood to be the tools for moving from "simple classification towards explanation" (Mair 2008: 183). One of the central ideas of a typology is the opposition to hierarchy, namely the inclusion of concepts which are related into one category (*The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, 2024, p. 2). According to Collier (Collier et al., 2008), "explicit discussion of concepts and sub-types, as in a typology, is an important step in mapping out the semantic field". Jaakkola (2020, p. 23) adds that typology papers help to reduce complexity, offer a multifaceted and "more [...] nuanced understanding of a phenomenon or concept, pinpointing and justifying key dimensions that distinguish the variants". The author mentions that typologies have several goals to fulfil – specifically, "explaining differences between variants of a concept [and] organizing fragmented research into common distinct types" (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 22). Further, typologies are recognized to be directly related to the process of systematic conceptualization, with a special focus on links between concepts and causality beyond "simple" correlations (Fiss, 2011).

Yet, there are a number of challenges that accompany the development of a typology. Collier (Collier et al., 2008) provides a summary of potential solutions which can serve the scholar facing

insufficiency or a lack of definitions. These include borrowing existing terms but assigning new meanings to them and "synthesizing various existing theoretical approaches in order to coin new and useful terms" (p. 160). Thus, instead of inventing a new concept, the method of synthetizing literature is considered to be preferential.

Another danger facing typology construction is that it might be purely conceptual/ abstract and distant from empirical cases (Smith, 2002). The dimensions of typologies frequently rely on an ideal type, which means that they remain on the level of "a mental construct that deliberately accentuates certain characteristics and [are] not necessarily something that is found in empirical reality" (Smith 2002: 381; Weber 1949). Being useful in terms of systematic comparisons, typologies might be "useful heuristics", but at the same time "incapable of producing the sharp policy distinctions needed to fully support the explanatory and predictive resources scholars want to extract from [them]" (Smith, 2002, p. 381). For the reasons mentioned above, the concept of the typology cannot serve its purpose in conceptualizing a policy framework, since it can be misleading to rely on "ideal types" that are hard to test empirically.

In the case that the inclusion of empirical observations in classificatory attempts is required, a scholar might prefer to apply another approach, namely a taxonomy. Though "taxonomy" as a concept is frequently but mistakenly understood to be synonymous with typology, taxonomic definitions differ from typologies in a number of ways – according to Lambert (2006, p. 4), by resulting from reasoning by inference, the consideration of a multiplicity of characteristics, and empirical derivations of "taxa" (categories) etc.

Taxonomies are frequently associated with inductive data collection and grounded theory. They are helpful in the process of pioneering attempts at conceptualization, as in the case of policy frameworks. The central objective of taxonomies is not the definition of a single and restricted entity but "a population of entities with some common properties" (Hodgson, 2019, p. 211). In this way, we might be able to escape the narrowness of typologies and move towards a more

diverse, and, to some extent, even divergent, population of cases with a common feature that unites them under one "umbrella label". Here, we can refer to policy frame- works from different fields, geographical scopes, institutional contexts, etc., but we cannot exclude the clear formulation of those common properties that Hodson (2019) refers to. Using a taxonomy in this paper will enable us to uncover the variety of cases and to highlight the broad nature of the concept.

Given our preference for taxonomic definitions, we can now proceed with our attempt to describe a policy framework through the list of the properties it possesses, employing references in the literature and, at the same time, avoiding "mak[ing] up entirely new meanings" (Graebner & Ghorbani, 2019, p. 3). One of the first things to note is that any taxonomy consists of a set of variables. In the case of the policy framework concept, it usually includes several features, the most obvious of which are its area of application, its geographical scope, and the type of institution that works with it.

1.5 Policy Frameworks by Geographical Scope

Referring to geographical scope is not novel in the literature (Kehm, 2003; Krahmann, 2003; Söderbaum & Hettne, 2006). On the one hand, there are the pure concepts of local, regional, national, international, and global. These are seen as interconnected, but, at the same time, distinctive. The connections are seen through the processes in which social actors are positioned "as inherently 'local' and [then] subsequently become regional, national and/or global" (Herod, 2008, p. 220). On the other hand, these processes might be happening the other way round, namely, from global to local, from regional to global, from global to national, etc. Herod (2008) presents these relations as a visual of nesting dolls, which consist of multiple interdependent layers and portray "a nested hierarchy of scales, with each scale fitting neatly together to provide a coherent whole" (p. 228).

On the other hand, Herod (2008, p. 223) notes that "the global and the local are seen not as things in and of themselves but are viewed instead as interpretative frames for analysing situations." This fluid approach, which opposes the strict dichotomies mentioned before, means that, in some cases, global policy frameworks might also be transferred to local, national, or regional levels, and vice versa. Here, we can mention an empirical example of the SDGs, which are global in the first place, but also national, regional, and local at the same time, depending on the research perspective.

1.6 Policy Frameworks by the Type of Institution

A policy framework cannot exist on its own – that is, without an institutional context. Policy frameworks originate in institutions and are adapted to their contexts. Thus, the taxonomy of policy frameworks would be incomplete without mentioning them. Yet institutions as such are not one-dimensional entities, since they consist of many types. Thus, it would be too simplistic and broad to state that a policy framework is an institutional entity.

Notably, there is very little conceptual consensus in the literature when it comes to defining an institution and outlining its different forms. Thus, the following part will attempt to synthetize the extant literature in this area. Since it is not the main focus of the study and the discussion will serve to identify the basis of the taxonomy of policy frameworks, the following part will not aim to provide an extensive insight into the institutional literature. The concept of an institution has been extensively discussed in the literature and attempts to provide valid definitions date back many decades. More recently, (Jepperson, 2021, p. 146) defined institutions as regulated entities and "socially constructed systems of roles or programs that produce routines." According to Scott (Scott et al., 2008, p. 56), institutions are highly relevant, since they "provide stability and meaning to social life".

Further, Scott (2008, p. 60) mentions types of institutions, namely those which are cultural-cognitive, regulative, and normative. Cultural-cognitive institutions are mimetic and orthodox,

based on a common understanding and shared ideas, and culturally indoctrinated. Normative institutions function on the principles of social obligation and feelings of shame/ honor, which arise from a moralistic perspective. These cultural-cognitive and normative institutions are "not applied" in such policy frameworks. Policy frameworks are likely to be documented entities, meaning they are commonly produced in written form. In contrast, regulative institutions rely on coercion and rules and are based on the notion of regulation. Thus, policy frameworks might be potential guarantors of an "organization". Therefore, when conceptualizing a policy framework this paper refers only to regulative institutions. This means that this study does not consider other types of institutions – specifically, those that are based on cultural or moralistic grounds. In this way, institutions such as families or religious groups are excluded from our understanding of the contextual base for policy frameworks.

Since policy frameworks have not previously been conceptualized through institutional lenses, this paper proposes its own types of institutions, which are also based on Scott's (2001) regulative type. In order to overcome the complexity of the institutional reality, we view institutions as single institutions (such as companies, banks, universities, schools, etc.), governmental institutions (ministries, national agencies, employment offices etc.), non-governmental (NGOs), and intergovernmental institutions (EU, UN, World Bank).

1.7 Policy Frameworks by Area of Application

Policy frameworks in the security sector might differ from those one can find in the area of higher education. Yet they are still policy frameworks. Therefore, it is worth mentioning policy areas in the taxonomy. Intuitively, one might outline major policy areas in which policy frameworks can be observed: education, culture, security, healthcare, tourism, transport, justice, IT, fiscal policy, energy, the environment, social policies, international relations etc.

However, it is also worth mentioning that a policy framework might not necessarily be mono-sectorial. It could encompass several sectors or even be universal. Thus, for the purposes of inclusion, this paper refers to the variety of policy frameworks and includes mono- sectoral, pluri-sectoral, and universal policy frameworks.

Since the main aim of this study is to define the term policy framework and not to provide an overwhelming and in-depth taxonomy of all possible cases, we will not elaborate the following taxonomy in an all-encompassing way. In Table 1, we present a taxonomy of policy frameworks, based on their geographical scope, types of institutions, and areas of application.

Table 1 Taxonomy of policy frameworks by geographic scope, types of institutions and areas of application

Categories	**Sub-categories**	**Examples**
Geographic Scope	Local	Social Policy Framework, the City of Red Deer, Canada; Framework Policy for RDM, University of Graz
	Regional	European Health 2020; African Union Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform; OECD policy framework on Sound Public Governance
	National	A Policy Framework for Patient Safety in Canada; UK security policy framework; German R&D policy framework; South African Gender Policy Framework; National Policy Framework for Land Transport Technology, Australia
	Global	Policy Framework for Responsible Digital Credit by Global Policy Leadership Alliance; USAID Policy framework; FAO Global Strategic Framework
Types of institutions	Single institutions (public and private)	The University of Melbourne policy framework
	Governmental Institutions	National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting Act (2007)
	NGOs	The World Economic Forum's Governance Framework for the Responsible use of Facial Recognition
	Intergovernmental	2015 Investment Policy Framework for Sustainable Development; IMF policy frameworks
Area of application	Mono-sectoral	The Global Platform for Sustainable Natural Rubber policy framework
	Pluri-sectoral	UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research

	Universal	The SDGs

(Source: own findings)

Overall, policy frameworks can be found in different countries, continents and regions. They are present in various fields of application and are variable in terms of their institutional contexts. The examples in Table 1 are neither exclusive nor exhaustive, as there are many more policy frameworks that one can encounter. However, it is crucial to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. A single policy framework may span multiple categories. For instance, a framework developed by an NGO (institution type) could have a global geographical scope and cover multiple sectors (pluri-sectoral). This flexibility is one of the strengths of policy frameworks, allowing them to be tailored to a variety of situations and challenges.

1.8 Conceptualizing Policy Frameworks in One Sentence

In the light of the discussion above, the paper proposes the following definition of a policy framework:

Policy frameworks are general structures, often encapsulated in documents or established practices, that provide institutions a guiding architecture for policy action across one or multiple policy areas.

This minimalistic definition is chosen for the purpose of positioning it on the ladder of abstraction. Since many policy frameworks are multi-level and pluri-sectoral, with their geographical scope going way beyond institutional walls and their various narratives or themes, a simple and less worded definition might serve better than an extended paragraph with numerous attributive qualities. We acknowledge that many sources in this paper refer to the realm of public policy, but with our definition we intend to include both public and private policies, thus placing the concept higher on Sartori's ladder of abstraction.

One of the first components is the reference to general structures, which is discussed by Ostrom as a main feature of frameworks (2011). Similarly, "guiding architecture" implies structural

components of policy frameworks with a "guiding" feature, implying that these could be different policy tools than just those of a regulatory kind. Next, we refer to the documented features of policy frameworks or their characteristic of representing established practices, which indicates that policy frameworks are more likely to be found in written form, since they are intended for multiple use by various actors that have access to them. By institutions, we imply formal organizations with rules and governing systems (Ostrom, 1992). Referring to the taxonomy, policy frameworks can be found within a single private or public institution, non/governmental institutions, or intragovernmental institutions. Further, policy action indicates the broadness of the concept, which might incorporate different policy actions, such as policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation, etc. The last part – specifically, the multiplicity of policy areas – refers to the taxonomy (mono-sectorial, pluri-sectorial, universal policy frameworks).

1.8.1 Conceptual Goodness?

Moving away from dichotomous and dialectical thinking, a scholar might question the validity of the defined concept. This can be one of the final steps, since it refers to the evaluation of the "conceptual goodness" of the definition, and, perhaps, to reformulations.

One possibility is to reconstruct the conceptual quality by means of the checklist proposed by Gerring (1999). According to him, any good concept has several criteria to fulfil. The author emphasizes that these cannot be reduced to a selected few and have to be fully elaborated in the process of conceptualization. Firstly, Gerring refers to the notion of coherence, which is also connected to differentiation and clarity. In this way, apples and tomatoes are both fruits but have different properties, even though they both belong to the category of fruits. According to the author, "the most coherent definitions are those that are able to identify a "core" or essential meaning (p. 42). Further, the border of the concept can be described in abstract terms, for instance "a property X is invoked to distinguish the concept from one neighbouring concept, and property Y to distinguish it from another, since neither resides uniquely within the extension" (p. 43).

Secondly, operationalization needs be carried out, which leads to the question: "How do we know it when we see it?" (p. 44). Here, the author does not search for classical absolute "attributes" (p. 48), but rather looks for groupings of attributes. Thirdly, the conceptualization should be valid or true. There should be alignment between the definition and the phenomenon (p. 48). This rather abstract category might be challenging, as it has to prove that the definition and the referents are aligned.

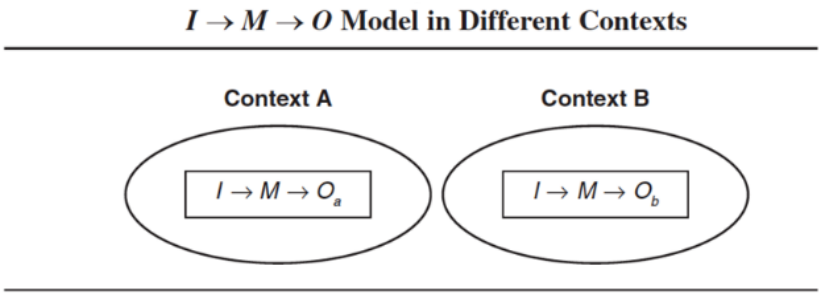
The fourth point is that the term should be conceptualized with respect to field utility. This entails the "adequacy of a single concept within a field of concepts" (p. 51). Here, the author refers to the classificatory utility of the term and its usefulness within a field of similar attributes. For instance, if we are to think about the term "American political culture", we might come across many other terms in the field (such as liberalism or Protestantism) (p. 51). This complicates the picture on the one hand but adds classificatory value on the other. The Gerring's fifth point refers to resonance. This can be explained with respect to the dichotomy of neologisms. Here, it is the task of a researcher to select wording for the concept according to the contextual settings. The sixth criterion is contextual range, namely the scope of a concept. The author emphasizes that an important feature of a good concept is its ability to "stretch comfortably over many contexts", which contrasts with "a poor concept", which "is parochial – limited to a small linguistic turf" (p. 54). The seventh criterion, parsimony, is a crucial part of the definition, as good concepts "do not have endless definitions" (p. 57). Here, the author calls for the exercise of semantic reduction rather than the use of lengthy and unnecessary constructions. The final note touches upon analytic/ empirical utility, which unites the essences of concept and theory formation. Here, the broader note is that "concepts rest within propositions, and propositions rest within research designs" (p. 60).

1.8.2 Context Sensitivity

Adding to Gerring's contextual range criterion, contextual variety might have a bigger impact on conceptual stretching. Theoretically, the variety of contextual responses can be explained by the

model proposed by Falleti and Lynch (2009). Their "Inputs-Mechanisms-Outputs" model, which is summarized in Figure 1, provides the explanation for addressing this contextual variety (Falleti & Lynch, 2009). The researchers state that "credible causal social scientific explanation can occur if and only if researchers are attentive to the interaction between causal mechanisms and the context in which they operate" (p. 1144).

Figure 4 Falleti & Lynch I-M-O model in different contexts



(Source: Falleti & Lynch, 2009)

The authors of the model subscribe to the idea that causal mechanisms lead to "deterministic outcomes" (Falleti & Lynch, 2009, p. 1152). Crucially, they view the context as the decisive determinant of the outcomes of the causal links: "the outcome of a causal mechanism depends on its context, we need to distinguish between mechanisms and their contexts and so define both the mechanism at work and the context in which it operates" (Falleti & Lynch, 2009, p. 1152). Similarly, Beach and Pedersen (2013, p. 2) see mechanisms as highly context-dependent, "meaning that the same causes can trigger different mechanisms in different contexts". Yet, here, one might be careful, since the scholar might not be able to include every single context in the multiple occurrences of the concept.

1.8.3 Conceptual Goodness of the Definition

The following part will analyse the proposed definition in the light of Gerring's (1999) concept evaluation strategy. Table 2 below is based on the previous discussion that explained Gerring's

conceptual logic (see Part 1). The table expands the criteria that were proposed by Gerring in 2001 (Gerring, 2001) by adding the feature of familiarity, which was included in the initial publication that dates back to 1999. The reason is that this paper is the first one to conceptualize policy frameworks and one of its objectives is to synthetize the literature in order to provide conceptual clarity of the term. Thus, familiarity serves as a helpful criterion for a newly-defined concept, since it shows that the concept is not entirely novel in the field.

Table 2 Policy frameworks through the lenses of conceptual goodness logic

Literature	Criteria	Content	Our definition
Gerring (1999)	Familiarity	How familiar is the word in the literature?	The definition is not absolutely new; it is synthetized from pre-existing literature. It is not a neologism and the components of the definition are well-known in scholarly discussions.
Gerring (2001)	Resonance	What is the resonance of the definition? Is it 'catchy' enough?	The demand for resonance is partially covered by the reference to the concept of a policy.
Gerring (2001)	Parsimony	How short is the definition and the list of attributes?	Our proposed definition is brief and concise; it does not have a long list of attributes; thus, it cannot evoke terminological confusion.
Gerring (2001)	Coherence	The degree of the logical consistency/coherence of attributes	The attributes are not contradictory.
Gerring (2001)	Differentiation	What the term is not	Based on Sartori's logic of antonyms, this paper claims that a policy framework differs from a policy. Similarly, it also diverges from many other formats, such as laws or strategies. Thus, this criterion can be fulfilled only partially.
Gerring (2001)	Depth	"How many accompanying properties are shared by the instances under definition?" (367)	One can find numerous attributes under the umbrella term "policy framework." The depth of the definition allows the grouping of different kinds of policy frameworks, based on their geographical scope, institutional type and the area of application (see the discussion on the taxonomy of policy frameworks).

Gerring (2001)	Theoretical utility	"How useful is the concept within a wider filed of inferences?"	The concept of a policy framework might be helpful in theory formation inquiries. Having a definition will be a starting point for theoretical debate and also empirical testing.
Gerring (2001)	Field Utility	Usefulness of the concept within a wider field	According to Gerring, a new concept might evoke "resettling of the semantic field." Since the term policy framework does not aim at the redefinition of any other concept in its field, it may cause only low levels of potential disruption.
Goertz (2006)	Classic/family concept	Classical (AND) vs family (OR) concepts	The definition is a classical concept.
Falleti & Lynch (2009)	Contextual sensitivity	Causalities and outcomes differ depending on the context	This paper employs a minimalistic definition for the purpose of broader inclusion. It also acknowledges different types of policy frameworks which are specified in the taxonomy.

Clearly, the table above does not include all possible pitfalls and does not aim to be all-encompassing. Certainly, it has its limitations due to its mostly theoretical nature, which is primarily based on a review of methodological literature and general research in the area of policy frameworks.

1.9 Conclusion

This paper sought to unpack the complexity of the term "policy framework". It aimed to overcome limitations in the literature by proposing a definition that is based on pre-existing discussions in the field. The proposed definition is based on the original logic of Sartori (1970) and other scholars who followed his methodological inquiry (Collier and Levitsky 1997; Collier and Adcock 1999; Goertz 2006; Mair 2008), the rich literature on classifications (Lambert 2005; Mair 2008; Collier 2008; Fiss 2011; Hodson 2019; Jaakkola 2020), as well as evaluative literature by Gerring (1999, 2001) and Goertz (2006). What has been done is to situate the term policy framework in the wider methodological and policy literature, in order to provide conceptual clarity and start a new chapter in policy research.

The limitations of this research are mostly in its rather broad and multidisciplinary orientation. It takes its inspiration in comparative politics, speaks about policy frameworks that are in the area of policy studies, and provides references across different fields in which policy frameworks are present. Our proposed definition is broad, which might be a challenge in a specific context or policy area. Further, by focusing on the works of authors from comparative politics we were not able to refer fully to the rich body of literature in policy processes, which is one of the main limitations of this paper.

Looking forward, we see potential in further research to test and refine our definition in different policy contexts, as well as to explore how different types of policy frameworks influence policy outcomes and which features of policy frameworks seem to be more efficient than others. It is also worth considering an exploration of voluntary policy frameworks in future research. For instance, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a compelling case study of a non-legally binding, yet widely influential policy framework. A nuanced analysis of the "soft" policy instruments underpinning such frameworks could shed light on the mechanisms that allow them to become integrated into and shape larger governance structures. Unravelling this dynamic could provide valuable insights into how voluntary frameworks can effectively contribute to policy-making and implementation despite their non-legally binding nature, thus broadening our understanding of policy frameworks and their role in global governance. Overall, we hope this paper will stimulate further discussion and research on the topic, contributing to a more nuanced and robust understanding of this important concept in the field of policy studies.

Chapter 2 **Intermediary Organizations and Their Role in Advancing the SDGs in Higher Education**

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Co-authored with Professor Luis Ortiz-Gervasi

Abstract

Drawing on evidence from documents and semi-structured interviews with members of the Catalan system of higher education, this research explores how intermediary organizations (IOs) facilitate the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), conceived as a global policy framework, in local contexts. We observed that, despite the voluntary nature of SDGs-related policies, most Catalan public universities embraced the SDGs. Two contextual factors likely facilitated their effective engagement with this global initiative: first, the autonomy granted by regional and national governments to the higher education sector when it comes to social responsibility, and, second, the willingness and ability of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Catalonia to work with the SDGs. The key element added to these contextual factors was the collaboration stimulated by meso-level actors, namely Catalan intermediaries. The Catalan case exhibits a process whereby IOs effectively engage with HEIs, forging a platform for collaboration; in turn, this led the local government to delegate the task of promoting the SDGs to IOs. This paper contributes to the debate in global higher education policy-making as it discusses the policy implications of the involvement of intermediary actors in bringing global policy frameworks to local level.

Keywords: higher education policy, sustainability, the SDGs, intermediaries

2.1 Introduction

Even though the transfer of (macro) global frameworks to the (micro) local level has received the attention of academics in the field of higher education policy (Altbach et al., 2019; Chankseliani et al., 2021; Maassen & Cloete, 2002; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Spring, 2014; Vidovich*, 2004), little has been said about the particular role of meso-level actors represented by regional IOs. Broadly speaking, intermediaries are defined as 'facilitators of innovation' (Klerkx & Leeuwis, 2009), mediators between two parties, who operate independently and 'provide distinct value beyond what the parties alone would be able to develop or to amass by themselves' (Honig, 2004, p. 67). In our paper, the case of Catalonia illustrates these exchanges between global and regional level and points out to the role of intermediaries in the system-level (local) adoption of the global policy framework put forward by the United Nations with the SDGs (2015–2030).

Beyond the particular SDG that directly targets education (SDG 4), the SDGs constitute a global policy framework in higher education adopted in 2015 by all the UN member states. The SDGs target transformative global policy shifts, necessitating the active participation of diverse stakeholders, including HEIs (*Higher Education in the Sustainable Development Goals Framework - Owens - 2017 - European Journal of Education - Wiley Online Library*, n.d.; McCowan, 2019). The 17 Goals constitute a particularly captivating research field from the perspective of higher education policy studies because these goals have the potential of becoming global transformers of local higher education institutions (HEIs) and the systems of higher education where they are integrated. Never before has a voluntary and to a certain degree abstract set of policy goals reached HEIs worldwide, irrespective of their economic objectives, geographical location, or institutional nature. However, it is unclear how they can be systematically implemented, given the absence of any clear coercive mechanism or well-established global funding scheme. Intermediary policy actors are a possible answer to this puzzle. Such an approach also has the potential of addressing a fundamental and broader question in policy research: how do IOs facilitate the adoption of global policies in local

contexts? In other words, how can a strong presence of intermediaries contribute to the system-level advancement of the region when it comes to the adoption of the SDGs?

With our work, we intend to contribute to two streams of literature. Firstly, to the literature about the adoption of global policies on a voluntary basis. Since global policies usually do not include traditional 'hard' regulations by authorities and international organizations (Stone, 2008), they face implementation challenges in local contexts. Therefore, "in the absence of enforcement capabilities and use of sanctions, non-compliance remains high" (Stone, 2008, p. 16). Secondly, we intend to unpack the role of IOs in the translation of global policies to local level, in particular in the realm of higher education. We presume that intermediaries, along with the state, market actors and international organizations, might be a partial solution to the challenges posed by new ways of policymaking that involve soft authority (Stone, 2008). We intend to expand the literature that calls for the general acknowledgement of analysis of governance processes beyond the top-down (Moss 2009) or bottom-up paradigms, thus following hybrid approach (Elmore, 1985; Sabatier, 1986). By seeing the process of governance as multi-level and multi-actor forms of coordination (Vukasovic et al., 2018), we aim to unpack the new realities of higher education governance when it comes to global policies, such as the SDGs.

2.2 Context: The SDGs in Higher Education

The 17 SDGs constitute a global policy framework approved by all 193 United Nations member states in 2015 (*The SDGs*, 2015). These goals touch upon almost every area of human existence, from poverty reduction to ocean protection. However, the goals have a wide-ranging scope, which, along with their complexity and abstract, non-coercive nature, makes their implementation challenging (Biermann et al., 2017). As with many global policies, the SDGs have faced various criticisms. Firstly, this ambitious and managerial-like framework includes 169 targets and 232 indicators (UN 2015). This perspective might suffer from a lack of context-sensitive analysis, since the numbers and statistical analyses are not always the true and only signs of sustainable

development. Furthermore, the framework does not include any coercive mechanisms, which evokes the danger of cherry picking or 'window dressing'. Window dressing is a process in which policies do not necessarily translate into practice, as 'external pressures for social performance encourage easily decoupled processes', thus creating an illusion of progress (Weaver et al., 1999, p. 539). IOs present a potential solution to avoid window dressing, as their involvement can be decisive for capacity building. IOs can build capacity by providing external expertise, which is not biased by internal organizational factors and helps to promote transparency. Furthermore, by 'facilitating the flows of knowledge, linking actors, forming ties across different scales, and supporting visioning and strategic planning' (Sundqvist & Tuominen, 2024, p. 1), intermediaries support transformative capacity building, which aims to 'create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social (including political) conditions make the existing system untenable' (Walker et al., 2004, p. 4).

Overall, the SDGs potentially empower HEIs and give them a role in the global sustainable development, thus enabling them to transcend their conventional role as educators and knowledge creators. It is important to note that the SDGs and the UN do not directly mandate or bolster HEIs into action. To understand how universities get engaged with the SDGs, we propose to study the involvement of intermediaries as key facilitators of the translation of the SDGs to local level.

2.3 Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinnings

2.3.1 Concept: Value and Types of IOs

Even though the term *intermediary* is used in a variety of research projects and reports, there is no clear conceptual agreement on its meaning. Intermediaries are known to perform various functions. According to Bullock and Lavis (2019, p. 2) they include

> educating and stimulating interest in a policy or programme; assessing evidence and a policy or programme's fit or feasibility in a certain context; linking knowledge generators and policy or programme developers with service deliverers; ensuring effective

> implementation and fidelity systems are developed and maintained; building capacity to implement…

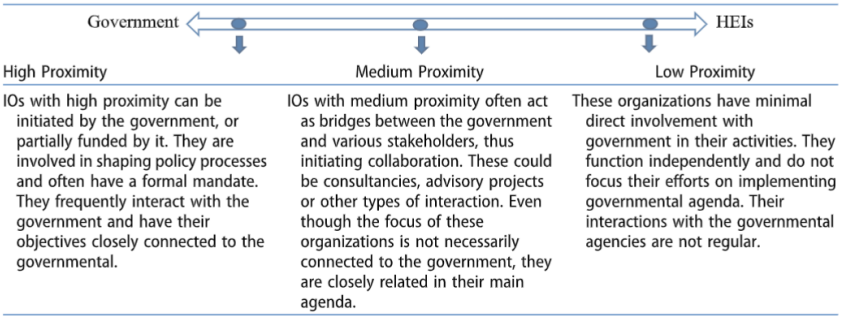
Frequently referred to as *knowledge brokers*, *boundary organizations*, or *interest groups* intermediaries aim to influence policy process via their info channels (Guston, 1999; Hammond et al., 2022). Although boundary organizations promote the sharing of information, their primary emphasis is on bridging the gap between policy and science (Guston, 1999). Knowledge brokers may include a broader range of roles and actors in disseminating knowledge, yet these may not necessarily focus on policy influence as their primary goal (M. Meyer, 2010).

The concept of intermediary organizations is also broader than interest groups. According to Beyers, Eising, and Maloney (Beyers et al., 2008), 'interest groups' should fulfil three requirements: some sort of organization, the aim of 'influencing political decision-making' and not competing in elections (informality), to what Klüver adds a fourth requirement: to 'rely on constituents for their survival'; that is, on agents (be them citizens, companies or institutions) that 'share a common policy objective and provide resources to interest groups' (Klüver, 2020, pp. 1438–1439). This characterization of interest groups prefigures competing interests in a given organizational field; interest groups promote the interest of some political actors within a field that may not be compatible or shared with other actors in that field (e.g. trade unions and employers' associations). Klüver and Pickup (2019) conceive interest groups as 'organizations that represent the policy preferences of their constituents, vis-à-vis policy makers', and they give trade unions as an example (95). Intermediary organizations have a broader sense of intermediation, not so conflictual. In the words of Bullock and Lavis (2019), they are 'organisations or programmes that work between policy-makers and service providers to facilitate effective implementation of evidence-informed policies, programmes and practices' (Bullock & Lavis, 2019, p. 1). The sense of conflict between different political agents for scarce resources or incompatible policy outcomes is not so salient here. Overall, the primary function of intermediary organizations is to mediate, whereas the primary function of the interest groups is to represent.

One of the challenges of defining and identifying intermediaries is that their boundaries could easily invade the realms or limits of the agents (agencies) they are trying to intermediate between. Thus, there may be intermediaries that are partially participated by government (they have government representatives in their board of government) or, as in our case, intermediaries that are participated by the representatives of HEIs. We presume that this hybridity and multi-actor collaboration helps to communicate policy goals more efficiently across multiple areas, owing to their embeddedness in the local context and access to insider knowledge. It is essential to recognize that IOs do not constitute a monolithic category. Instead, they span a spectrum, ranging from the formal and frequently close to government agencies with a policy-oriented mandate to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that contribute to policy discussions but may not have a direct policy influence objective. Acknowledging this diversity is critical for a comprehensive understanding of IOs. A line can be drawn from government to individual universities. IOs can be placed along this line. Table 3 provides a short summary of the types of IOs depending on their proximity to the government.

In terms of the fields of their activity, IOs are found in numerous policy areas, including technology and innovation, health, or environmental protection. They are frequently mentioned in the context of sustainability transition policies (Kivimaa et al., 2019). Many studies recognize the importance of intermediaries as linking actors that are able to create 'a momentum for change…new collaborations and disrupt prevailing socio-technical configurations' (Kivimaa et al., 2019; Parag & Janda, 2014). In the area of higher education, examples of IOs are wide-ranging: university networks, think tanks, academic associations, quality-assurance institutions, ranking agencies, and associations of students or university representatives (Sahlin et al., 2015).

Table 3 Types of intermediary organizations according to their proximity to the government



High Proximity	Medium Proximity	Low Proximity
IOs with high proximity can be initiated by the government, or partially funded by it. They are involved in shaping policy processes and often have a formal mandate. They frequently interact with the government and have their objectives closely connected to the governmental.	IOs with medium proximity often act as bridges between the government and various stakeholders, thus initiating collaboration. These could be consultancies, advisory projects or other types of interaction. Even though the focus of these organizations is not necessarily connected to the government, they are closely related in their main agenda.	These organizations have minimal direct involvement with government in their activities. They function independently and do not focus their efforts on implementing governmental agenda. Their interactions with the governmental agencies are not regular.

Overall, IOs stand out from other entities due to their inherent intermediation processes, whether it is top-down or vice versa. This mediating function sets them apart from other organizations, like HEIs or governmental agencies, whose role is not primarily perceived as middle actors. Further, intermediaries frequently initiate collaborative initiatives, such as working groups, meetings and various networking opportunities. In this way, they are able to facilitate collaboration among a diverse range of stakeholders.

2.3.2 Theoretical reference

For decades policy-making literature was centred on bottom-up or top-down perspectives. IOs have rarely been presented as bridges between these two approaches; that is, as a potential focus of policy transformation. One way to look at IOs, is to view them as the catalysts that activate the global policy-making processes at local level (Bushouse & Mosley, 2018). Despite their active role as providers of new resources, such as knowledge, social ties and administrative infrastructure, intermediaries 'appeared in the background' (Honig, 2004, pp. 65–66). What needs to be acknowledged is that HEIs are not isolated entities, as they are interconnected to a wide range of stakeholders and participate in multiple policy processes. In such a complex, non-linear network system the role of intermediaries has become more salient (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015). IOs have often been treated as channels in the top-down or bottom-up policy approaches, but not as main drivers of policy change. In the particular case of a global policy like the SDGs, a successful

outcome may be less likely to happen if the policy approach is, strictly speaking, top-down (imposed by HE authorities) or generated by some universities by themselves and diffused without any resort to IOs. In sum, intermediary organizations may have not received sufficiently central attention in more traditional accounts of policy-making.

A general theory of intermediaries is 'a theory of the actors whose primary function or mission is to mediate; that is, to represent and/or to intervene, in different ways and with different outcomes, in the relationship between a focal organization and its stakeholders' (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015, p. 254). Unlike the stakeholder theory which considers stakeholder-organization relationship as dyadic, general theory of intermediaries considers the presence of multiple actors (Friedman & Miles, 2006). Similarly, Bressers and O'Toole (1998) viewed policy process as a part of the complex interactions within policy networks. Defined as 'a cluster of actors, each of which has an interest, or "stake" in a given policy sector and the capacity to help determine policy success or failure' (Peterson & Bomberg, 1999, p. 8), policy networks may be loosely structured but still not able to engage in collective action (Peterson, 2003). Here come intermediary organizations, whose function is to facilitate collective action within policy networks. In the case of higher education, networks are constituted by multiple actors, such as governmental agencies, HEIs and a wide range of stakeholders. IOs are a part of this ecosystem, who are placed within networks and aim to facilitate connections within. Bressers and O'Toole (1998) referred to two main dimensions of policy networks, namely *cohesion* and *interconnectedness*. The former refers to 'the contacts in the relevant policy formation process…and also the relationships between these actors outside the actual policy process at any particular time' (Bressers & Laurence J. O'Toole, 1998, p. 219). The latter is 'the extent to which individuals, groups, and organizations empathise with each other's objectives' (1998, p. 219). These two features are closely related to the selection of tools in policy process, since when 'strong cohesion is combined with weak interconnectedness, it is sometimes necessary to set up intermediary structures' (1998, p. 229). In our case, this refers to the contextual conditions,

which implied shared ideas for the need of sustainable development policies and a lack of interconnectedness between Catalan HEIs in this respect. This situation resulted in the active involvement of IOs that later helped to improve interconnectedness within the Catalan higher education policy networks.

As it is expected from the general theory of intermediaries, one of the functions of IOs is to correct information imbalances between parties. By doing so, they contribute to the reduction of transaction costs. For example, an IO can help to improve communication between the parties and reduce costs that are associated with partner search, setting up the agenda and negotiating. Another contribution that IOs can provide is establishing trust between the engaged parties, which is necessary for further collaboration.

Through the lens of neo-institutional theories, intermediaries can be seen as actors encouraging a certain degree of isomorphism via the platforms they offer. One of the ways IOs act as catalysts of global policy-making in local scenarios is by developing networks between HEIs. These networks facilitate the transmission of values, norms and information across a given organizational field. Depending on the situational context, isomorphism can be coercive, mimetic or normative (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Coercive isomorphism is rooted in social responsibility pressures, governmental influence or striving for legitimacy. This type of isomorphism is often associated with governmental agencies. Mimetic isomorphism comes from the fact that institutions tend to model their strategies based on the 'success stories' that they find in their organizational field. By providing a platform for collaboration, intermediaries act as capacity builders that initiate learning about advancements from other organizations. Moreover, the presence of individuals working across multiple organizations or transitioning between them can also lead to mimetic isomorphism. The third type of isomorphism, namely normative, comes from the notion of professionalization. Normative isomorphism is defined as 'the collective struggle of members of an occupation to

define the conditions and methods of their work…to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 152).

While these three types of isomorphism are not mutually exclusive, IOs are unlikely to be drivers of coercive isomorphism, given their limited capacity to exert coercion. Nonetheless, they may drive mimetic or normative isomorphism. We can presume that IOs have an opportunity to effectively promote implementation of sustainability policies among HEIs by providing relevant information and resources. In this way, mimetic isomorphism can be stimulated by IOs, because these can constitute platforms where mutual learning can be enhanced. In some contexts, having people working for several organizations because of job rotation or job sharing can also encourage mimetic isomorphism. IOs can spread information about successful practices that can encourage HEIs to adopt similar approaches, thereby fostering mimetic isomorphism. Furthermore, by providing *fora* where different higher education institutions meet and where values and norms are transmitted, intermediaries can encourage the development of shared norms in regard to sustainability, thus leading to normative isomorphism. Mimetic and normative isomorphism, in turn, guarantee that the global policy is spread across the local policy field.

Table 4 Types of isomorphism depending on the proximity to the government

	Types of Isomorphism		
IOs by Proximity to the Government	Coercive	Normative	Mimetic
High Proximity	likely	likely	unlikely
Medium Proximity	unlikely	likely	likely
Low Proximity	unlikely	likely	very likely

However, not all intermediaries are the same and have similar agenda. Depending on their proximity to the government, they may exercise different kinds of influence. The further away IOs are from the government, the more they refer to the tools of mimetic or normative isomorphism.

Table 4 provides a framework for understanding the relationship between the isomorphism types and the proximity of IOs to the government, but it is also important to consider the context of each IO to understand the extent to which they initiate isomorphic pressures.

2.4 Case Selection: Catalan Higher Education System and the SDGs

In order to answer how having strong intermediary organizations can contribute to the system-level advancement of the region when it comes to the adoption of the SDGs, we selected the Catalan system of higher education as a case study. With a population of 7.5 million inhabitants, Catalonia is one of the most developed Autonomous Communities within Spain when it comes to higher education. In 2020 there were around 208,000 students enrolled and 1270 different degree programs offered in the 12 Catalan universities (Gencat 2020). The capital Barcelona hosts 8 out of 12 Catalan public universities. In general, Catalan and Spanish university systems are based on the autonomy of individual HEIs, which can also lead to an increase in accountability in broader societal terms (Fumasoli et al., 2014). As it has also happened globally, the quest for legitimation, together with external societal pressures, such as stakeholder expectations, within Catalan, national and global arenas, pushed local universities to go beyond traditional roles of teaching and knowledge production and to work with wider societal questions, such as sustainability. The Catalan system of higher education looks also suitable for the study of the role of IOs in translation of global policies to local level because, unlike other organizational fields possibly more dominated by interest groups with conflictual interests, the presence of public universities is still overwhelming; there are relatively few private universities.

Catalan higher education progress in terms of the translation of the SDGs to local level is rooted in its already available institutional mechanisms and practices. For instance, universities in Catalonia have been collaborating among themselves since the early 90s (Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, AQU, Interview 1, 25.02.2022), mostly regarding admission policies. Back then, the Catalan government decided to build a centralized regional system for that matter, which

resulted in deeper inter-institutional collaborations over the years. From the governmental side, Advisory Council for the Sustainable Development of Catalonia (CADS) was created back in 1998. This council is not primarily focused on higher education, as it works in the broader areas of sustainable development in the region and one of its numerous functions is 'to encourage the transfer of knowledge between the government, the academic world and civil society in the field of sustainable development' (*Advisory Council for the Sustainable Development of Catalonia (CADS) Report 'The 2030 Agenda*, n.d.).

In terms of involvement with the SDGs, Catalan university system exhibits several characteristics. Firstly, there is a clear systematic effort when it comes to the SDGs. A proof of that is the existence of the official Action Plan for the Catalan University System initiated by Inter-university Council of Catalonia (the CIC) 2030 Agenda Group. The Action Plan includes several areas of implementation, among which are governance, teaching and learning, research and technology and knowledge transfer, commitment to society and commitment to environmental protection (*Action Plan for the Catalan University System*, n.d.). This plan is inspired by the SDGs and follows some of their main ideas as its core.

Overall, the SDGs are present across the Catalan higher education landscape, which is also showcased on the official website of the SDGs initiative of the Catalan Association of Public Universities (the ACUP) (https://ods.cat/en/). Even though the website cannot be regarded as a full representation of the regional effort to work with the SDGs, it serves as evidence of broader involvement and advancement within this global policy framework. This involvement is a proof of systematic efforts that are documented for the wider audience.

In addition, many Catalan universities, like numerous HEIs worldwide, publish extensive SDG-reports or summaries, which are accessible online (examples are Universitat Rovira i Virgili 2021; University of Barcelona 2020). Another way of demonstrating working with the sustainable development can be a summary of all research activities that are related to the SDGs. For example,

Universitat Pompeu Fabra published their survey regarding the goals (UPF 2020). It is an exhaustive overview of all the research groups that contribute to the SDGs, accounting for 73% of the university's total research output. However, it is worth noting the potential concern of retroactively labelling preexisting projects with the SDGs or aligning ongoing research with these goals, which could misrepresent a real research impact in the area of sustainable development.

Moreover, Catalan universities are active in the SDGs-related Times Higher Education Impact Ranking. Although the nature of the rankings is widely disputed in the academic literature[2] (Altbach et al., 2019; Brankovic et al., 2018), participating in the ranking that evaluates the SDGs adoption already signals interest in this global policy framework and their readiness to be transparent in their sustainability actions. In fact, it is a resource-intensive activity for an HEI, as it demands significant bureaucratic effort, incurring both personal and financial costs. In 2021, 7 Catalan universities participated voluntarily in the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2021 by The World University Rankings (*Impact Ranking*, 2021). This could have offered a framework for universities to assess their performance, and perhaps to look at the gaps in the development of a specific local policy for the introduction of the SDGs. Further, sustainability rankings can provide more voice to universities not only in terms of their research and teaching performance, but also to their social responsibility commitments. This might have even been an advantage for Catalan universities, which aimed for Spanish and international recognition (CADS, Interview 1, 06.03.2022).

Furthermore, reports by the Global University Network for Innovation (the GUNI) suggest that the overall attention to the SDGs has been peaking in the last few years (the GUNI 2022). Even though the network is concerned with the SDG situation on a global scale, having such an

[2] Rankings have been the subject of criticism due to concerns surrounding their methodology, lack of inclusivity and other reasons. Nonetheless, it should be highlighted that the focus of our research is not on the weaknesses of university rankings. Rather, we refer to sustainability rankings as a means of gauging the willingness of HEIs to participate in such rankings, rather than as a means of showcasing specific scores.

institution in a relative proximity to Catalan universities can bring about numerous opportunities. For example, the GUNI frequently hosts international conferences, which can be valuable platforms for universities to exchange knowledge and best practices. One of the latest events of global importance was UNESCO World Higher Education Conference held on 18–20 May 2022.

According to the International Association of Universities (IAU), which released the 2nd Global Survey Report on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development in 2019, Catalonia has been actively involved with the SDGs already back in 2019. At the time of the survey, five Catalan HEIs already had a strategic plan related to the introduction of the SDGs and three others were in the process of organizing their policies around the SDGs, out of a total of 17 public universities in Catalonia (*IAU HESD Global Survey 2019 - IAU*, n.d.). This fact already placed Catalonia above the EU average, since only 32% of the universities in Europe owned similar strategic SDG-plans on the level of the whole institution. At the same time, it is not clear why this advancement relative to other regions in Europe has taken place and in what way. We hypothesize that Catalan intermediaries played a vital role in the critical engagement, which is to be unpacked in the next parts of the paper.

2.5 Research Design and Data Collection

To address our research question, we use a process-tracing method. Process-tracing is defined as 'a research method for tracing causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in an actual case' (Beach, 2017). This method allows us to unpack the main mechanisms leading to the eventual delegation of some of the policy functions to IOs, thus resulting in soft coercion and system-level adoption of the SDGs in Catalan higher education. Therefore, IOs transform into actors that do not have full decision-making power in the policy processes but have a significant influence or involvement in shaping policies. In this way, IOs may act as catalysts of policymaking, but leaving the implementation of the policies to the individual universities.

We scrutinize the catalytic processes within the Catalan higher education system, emphasizing the system-level mechanisms where entities engage in transformative activities (Beach, 2017). These are generators of change and can be logically interconnected. Our methodological approach employed abductive reasoning, which combined theorization and empirical observations, focusing on the single case of Catalonia. In our case, we do not make a certain conclusion, but provide a tentative explanation of the advancement of Catalonia with the help of the IOs. The causal mechanism we explore has several parts that link Cause X (the very beginning of the SDGs, marked by Spain's approval of the goals back in 2015 and the interest of Catalan HEIs to contribute to these goals) and Outcome Y (IOs transformation towards soft coercion and the sustained integration of the SDGs at the regional level). The mechanisms leading to an outcome will be described in the subsequent parts of the paper.

Notably, this causal process was developed using abductive reasoning, which implies its refinement after the interviews in the field and continuous improvement. A limitation of this approach is that it mostly focuses on IOs, potentially overlooking alternative explanations; in particular, the potential role of the government or the agents at the bottom of the field. While this paper centres on the role of IOs in advancing sustainable development, we acknowledge a possibility of further additional causal streams that may have led to the advancement of the Catalan higher education system.

In our research, we refer to theoretical underpinnings that are based on institutional theories and intermediary theory, which we juxtapose with empirical observations from the Catalan higher education context. Based on Beach's two-stage evidence evaluation framework for turning empirical evidence into evidence of mechanisms (Beach & Pedersen, 2013), we assessed the data that we obtained from the interviews and content analysis of the open access sources based on the two criteria: (a) the presence/absence of empirical references, (b) analytical evaluation of the trustworthiness of the source. In the following part, we explain our data collection process.

On the basis of document analysis of the governmental and university websites, in-person consultations with the experts on the Catalan higher education system and insider knowledge of higher education sector employees, we identified four main intermediary actors in Catalan higher education (Table 5). During the exploratory phase of our research, we systematically examined the network of organizations influencing the Catalan higher education policy landscape. This led to the identification of four key IOs that played intermediary roles between the Catalan HEIs and the government, catalysing the exchanges regarding the SDGs. Four IOs were identified on the basis of exploratory expert interviews and several conversations with various representatives of Catalan higher education, such as academics, university administrators and students. Once the key IOs were identified, we proceeded with the identification of potential interviewees, whose selection was guided by our initial research and was further validated by the expert recommendations within the Catalan higher education system.

To assess the robustness of the networks fostered with the help of the IOs, we took into consideration several factors, such as the frequency and regularity of interactions between the IOs and the Catalan HEIs, as well as their duration and the thematic relevance of such interactions. Regarding the measurement of the success of collaboration, we acknowledged the achievement of pre-defined goals within IO-initiated initiatives and the extent to which agreed-upon outcomes are met by all parties. The trust mechanisms included the perceptions of trust that were asked in the interviews, as well as their past collaboration activities and their outcomes.

Table 5 describes the IOs identified in terms of their major characteristics, such as their scale of outreach, type,[3] proximity to the government, funding basis, size, age, presence/ absence of

[3] Mignon and Kanda (2018) provided a typology of IOs in the context of sustainability innovation. The study highlighted three types of intermediaries, which are cluster organizations ('a concentration of interconnected organizations that cooperate regarding different activities') (p. 106), efficiency agencies (which are typically funded by the government and have a specific function of supporting local organizations in certain sustainability-related areas), and project developing companies (consultancy firms).

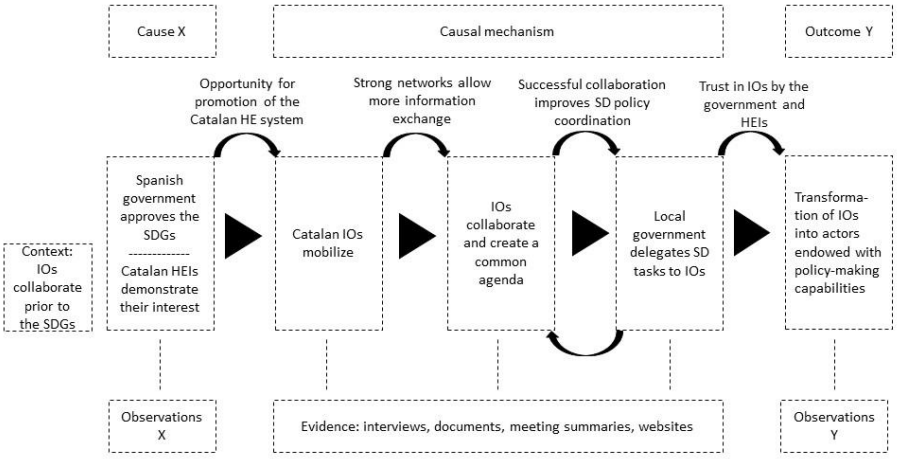
sustainable development discourse and their main members. In our case, AQU, a governmental agency, is close to the Catalan government. The GUNI and the rest of the IOs can be placed closer to individual universities, since they are participated by them and not by the government.

Table 5 Main intermediary actors

IO	Scale	Type of organization[3]	Proximity to the government	Funding	Number of employees	Year of establishment	The SDGS are main priority	Members
The GUNI	global	University network Cluster organization	Low	Private/ by UNESCO and the Catalan Association of Public Universities (The ACUP)	9	1999	Yes	291 members from 87 countries. The members include higher education institutions, UNESCO Chairs and research centers.
The ACUP	local	Association of public universities	Medium	Private	9	2002	No	Universitat de Barcelona (UB), Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya (UPC), Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), Universitat de Girona (UdG), Universitat de Lleida (UdL), Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV) and Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)
AQU	local	Quality assurance Efficiency agency	High	Public	53	1996	No	Accredited universities in Catalonia
The CIC	local	Cluster organization	Medium	Voluntary basis participation	Voluntary employment	2019	Yes	12 Catalan universities (also 4 private), representatives from the student community, AQU Agency for Management of University and Research Grants (AGAUR), the CERCA Institute, the ACUP and the Secretariat General of the CIC

The evidence for the causal mechanism (Figure 5) was collected from analysis of public statements and reports of the universities and the IOs. In turn, the analysis of these documents was used for collecting the evidence for the future steps, namely, 17 semi-structured interviews with representatives from the Catalan higher education system (selected IOs and individual HEIs, which were mostly university professors, administrators, and a student representative). These interviews lasted approximately 90–120 min. The respondents were approached by email and the interviews were conducted either in person or online. Prospective interviewees were provided with information regarding the main areas of the interviews in advance. Questions that were proposed to the interviewees can be found in Appendix. Notably, the interviews were customized to the roles and well as years that interviewees had been in charge in their positions within their respective organizations. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, our questionnaire was enriched by ad hoc questions that were added as follow-ups to the statements of the interviewees.

Figure 5 Causal mechanism



The respondents were selected based on purposeful sampling, which relies on interviewing individuals who are more likely to provide information that is necessary to answer the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Therefore, we considered selecting interviewees with 'insider knowledge' (Creswell & Poth, 2016), whom we identified from the public statements of the universities, available documents from the Catalan government and university networks and the recommendations of the participants. Table 6 presents additional details regarding the data gathered via interviews.

Apart from interviewing representatives of four intermediaries, we conducted interviews with the representatives of Catalan universities (administrators, academics and a student representative), the Catalan government (head of the Inter-university Council of Catalonia, Secretary General of Foreign Affairs), the Spanish Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation, ANECA (Team of Titles and Institutions officer, responsible for the SDGs). The interviews covered questions related to the history of the SDGs in the Catalan higher education context, main actors that

contributed to its advancement and plans, roles and main activities of the selected intermediaries, incentives/ coercive mechanisms of policy change, evaluative tools and challenges (Questions are available in Appendix).

Table 6 Data collection

Organization	Interviewees	Documents of analysis
AQU	Head of Internationalization and Knowledge Generation Department Project coordinator	Webpages Standards and Criteria for the Institutional Accreditation of University Centres Internal presentations Newsletter Corporate social responsibility report
The CIC working group (the 2030 Agenda Woking Group)	Coordinator The CIC founder The CIC representative Student representative	Webpages 2nd Global Survey on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development Action Plan for the Catalan University System
The GUNI	Director Project officer	Webpages Conference presentations Reports on the SDGs Open access publications Newsletter
The ACUP	Project Officer Executive Secretary	Webpages Internal notes Declaration 'The commitment of Catalan universities with the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a transformative education for a new world' Information portal showcasing the examples of the SDGs in Catalan higher education.

2.6 Intermediary Organizations: Causal Mechanisms

2.6.1 Context prior to the SDGs

Prior to the introduction of the SDGs, Catalan IOs' presence shaped higher education in multiple ways. The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, AQU, founded in 1996, was the first quality assurance agency in Spain. AQU is an external review organization linked to the Catalan government, even though it is autonomous in its actions. By gaining its legitimacy through a direct relation to the government and international quality assurance agencies, AQU has gained authority to push universities to be accountable in terms of social responsibility.

Beyond the focus on sustainable development, since 2015, AQU has a regulatory mandate regarding gender equity in Catalan higher education, a mandate that is also enshrined in Catalan law. AQU is dedicated to ensuring the integration of a gender mainstreaming perspective within

Catalan universities. The agency aligns the main points of the SDGs regarding gender mainstreaming with its responsibilities in the region. For example, the organization conducts three yearly surveys targeting recent graduates, and gender equality is one of the main points of the survey. The existence of a social responsibility mandate concerning gender prior to the SDGs proves that Catalonia has long had strong institutional foundations in place.

Another IO is the Inter-university Council of Catalonia (the CIC). Created in 1977, it is the oldest IO in the region serving as a mediator between the Catalan government and universities. Its three main functions include admissions management, assessment and internationalization. Apart from that, it integrates all public and private HEIs in Catalonia and provides a regular platform for collaboration.

The Catalan Association of Public Universities (the ACUP) is a third intermediary organization that supports Catalan public universities by offering a collaborative platform. Since its creation, the ACUP has played a key role in promoting social responsibility within Catalan higher education, as it was also followed by the Catalan government in its initiatives. The governmental institutions, on the other hand, were more concerned about core functions of higher education, such as the admission process, funding, equal access, etc. Consequently, the ACUP could fill the gap regarding social responsibility questions, like the SDGs.

A fourth and final IO is a university network, Global University Network for Innovation, (the GUNI), a global think tank based in Barcelona. It is currently constituted by 268 HEIs from 85 countries (the GUNI 2022). Created in 1999 after the first UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in 1999, this network was the result of a joint initiative by the ACUP and UNESCO, which helped the GUNI to gain legitimacy in local and international contexts. By being embedded in both Catalan and global higher education landscapes, the GUNI has served as a mediator and policy diffusion agent in the region.

What is very notable about Catalan intermediaries' context is its highly networked structure. Most employees of these intermediaries either have a close contact with other IOs or even share positions in several of them. As it was mentioned in one of the interviews, highly networked structures of Catalan higher education, together with the interest of its main actors, provided an initial interest in the SDGs:

> It is thanks to the motivation of people involved in the higher education scene of Catalonia, we could reach the current level of awareness with the questions of social responsibility and sustainability. We work closely together, and the network of people is well connected (AQU, Interview 1, 25.02.2022)

In most cases, IOs are formed by 'people of recognised prestige in the academic world' (CADS, Interview 1, 06.03.2022). This raises the legitimacy of IOs in the higher education sector, and adds to the trust levels, as their employees are already well-known in Catalan higher education context.

2.6.2 The Introduction of the SDGs: Window of Opportunity for Catalan Higher Education

Spain approved the SDGs in September 2015 alongside 192 other nations. For higher education sector, this commitment meant new opportunities, but also presented potential challenges of collaboration and coordination. Spanish higher education sector relies on the autonomy of HEIs; that is, on a principle of self-government and administration and the ability of the university to generate its own statutes. In fact, there is little centralized pressure from the central authorities. However, the SDGs are built on the notion of collaboration, which in the case of Catalan higher education, was facilitated by the IOs.

One of the biggest collaborative events at the national level happened at the meeting of CRUE (Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities) held in Madrid on 29.05.2018. The meeting was dedicated to the SDGs and the agreement to pursue 2018–2020 Action Plan. The CRUE meeting sparked interest in collaboration among Catalan universities, culminating it the foundation of a special intermediary organization dedicated to the promotion of the SDGs, the CIC 2030 working group (the CIC, Interview 1, 07.03.2022).

As it was mentioned in the interview with the CIC representative (the CIC, Interview 1, 07.03.2022), organizing events at the Spanish level poses significant challenges in terms of planning and budget, and therefore regional cooperation is a more favourable option (the CIC, Interview 1, 07.03.2022). Moreover, Catalonia already had a strong pre-existing embeddedness of the IOs in their higher education system and there were already collaborative mechanisms in place. As mentioned in the interview with a representative of the ACUP (Interview 1, 30.01.2022): 'Collaboration is not a new aspect for Catalan universities, and we have witnessed it since the early nineties, when Catalan universities started working together on admission policies.

At the same time, the SDGs were seen as a vehicle for claiming the legitimacy for HEIs in the area of social responsibility; a tool for inter-university collaboration; and an international representation of Catalonia, since the SDGs are currently at the centre of attention for numerous university networks, EU funding and collaborative research projects (the GUNI, Interview 1, 06.04.2022). The goals were perceived as an opportunity for the promotion of Catalan higher education at the international level. Later, Catalan universities also appeared in the SDG-related international ranking, which potentially helped to promote efforts of Catalan HEIs abroad (the GUNI, Interview 1, 06.04.22). In this sense, the introduction of the SDGs on the regional level brings the idea of diplomacy in higher education, making Catalan higher education 'an ideal vehicle for soft power' (Peterson 2014). Understood as a two-way process, knowledge diplomacy refers to higher education actors influencing international relations and vice versa (Knight 2020). Utilizing higher education as a soft diplomacy tool can promote Catalonia internationally, fostering connections with other regions and enhancing academic exchange. In the case of certain universities, like Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), participation in international university networks has facilitated further interest in the SDGs:

> Having the SDGs is both voluntary and coercive, since no funding nowadays goes without social responsibility elements…The university is a part of many networks.

> EUTOPIA is one of them and the SDGs are in its focus, therefore also international actors influence the implementation of the SDGs. (UPF, Interview 1, 06.02.2022)

2.6.3 Mobilization and Collaboration of Catalan Intermediaries

Creation and activities of the CIC 2030 working group

Created in February 2019, the CIC working group acts as an intermediary between 8 public, 4 private universities and a wider range of stakeholders, including the IOs. Currently, the working group operates voluntarily and has an advisory function. Our key informant from the CIC claimed that there is no other systemic coordination group in any other Spanish region that aims to accelerate the incorporation of the SDGs in higher education, and 'other regional representatives in Spain frequently contact the CIC to know more about their way of implementing the SDGs' (the CIC, Interview 2, 03.06.2022). The information about the uniqueness of the group was also confirmed by the representative of Spanish quality assurance agency, ANECA (27.06.2022).

Created as a collaborative space for peer-learning and sustainability discussions, the establishment of the CIC Working Group was influenced by a variety of factors:

> There were several reasons behind starting a working group, among which there was some kind of a crisis of legitimacy of universities, high interest to network and the confluence of stakeholders at the meeting of CRUE. Coming back to the coordination on the level of Spain: there was an effort, when all relevant stakeholders were gathered and the main priorities were identified. Coordinating on a level of the region is easier. (the CIC, Interview 1, 07.03.2022)

The activities of the CIC working group commenced with their collaboration with the International Association of Universities, in order to clarify the position of Catalan universities regarding the SDGs. The working group analysed the answers of 12 public universities to the 2nd Global Survey on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development (IAU 2nd Global Survey Report 2020). This helped to set the foundation for the next step, which was the creation of Action Plan for the Catalan University System. Approved by the Catalan government, the IOs and Catalan HEIs, the plan encompasses a variety of domains, including, strategy and governance, education

and teaching, research and knowledge transfer, social engagement and campus initiatives (Action Plan for the Catalan university system 2021). The action plan advocates for a synergistic approach, calling for collective action.

In an interview with the representative of the working group, it was mentioned that the Open University of Catalonia was one of the first to raise the question of the SDGs back in 2017, and their 'example was later brought in the meetings and followed by several other HEIs in Catalonia' (the CIC, Interview 1, 07.03.2022). In addition to HEIs, the working group also collaborates with other intermediaries, including the ACUP and AQU, to advance the SDGs. This robust network allows more information exchange, potentially leading to the transmission of norms and ideas. Later, the Catalan government started officially supporting the activities of the working group, but without directly promoting or funding it. As stated in the interview with the representative of the working group: 'The CIC was not directly promoted but praised for its efforts in the implementation of the SDGs' (the CIC, Interview 1, 07.03.2022).

One of the central missions of the CIC is to enact systematic change in alignment with Agenda 2030. The working group is aware of the risk of superficial compliance (window dressing) and they proactively counter it by regular meetings and in-person informal interactions within and beyond their formal meetings. One of our informants stated:

> Universities have the resources for the implementation of the SDGs, and they are free to decide whether or not to use them. It is our task to persuade the top management to change their mind and include the SDGs into their main agenda. We do not ask for a lipstick service or one-day events that do not make any substantial difference; we do want a systemic change that will allow us to feel the presence of the SDGs even after their term comes to an end. (the CIC, Interview 2, 03.06.2022)

Even though the specific measurement instruments for assessing systematic change were not mentioned in detail, the CIC working group was developing these at the moment of the interview. Furthermore, the CIC working group aims to cultivate a learning environment across the Catalan

higher education landscape that stimulates the exchange of experiences, including both negative and positive.

AQU (The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency)

As a quality assurance agency, AQU views the SDGs from two angles: as a policy framework that is important for their own institution, and as a framework that AQU itself aims to promote among Catalan HEIs. The main activity of AQU is associated with Goal 4, namely Quality Education. Additional areas of expertise of AQU are 'governance, employment-related questions, creating alliances and working with external societal stakeholders' (AQU, Interview 1, 25.02.2022). In relation to these main areas, AQU defines its most relevant goals, which are: Quality Education; Gender Quality Education; Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions; Reduced Inequalities; Decent Work and Economic Growth; Partnerships for the Goals. AQU has also published its Summary of the AQU Catalunya Annual Activities and Corporate Social Responsibility Report 2021 (2022), which is structured around the SDGs. However, the link between the SDGs and the activities is not clearly explained and someone unfamiliar with the SDGs might not understand their importance in the context of the report.

It is important to note that AQU has a longstanding commitment to social responsibility, mostly in the area of gender equality: 'Gender mainstreaming in higher education is a regulatory mandate in Catalonia' (AQU, Interview 1, 25.02.2022). Gender equality, being an integral part of the SDGs, facilitates the alignment of the previous efforts and the SDGs discourse. The latter is considered to be not only a framework, but also 'a new way to work in general, [because] as a society, we are asking for it' (AQU, Interview 1, 25.02.2022). Apart from the personal agency and general societal pressure, the representative of AQU commented that 'it is the international agenda that is really pushing this subject' (AQU, Interview 1, 25.02.2022), perhaps adding to the international competitiveness of Catalan universities and allowing them to act as knowledge diplomats of the region.

So far, there is no official standard created by AQU to formally assess the implementation of the SDGs by individual HEIs, but there is a document published in 2021, called 'Standards and Criteria for the Institutional Accreditation of University Centres', one of whose key points is the inclusion of sustainable development into its main agenda, which has never been done before. According to the information gathered from the AQU representatives, Catalonia will be the first region in Spain when it comes to a compulsory sustainable development assessment. This is a potential example of coercive isomorphism, which pushes universities in Catalonia to meet the standards of sustainable development and to act in certain ways that the SDGs dictate (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). This represents not only a shift in the attitude towards the SDGs, but also the potential for future institutionalization of sustainable development in the region. However, compulsory inclusion might also endanger in-depth implementation. Imposing sustainable development as a requirement might push universities to engage in window dressing, namely to find ways of ticking the boxes without enacting specific in-depth policy changes. On the other hand, the compulsory implementation for accreditation comes only after a pre-established long-term collaboration, meaning all HEIs would have already embraced it, thereby potentially minimizing the resistance to change.

The GUNI (Global University Network for Innovation)

Established in 1999, following the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, the GUNI was the result of a joint initiative between the Catalan Association of Public Universities (the ACUP) and UNESCO, which helped the GUNI to gain legitimacy in local and international contexts. At the moment, one of the central agendas of the GUNI is constituted by the SDGs, as it calls itself 'a reference institution in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in higher education' (the GUNI website 2022). Its main activities include reporting, organizing workshops, seminars and international conferences, facilitating international projects and generating new knowledge.

According to the interview with the GUNI representative (the GUNI, Interview 1, 06.04.22), social responsibility narratives of Catalan universities have deep historic roots, providing a foundation for the SDGs. The implementation of the SDGs is also driven by the reputational benefits for Catalan universities, both locally and globally. The interview did not clearly mention financial incentives, confirming the presumption that there is no institutionalized funding exclusively for sustainability projects.

Since 2016, one of the central priorities of the GUNI is sustainable development, which even pre-dates the creation of the 2030 working group. The organization has a capacity to gather international stakeholders, and therefore fosters a process of mimetic isomorphism between Catalan HEIs, nationally and globally (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Overall, having a global university network that works with the SDGs in Catalonia brings a strategic advantage in terms of the SDGs implementation to the region.

Knowledge dissemination through global networks is a requisite for a region that aims for global recognition in higher education (the GUNI, Interview 1, 06.04.2022). Catalan higher education and the IOs benefit from international conferences and workshops that the GUNI organizes. These conferences constitute a way to promote Catalan universities abroad and, at the same time, to learn from experts and higher education practitioners from other countries, causing certain degrees of mimetic isomorphism across borders. In some ways, events organized by the GUNI exert external normative pressure on Catalan higher education and the IOs, by bringing up the need to learn international best practice SDG-cases, and, later, showcase their own work.

ACUP (The Catalan Association of Public Universities)

Before the creation of the 2030 working group in 2019, the ACUP published a special declaration entitled 'The Commitment of Catalan Universities with the Sustainable Development Goals:

Towards a Transformative Education for a New World' (ACUP 2017).[4] The declaration asks for teaching global citizenship, local and global collaboration for the sake of the achievement of the SDGs.

The ACUP has a webpage dedicated to the introduction of the SDGs in the Catalan higher education system, www.ods.cat. This webpage serves as a platform where Catalan universities can share their experience and achievements regarding the SDGs. Being an open-access platform, also available in English, it has become a peer-learning tool among Catalan and international HEIs.

Apart from the very close collaboration with the GUNI, which the ACUP was chairing at the moment of this research, this IO contributes to the attainment of the SDGs through the Territorial Innovation Knowledge Platform (CTI Platform, https://plataformacti.cat). This platform promotes Catalan social and economic development through cooperation between various actors, such as universities, businesses, NGOs and governmental administration. Even though it was created before the SDGs, in 2013, this platform serves as a collaborative space for governmental institutions, civil society organizations, businesses and universities in Catalonia. The SDGs are not the primary goal of the platform, but the activities of CTI correspond to some of the priorities of the SDGs, such as collaborative research, involvement of the wider stake- holder groups, policy learning and networking.

2.6.4 Local Government Delegates Tasks to Intermediaries

Regardless of their funding or closeness to the government, intermediaries were able to represent a neutral position to be considered legitimate by HEIs, since most of the actors that constitute intermediaries come from local higher education sector (Matschoss & Heiskanen, 2017). Also, from an administrative point of view, 'having [IOs] helped universities to improve our communication

[4] https://www.acup.cat/ca/publicacio/declaracio-el-compromis-de-les-universitats-catalanes- amb-els-objectius-de is published in Catalan.

processes when it comes to the ODS [the SDGs in Spanish]. Thanks to the meetings organized by the working group we can exchange our ideas much faster and easier' (UPF, Interview 3, 21.02.2022). Perhaps the fact that intermediaries in question include representatives from universities who are in leadership positions helped them to obtain legitimacy and trust in the eyes of universities without additional approval. Further, having a closer network of people allowed better coordination and increased collaboration efforts: 'It is thanks to the motivation of the people and their activism on sustainable development we have a well-coordinated system' (UAB, Interview 1, 20.02.2022). Although most intermediaries are connected to the regional government, this connection does not imply the government telling them how to promote the SDGs; on the contrary, the initiative comes from universities and the IOs that help to facilitate such exchanges (Gencat, Interview 1, 07.04.2022). In the context of Catalonia, intermediaries do not have the resources to provide economic incentives for participating universities, but they managed to gain authority without any financial power dynamics, possibly because they are not purely meso-level organizations, but they include internal stakeholders. Notably, funding opportunities did not play a significant role in the effective dissemination of the SDGs among the Catalan HEIs; instead, it was the motivation of the IOs' representatives that largely contributed to its success (UAB, Interview 1, 20.02.2022).

By acknowledging the focal role of the IOs, Catalan government delegated promotion and establishment of sustainable development practices in higher education to them. According to a representative of Catalan government: 'It is actually in our advantage to have other organizations that promote sustainable development. They have a close connection to universities and help to establish dialogues and help universities to learn from each other' (CADS, Interview 1, 06.03.2022). Without direct top-down intervention, HEIs maintained their autonomy and had more opportunities for peer learning and collaboration, provided by the joint platforms organized by the IOs: 'We learn from other universities in our meetings, since they present their progress' (CADS,

Interview 1, 06.03.2022); and 'We thought about assessing our sustainability focus in our curriculum for a long time, and our collaborative meetings really helped to re-think our sustainability-related courses' (UPF, Interview 2, 14.02.2022). This hybrid coordination model proved to be successful in the Catalan case, leading to the absence of resistance to institutional changes from the HEIs and therefore a more smooth and transformative adoption of the SDGs.

2.6.5 Transformation of Intermediaries into Actors Endowed with Policy-making Capabilities

Both top-level actors (represented by the government) and bottom-level actors (HEIs) benefitted from the active stance taken by the IOs. From the governmental side, it meant achieving sustainable development in higher education sector with limited funding. For HEIs, it meant more freedom of adoption and more opportunities of peer learning and collaboration. Given the absence of a strong policy-making body when it comes to the SDGs and a simultaneous need of it, the IOs have taken the role of catalysts in the policy making process. Even though most IOs (apart from the 2030 working group) have other areas of interest apart from the SDGs, they managed to collaborate among each other for a more unified agenda (Action Plan for the Catalan University System) and to set up a collaborative space for HEIs in regards of sustainable development. Moreover, coercive isomorphism was de facto absent in this process. Even an organization like AQU, which is very close to the government in its mission and also funding structures, did not exercise a direct mandate to implement the SDGs.

2.7 Conclusion and Policy Implications

In this paper, we have analysed 'intermediary organizations' (intermediaries) as key actors in policy innovation regarding the attainment of the SDGs in higher education. In order to study the role of intermediaries in the sustainability advancement of the Catalan higher education system, we interviewed key actors from the IOs based in Catalonia. We also interviewed representatives of

local universities and the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain, ANECA, in order to avoid any 'insider bias'.

Our paper makes two contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to the broader debates in public policy literature about IOs and global policy applications. Our evidence shows that intermediaries can have a transformative impact when it comes to the localization of global policies (transformation of design from global to local level), especially in well-established higher education systems, like the Catalan one. By transformative, we imply an increasing flow of communication among the Catalan HEIs thanks to the IOs, a possibility to learn best practices from colleagues at other institutions and a presence of indirect peer pressure (competition, rivalry) that may help more universities to push boundaries towards sustainable development. Secondly, by looking at the advanced SDGs higher education system, we provide tentative evidence that IOs may play a key role in shaping the transmission of global voluntary policies into local higher education contexts.

Our evidence shows that intermediaries do not make decisions on behalf of universities, as their role is to lead, and not to manage. In our case, intermediaries do not have specific well-established funding for the SDGs, which makes the case of Catalonia relevant to voluntary global policy localization. To some extent, this can be relevant for regions that do not have funds for systematic delegation of the SDGs but have a strong presence of networked intermediaries that are embedded in the system for a longer period.

Additionally, we found interaction with global policymaking experts that was crucial for the effectiveness of intermediary organization. For example, the CIC drew their conclusions from the data available from the 2nd Global Survey Report on Higher Education and Research for Sustainable Development. This helped them to establish a solid background for the Action Plan for the Catalan University System. Similarly, regular conferences and expert consultations by the GUNI helped to facilitate policy exchange and encouraged universities to implement SDG-related policies.

Moreover, the evidence we drew from our interviews suggests that intermediaries may be crucial for the creation of networks when it comes to the SDGs. For example, regular meetings held by the ACUP have the value of providing information, facilitating policy learning and stimulating emulation between HEIs. Facilitating exchange might have been a crucial factor that contributes to the advancement of the Catalan higher education system when it comes to the SDGs. This can be also applied to other areas, such as certain quality assurance practices or regulatory frameworks in the areas of admissions, gender equality, or campus sustainability.

We were informed that the intermediaries also contributed to the enhancement of the competitiveness of the region in such ways. Some of them, like the GUNI, AQU and the Catalan government, are interested in the promotion of the Catalan higher education system abroad. The SDGs are a globally recognized policy framework, and its values are shared by universities worldwide. The label of the 17 Global Goals is also used for the purposes of marketing of Catalan universities abroad.

Moreover, we found evidence that the effectiveness of intermediaries in translating global policies to local scenarios depends on the proximity to the government. At the first stage, intermediaries with low and medium proximity to the government showed to be quite effective in promoting collaboration and exchanges that facilitated this translation of the SDGs to local level by normative and mimetic isomorphism. For example, having regular meetings with the universities with clear expectations of them to showcase their progress leads to the establishment of sustainable development norms in the Catalan higher education landscape. At a later stage, the intermediary organization with high proximity (AQU) was already in a good position to begin thinking on additional criteria for the assessment of individual HEIs that were explicitly related to the SDGs. By partially delegating policy-making in the area of the SDGs to intermediaries, the government can benefit from their insider status, implicit motivation of the employees and powerful pre-existing networks. By avoiding a top-down policy implementation, especially in the cases of non-

coercive and voluntary policies, the government can leave more space for the actors to be included in a less directive way.

Regarding the policy implications of our study, we believe our findings can be partially reproduced in other systems of higher education at the regional or national level. There may be some conditions that are unique to Catalonia, like hosting a global network with connections to UNESCO, as it is the GUNI. But there are several conditions for the successful implementation of the SDGs at local level that can be reproduced in other systems of higher education. Firstly, the active presence of meso-level organizations, or the potential for their development, is essential. To develop this 'soil', there needs to be certain absence of centralized governmental power, or, in other words, some degree of autonomy. If the governments were to be directive and immensely powerful, it might be challenging or even impossible for intermediaries to make such a direct and rapid impact in terms of sustainability transitions. Secondly, another crucial factor to consider is the presence of civil society, which can stimulate cooperation and promote active engagement.

Indeed, intermediaries can be composed from civil society actors. Thirdly, there are other drivers that can increase the chances of replications, such as global competition (which is a very relevant and timely challenge for HEIs not only in Catalonia, but across the globe) and pursuit of prestige within the country. The former may be found in the form of competitiveness for international prestige, funding, international and national students or ambitions to be top performers in global rankings. The latter is more suitable to the context of Spain, where there is an increased inter-regional competition when it comes to higher education (AQU, Interview 1, 25.02.2022).

Secondly, our study suggests several factors that contribute to the effectiveness of IOs. In our case, Catalan IOs, excel at mobilizing resources from both the top and bottom levels in higher education, acting as proficient delegators. However, the functionality of IOs can be endangered by excessive competition and lack of collaboration. In the Catalan context, the nature of the IOs is highly overlapping, which significantly contributed to that cooperation. Their main features were mutual

policy guidance and influence, which we documented in our interviews, and also found in the documents. For instance, when some IOs were co-creating sustainability initiatives without competing for influence. Similarly, the goals of HEIs are overlapping and there is little to no rivalry between them in the Catalan context. HEIs have long collaborative history, which preceded the SDGs, and cooperation is well-established. This is a unique feature which might not travel to other contexts.

Overall, our research illuminates the intricate dynamics of Catalan higher education arena and its ongoing sustainability transitions, with a special focus on the IOs. The replication and effectiveness of these processes hinge on a balance of autonomy, need and ability to collaboration, and the presence of active civil society, all of which foster normative and mimetic isomorphisms, thus encouraging homogeneity across the field in response to sustainability. We give extra credit to the IOs for their ability to solidify collaboration networks for sustainability transition, which are essential for making it happen.

There are several limitations in our research. First of all, we do not provide an actual measurement of the degree to which sustainable development is present in Catalan higher education, as we focus on the actions of the IOs. Second, due to limited time avail- ability, only a limited number of people were interviewed among the different agents relevant for our phenomenon of study. A larger number of interviews may have generated more certainty in the information provided by these interviewees who, at any rate, were considered experts. There are always limits in the extent to which statements about the collaboration between HEIs and IOs and the introduction of IOs could be formulated more in normative terms than as report of actual changes or transformations. Further interviews would have allowed us to check the extent to which actual changes in the direction of implementation of IOs were actually introduced. Second, along with the emphasis attached to the role of IOs, other two nodes of policy agency could certainly contribute to the introduction of the SDGs, at least in theory: the market and the state. On the one hand, the local

design of the SDGs may be theoretically left to the market, so that universities demonstrate that they have gone deeper (further) in the introduction of the SDGs in order to enhance their stance in a purely competitive higher education market. This could be a scenario in highly decentralized systems of higher education dominated by the market (e.g. US). There, the SDGs may become a token of prestige and distinction. Alter- natively, in highly centralized systems of higher education, the SDGs may be explicitly promoted by higher education authorities deeply committed to these goals. These two scenarios are conceivable, but they have not been explored in this paper due to the idiosyncrasy of the Catalan and Spanish systems of higher education. One interesting line of research would be to compare the effectiveness of IOs as promoters of the SDGs with the potential effectiveness of markets or the state.

2.8 Future Research

In our paper, we have found preliminary evidence that the effectiveness of IOs in translating global policies into local scenarios is related to the existence of different types of IOs; in particular, to the existence of IOs at different points along a line connecting relevant authorities in the policy field with individual agents at the bottom of that field. In our case, this line connects higher education governmental authorities and individual universities. Low- and medium-proximity IOs (relatively distant from the government but close to individual universities) foster collaborative efforts. This collaboration initiates the application of global policies at the local level, through the mechanisms of mimetic and normative isomorphisms. This inceptive process of localization of the SDGs generates trust in the policy-making potential of IOs among formal policy makers.

A more thorough confirmation of this rationale would require the comparison of different national cases like the one we have presented here, in this work. These national cases would need to represent different combinations of the IOs presented in Table 5; that is, different combinations of IOs with high, medium and low proximity to the government. Arguably, a higher effectiveness

would be expected in settings with a representation of each one of these types so that the connection between individual agents (universities) and the government can be eventually and easily established, involving low-proximity IOs into the policy-making process, making it more formal. High proximity IOs (like the one represented in this paper by AQU) would initiate the formulation of hard incentives (e.g. money, or accreditation of introduction of the SDGs), knowing that individual universities would not resist these measures since they have been already cooperating (through their involvement in medium- and low-proximity IOs) in the introduction of these measures.

Besides the comparison of systems of higher education with different combinations of types of IOs, the role of IOs in the translation of global policies to local scenarios would need to be studied in systems of higher education where the state and the market play a major role, vis-à-vis intermediary organizations of any type. In other words, it would be interesting to assess the effectiveness of the state and the market in effectively translating global policies to local scenarios. For instance, in highly decentralized systems of higher education where the market plays a major role (e.g. US), the market may be decisive in the translation of the SDGs to individual HEIs as a mere and sheer matter of competition for students and resources, without IOs or the state playing any meaningful role.

Appendix

Interview questions to experts (prior to selecting the IOs):

From your perspective, which organizations or entities have been actively engaged in policy discussions regarding sustainable development in the field of Catalan higher education?

How strong is the governmental mandate regarding sustainable development in higher education in the region? If yes, how? If it not strongly present, are there any other actors promoting sustainable development?

Do you know any specific people who are actively engaged in sustainability initiatives in Catalonia? If yes, are they a part of any organizations?

Is there any way for universities to share their progress regarding sustainable development in the region? Do they have to formally report on their progress? If yes, what are the requirements? If not, are there any opportunities to share with their peers? If they share it, what are the possible ways of networking?

Whom do you believe we may contact to know more about sustainable development in Catalan higher education?

Interview questions to intermediary organizations:

Who are the main actors (if any) when it comes to the SDGs implementation in Catalan higher education? Could you provide any names?

When were the SDGs first commented as a policy goal? Who initiated this? Why the SDGs gained attention in the first place?

How does your organization contribute to the implementation of the SDGs by Catalan universities? Can you please provide specific examples of projects that you lead or participate in?

Does your organization evaluate the implementation of the SDGs? If yes, how? If not, are there any plans for the future to evaluate, if it does not happen currently?

Do you believe there is something that makes Catalonia distinctive as the region when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs in higher education? If there are any differences, could you please elaborate on these?

Are there any specific incentives for universities to implement the SDGs? If not, how are they motivated?

How regularly are you in touch with the representatives of universities? What do meetings look like? Do you believe that your meetings lead to improvements, and if so, why?

How regularly do you contact or are contacted by the government? What are your main points of discussion, if any?

Interview questions to the representatives of the Catalan government:

Who are the main actors (if any) when it comes to the SDGs implementation in Catalan higher education? Could you provide any names?

Do you believe there is something that makes Catalonia distinctive as the region when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs in higher education? If there are any differences, could you please elaborate on these?

How does your office contribute towards sustainable development in higher education in Catalonia? Do you collaborate with other actors when it comes to sustainable development in higher education?

Could you elaborate on any partnerships or collaborations that the government has established with other organizations to advance the SDGs in Catalan higher education?

Do you monitor progress related to sustainable development in Catalan higher education? If you

do not directly measure it, do you collect evidence from other sources?

Can you name best cases when it comes to sustainable development in higher education? What are the main factors of their success?

Which actors do you believe can help to make a difference when it comes to sustainable development in Catalan higher education in the future? How do you see your office in this?

Interview questions to academics and administrators:

How does your university contribute to the SDGs? Do you know any particular examples of activities?

Do you recall when sustainable development started to be a part of the agenda? Why was it considered relevant back then and who were the main actors that advocated for it?

Does your department/unit engage with the SDGs? How?

Whom do you know in Catalan higher education as an active advocate for sustainable development? Do you know if they are a part of any organization?

Have you attended any meetings regarding sustainable development? If yes, what was the main agenda? Who organized these meetings?

Do you know what role does the government play in the implementation of the SDGs in your university?

Do you know any other organizations, apart from the government, that are active in the area of sustainable development? If yes, what are their main activities?

In your opinion, what are the main factors that motivate your university to work with sustainable development discourse? Can you provide examples?

In your opinion, what are the main factors that contribute to the successful implementation of the

SDGs? How can it be improved in the future?

Interview questions to the student representative:

How would you describe current state of sustainable development in Catalan higher education? What are the main driving forces of sustainable development?

In your opinion, what factors have been most significant in shaping sustainability practices at your institution?

Do you know about other universities, since you participate in the Catalan- wide meetings?

Do you know about, or have you collaborated with any external organizations that support sustainability projects in Catalan higher education? If yes, what are these organizations and how do these organizations interact with student groups or the university administration?

As a student representative from Catalonia, how frequent do you come into contact with other representatives from Spain? If you do, do you happen to know main actors in their sustainability policy landscape?

Can you share any personal experiences where you witnessed the positive influence of an external organization on sustainability initiatives at your university or universities in Catalonia?

Interview with ANECA:

What role does ANECA play in the implementation of the SDGs on the Spanish level?

Is there any activity that promotes the SDGs which ANECA has carried out so far? Which activities have been done so far?

Are there any regions that are particularly active when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs locally?

Do Spanish universities have incentives in implementing the SDGs? Are Spanish universities provided with incentives of any kind in order to promote / implement the SDGs?

Are there any working group in Spain that is specifically dedicated to the implementation of the SDGs? What do you know about their activities?

Chapter 3 **Green or Green-washed? Examining Sustainability Reporting in Higher Education**

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Abstract

Sustainability reporting has gained popularity across various fields, and the higher education sector is no exception. Higher education institutions across the globe are voluntarily investing time and resources into showcasing their activities and progress in sustainable development. Are these efforts just superficial instances of following a trend or do they exemplify a path towards an in-depth transformation in the area of sustainability, as it is called for by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2015–2030? This article aims to answer this question by studying public sustainability reports of the top 50 UK universities, focusing on their self-reflective elements and thematic comprehensiveness.

3.1 Introduction

With rising expectations for transparency and accountability in higher education, the prominence of digital sustainability reporting has significantly increased (Lubinger et al., 2019; Nickell & Roberts, 2014). On one hand, several researchers assume that publishing sustainability reports may lead to the institutionalization of sustainability and thus trigger transformative changes (Rath & Schmitt, 2017). On the other hand, sustainability reporting often encounters critical reception, being perceived as a superficial tool for communication, and, in some cases, as a form of greenwashing or window dressing used to 'appease stakeholders' (Burritt & Schaltegger, 2010; Lubinger et al., 2019; Melles et al., 2021).

Sustainability reporting is not legally binding and lacks universally accepted standards. Some scholars have noted a potential bias in this regard, namely, the tendency to portray higher education institutions (HEIs) exclusively in a positive light in these reports and omit information on failures (Cho et al., 2015). In a way, this tendency towards positivity in sustainability reporting can be expected, given its goal to reveal achievements and showcase these to a wider range of stakeholders. However, avoiding self-criticism, providing limited self-reflection or reporting only on certain areas could hinder the identification of those aspects regarding sustainability in HEIs that need re-evaluation and improvement.

Another challenge in sustainability reporting in higher education is a tendency to focus only on the environmental and physical aspects (A. Adams, 2013), such as campus sustainability. One cannot exclude physical space from reporting, as it is one of the emblems of sustainable development, visible to staff, students and external stakeholders. However, while it is true that physical space serves as a significant representation of HEI's sustainability stance, reporting only on physical aspects of sustainability can be limiting. By adopting a more comprehensive approach to reporting and offering a whole-institution perspective, HEIs can provide a fuller, more accurate picture of

their sustainability efforts. Finding the right balance between physical space and integrating other dimensions of sustainability is crucial for demonstrating the impact HEIs make in the broader context of sustainable development.

The rise in the use of digital means and digital space, and an increase in accessibility of information puts additional pressure on HEIs to provide more transparency regarding their actions, including with regard to sustainability. With the expansion of the use of and access to the digital space in higher education, sustainability reports can reach much wider audiences. The university websites, for example, widen readership and enhance transparency and accountability. Additionally, the digital space allows not only for easier circulation of information but also for lower production costs, eliminating expenses like printing or distribution. Of course, these benefits are not exclusive to sustainability reports, which are, among many other documents, a part of the wider online communicative space. To fulfil their role among many other sources, sustainability reports have to be transparent and demonstrate genuine commitment to sustainability.

In this context, the question arises whether these reports represent an informative exposition and candid analysis, or are they merely instruments of certain formalistic compliance and trend-following? Several studies within the higher education literature have addressed issues of sustainability reporting (Ceulemans et al., 2015; Leal Filho et al., 2022; Lozano, 2011). Yet, it is still not clear to what extent and how HEIs employ sustainability reporting beyond formalistic adherence. As this article aims to understand this phenomenon, it addresses the following questions: To what extent do HEIs incorporate a comprehensive and objective approach in their sustainability reporting? What place, if any, does the physical space of campuses hold in sustainability reporting compared to other dimensions?

In terms of geographical scope, this research encompasses a sample of UK universities. To date, little has been written about university sustainability reporting in the UK (Kosta, 2018; Sassen et al., 2018). The UK has a higher education system (or systems, considering elements of devolution

among the four constitutive nations) that serves as a world reference; it has a significant share of the global higher education market, with 2.86 million students enrolled in 2021/22, and with an average tertiary education participation rate of 58%, which is above the OECD average of 52% (Bolton, 2023). To sustain their competitive edge in the global market, UK universities need to uphold their reputation, which also encompasses their commitment to sustainability topics.

3.2 Sustainability Reporting in Higher Education

According to Leal Filho et al. (2022), there is a scarcity of studies on sustainability reporting in the higher education sector since most HEIs have not adequately tackled sustainable development in general and reporting on this issue is still in its early stages. Nonetheless, the existing body of research on sustainability reporting in higher education encompasses a broad thematic spectrum, including several topics, such as sustainability assessment tools (Sepasi et al., 2018); sustainability reporting guidelines for higher education (Huber & Bassen, 2017); country-level studies on the state of sustainability, for example, Canada (Fonseca et al., 2011), Germany and Austria (Lopatta & Jaeschke, 2014), New Zealand (An et al., 2017), Australia (Gamage & Sciulli, 2017), Ghana (Hinson et al., 2015), etc.; or studies with an international perspective (Lozano, 2011). However, little or no attention has been paid to questioning the practices of sustainability reporting, particularly regarding their thematic coverage and the presence/absence of self-reflection.

3.3 Research Context: UK

In the UK context, there have been very few studies addressing sustainability reporting in higher education (Lipscombe et al., 2008; Sassen et al., 2018). The findings of Sassen et al. (2018) indicated that in July 2014, only 17% of HEIs disclosed information regarding their sustainability policies. The authors performed logistic regression analysis which demonstrated that larger institutions had a greater likelihood of reporting. Interestingly, institutions receiving a high share of public funding were less likely to engage in sustainability reporting. A more recent study by Kosta (2018)

investigated the incorporation of sustainability curriculum in reports within the UK higher education sector. The sample for this study comprised sustainability reports issued between 2016 and 2018. The results indicate that among the 167 UK HEIs, only 4% comprehensively reported on sustainability in their curriculum. Another study, by Lipscombe et al. (2008), examined the extra-curricular activities related to the topic of sustainable development in UK higher education. Their findings indicate that over a third of the surveyed institutions had sustainability-related activities, with most of them focusing only on environmental topics, thus potentially avoiding other pillars of sustainability.

In the UK, there is a specialized student-led ranking 'People & Planet University League Table' that focuses on the environmental and ethical performance of universities. For the final scoring, 55% is based on publicly available information, while 45% is derived from the university's Environmental Management System reporting (2023). The majority of the points awarded in this scoring are related to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13, ('Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts'), with carbon reduction performance accounted for 15%, carbon management for 7% and environmental management systems for 10%. Jones (2012, p. 1) criticized the UK's 'Green League Table' by suggesting that this ranking 'could be acting as an institutional hegemonic mechanism for social legitimacy through the desire by universities to show that environmental issues are effectively under control' which, in fact, may not quite be the case.

3.4 Whole-institution Approach in Sustainability Reporting

A whole-institution approach for sustainability in education, encouraged by UNESCO (*World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action and Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development in Higher Education, Adopted by the World Conference on Higher Education: Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century, Vision and Action, 9 October 1998 - UNESCO Digital Library*, n.d.), aims to overcome this fragmented understanding of sustainability (Carolee &

Heather, 2014). The approach refers to a comprehensive sustainability strategy, integrated into the entire institution and all its major areas of activity. According to Adams (2013, p. 385), few HEIs pay attention to sustainability challenges from a whole-institution perspective in their sustainability reports. Instead, they prefer to disclose selectively only certain topics, such as green campus and a 'sustainability course here and there' in their curriculum.

In line with a whole-institution approach, McCowan (2019, p. 220) identified five modalities (types of activities) of HEIs that constitute their institutional structure and interact within the sustainability discourse:

- Education (personal development and personal civic learning, e.g. 'equipping young people with the knowledge and skills to ensure decent livelihoods');
- Knowledge production (basic research, technological innovation, e.g. 'developing technologies for ensuring food security for farmers');
- Public debate (dissimilation of ideas, deliberative space, e.g. 'raising awareness of the negative impact of punitive debt repayments of the poorest countries');
- Service delivery (outreach activities, secondments, e.g. 'providing free-of-charge internet facility for local communities');
- Campus operations (sustainability planning, investments, e.g. 'paying its own cleaning staff a [good] living wage').

The five-modality model by McCowan (2019) offers a framework for connecting general functions of higher education with sustainability. This integration ensures that sustainability is not just an isolated topic, but a fundamental part of HEIs. For example, the modality of education is the most recognized function of HEIs and is fundamental to their operations, therefore also vital for sustainability initiatives. The second modality, knowledge production, does not imply mere dissemination of knowledge, but its creation by research staff, professors or students. This modality

is not only important for HEIs themselves but also necessary for addressing the needs of external entities, such as governments, civil society organizations or companies. The third and fourth modalities, public debate and service delivery, encompass the way an HEI can engage with external communities in the area of sustainability. Examples of public debate are discussions on the local radio, television interviews or public debates on campus. Service delivery can be characterized by offering services directly to the communities. These could be consultancies, legal clinics, training courses, outreach activities and secondments. The fifth and final modality is campus operations. It represents one of the most prevalent topics in sustainability reporting. Most educational institutions have campuses that support multiple learning functions, and these functions 'allow educators and learners to integrate sustainability principles into their daily practices and facilitate capacity-building, competence development, and value education in a comprehensive manner' (Leicht et al., 2018, p. 46). These are not just campus rooms or labs, or just classrooms for formal teaching and learning but they serve as dynamic environments for social interactions. Often, the campus design reflects the values of HEIs. Given that the campus operations modality refers to campus, and mostly represents the physical space of an HEI functioning, this article refers to it as *campus space*.

3.5 Sustainability Reporting and Self-reflection

Sustainability reports disclosing negative performance may impact HEIs negatively, potentially leading to fewer study applicants, less successful funding applications, or a generally negative societal perception. On the other hand, without reporting negative performance aspects, HEIs may weaken the trust of their stakeholders in the long term. As Hahn and Lülfs (2014, p. 402) note, 'actively disclosing negative aspects of sustainability performance might even be regarded as a positive signal in terms of actively managing risk'.

As several studies point out, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards are widely applied by companies to sustainability reporting (Levy et al., 2010; Lozano, 2011). In some cases, HEIs apply

the GRI standards to their sustainability reports. Even though these standards are completely optional, the GRI points out that omitting negative sentiments in sustainability reporting can potentially reduce the credibility of the reports. According to the GRI, the basic criteria of a comprehensive report are:

1. The report covers both favourable and unfavourable results and topics;

2. The information in the report is presented in a format that allows users to see both positive and negative trends in performance on a year-to-year basis (p. 13).

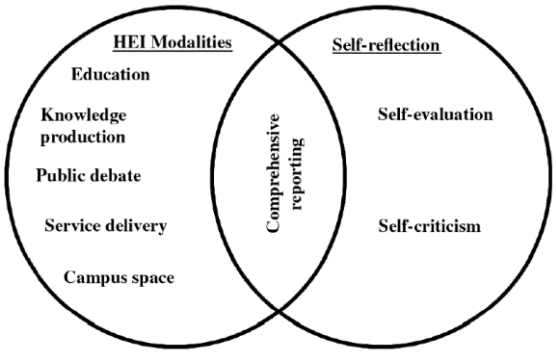
In general, self-reflection, which may also include negative points, is a crucial factor for several reasons, such as evaluation of policy effectiveness, identification of improvements, rational and informed decision-making (Sanderson, 2002). Hence, sustainability reporting that only covers positive aspects, while excluding challenges and self-reflective elements, such as acknowledgement of failures and suggesting potential improvements, may prove less effective, and could give rise to a window-dressing effect.

For example, one can find several evaluative statements in the University of Cambridge report: 'we did not achieve this target, as our water consumption (m3) reduced by 4.3% from our 2005/06 baseline to our target year 2020/21' (University of Cambridge, 2020, 2021, p. 4); 'this year 56.4% of our waste was recycled. The recycling rate for operational and construction waste decreased this year. The re-tender of the University's main waste collection contract has been completed which will increase recycling rates' (p. 5). Similar statements can be found in the report of the University of Plymouth (2020). Similarly, the University of Kent report in 2017–2018 mentions unachieved targets: 'Unfortunately we did not meet our water reduction target this year, however, we did achieve a reduction of 1.3% and are looking at ways of improving over the next year' (p. 14).

To sum up, a sustainability report of an HEI should include both reflections and all higher education modality components to be considered comprehensive. This implies incorporating a

broad range of aspects, thus ensuring it is not a mere compliance act but represents documented dedication to sustainable development. Figure 6 provides a framework for analysis that aims to explain the basic components of a holistic sustainability report in higher education

Figure 6 Comprehensive sustainability reporting in higher education



3.6 Research Design

3.6.1 Timeframe

The study covers the period from 2016 to 2022, starting in the year following the adoption of the SDGs, a milestone that gave HEIs a special role in the attainment of global sustainable development. However, it has to be noted that sustainable development discourse in higher education has not started with the introduction of the SDGs.

The role of higher education in sustainability discourse has been at the centre of discussions since the early 1990s, exemplified by the Talloires Declaration (Association of Universities for Sustainable Future, 1990). This document, a 10-point action plan for embedding sustainable development into higher education, has gathered the endorsement from over 500 university leaders across more than 50 countries. Similarly, Kyoto Declaration (International Association of Universities, 1993), initiated in 1993 during the 8th Round table of the International Association of Universities (IAUs), consists of 8 points that urge universities to use their resources in a sustain-

able way and to incorporate principles of sustainable development into teaching, research and outreach. Another example of a systematic action plan is 'World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action and Framework for Priority Action for Change and Development in Higher Education' adopted at the World Conference on Higher Education in the 21st century Vision and Action, UNESCO in Paris in October 1998 (UNESCO, 1998). This declaration underscores sustainable development as a key thematic pillar of higher education, alongside democracy, peace and justice. It articulates that HEIs should 'use their autonomy and high academic standards to contribute to the sustainable development of society to the resolution of the issues facing the society of the future' (12).

While these international declarations provided a solid ground for sustainability in higher education, it was only in 2015 that HEIs were officially recognized as a part of global sustainable development by all UN member states. This shift has empowered the higher education sector, while also increasing its responsibilities and pressures from stakeholders regarding sustainability.

3.6.2 Data Collection

This research examines sustainability reporting among the top 50 British universities as ranked by the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) 2022. The ranking has been extensively used as a benchmark for international comparisons of HEIs (Aghion et al., 2010; Docampo & Cram, 2014). This article references the ARWU for purely sampling reasons and does not aim to study the impact of this ranking on the degree of sustainability reporting. In total, 107 sustainability reports were identified from these universities (Table A1). Only stand-alone reports were considered for this research, which indicates clean and undeniable proof that a university has dedicated time, resources and attention to the topic of sustainability reporting, even despite having no legal obligation to do so.

3.7 Data Analysis

3.7.1 Thematic Analysis

A Python script was used for web scraping to retrieve reports from websites, followed by a deductive thematic analysis with a-priori codes, conducted with the OpenAI Chat Completions API. The results of the thematic analysis were subsequently checked manually with the help of MAXQDA software. The five steps of thematic analysis were applied: (1) Data collection and familiarization, (2) generation of initial codes based on the whole-institution approach (McCowan, 2019, 2020), (3) text search for the 5 modalities of higher education, (4) reviewing the themes (5) producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To validate the results, the subsequent step involved manually searching and coding the modalities using MAXQDA software.

3.7.2 Sentiment Analysis

Aligned with the recommendations of the GRI, the paper conducted a sentiment analysis of the reports, examining the absence or presence of self-evaluative and self-critical statements. Defined as 'the habit or act of criticizing yourself, especially your own behaviour, work, or performance' (*Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus*, 2024), self-criticism can serve as a tool for improvement and critical thinking regarding sustainable development. While self-criticism and self-evaluation in sustainability reporting represent two different concepts, their meaning can overlap. Table 7 summarizes the primary factors that were used to identify the statements that include self-evaluation and self-criticism.

Table 7 Self-evaluation and self-criticism in sustainability reporting

	Self-evaluation	Self-criticism
Description	• Objectively evaluating the practices of sustainability against certain pre-defined criteria (e.g. waste management, carbon reduction, gender equality), manifesting self-awareness; • Factual information with an evaluative note; • Data-driven, can include measurements or statistical data; • May be positive or negative, but it usually has a neutral tone; • Example: An HEI has its own pre-defined target or global standards for change and then reflects upon it in the next years	• More critical, rigorous assessment which focuses on perceived challenges and failures; • Suggesting 'honesty' by admitting shortcomings; • Clearly admitting failure of certain policies or even their absence ('uncomfortable truth'), and possibly reflecting on the reasons; • Potentially indicating the possibility to learn from failures; • Might involve an HEI pointing out its own failures or areas where it did not meet internal or external expectations; • Can involve seeking feedback; • Has a negative tone; • Example: An HEI did not have a clearly designed waste reduction plan, clearly admits it, points out to the reasons of why this happened and possibly outlines the plans for the future that aim to improve the situation
Intent	• To showcase and understand what the current progress is regarding sustainable development; • To highlight accountability and commitment; • To suggest change, to re-evaluate performance and potentially improve in the future	• To acknowledge failures, demonstrate transparency to its stakeholders; • To showcase commitment to continuous improvement

Note: Higgins and Walker (2012); Hahn and Lülfs (2014); Wildavsky (2018).

Overall, this article refers to self-evaluation as a set of objective statements assessing both positive and negative sides, while self-criticism can be described as focused on the efforts to identify failures.

Additionally, there is another self-reflective dimension that has to be considered, which is self-mapping. This process is foundational in sustainability reporting, and it usually incorporates the description of how an HEI integrates sustainable development into the core modalities, such as education, knowledge production, public debate, services and campus space. One of the core activities of this component of sustainability reporting is the reflection on the current practices, and governance principles that are behind sustainability policies. This enables benchmarking against other institutions and possible sharing of best practice cases/policy failures in the field of sustainable development in higher education. The initial step of this study, namely, thematic analysis, includes self-mapping in the five areas, represented by higher education modalities.

3.7.3 Analysis of Comprehensive Reports

It was anticipated that not all the reports would be equally comprehensive in terms of the reported modalities and their sentiments. Only those reports that fulfil all the dimensions (education, knowledge production, public debate, service delivery, campus space, self-evaluation and self-criticism) were selected for the in-depth analysis.

It was expected that the most reported modality would be campus space in the context of environmental protection and the SDG 13, Climate Action (Vaughter et al., 2016), given the preference of HEIs to report on environmental topics, which are more visible on campus and easier to measure than other, such as, for example, social commitments.

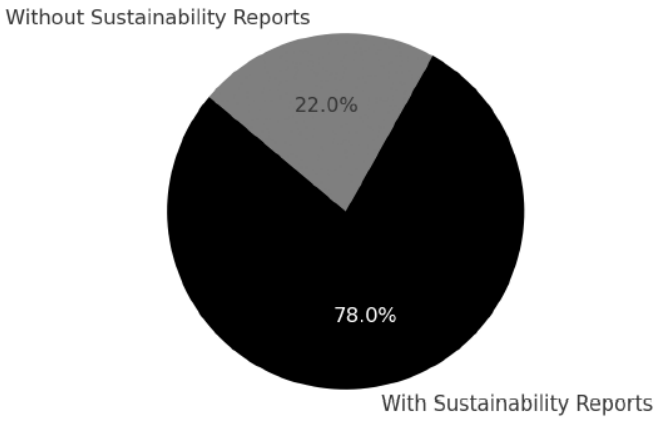
3.8 Findings

3.8.1 General Data on Reports

In total, 107 reports were collected spanning a 7-year period (Table A1), covering approximately one-third of the total universities in the UK. A limitation of this paper is that the universities included in the sample exhibit a higher level of resources compared to smaller or lower ranked institutions. These were expected to report their performance to external stakeholders (Richardson & Kachler, 2017) and may have a higher level of sustainability reporting in comparison with the lower ranked universities.

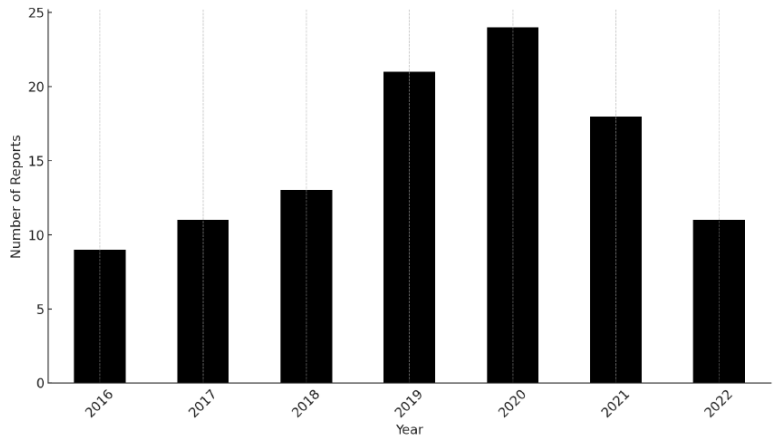
In total, 78% of these universities showcase their sustainability performance in the open-access digital space, which is significantly higher than reported in earlier studies (Sassen et al., 2018). As depicted in Figure 7, among the 50 universities examined, only 11 did not have sustainability reports available in an open-access format within their digital space. While all universities maintained sustainability webpages, only those explicitly publishing their reports in open access were considered.

Figure 7 Sustainability reporting in UK universities



As visualized in Figure 8, 2020 was the most active year in terms of sustainability reporting, while the numbers of 2021 and 2022 have shown a decline. Given that this research was conducted in the second half of 2023, with a recently concluded academic year, the lower figures for 2022 may be improved with the publication of new reports for 2022/23.

Figure 8 Number of sustainability reports over time (2016-2022)

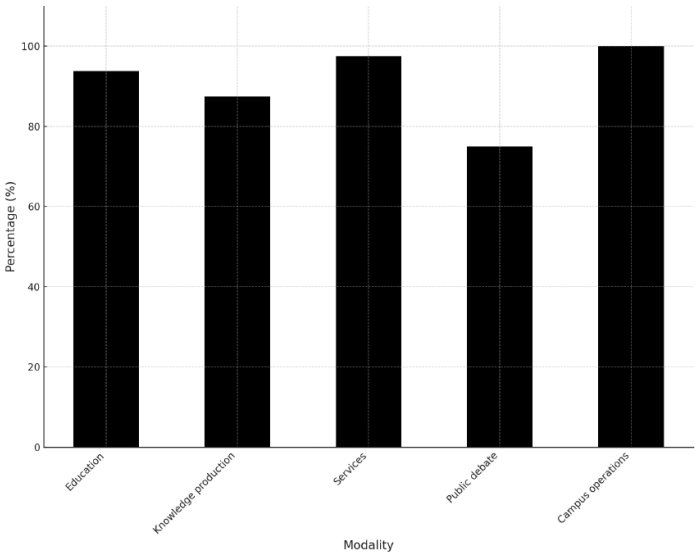


3.8.2 Modalities of the UK Higher Education Sustainability Reports

Only reports with fully accessible links were considered. In total, 80 reports were analysed in the light of five modalities of higher education (Table A2). Overall, all higher education modalities were accounted for, with certain ones (such as campus space) consistently being reported upon,

while others (like public debate) being referred to less often. Figure 9 provides a visualization of the modalities by percentages of reports that covered them.

Figure 9 Higher education modalities in sustainability reporting



As it was anticipated, the fact that campus space modality was present in all the reports, signals that universities primarily described their sustainability activities with a focus on environmental characteristics, frequently related to facility aspects. These encompass areas such as waste management, the promotion of sustainable food in canteens, renewable energy on campus, reduction of water usage and efforts to reduce printing, among others. For example, the University of Keele (2018) Sustainability Report mentions several aspects of sustainability on campus including (1) energy, water and carbon emissions, (2) reuse, recycling and waste, (3) sustainable procurement, (4) sustainable catering, (5) grounds and biodiversity, (6) transport and travel.

Another notable modality, namely, services, was also mentioned in the majority of university sustainability reports. For example, Kent Community Oasis Garden (University of Kent, 2020) is one of the projects that aims to foster sustainability and community well-being. It can be described as a multiuse, accessible space, which serves as a hub for engaging with sustainable food practices, biodiversity, habitat creation and community engagement. Focusing on sustainable development,

this outreach project offers regular programs to engage participants in gardening activities and skills development.

In the context of sustainability reporting, education emerged as another crucial dimension. For example, the University College London 2021 Sustainability Report refers to several educational activities, such as the Green UCL Discovery Module. Participants of this module are invited to take part in a mock citizen assembly activity. During this assembly, they can share their views on actual decisions the university intends to implement in its pursuit of achieving carbon neutrality by 2024.

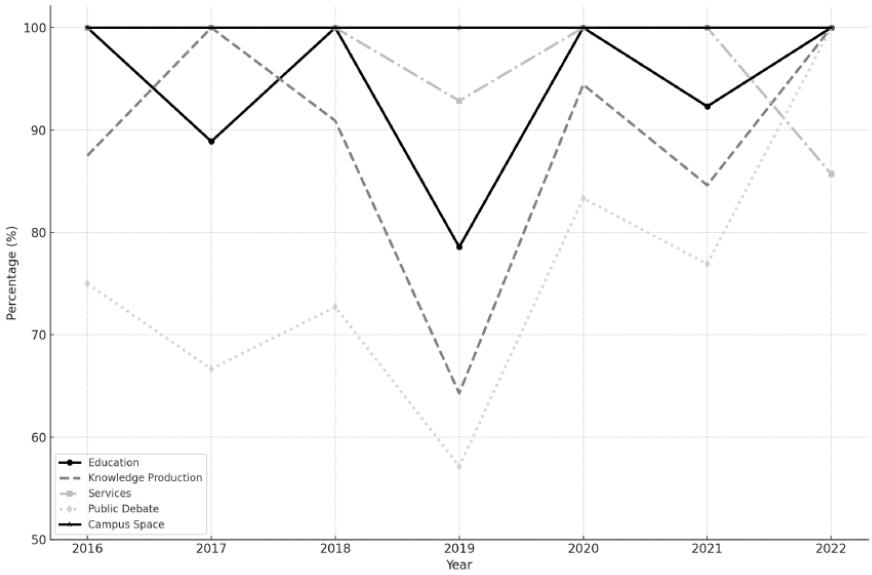
Similarly to education, knowledge production was present in the majority of reports. The London School of Economics 2021/22 Sustainability Report indicates that sustainability remains a central focus, accounting for 23% of all research funding applications in 2022. Another example underscoring the significance of research funding for sustainability initiatives is the sustainability report of the University of Cambridge (2020, 2021). The report mentioned the collaboration of Cambridge Zero staff within the UK Space Agency National Space Innovation Programme (NSIP) project, partnering with the Institute of Astronomy, Department of Computer Science & Technology, and Department of Architecture. This initiative, supported by £7 million in funding for innovative climate change solutions, emphasized the use of space-based thermal infrared telescopes and drone-mounted infrared cameras to assess building energy outputs. The aim was to leverage this data to ensure various stakeholders, from governments to individuals, align with carbon emission targets.

The least reported modality was public debate, which was nevertheless present in approximately three-quarters of the university reports. The University of St Andrews provided several examples of public debate, including Skillshare, a community-based Transition initiative, which educates both the university population and the general public on skills aimed at prolonging the lifespan of items through collective learning. Another instance of public debate was provided by the University of

Lancaster (Environmental Sustainability Report 2022–23), which was organized in alignment with the COP26 Summit in Glasgow in late 2021. Lancaster University hosted its own COP26 festival, which was a week-long activity featuring 39 events and focusing on various facets of climate change. The festivities started with the 'Zero Carbon Tour' and featured its 100% electric Carbon Battle Bus, which presented local carbon-reducing initiatives and encouraged businesses to adopt net-zero commitments. Further events included a public talk on the Lancaster University's approach to the climate emergency and several collaborations with the local community.

In terms of temporal developments regarding the inclusion of five modalities (Figure 10), only the modality of campus space remained consistent and was present in each report, while others fluctuated significantly. Additionally, the lower scores for public debates may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent reduction in public events offered by universities in the academic year of 2019/20. Overall, universities showed a relatively high tendency of depicting their sustainability efforts through a comprehensive, whole-institution approach, including all modalities of higher education (McCowan, 2020), even though not in an equal manner. Compared to earlier studies on sustainability in higher education reporting (Sassen et al., 2018), the present state of research reveals a significant shift in recognizing the importance of showcasing sustainability within the online space of universities. On the other hand, campus space was more acknowledged that other modalities, signalling predominantly environmental, thus more limiting, understanding of sustainability.

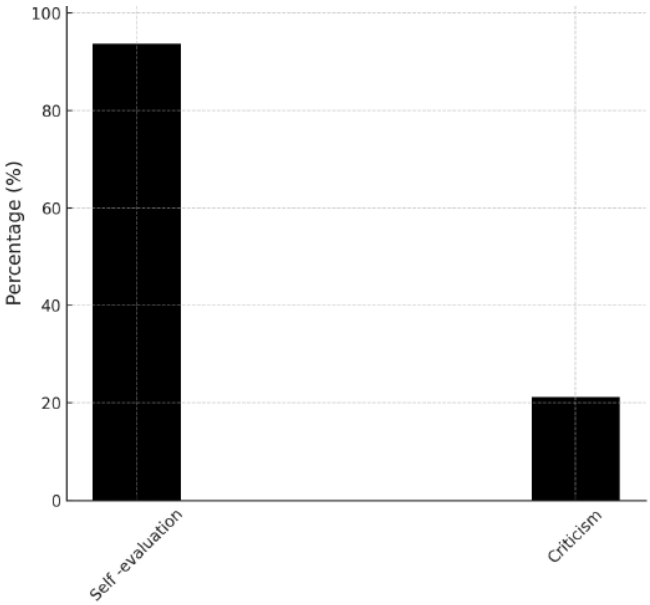
Figure 10 Higher education modalities in sustainability reporting 2016-2022



3.8.3 Self-reflection in the UK Higher Education Sustainability Reports

This study focused on analysing the reports based on two key textual elements, namely, self-evaluation and self-criticism. Figure 11 reveals the prevalence of self-evaluation, contrasted with a notable lack of self-criticism.

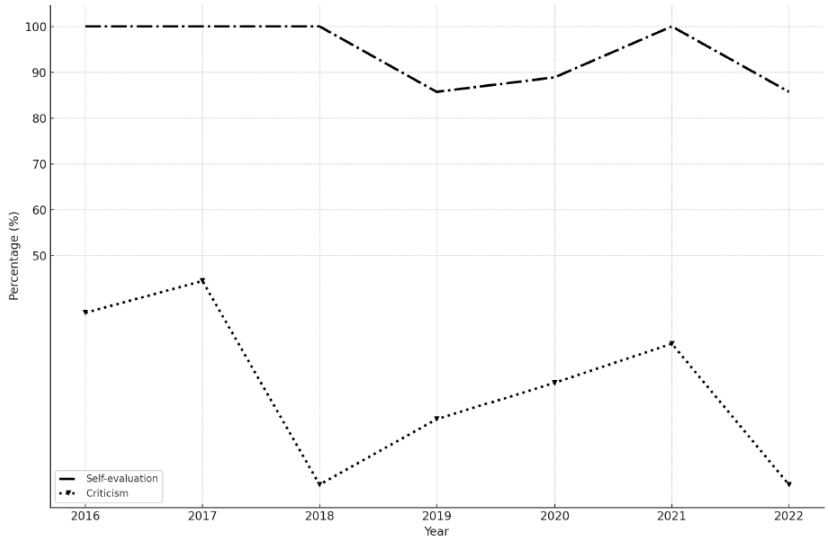
Figure 11 Sentiment analysis results



The University of Cambridge 2019/2020 report offers several instances of self-evaluation and self-criticism. For example, in the context of Strategic Procurement Review, the university 'benchmarked [their] performance against peers, both in [higher education] sector and externally,' which resulted in the acknowledgement of areas of underperformance (University of Cambridge, 2020, p. 17). Another example of self-evaluation is described in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the closure of non-essential buildings, causing the drop of electricity consumption. Nevertheless, research infrastructure continued consuming the same amount of electricity (7). Moreover, the University of Cambridge reports have several instances of self-criticism which are visualized with the thumb-down image in the section on progress. For example, the target 'to reduce water consumption by 20% by 2020/21 against a 2005/06 baseline' resulted in water consumption falling 'to the level of our baseline year [but] still a lot of work to do bring [our] water use down.' The report's critical reflection includes the acknowledgement that although this target was met, this did not happen because of the pro-active efforts of the university, but rather due to an external factor (pandemic lockdown): 'Per capita emissions were 27% lower than in 2014/15, but this is due to the impact of COVID-19 rather than progress in reducing emissions'.

Regarding temporal representation, self-evaluation appears to be constantly present across the sustainability reports. In contrast, self-criticism was more prevalent in the early reports, with a marked decline in 2018. Although there was a subsequent increase in the next years, the frequency of self-criticism never returned to the initial years. Figure 12 depicts these trends.

Figure 12 Self-evaluation and self-criticism over time (2016-2022)



3.8.4 Comprehensive Reports and Their Representation of Campus Space

Overall, only 12 reports comprehensively covered all 7 categories of higher education modalities and in their sustainability reports, representing 15% of the total. As was also in the overall results, campus space emerged as the most frequently reported topic, followed by self-evaluation and references to further topics, as illustrated in Figure 13.

Figure 13 Thematic coverage of the selected sustainability reports

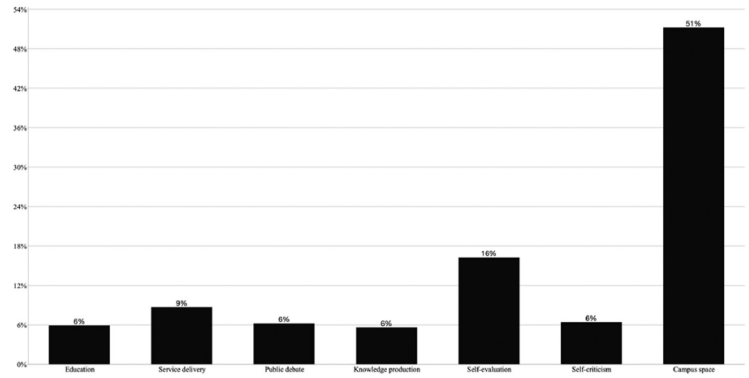
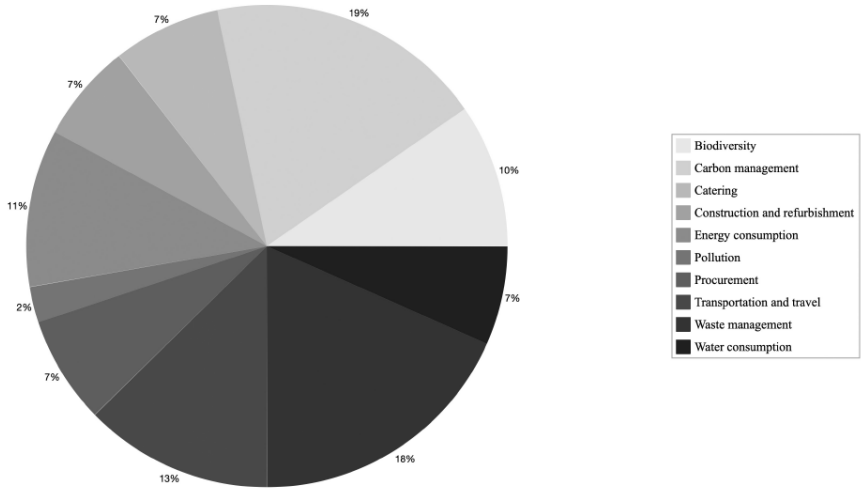


FIGURE 8 Thematic coverage of the selected reports.

However, campus space does not constitute a mono-category; it encompasses a variety of sub-topics. Campus space was examined in detail and the second-level code was developed inductively.

As depicted in Figure 14, carbon management emerges as one of the most frequently mentioned aspects (19% of the campus space code), followed by waste management (18%), transportation and travel (13%), energy consumption (11%) and biodiversity (10%).

Figure 14 Campus space sub-categories



University campuses often consume significant amounts of energy, resulting in a substantial carbon footprint. By effectively managing this footprint, HEIs can not only mitigate their own negative impact on the environment but also serve as role models for other organizations. This challenge, however, lies in finding the right balance between the inherently carbon-intensive facilities of universities, for example, research facilities, and the imperative to reduce carbon emissions.

Another frequently highlighted dimension is waste management, which is directly controllable by universities, compared with broader issues, such as carbon management. Waste management encompasses various strategies, including recycling, waste logistics, waste reduction and broader awareness initiatives about the topic, such as reuse campaigns. A commonly reported challenge in waste management is the overreliance on third-party providers, which complicates the effectiveness of waste management strategies.

Transportation and travel constituted another significant part of the reports, often linked to the topic of carbon emissions. This area poses several challenges, including finding the balance between

the need for global connectedness for academic events, such as conferences or summer schools, and the carbon footprint these activities generate. To counteract this challenge, universities aimed to compensate it by promoting sustainable ways of travel on campus, such as subsidizing cycling, and public transportation.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that there are overlaps between the coded segments, with the most common being observed between campus space sub-codes of carbon management, waste management and self-evaluative statements, each comprising 28 instances (Table 8). This comes from the fact that these areas of campus space are frequently quantified and evaluated, based on the expected outcomes, targets and goals that were set in the previous years. These two sub-themes of campus management signal a positive development; however, there is still a noticeable scarcity in other areas. This highlights the lack of predefined indicators in sustainability reporting, reflecting the need for more comprehensive and, perhaps, standardized evaluation metrics in sustainability reporting in higher education.

Table 8 Code overlaps

Campus space dimensions	Service delivery	Education	Public debate	Knowledge production	Self-evaluation	Self-criticism
Biodiversity	0	1	2	1	3	0
Carbon management	3	2	1	2	28	3
Catering	2	1	3	0	3	0
Construction and refurbishment	0	0	0	1	2	3
Energy consumption	1	0	0	1	9	1
Pollution	0	0	0	0	2	0
Procurement	0	0	0	0	9	1
Transportation and travel	0	0	0	0	14	3
Waste management	0	0	0	0	28	7
Water consumption	0	0	0	0	11	7

3.9 Discussion and Conclusion

Sustainability reporting has evolved beyond being a practice in just a handful of HEIs. Over time, it has developed into a professionalized communication tool, widely employed via using the digital space of university websites. Open to everyone with Internet access, sustainability reporting has become a regular task for universities, which also brings about a new layer of complexity to the administrative tasks of HEIs. On the other hand, sustainability reporting still lacks thoroughness, with only 15% of reports being comprehensive.

While the modality of campus space remains the most prevalent in sustainability reporting, other modalities are also present. The fact that campus space is present in every single report indicates a predominant understanding of sustainability as primarily an environmental concern. In fact, a focus on facility management, such as waste or electricity consumption reduction, could be indicative of a 'reductionist' approach to sustainable development, potentially overlooking its other dimensions.

On the other hand, campus space is significant for several reasons. First, its impact is more measurable, and it is simpler to tackle the progress. Second, having a clear campus sustainability strategy is one of the very initial and foundational steps towards tackling further, more abstract changes, such as sustainability in public debate and service provision. Third, sustainability on campus incorporates several topics, such as carbon management, waste management, biodiversity, energy consumption, effective transportation, etc. Each of these components not only contributes towards overall sustainability on campus but also serves as a living lab for sustainable practices.

Furthermore, the sustainability reports examined in this paper are not lacking self-evaluative statements, but still do not show much self-criticism. This implies less systemic approaches to reporting and the tendency to shy away from negative disclosures, indicating possible window dressing or lack of evaluation. Presenting predominantly positive facts and avoiding showcasing failures can diminish the credibility of the reports. Conversely, providing less self-critical points

may result in misconceptions about the current situation. It is problematic, because it may lead to misleading stakeholders, potentially causing reputational damage and scepticism. Additionally, it could divert attention from the genuine sustainability efforts undertaken by universities.

Overall, even despite higher numbers of sustainability reports that were mentioned in the previous studies, and the presence of a strong sustainability discourse in an online space of the UK universities, sustainability reporting is not systematic yet. Even though it is a positive sign that universities report on their sustainable development activities, these are predominantly future-oriented promises and are hard to measure at the moment of research. Lacking self-reflection in sustainability reporting is an alarming sign of compliance without in-depth processing of the information related to sustainability.

Although this research spans a seven-year period, one limitation is that sustainability reporting is still in its relative infancy in higher education. Despite the higher number of reports that are available online, these are very different in their scope and quality. While some use reporting standards, such as the GRI, others rely on purely descriptive narratives, lacking self-reflection or failing to represent all higher education modalities equitably. Studying this diversity of reporting has a potential for further research.

Another possibility for future research is the exploration of innovative formats for sustainability reporting, which are prevalent due to the increasing employment of digital tools by HEIs. These formats may include videos, interactive websites with animated infographics, podcasts or other forms of digital storytelling.

Another limitation of studying reports in the period of 2016–2022 is that the SDGs were adopted in 2015 and the timeframe for implementation for higher education is relatively short if aiming for long-term impact evaluation. Therefore, several reports have more elements of planning, such as sustainability strategies and declarations, than evaluation. This shows the willingness to work with

sustainability policies, but it is hard to criticize the limited amount of self-criticism, knowing that for many universities, the topic of sustainability is relatively novel.

Furthermore, the SDGs ask for immediate change, which is not always possible in the higher education con- text. Even though the topic of sustainability has been present in higher education before the SDGs, the efforts were limited, and the real uptake of reporting has only happened recently. This leads to more possibilities for future research, such as a comparison of the later sustainability reports with the earlier versions. Another possibility is looking at sustainability reports from a cross-national comparative perspective, which will also help to understand the speed of change in HEIs in different contexts.

Appendix A

TABLE A1. Sustainability reports of UK universities (2016–2022).

University name	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
University of Cambridge	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
University of Oxford	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
University College London	0	1	0	1	1	1	0
Imperial College London	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
The University of Edinburgh	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
University of Manchester	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Kings College London	0	1	1	1	0	1	0
University of Bristol	0	1	1	1	1	1	0
London School of Economics and Political Science	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
University of Glasgow	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
The University of Sheffield	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
University of Birmingham	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
University of Exeter	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
University of Liverpool	0	0	0	1	1	0	0

University name	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
University of Nottingham	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
University of Warwick	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Cardiff University	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
University of Leeds	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
University of Sussex	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
University of Southhampton	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Newcastle University	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Queen Mary University of London	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
University of Aberdeen	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
University of East Anglia	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Durham University	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lancaster University	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Queens University Belfast	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The University of Dundee	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

University name	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
University of Reading	0	0	1	1	1	1	1
University of Leicester	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
University of St Andrews	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
University of Surrey	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
University of Bath	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
University of Essex	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
University of Kent	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
University of Strathclyde	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
University of York	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
St Georges University of London	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Swansea University	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
University of Plymouth	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
Bangor University	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
Brunel University	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Liverpool John Moores University	0	0	0	1	0	0	0

University name	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Northumbria University	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Nottingham Trent University	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Royal Holloway University of London	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
The Open University	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
University of Greenwich	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Keele University	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total: 107							

TABLE A2. Results of thematic analysis.

Ranking	University	Year	Education	Knowledge production	Services	Public debate	Campus space	Self-evaluation	Criticism
1	University of Cambridge	2016	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1	University of Cambridge	2017	1	1	1	0	1	1	1
1	University of Cambridge	2018	1	1	1	1	1	1	0

Ranking	University	Year	Education	Knowledge production	Services	Public debate	Campus space	Self-evaluation	Criticism
1	University of Cambridge	2019	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
1	University of Cambridge	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
1	University of Cambridge	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	University of Oxford	2016	1	1	1	0	1	1	1
2	University of Oxford	2017	0	1	1	0	1	1	0
2	University of Oxford	2019	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
2	University of Oxford	2020	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
2	University of Oxford	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
2	University of Oxford	2022	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
3	University College London	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
3	University College London	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
5	The University of Edinburgh	2016	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Ranking	University	Year	Education	Knowledge production	Services	Public debate	Campus space	Self-evaluation	Criticism
5	The University of Edinburgh	2017	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
5	The University of Edinburgh	2018	1	0	1	0	1	1	0
7	Kings College London	2017	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
7	Kings College London	2018	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
7	Kings College London	2019	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
8	University of Bristol	2017	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
8	University of Bristol	2018	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
8	University of Bristol	2019	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
8	University of Bristol	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
8	University of Bristol	2021	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
9	London School of Economics and Political Science	2016	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
9	London School of Economics and Political Science	2017	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

Ranking	University	Year	Education	Knowledge production	Services	Public debate	Campus space	Self-evaluation	Criticism
9	London School of Economics and Political Science	2019	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
9	London School of Economics and Political Science	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
9	London School of Economics and Political Science	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
9	London School of Economics and Political Science	2022	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
10	University of Glasgow	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
10	University of Glasgow	2022	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
13	University of Exeter	2019	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
13	University of Exeter	2020	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
13	University of Exeter	2021	1	0	1	0	1	1	0
14	University of Liverpool	2019	1	1	1	1	1	1	0

Ranking	University	Year	Education	Knowledge production	Services	Public debate	Campus space	Self-evaluation	Criticism
14	University of Liverpool	2020	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
15	University of Nottingham	2016	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
15	University of Nottingham	2017	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
15	University of Nottingham	2018	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
15	University of Nottingham	2019	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
15	University of Nottingham	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
16	University of Warwick	2019	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
16	University of Warwick	2020	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
17	Cardiff University	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
23	Queen Mary University of London	2019	1	0	1	0	1	1	0
23	Queen Mary University of London	2020	1	1	1	0	1	1	1

Ranking	University	Year	Education	Knowledge production	Services	Public debate	Campus space	Self-evaluation	Criticism
24	University of Aberdeen	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
24	University of Aberdeen	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
27	Lancaster University	2022	1	1	0	1	1	1	0
30	University of Reading	2019	1	0	1	0	1	1	0
30	University of Reading	2020	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
30	University of Reading	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
30	University of Reading	2022	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
31	University of Leicester	2018	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
32	University of St Andrews	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
32	University of St Andrews	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
32	University of St Andrews	2022	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
33	University of Surrey	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0

Ranking	University	Year	Education	Knowledge production	Services	Public debate	Campus space	Self-evaluation	Criticism
36	University of Kent	2016	1	0	1	1	1	1	0
36	University of Kent	2017	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
36	University of Kent	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
38	University of York	2021	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
41	University of Plymouth	2016	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
41	University of Plymouth	2018	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
41	University of Plymouth	2019	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
41	University of Plymouth	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
41	University of Plymouth	2021	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
41	University of Plymouth	2022	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
42	Bangor University	2017	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
42	Bangor University	2018	1	1	1	0	1	1	0

Ranking	University	Year	Education	Knowledge production	Services	Public debate	Campus space	Self-evaluation	Criticism
42	Bangor University	2019	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
42	Bangor University	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
46	Nottingham Trent University	2019	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
48	The Open University	2018	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
49	University of Greenwich	2018	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
49	University of Greenwich	2020	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
50	Keele University	2016	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
50	Keele University	2018	1	1	1	1	1	1	0

Conclusions

This research contributes to the scholarship of higher education policy, more specifically in the field of sustainability. The dissertation is based on four published research papers focusing on separate but interrelated topics. What unites them is an endeavour to provide a novel and better suited understanding of the SDGs phenomenon, first by analysing the SDGs as a global policy framework for higher education, then by looking at the ways in which they are adopted in local contexts without significant legal pressure or financial reward, and finally by scrutinizing the real extent of the engagement of higher education institutions in sustainability efforts.

In this dissertation, I aimed to focus on the SDGs as a global policy framework in higher education. However, the notion of policy framework lacked conceptual clarity. Frequently mentioned but not explicitly defined, policy frameworks are too important for empirical and academic reasons to be ignored. Paper 1 (single-authored), "What Is a Policy Framework? An Attempt at Conceptualization," published in *Social Studies*, aimed to fill a gap by providing a conceptual clarification regarding policy frameworks (what they are, how they function). Based on the conceptualisation model of Sartori (1970), this paper offered not only a systematic explanation regarding this particular concept, but it delved more broadly into the theory of concept formation in in public policy in general.

In the second paper (co-authored with Luis Ortiz-Gervasi), "Intermediary organizations and their role in advancing the SDGs in higher education," published in *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, we looked at the specific case of Catalonia and the embeddedness of the SDGs into its higher education landscape. This is an exemplary case which shows that despite the absence of coercive or legally binding measures, the global policy framework constituted around the SDGs was acknowledged, taken seriously and implemented in a particular higher education system. This case also was particularly informative given the relatively high autonomy of HEIs in Catalonia and the

little to non-existing funding dedicated to the SDGs. In the Catalan context, it was the strong presence of the intermediary organisations that helped create strong networks among the HEIs, with these intermediaries acting as semi-policy makers and key facilitators of the adoption of the SDGs and later led to its systematic implementation. This paper shows one of the ways that can be effective when it comes to the implementation of the SDGs into the regions with limited funding opportunities but strongly networked systems of higher education.

The third paper (single-authored), "Green or green-washed? Examining sustainability reporting in higher education," published in *Higher Education Quarterly*, looked at the communicative strategies of universities that already work with the SDGs. The paper was inspired by the fact that numerous HEIs nowadays refer to the SDGs on their communication channels with the broader society, but it is not clear how far they genuinely apply the global policy framework of the SDGs. Mentioning the SDGs on the webpages might be useful for general awareness, but how far are these mentions just following a superficial trend or indicate genuine commitment to the SDGs is not clear. The paper looked at the sustainability reports of the top 50 UK universities from the points of the coverage of all higher education modalities (education, knowledge production, public debate, service delivery and campus space reference needed) and their sentiments (self-evaluation and self-criticism reference). The results show that campus space was a dominant modality when it comes to the SDGs. This means that for the most universities in question sustainability is primarily conceived as related to physical aspects (such as water reduction, waste management, sustainable food sources). Additionally, there was little self-criticism present, which indicates less attention to evaluative policy measures and potentially signals window dressing.

Overall, the SDGs already made an impact in higher education, as there are HEIs all over the world that refer to this global policy framework. As the SDGs are still an ongoing phenomenon (2015-2030), and still have several years to make an impact, it would be crucial to study them also after

2030. Would this global policy framework manage to change the landscape of higher education or is it going to be an over-time forgotten label?

Given the paper-based nature of the dissertation, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research. Given the extensive scope of the SDGs in higher education, this research was unable to address a comprehensive range of questions related to the topic. The following section presents a series of suggestions for future research. Furthermore, the papers that constitute the chapters of this dissertation underwent multiple revisions, resulting in the loss of some of the original connecting ideas that were essential to the overall coherence of the dissertation.

It would be useful to study the phenomenon of the SDGs from the point of view of their comprehensiveness in the higher education sector, thus continuing the work I started in the third paper. It is clear that there are the SDGs have an impact in higher education already, but as the findings of the third paper show, there are still many implementation gaps, especially when it comes to sustainability reporting. To the extent that currently there are no universally accepted criteria that help to distinguish between a deep implementation of the SDGs and superficial window-dressing, it would be useful to study the differences between these two contrasting states. Research on real, impactful work vs. lipstick service sustainability initiatives can also be useful for other sectors, such as governments, businesses and NGOs.

The second paper of this dissertation looks at a Catalan higher education context in which there is little financial support for SDG implementation, but a very strong presence of networked and highly motivated higher education professionals who form intermediary organisations. Collecting more data from other similar regions has the potential to inform further policy recommendations for regions with similar characteristics. Further research on the role of intermediary organisations in sustainability transitions can provide valuable policy advice to the higher education sector and beyond.

In conclusion, this dissertation contributes to the ongoing debate surrounding the SDGs in higher education. It analyses the SDGs as a global policy framework and examines their implementation in local contexts, as well as the results of this implementation. This dissertation considers the SDGs as a unified framework, without emphasising individual goals or aspects. Furthermore, HEIs are studied from the perspective of a comprehensive institutional approach, without separately examining the impact of the SDGs on individual higher education modalities. This constitutes a significant contribution to the existing literature on sustainability in higher education, as the majority of studies tend to focus on specific aspects of HEIs, such as the curriculum, research, campus operations, and so forth. Alternatively, they may examine individual SDGs, such as by concentrating on a single or several goals, rather than adopting an integrated perspective that encompasses the SDGs as a unified policy framework.

The overall contributions of this dissertation are also relevant to policy makers in three ways. Firstly, it aims to contribute to the definition of a policy framework, which can be useful for the purpose of documenting what is meant by this term, frequently used by governments and international organisations worldwide but not precisely defined. Secondly, by examining the role of intermediary organisations in influencing policy dynamics in the field of sustainability in autonomous higher education systems, this research contributes to the potential promotion of intermediaries as policy actors in sustainability transitions. Thirdly, this dissertation contributes to the field of sustainability reporting, as it highlights its potential usefulness as a tool for policy evaluation and monitoring in higher education.

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Tools used in this research:

Name of the tool	Application
MAXQDA	Qualitative text analysis for Chapter 2 and 3
DEEPL/Grammarly	Stylistic improvements
ChatGPT, version 3.5 and 4	Qualitative text analysis for Chapter 3