



Original Article (Qualitative)

Designing a Green University Model Based on Sustainable Social Development at Islamic Azad University

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to design a green university model based on sustainable social development at Azad University. This study is applicable in terms of purpose, and qualitative in terms of implementation. The research population includes 21 faculty members of the Islamic Azad University departments in Tehran Province, selected based on purposive sampling and using the data saturation technique. Data collection was done using a semi-structured in-depth interview method. Data analysis was done using thematic analysis method. The findings of the thematic network analysis showed that 6 themes (organizers), 19 basic themes, and 77 primary codes are components and categories of the green university based on sustainable social development. The themes (organizers) were presented in the form of 6 dimensions: "Green management macro-policies", "Green educational and research macro-policies", "Environmental management system of university space", "Green social participation and interactions", "Environmental concern and social capital", and "Green human resource management". Azad University can take steps on the path of development by optimally using its scientific, educational, and research capacities and protecting the environment in realizing sustainable social development of society to overcome challenges and achieve the desired scientific and educational status of the country.

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Extended abstract

Introduction

In today's world, universities are the most valuable resources that societies have for progress and development, and the main role is always that progress is at the material and spiritual levels. Principled investment in this sector plays an important role in creating facilities for future generations and taking the right action towards the comprehensive development of the country (Ghasemi Gilvaei & Ghorbani Param, 2025). The reality is that universities and higher education centers operate as a complex social system in their environment. Therefore, they not only affect their environment and its developments in various scientific, educational, service, cultural, social, political and economic aspects, but also they themselves are affected by the environment and its developments (Tahmasab & Dehghan Mangabadi, 2024).

Sustainable use of natural resources (materials and energy) and the environment in the world has become an inevitable necessity in societies, the expansion of which is beyond the exclusive authority and duties of governments and is a vital issue for all individuals and groups in society (Rad & Jabari, 2021). An issue that is not only an inseparable part of the laws and executive policies of today's societies, but also requires a change in the behavior and lifestyle of all individuals, groups, and institutions of society in the 21st century, especially academic institutions, including the Free University, which, with their pivotal and effective role in society, are key players in achieving a sustainable future (Bagherimajd & balaghat, 2023).

University system activists, especially in developed countries, are trying to move the university environment towards a nature-friendly environment by increasing green spaces, creating green buildings, and green management, and to encourage all students to protect the university's nature and participate in environmental projects, because students studying at the university will enter the job market within the next 5 to 10 years, and in the next twenty years, they will probably join the country's decision-makers and managers, and familiarizing these people with the concept of the environment is a kind of investment in the country's future (Sajjad et al., 2022). A green university based on sustainable social development is an approach that emphasizes, on one hand, reforming the cycles of material and energy consumption and, on the other hand, reducing the production of pollutants and waste in universities. In general terms, a green university is a university in which all activities are based on aspects of sustainable social development, namely, creating and maintaining a healthy, just, and high-quality society, and demonstrates a commitment and belief in the role of higher education centers in approaching more sustainable development (McCowan, 2023).

The present study aims to answer the following scientific question: What concepts, dimensions, and components does the green university model based on sustainable social development have from the perspective of experts?

Theoretical Framework

Green University

A green university is a university that, in all its activities (including educational and research and all available services), administrative, financial, laboratories, workshops, and health, safety, and environmental protection perspectives and the efficient and optimal use of resources and consumables can be emphasized and practiced in achieving the goals of sustainable development of society. For the first time in the world, the issue of green university and sustainable development was raised by an American (Hummels & Argyrou, 2022).



Social sustainable development

Social sustainable development is a set of actions and policies that aim to improve the quality of life and equitable access to the distribution of rights and the appropriate use of the natural and built environment, which affects the improvement of the quality of living conditions, the reduction of poverty, and the increase in human satisfaction (Tahmasbnia & Dehghanmongabadi, 2024).

Zhu et al. (2024) investigated the dynamic goals for sustainable university development by examining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The results of this study showed that the development of sustainable top universities in five continents with three levels of development in the world is very uneven. Although the quality of sustainability has improved year by year in the world, the sub-quality of sustainability of top universities in each continent is clearly different. The degree of sustainable connectivity of top universities in the five continents is increasing, but the overall strength of connectivity is not high. The development of connectivity at the coordination level is weak. SDG12 is the main dynamic goal for top universities in Asia and America, SDG6 for Europe and Oceania, and SDG3 for Africa.

Taheri & Mashari (2024) investigated the role of green universities in realizing sustainable development, with an emphasis on environmental education. The results of this study showed that green universities are drivers of sustainable development and the transformative impact they can have on environmental education.

Research Methodology

This research is applicable in terms of purpose, and qualitative in terms of implementation. The research population includes 21 faculty members of the Islamic Azad University of Tehran Province, selected based on purposive sampling and using the data saturation technique. Data collection was carried out using the semi-structured in-depth interview method.

Research Findings

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis method. The findings of the thematic network analysis showed that 6 themes (organizers), 19 basic themes, and 77 primary codes of the components and categories of the Green University are based on sustainable social development. The themes (organizers) were presented in the form of 6 dimensions, which are: "Green management macro-policies", "Green educational and research macro-policies", "Environmental management system of university space", "Green social participation and interactions", "Environmental concern and social capital", "Green human resource management". Azad University can take steps on the path of development by optimally using its scientific, educational, and research capacities and protecting the environment in realizing sustainable social development of society to overcome challenges and achieve the desired scientific and educational status of the country.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of designing a green university model based on sustainable social development at Azad University. The results of this hypothesis are consistent with the findings of Rad & Jabari (2021), Taheri & Mashari (2024), Deus et al. (2016), Silvia et al. (2016), Zhu et al. (2024), Deus et al. (2016), Silvia et al. (2016), and Jafari (2021). In the current competitive and difficult world, Azad University should move towards a green university based on sustainable social development, increasing the quality of education and the importance of green curriculum, research related to sustainable social development and sustainable lifestyle of students, in order to reduce costs and increase the



well-being of professors, staff and students and the future of the community inside and outside the university, because falling behind this group can seriously endanger the scientific development and survival of the Azad University.

It is suggested that in the context of a green university based on sustainable social development, more attention should be paid to the dimensions and components that reduce energy and material consumption in the university, prevent environmental degradation due to university activities, and seriously consider improving the environmental components of the university.