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UNIVERSITY SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE QS RANKING-IMPORTANCE, PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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Purpose of the article: *The study analyzes the importance, challenges, and solutions related to integrating sustainability into university performance evaluation, focusing on Moldovan higher education institutions and their participation in the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability component.*

Methodology: *A comparative analysis was conducted on QS indicators, weightings, and performance of leading universities, correlated with Moldova's progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study also included an institutional review of regulatory and curricular frameworks and interviews with academic leaders responsible for sustainability reporting.*

Conclusions: *Findings show that top universities achieve balanced results across environmental, social, and governance indicators, confirming the systemic nature of sustainability. Moldovan universities have made progress in SDG 4 ("Quality Education") and SDG 5 ("Gender Equality") but face challenges in data reporting, SDG integration, and institutional strategy development.*

Originality: *The paper contributes to understanding how sustainability frameworks can enhance the visibility, governance, and international competitiveness of Moldovan universities.*

Key words*: indicator, QS World University Rankings, sustainability, university.*
JEL Classifications: I23, Q01, Q56

INTRODUCTION

Climate crises, the trend of depleting natural resources, and social inequalities have led to a significant increase in concerns about sustainability in recent decades. International organizations, governments, educational institutions, and companies across all sectors are becoming increasingly aware of the need to adopt sustainable practices that meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. In this context, sustainability has become an essential criterion in evaluating institutional performance, including in higher education.

Universities play a vital role in promoting sustainable development, operating on several levels: (a) education focused on sustainable development; (b) research oriented toward sustainable development; (c) proper management of available resources in accordance with sustainable development principles. Therefore, by training future leaders and specialists, conducting relevant research, and engaging actively with the community, they contribute to finding solutions for social, economic, and environmental challenges. At the same time, universities can and must serve as models of best practices in sustainability through responsible resource management and by integrating sustainable principles into their own policies and administrative processes.

The significance of universities' active involvement in achieving sustainable development goals has become widely recognized and acknowledged worldwide - a rationale supported by the inclusion of the "Sustainability" component in the renowned QS international ranking. According to the official QS ranking page, it represents the most comprehensive ranking of its kind, highlighting the best institutions worldwide and thus providing valuable informational support for individuals seeking to enhance their potential through education, international mobility, and career development (QS World University Rankings).

The QS World University Rankings is a portfolio of comparative rankings of colleges and universities, compiled by Quacquarelli Symonds, a higher education analytics company. Its first and oldest edition was published in October 2004 (Foster, 2024) in collaboration with Times Higher Education (THE), under the title Times Higher Education–QS World University Rankings. Since 2009, the two organizations have operated independently. Since then, the QS ranking portfolio has been expanded, and currently consists of several components, as shown in Figure 1.

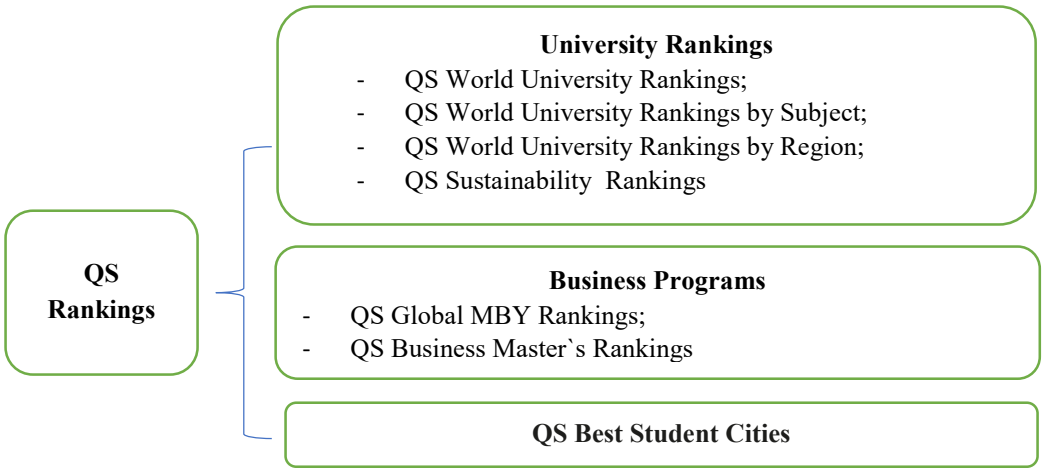


Fig.1. Components of the QS Rankings.

Source: *Developed by the author based on (QS TopUniversities).*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to achieve the stated objectives, the following methodological tools were used:

- documentary and comparative analysis of international literature and reports on university rankings and sustainable development;
- statistical and analytical study of the indicators of the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2025 and of SDG progress in the Republic of Moldova;
- content analysis of the strategies, websites, and documents of higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova;
- interviews with university leadership representatives and members of the teams responsible for reporting QS indicators;
- correlation of the data with national and international sustainable development objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The QS World University Rankings: Sustainability was launched with a pilot edition at the end of 2022, with the full ranking released in 2023 (QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2025 – Now live!). Table 1 presents the categories, objectives, and the cumulative weight of the indicators associated with them in the evaluation of the "Sustainability" component within the QS Rankings.

Based on Table 1, we can deduce that the highest weight in the overall score goes to the indicators under the objective "Environmental Education", which, although only three in number, account for 17% of the total score. Among these is also the single most heavily weighted indicator -10% - "EE1 - Academic Reputation in Earth & Environment". The other two indicators—"EE2 - Alumni Impact for Environmental Sustainability - Public and Third Sector" and "EE3 - Climate Science and/or Sustainability Courses" - hold 4% and 3% of the total score, respectively. The second position in terms of weight in the overall score is

held by the objective "Environmental Sustainability", which accounts for 15%, of which 5% belongs to the indicator "ES1 - Alumni Impact for Innovation". The third position is occupied by the objective "Environmental Research" with a weight of 13%, of which 9% is attributed to the indicator "ER1 - Research Impact on SDGs for Sustainable Research" (QS World University Rankings: Sustainability).

Table 1. Categories, lens, and indicators used in QS World University Rankings: Sustainability

Categories	Lens	The number of related indicators	The total weight of the related indicators in the overall assessment, %	The category weight in total rating, %
Environmental Impact	Environmental Education	3	17	45
	Environmental Research	4	13	
	Environmental Sustainability	10	15	
Social Impact	Employability and Opportunities	6	11	45
	Equality	8	12	
	Helth and Wellbeing	3	5	
	Impact of Education	5	7	
	Knowledge Exchange	4	10	
Governance	Good Governance	10	10	10
Total		53	100	100

Source: *developed by the author based on (QS World University Rankings: Sustainability).*

At the same time, even though we observe higher weights for indicators in certain objectives, we must take into account the fact that the categories "Environmental Impact" and "Social Impact" each carry equal weights in the overall score, namely 45%. The difference lies in the number and, respectively, the weight of each associated indicator. Therefore, with the aim of achieving as high a position as possible in the QS Sustainability Ranking, it would be a mistake to prioritize only certain indicators without adopting a systemic approach to all categories and, by extension, to the objectives within each category.

Likewise, although the "Governance" category accounts for only 10 points in the total score, a lower score obtained in this category will still affect the institution's overall position in the ranking. To support this reasoning, we will review the universities holding the highest positions in the QS Sustainability Ranking within the World University Rankings 2025, with the data presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Top 10 higher education institutions in the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2025

Rank	Name of the higher education institution	Score by evaluation categories, %		
		Environmental Impact	Social Impact	Governance
1	University of Toronto, Canada	97.3	100	98.5
2	ETH Zurich - Swiss Federal Institute of Technology	100	96.7	98
3	Lund University, Sweden	96	98.4	99.9
3	University of California, Berkeley (UCB), USA	98.7	97.6	92.2
5	UCL, United Kingdom	96.4	98.1	98.3
5	University of British Columbia, Canada	94.4	100	97.6
7	Imperial College London, United Kingdom	98	97.2	92.8
7	The University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom	95.7	98.1	99.1
9	The University of Manchester, United Kingdom	96	97.6	99.1
10	The University of Melbourne, Australia	94.2	99.5	97.5

Source: *Synthesized by the author based on (QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2025).*

As we can see from Table 2, higher education institutions holding top positions in the ranking achieved high scores across all evaluated categories. This supports the previously stated reasoning that only a comprehensive and systemic approach to the categories and, consequently, the indicators can ensure a high position in the ranking.

Even though attaining a notable position in this ranking requires significant effort, an increasing number of higher education institutions worldwide are participating. Thus, in 2025, a total of 1,743 universities were included. The data regarding the countries with institutions among the top 200 are illustrated in Figure 2.

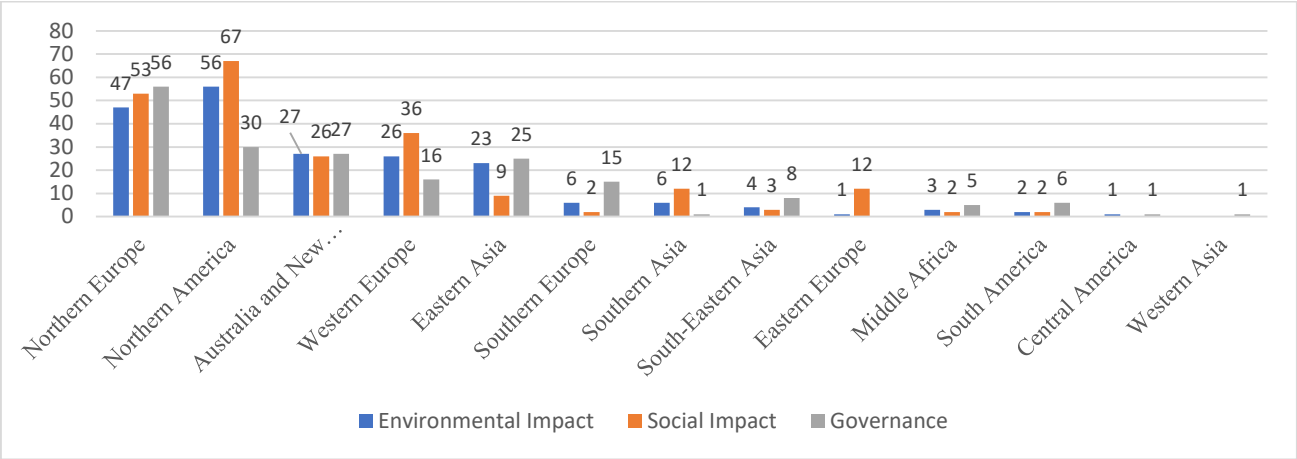


Figure 2. Number of institutions in the top 200 of the QS Rankings, "Sustainability 2025" component, by country, units.

Source: *(QS World University Rankings: Sustainability 2025 – Now live!).*

From Figure 2, it can be seen that most universities in the top 200 are from Northern Europe, followed by North America in second place, and Australia and New Zealand in third.

The Republic of Moldova committed itself to implementing the 2030 Agenda as early as 2015, alongside 192 other United Nations member states, by adopting the Declaration of the Summit on Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030 For Sustainable Development). In this context, significant efforts have been made to align the indicators with national realities, culminating in the approval in 2022 of the National Development Strategy "European Moldova 2030" (Law no. 315 of 17.11.2022).

The 2024 Progress Report on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda in the Republic of Moldova shows the highest scores for SDG 4 *"*Quality Education" (80 points out of 100) and SDG 5 *"*Gender Equality*"* (77 points). High scores were also obtained for SDG 10 *"*Reduced Inequalities" (69 points) and SDG 12 "Responsible Consumption and Production" (69 points). At the same time, the lowest scores were recorded for SDG 11 "Sustainable Cities and Communities" (48 points) and SDG 8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth" (50 points). It is important to note that results are interpreted as follows: over 70 points – significant progress; over 60 points – moderate progress; over 50 points – limited progress; below 50 points – slow pace of progress (Progress Report 2024).

A comparative analysis of performance obtained in 2024 versus 2023 (Figure 2) shows that progress was achieved on 10 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The greatest positive difference (+10 points) was observed for SDG 16 "Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions", followed in second place by SDG 15 "Life on Land" (+8 points), and in third place by SDG 4 "Quality Education" (+6 points). At the same time, substantial regressions, equivalent to -10 points, were recorded for SDG 8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth" and SDG 9 "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure". Decreases were also registered for SDG 11

"Sustainable Cities and Communities" (-5 points), SDG 2 "Zero Hunger" (-4 points), and SDG 17 "Partnerships for the Goals" (-1 point). No changes were noted in the scores for SDG 1 "No Poverty" and SDG 14 "Life Below Water" (Progress Report 2023; Progress Report 2024).

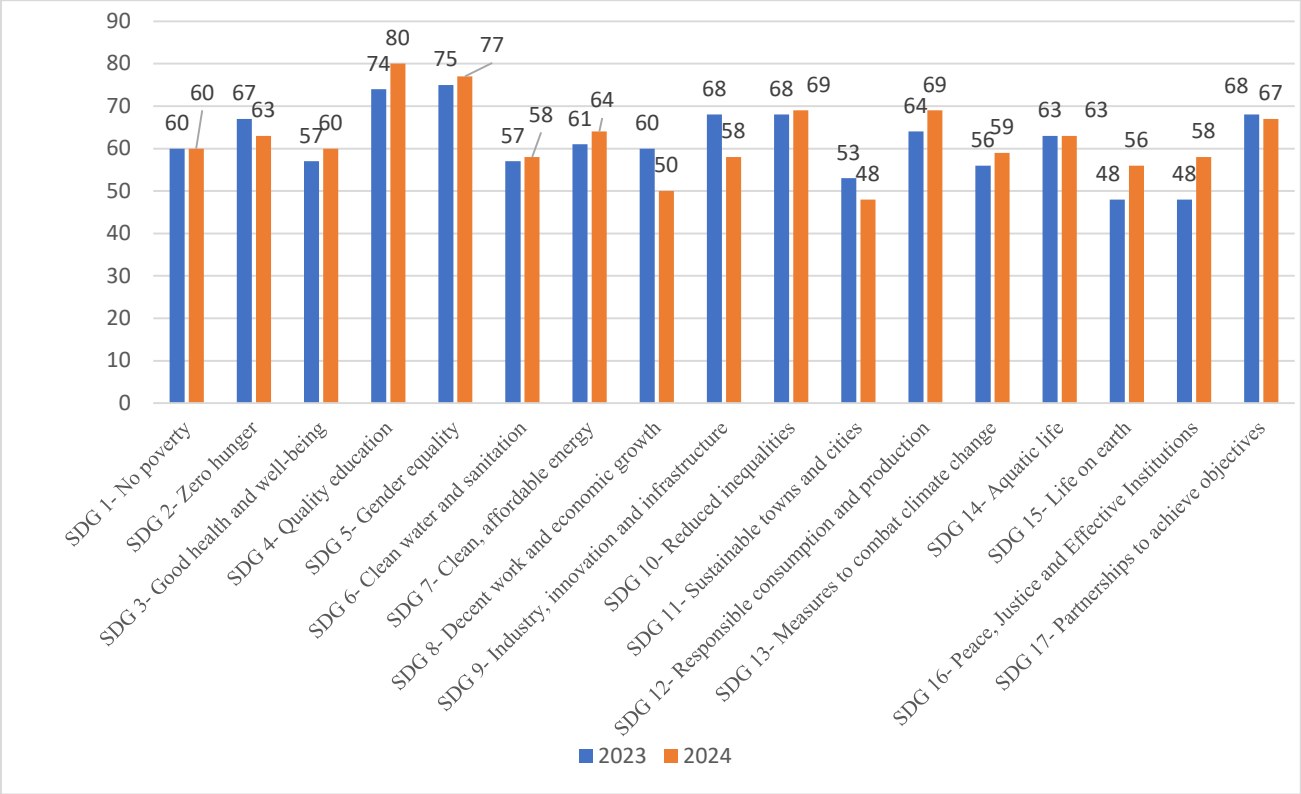


Figure 2. Comparative assessment of progress scores on the Sustainable Development Goals in 2023 and 2024.

Source: *Developed by the author based on (Progress Report 2023; Progress Report 2024).*

Alongside the alarming situation regarding a number of indicators that are either regressing or stagnating, an important issue is the level of indicator reporting. Thus, as specified in the Progress Report 2023, the average reporting rate was only 65%. According to the same source, data for 2022 and previous years - necessary for drafting the report and assessing trends -were available for only 146 indicators and sub-indicators out of the 398 required for reporting. Therefore, we can conclude that only 37% of the necessary data were ensured, while 40% of the indicators had partially insufficient data, and 23% had a complete absence of data.

With regard to reporting rates per indicator, the highest levels were recorded for SDG 4 "Quality Education" (86%), SDG 3 "Good Health and Well-Being" (76%), SDG 1 "No Poverty" (75%), and SDG 10 "Reduced Inequalities" (73%). At the same time, among the goals with a low reporting rate were SDG 14 "Life Below Water" (30%), SDG 2 "Zero Hunger" (34%), as well as SDG 11 "Sustainable Cities and Communities" and SDG 13 "Climate Action" *(50%).*

From the above, we can positively highlight the high reporting level for SDG 4 "Quality Education", as well as its highest progress score and upward trend during the analyzed period. On the other hand, the efforts made in the educational system are justified by the fundamental role of education in achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals. In this context, we emphasize the important role of higher education institutions which, by virtue of their assumed missions, are found practically in all four strategic priorities

of the "European Moldova 2030" Strategy: by providing relevant and high-quality educational services (Priority II), positioning themselves as honest and efficient institutions in managing available resources (Priority III), contributing to ensuring a healthy environment (Priority IV), and supporting a sustainable and inclusive economy (Priority I) (Law no. 315 of 17.11.2022).

On this basis, we can deduce that the efforts of higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova to obtain a respectable position in the QS Rankings, Sustainability component, are justified not only by the increase in their image and prestige at national and international level, but also by their contribution to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals—a contribution of particular significance at the current stage. At the same time, as a result of assessing the actual situation in Moldovan universities regarding the existence of an adequate regulatory, curricular, and organizational framework for participation in the QS Rankings, Sustainability component, a number of shortcomings have been identified. These are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Identified shortcomings in the regulatory, curricular, and organizational framework of universities for participation in the QS Rankings, Sustainability component

Framework of reference	Identified shortcomings	Source of information
Regulatory framework	Absence of institutional strategies and policies for education and research on sustainability	University websites
Curricular framework	Insufficient integration of sustainable development goals into the study program curricula	University websites
Organizational framework	• Reluctance of external actors to get involved in opinion polls; • Lack of commitment assumed by academic staff in streamlining communication with the external environment; • Insufficient human resources in the university to be engaged in the process of monitoring activities related to sustainability, including its reporting; • Insufficient awareness of the importance of sustainability objectives, as well as measures aimed at increasing the university's image and improving its position in international rankings.	Discussions with representatives of university management from four higher education institutions; interviews with six members of the USM team responsible for completing the QS platform.

Source: *Developed by the author.*

CONCLUZIONS

In order to strengthen the position of universities on the "Sustainability" component, optimal mobilization is necessary, including by undertaking the following actions:

- Highlighting sustainable development objectives among the priorities assumed by the university;
- Developing and actively promoting sustainable development policies;
- Assigning the tasks of monitoring sustainability indicators and completing the QS platform components to specific subdivisions or positions, with periodic evaluation of the situation;
- Including activities related to sustainable development in the list of teaching and research performance indicators;
- Actively involving the student self-government structure in activities related to sustainable development.

Among the main anticipated effects of the proposed actions are:

1. Improvement of university management through the adoption of practices and strategies that enhance resource management efficiency and align institutional performance with sustainable development objectives.
2. Strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions to actively contribute to the implementation of the National Development Strategy *"European Moldova 2030."*
3. Stimulating international collaborations by creating a more favorable framework for academic partnerships and joint projects with international institutions.
4. Increasing awareness and involvement of faculty, students, and university leadership in institutional sustainability processes.

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