Integrating Sustainability Education in Economics and Business Education: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract
Sustainable Education (ESD) is an important approach in economics and business education to shape students' sustainable competencies. However, there are still research gaps regarding its integration, implementation factors, and impacts, so a systematic study is needed to map trends, factors, and their influence on student competencies. This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with the PRISMA approach to systematically analyze the integration of sustainability education into economics and business education, drawing on Scopus data. Through identification, screening, and selection based on specific criteria, 752 initial documents were screened, yielding 31 articles that met the criteria for further analysis. The results show that research on integrating sustainability education into economics and business education is on the rise, though it is still in its early stages and offers significant potential. The success of its implementation is influenced by the synergy of pedagogical, structural, and contextual factors and has been proven to improve students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies in the formation of sustainable change agents. This study presents a comprehensive synthesis of trends, implementation factors, and the impacts of sustainability education in economics and business education, and offers a conceptual framework that can serve as a reference for curriculum development, learning practices, and sustainability education policies.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability education has become a global focus in addressing 21st-century challenges, including climate change, economic inequality, and the resource crisis. In this context, education is no longer solely focused on transferring knowledge but also on developing competencies that enable individuals to make socially, economically, and environmentally responsible decisions. The integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) across disciplines, including economics and business education, is becoming increasingly important because this field plays a strategic role in shaping the mindset and economic behavior of future generations (Mendez-Noguera et al. 2024; Schrage et al., 2025).

In general, previous research shows that sustainability education contributes to increased environmental awareness, a better understanding of sustainable economic concepts, and the development of ethical values in decision-making (Painter-morland et al., 2016). In economics and business education, the integration of concepts such as the green and circular economies and sustainable business practices has been implemented through various pedagogical approaches, including project-based, experiential, and problem-based learning (Stough et al., 2018; Painter-morland et al., 2016; Mendez-Noguera et al., 2024). These studies also highlight that sustainability education can enrich students' economic literacy with a more holistic perspective on sustainability (Grobler, 2024). However, existing research still shows significant variation in approaches, implementation contexts, and learning outcomes. Some studies emphasize cognitive aspects, such as increasing knowledge and conceptual understanding, while others focus more on changes in pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Schrage et al., 2025; Lahteenkorva et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is evidence that the effectiveness of sustainability education implementation is significantly influenced by factors such as

curriculum design, educator competency, and institutional support (Stough et al., 2018; Painter-morland et al., 2016; Sewchurran et al., 2021).

Although the literature on sustainability education in economics and business education continues to grow, several significant research gaps remain. These gaps include the lack of a comprehensive synthesis that systematically maps research trends in this field, particularly over the past decade (Syamsir et al., 2025). Yet, understanding research trends is crucial for identifying the direction of development and the dominant focus of studies.

Furthermore, factors influencing the successful implementation of sustainability education have not been identified in an integrated manner. Some studies examine pedagogical factors, while others highlight institutional aspects or student characteristics (Kopnina, 2015; Pinter et al., 2021; Cocu et al., 2025). However, no study has yet combined these factors into a coherent analytical framework. Although many studies report the positive impact of sustainability education, the findings are fragmented and do not provide a clear picture of its influence on overall student competency, including cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. In other words, the relationship between sustainability education and student competency development requires more systematic and comprehensive exploration.

Based on this, it can be concluded that the existing literature does not fully address how sustainability education can be effectively integrated into economics and business education, and how it impacts student competency development. To address this gap, this study aims to conduct a systematic literature review to comprehensively analyze the integration of sustainability education into economics and business education. Specifically, this study focuses on three main aspects: research trends, factors influencing implementation, and their impact on student competency. This study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution by offering a conceptual framework that integrates sustainability education with student competency development in the context of economics and business education. Practically, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing and implementing more sustainability-oriented economics and business learning.

METHODS

This study uses a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, following the PRISMA guidelines, to examine the Integration of Sustainability Education in Economics and Business Education. This approach was chosen because the topic continues to develop, both theoretically and empirically, so a comprehensive method is needed to map research trends and identify research gaps that have not been widely explained in the literature. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) systematically selects articles based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (Pati et al., 2018; Selcuk, 2019). SLR provides a structured framework for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing relevant research findings from various primary data sources in this study, namely the Scopus database of 31 articles.

This study applied the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines during the article screening process. The PRISMA stages include: (1) Identification, which involves collecting all relevant articles from Scopus; (2) Screening, which involves removing duplicates and selecting articles based on title, abstract, and keywords; and (3) Included, which involves determining the final number of articles used in the SLR analysis (Sarkis-onofre et al., 2021).

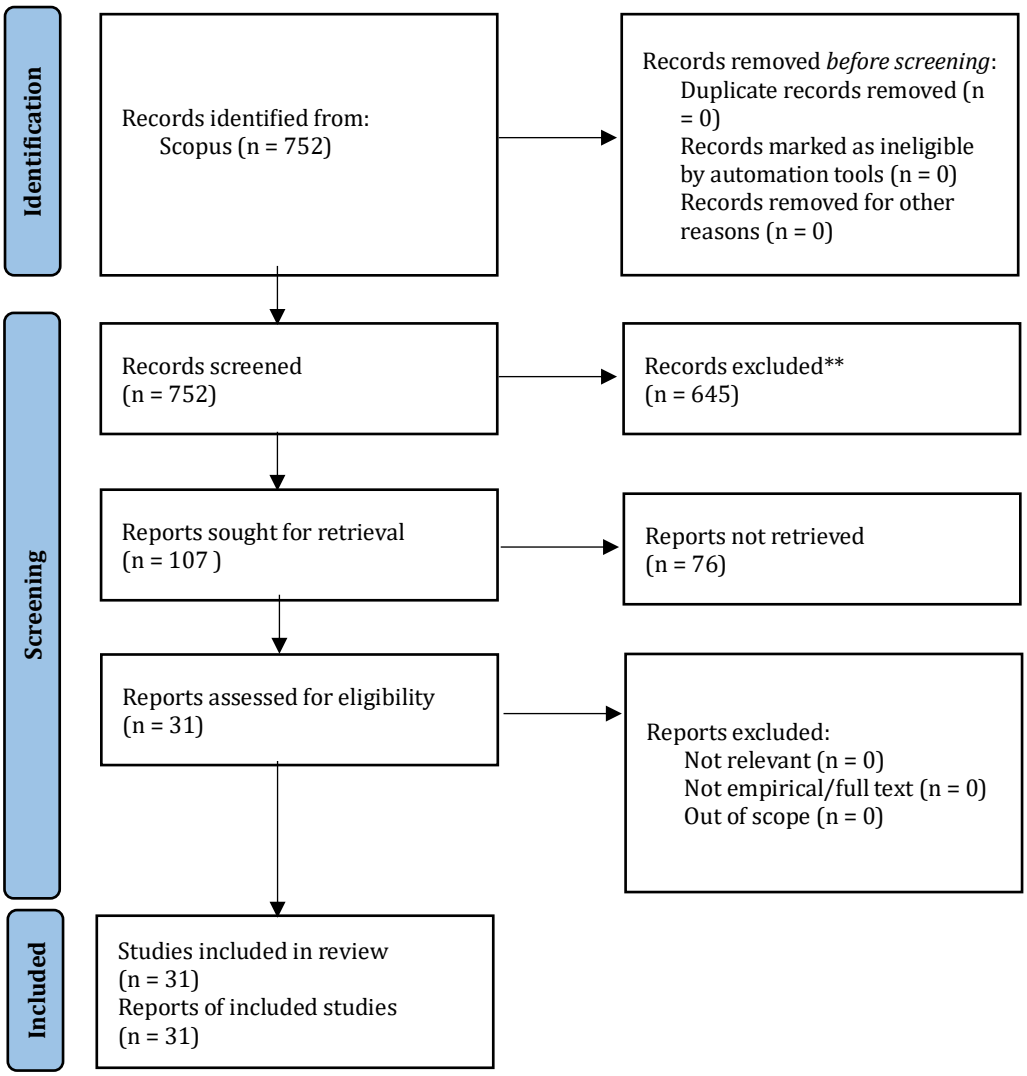

Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review information flow using PRISMA

The process of identifying articles for this study was conducted using the Scopus database, covering the period 2015–2025. In the initial stage, 752 documents were obtained that were relevant to the research keywords. The keywords used were Boolean keywords in the form of: ("sustainability education" OR "education for sustainable development" OR "ESD") AND ("economics education" OR "business education" OR "economic literacy") AND ("green economy" OR "circular economy" OR "sustainable business" OR "SDGs") AND ("teaching method" OR "learning model" OR "curriculum integration"). Furthermore, no duplicate data was found or automatically eliminated, so all documents proceeded to the filtering stage. In the initial screening stage, the document type was restricted to journal articles. This process was then continued with publication status screening, retaining only articles with final status, and then with language restriction, selecting only English-language articles. After these stages, 107 documents remained, while 645 documents were eliminated for not meeting these criteria.

The next stage was further filtering by scientific field, limited to Business, Management and Accounting, and Economics, Econometrics and Finance, to ensure suitability for the context of economic and business research. Furthermore, only open-access articles were selected to ensure full-text availability. Through this process, the number of documents was reduced from 107 to 31, with 76 discontinued for failing to meet accessibility and field-relevance criteria. Furthermore, 31 remaining documents met the eligibility criteria. The results showed that all documents met the inclusion criteria, so no articles were eliminated at this stage. Thus, 31 articles were selected for this research analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Trends on the Integration of Sustainability Education in Economics and Business Education

Based on the data from the Scopus database shown in Figure 2, the development of scientific publications on the integration of sustainability education in economics and business education during the 2015–2025 period shows a dynamic pattern, with an initial increase from 2015 to 2017. The number of publications remains very limited and relatively stagnant, with only one document per year. This indicates that integrating sustainability education into economics and business is still in its early stages of development and has not yet become mainstream in academic research.

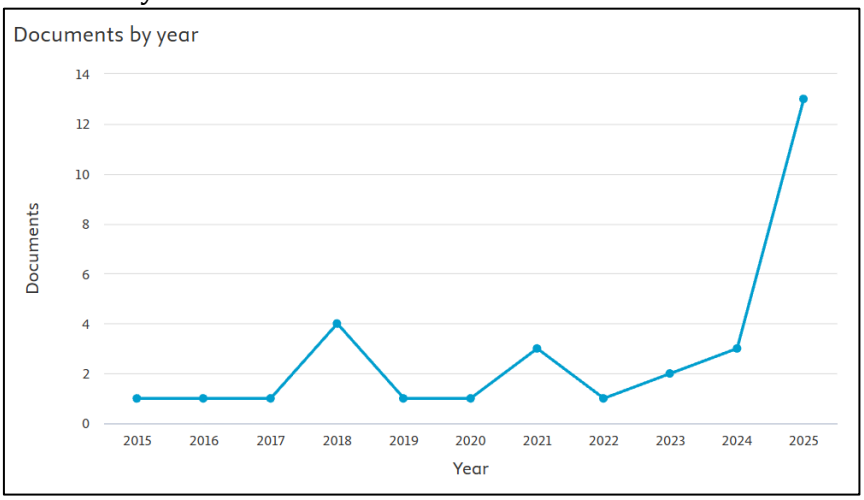

Figure 2. Number of Documents per Year
Source: Scopus Database

Entering 2018, there was a significant increase, with the number of publications reaching four documents. This surge can be interpreted as a growing academic awareness of the importance of integrating sustainability principles into economics and business curricula (Stough et al., 2018). However, this trend declined again in 2019 and 2020, with only one publication each, indicating that research development in this field remains unstable and continues to face various challenges, including limitations in the conceptual framework and practical implementation.

In 2021, the number of publications increased again to three papers, reflecting a resurgence of research interest in this topic, likely influenced by the growing global focus on sustainability and educational transformation. Although this declined to 1 paper in 2022, the growth trend was again observed in 2023 and 2024, with 2 and 3 publications, respectively. This gradual increase indicates consolidation of research and a strengthening of the topic's relevance in modern economics and business education (Kopnina, 2015).

The peak of development was seen in 2025, with a significant increase of 13 publications. This sharp increase indicates that integrating sustainability education has become a significant focus in global academic research, in line with the growing urgency of sustainability issues, industry's demand for environmentally conscious graduates, and the push for more adaptive educational policies to meet the challenges of the 21st century (Akeke et al., 2023).

Overall, this trend indicates that research on integrating sustainability education into economics and business education has progressed from an early, exploratory stage to a more mature, growing phase. This confirms that the topic is an emerging, rapidly growing field with significant potential for continued research, particularly in curriculum development, pedagogical innovation, and the implementation of sustainability-oriented learning practices (Seidel et al., 2018).

The distribution of scientific publications on integrating sustainability education into economics and business education shows a fairly wide geographic spread, though the level of contribution remains relatively limited in each country. Figure 2 shows that the Netherlands has the highest number of publications, with four documents. This position indicates a stronger focus on developing and integrating sustainability education into economics and business, likely supported by progressive education policies and a commitment to the sustainable development agenda.

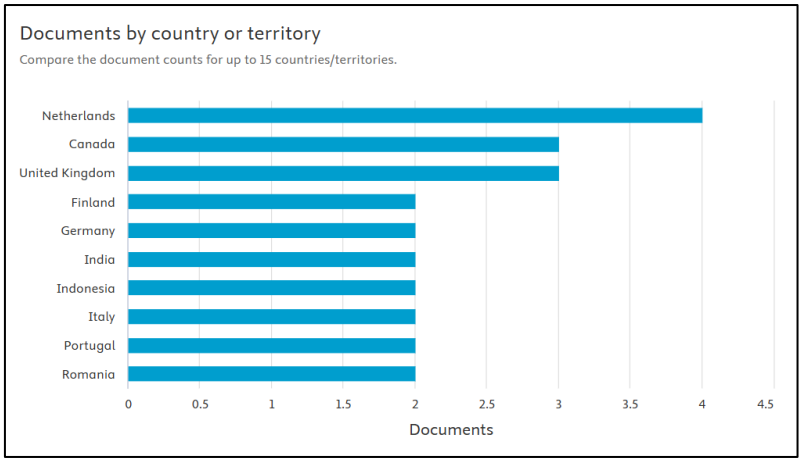

Figure 3: Distribution of Documents by Country or Territory
Source: Scopus Database

Following the Netherlands are Canada and the United Kingdom, with three publications each. Both countries are known for their advanced higher education systems and are actively developing curriculum innovations, including integrating sustainability principles into economics and business education. Furthermore, several countries, such as Finland, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Portugal, and Romania, each contributed two publications. The involvement of these countries demonstrates that sustainability education is a global concern across regions, including Europe, Asia, and developing countries. In addition, several other countries, such as South Africa, Spain, and Vietnam, made similar contributions, as did countries with a limited number of publications, such as Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, and Brazil, each of which produced only one document. This indicates that although this topic has attracted global attention, research intensity across countries remains uneven.

Overall, this distribution indicates that research on integrating sustainability education into economics and business education is global but still an emerging field. The relative dominance of European countries indicates that the region is becoming a hub for the development of sustainability education concepts and practices. In contrast, the participation of developing countries, including Indonesia, demonstrates growing awareness and engagement in this issue. Therefore, opportunities for international collaboration and for strengthening research capacity across countries are crucial for encouraging the development of this study more equitably and sustainably in the future.

The distribution of scientific publications by institutional affiliation in research on integrating sustainability education into economics and business education shows a scattered pattern, with no single dominant institution. Figure 3 shows that RMIT University Vietnam is the affiliate with the highest contribution of publications, with two papers. While still a relatively small number, this position indicates that the institution has a more consistent focus on studying the integration of sustainability education, particularly in the context of economics and business education in the Asian region.

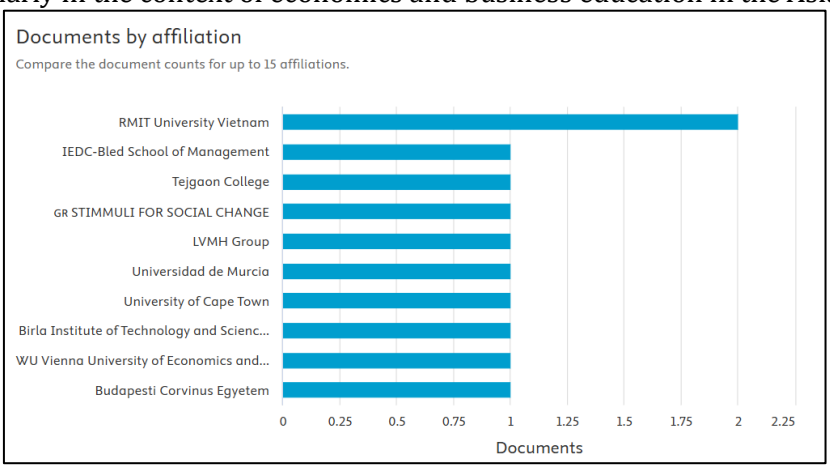

Figure 4: Document Distribution by Affiliation
Source: Scopus Database

Meanwhile, most other affiliates have only produced one publication each. These institutions include IEDC-Bled School of Management, Tejgaon College, GR Stimmuli For Social Change, LVMH Group, Universidad de Murcia, University of Cape Town, Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani, WU Vienna University of Economics and Business, and Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem, among others. This diversity of affiliates reflects that research related to sustainability education in economics and business education has involved various types of institutions, including universities, business schools, non-academic organizations, and the industrial sector. However, the absence of strong dominance by a single or a few large institutions indicates that this field of study is still in an emerging stage, with research contributions scattered and not yet consolidated in specific research centers. This also indicates that the development of knowledge related to integrating sustainability education is still carried out sporadically by various actors with diverse backgrounds.

Overall, these findings confirm that research on integrating sustainability education into economics and business education is global and multidisciplinary, but still requires strengthened collaboration among institutions and the establishment of more structured research networks. With more intensive collaboration, it is hoped that research in this area can progress more rapidly and produce more significant contributions to the development of sustainability-oriented curricula and educational practices.

Factors Influencing the Successful Implementation of Sustainability Education in Economics and Business Education

Various studies show that the successful implementation of sustainability education in economics and business education is not determined by a single factor, but rather by a combination of interrelated pedagogical, structural, and contextual factors. In general, this success is rooted in the synergy between innovative learning design, an integrated curriculum, and adequate systemic support (Gomes et al., 2021; Carter et al., 2021). In this context, pedagogical approaches such as andragogy, self-directed learning, and heutagogy play a crucial role in encouraging students to be more active, autonomous, and able to connect learning to real-world realities. The shift in lecturers' roles from teacher to facilitator or coach also strengthens the reflective and contextual learning process (Painter-morland et al., 2016; Seidel et al., 2018; Mendez-Noguera et al., 2024).

The effectiveness of implementation is also largely determined by the strength of structural integration within the curriculum. Sustainability is no longer positioned as supplementary material, but rather internalized throughout core courses through approaches such as constructive alignment and assurance of learning (Kopnina, 2015; Painter-morland et al., 2016; Lahteenkorva et al., 2025). This approach ensures alignment between learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessments. Furthermore, learning strategies such as problem-based learning, service learning, and iterative approaches like Design For Iteration (DFI) enable students to more deeply understand the complexity of sustainability issues before formulating relevant solutions (Gomes et al., 2021).

The connection between learning and real-world practice is another crucial element in strengthening successful implementation. Collaboration with industry, communities, and external organizations through approaches such as living labs and real-world projects can enhance the relevance of learning and enhance students' professional preparedness (Calvo & Villarreal, 2018). Collaborative learning environments, including studio-based models and visual approaches, also foster creativity and problem-solving skills (Foster & Stagl, 2018; Stough et al., 2018). In this context, experiential learning, which encompasses a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, has proven effective in building a deeper understanding and empathy for social and environmental issues.

However, successful implementation depends heavily on institutional support and on strengthening faculty members' capacity. Institutional commitment to providing ongoing training, building communities of practice, and creating an academic culture that supports exploration and learning from failure are key factors. Challenges such as institutional inertia and rigid curricula need to be addressed through adaptive policies, flexible credit systems, and standardized evaluation frameworks (Bianchi & Vignieri, 2021; Rathore & Mahesh, 2025). Furthermore, partnerships with various stakeholders, including industry, government, and the community, enable co-creation processes that produce more context-specific, sustainable solutions (Calvo & Villarreal, 2018; Schrage et al., 2025; Cocu et al., 2025).

In addition to pedagogical and structural factors, contextual dimensions also play a crucial role, particularly in developing countries. Adapting to local contexts, culture, and student characteristics is crucial for the effective implementation of sustainability education. An inclusive approach that considers social, psychological, and even gender factors helps bridge the gap between knowledge and concrete action (Schrage et al., 2025; Issa et al., 2025; Cocu et al., 2025). In this regard, developing entrepreneurial self-efficacy, social support, and observational learning from practitioners strengthens students' readiness to face sustainability challenges (Issa et al., 2025; Schrage et al., 2025).

Along with technological advancements, digitalization is also increasingly enriching the implementation of sustainability education (Venturi et al., 2025; Abulibdeh et al., 2024). The use of cloud-based platforms, artificial intelligence, knowledge graphs, and edutainment-based gamification can increase student engagement and understanding (Abulibdeh et al., 2024; Grobler, 2024). This technological integration, when combined with psychological approaches such as attitude formation, social norms, and perceived behavioral control, can drive change from mere intentions to concrete actions (Lajci & Kuqi, 2025). However, the success of this strategy remains dependent on the institution's readiness to provide infrastructure and improve digital literacy.

Successful implementation of sustainability education is not only oriented towards mastering knowledge, but also towards transforming learning that fosters wisdom (Painter-morland et al., 2016). A holistic pedagogical approach, encompassing cognitive, affective, ethical, and action dimensions, encourages students to develop integrative thinking, social responsibility, and ethical leadership (Mendez-Noguera et al., 2024). Thus, the entire process culminates in graduates who are not only academically competent but also capable of making a real contribution to sustainable development.

The Impact of Sustainability Education on Student Competence (Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral)

Sustainability education (Education for Sustainable Development) has a significant and multidimensional impact on student competency, going beyond mere knowledge transfer to transforming ways of thinking, behaving, and acting. This impact encompasses integrated cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Seidel et al., 2018). However, traditional economics curricula often fail to achieve this goal because they tend to view the economic system separately from its ecological and social context, creating a gap in understanding the complexities of sustainability (Foster & Stagl, 2018; Mendez-Noguera et al., 2024).

In the cognitive dimension, sustainability education contributes to improving students' knowledge, literacy, and higher-order thinking skills (Issa et al., 2025; Lahteenkorva et al., 2025). Through innovative approaches such as interactive media and technology-based learning, students can improve knowledge retention, particularly related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Furthermore, ESD encourages the development of critical and systemic thinking, as well as the ability to understand the complex relationships among economic, social, and environmental aspects (Sewchurran et al., 2021). This transformation is also evident in students' shift from short-term, individualistic thinking to an integrative, holistic understanding. Furthermore, students are equipped with data literacy and analytical skills relevant to the demands of the digital era, thus bridging the gap between theory and practice in understanding complex sustainability phenomena (Schrage et al., 2025; Rathore & Mahesh, 2025).

In the affective dimension, sustainability education serves as a transformative learning experience in shaping students' values, attitudes, and ethical orientations (Rathore & Mahesh, 2025). ESD instills an awareness of social and environmental responsibility and encourages students to transcend personal interests toward self-transcending values oriented toward the common good (Schrage et al., 2025). This process is reinforced through interactive and experiential learning that can increase intrinsic motivation, emotional engagement, and the development of spiritual and reflective dimensions (Issa et al., 2025). Students develop not only an ethical mindset but also virtues such as authenticity, reflexivity, and practical wisdom (phronesis) that help them navigate the complexities of the real world (Sewchurran et al., 2021). Thus, sustainability education serves as a means of character formation and a moral compass in decision-making.

This impact manifests in the behavioral dimension, where students can translate knowledge and values into concrete actions. Sustainability education equips students with practical skills such as ethical

decision-making, complex problem-solving, and collaboration skills in professional contexts (Schrage et al., 2025; Foster & Stagl, 2018). Learning-by-doing approaches, such as hands-on experiments, internships, and community-based projects, enable students to internalize sustainability principles through real-world experience. Furthermore, students develop a sustainability management orientation, encouraging them to integrate environmental and social aspects into business practices. This ability is strengthened by adaptive leadership skills (leadership agility), which enable them to navigate global uncertainty and dynamics strategically (Stough et al., 2018).

The integration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions leads to greater changes in students' professional orientation. Sustainability education not only develops technical competencies but also empowers students to become agents of change, actively contributing to sustainable development (Gomes et al., 2021; Mendez-Noguera et al., 2024). This is reflected in their ability to think integratively, act collaboratively, and design innovative solutions responsive to global challenges. Thus, ESD plays a crucial role in shaping graduates who are not only academically competent but also ethically aware, socially responsible, and ready to create a sustainable, positive impact on society.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Overall, research on the integration of sustainability education in economics and business education shows a growing trend, is global, and multidisciplinary in nature. However, it is still in its infancy, necessitating strengthened collaboration and research consolidation to encourage more structured and sustainable development. The successful implementation of sustainability education in economics and business education is determined by the synergy between pedagogical innovation, comprehensive curriculum integration, linkages to real-world practice, institutional support and faculty capacity, adaptation to local contexts, the use of digital technology, and a holistic learning approach that encourages the transformation of students' knowledge, attitudes, and actions toward sustainability. Sustainability education (ESD) has a multidimensional impact on student competencies by integrating increased knowledge and critical thinking (cognitive), the formation of values and ethical awareness (affective), and the strengthening of skills and concrete actions (behavioral), thus empowering students to become agents of change capable of contributing to sustainable development.

This study has several limitations, including the use of a single database, Scopus, which potentially does not cover all relevant publications. Furthermore, the approach used remains descriptive, thus failing to reveal causal relationships or the depth of sustainability education implementation across diverse empirical contexts. Future research is recommended to expand data sources by integrating international databases, to use more diverse methodological approaches, such as mixed-methods or in-depth empirical studies, and to explore the contextual implementation of sustainability education across countries, particularly in developing countries.

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