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THE ROLE OF ESG IN ADVANCING UNIVERSITY RANKINGS AND INSTITUTIONAL REPUTATION: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine how Environmental, Social, and Governance integration can enhance the reputation and ranking performance of higher education institutions , with a focus on the Indian context. The research adopts a conceptual analysis methodology, drawing on secondary data from global and national ESG reporting frameworks such as the Global Initiative, UN Sustainable Development Goals , Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System , ISO 26000, and Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting in India. The study also evaluates their alignment with university ranking systems, including the Times Higher Education THE Impact Rankings, QS Sustainability Rankings, UI Green Metric, and the National Institutional Ranking Framework. Findings indicate that adopting recognized ESG frameworks improves transparency, accountability, and sustainability performance, leading to stronger stakeholder trust, enhanced institutional credibility, and improved ranking outcomes. The paper concludes that ESG should be viewed as a strategic imperative rather than a compliance measure. Recommendations include embedding ESG into governance and operations, adopting relevant frameworks, and leveraging ESG performance to achieve long-term competitiveness and societal impact.

Keywords: *ESG, higher education, university rankings, sustainability reporting, India*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of global higher education, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors have emerged as crucial indicators of institutional sustainability and strategic excellence. Initially rooted in corporate social responsibility and socially responsible investing (SRI), ESG frameworks have matured into comprehensive evaluative tools that extend beyond the financial sector and increasingly shape the strategic direction of universities and other public institutions (Glac, 2014; Parkhomenko et al., 2021). With growing demands for transparency, ethical conduct, and sustainable development, universities are now expected not only to deliver academic excellence but also to align their operational and governance practices with broader societal and environmental goals (Che et al., 2024; Kulal et al., 2023).

The historical development of ESG underscores a broader societal shift toward responsible practices. From the early values-driven SRI movements of the 1960s–70s to the formal introduction of ESG in the 2005 UN report *Who Cares Wins*, the concept has expanded in scope and application (Daugaard, 2020; Townsend, 2020). Frameworks like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), and ISO 26000 have helped institutionalize ESG reporting, while global regulations such as the EU's

Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR) and India's Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) have further standardized expectations (Macneil & Irene-Esser, 2021; SEBI, 2021; Hammond & O'Brien, 2021).

In the higher education sector, the integration of ESG has become increasingly relevant. Institutions are under growing pressure to demonstrate how they contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals , promote inclusive governance, and reduce their environmental impact (Upadhyay, 2024; Naqvi & Zaidi, 2025). This trend is reinforced by major university ranking systems such as the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings and the QS Sustainability Rankings, which evaluate institutions based on ESG-aligned metrics including SDG contributions, ethical leadership, social equity, and ecological responsibility (Huang, 2024; QS, 2024; Ifediora et al., 2024).

Empirical evidence suggests a strong correlation between ESG performance and institutional reputation. Universities that actively adopt ESG practices report improved rankings, stronger stakeholder trust, and increased competitiveness in attracting students, faculty, and funding (Khamisu et al., 2024; Krishnan et al., 2024; Hwang, 2024). Moreover, ESG integration can serve as a risk mitigation strategy, enhancing operational resilience and fostering long-term sustainability, especially in uncertain environments such as the post-COVID era (Budiasih, 2024; Alharbi & Mahgoub, 2024).

The conceptual evolution from CSR and SRI to ESG represents a shift from voluntary ethical behavior to measurable, accountable, and strategic sustainability performance (Zhang et al., 2024; Grazhevska & Mostepaniuk, 2021). While CSR focused on philanthropy and moral responsibility, ESG emphasizes data-driven governance, environmental stewardship, and social inclusivity embedded in institutional frameworks (Dancewicz & Struve, 2018; Pryke, 2009).

While the integration of ESG principles in higher education has been widely explored in global contexts, their application within the Indian higher education system is still at a formative stage. Indian universities operate within a distinct regulatory and evaluative environment, where frameworks such as the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), and national sustainability initiatives incorporate ESG dimensions to varying extents. Some of these systems measure ESG-related aspects directly, such as environmental performance in the Swachh Campus Ranking, while others assess them indirectly through parameters like outreach, inclusivity, institutional values, and governance quality. Understanding how ESG principles intersect with these national mechanisms is essential for identifying strategic pathways that can enhance institutional reputation, improve ranking performance, and align Indian universities with both domestic and global sustainability benchmarks.

By analyzing key global ESG frameworks, higher education ranking systems, and relevant scholarly literature, the study aims to develop an integrated understanding of how universities can strategically leverage ESG practices to align with global benchmarks and enhance their academic and social standing (Azim et al., 2025; Ifediora & Nwosu, 2024).

2.REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Evolution of ESG in Higher Education

Findler et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive review of the impacts of higher education institutions (HEIs) on sustainable development. Their study conceptualized sustainability in HEIs as extending beyond environmental stewardship to include social responsibility and governance structures. The authors argued that HEIs have a dual role: producing knowledge and serving as exemplars of sustainable practices. They emphasized that integrating sustainability principles into governance, operations, and curricula strengthens institutional reputation and creates measurable impacts on communities and stakeholders. This study laid an important conceptual foundation for understanding ESG adoption in higher education as a multidimensional process.

Javadov et al. (2024) examined the role of the European Standards and Guidelines in higher education quality assurance systems. Their findings showed that ESG-based frameworks enhance transparency, accountability, and institutional performance. They emphasized that adopting such structured governance and sustainability standards improves not only compliance but also stakeholder trust and institutional reputation. This research is particularly relevant in demonstrating how ESG frameworks, originally developed for quality assurance in Europe, can serve as a model for improving performance in other higher education systems.

Tu and Guo (2024) explored ESG adoption in HEIs from the perspective of sustainable internationalization. Their research found that universities integrating ESG into strategic planning are better positioned to attract international students, faculty, and collaborations. They highlighted that ESG-aligned institutions tend to perform better in sustainability-related global rankings, thereby improving both visibility and competitiveness. Their findings support the argument that ESG is becoming a critical factor in global higher education strategies.

2.2 ESG and University Rankings

Manzari et al. (2025) investigated the integration of sustainability metrics into global university ranking methodologies, focusing on frameworks such as the THE Impact Rankings and QS World University Rankings: Sustainability. Their study emphasized that these ranking systems have shifted from evaluating universities solely on research and teaching performance to incorporating broader ESG-related indicators, including contributions to the United Nations SDGs. This shift reflects the recognition that higher education institutions are

significant drivers of sustainable development and that ESG performance is now a determinant of institutional competitiveness in global rankings.
Mo and Wang (2023) analyzed the role of sustainability and social responsibility metrics in university ranking systems. They found that the growing incorporation of ESG-related parameters in ranking criteria signals an evolution in how institutional excellence is defined. Rather than being confined to academic and research achievements, universities are now expected to showcase measurable environmental stewardship, social inclusivity, and governance transparency. Their findings suggest that aligning with ESG principles not only boosts ranking performance but also fosters greater stakeholder trust and institutional reputation.
Kim et al. (2024) explored how governance and sustainability initiatives in HEIs influence institutional performance in global rankings. Their research demonstrated that ESG adoption positively affects academic reputation, student recruitment, and international partnerships. They argued that global rankings now reward universities that position themselves as leaders in sustainability and ethical governance, making ESG integration an indispensable component of competitive strategy in higher education.

2.3 Challenges and Opportunities in ESG Integration
Alenezi and Alanazi (2024) explored the barriers faced by HEIs in effectively integrating ESG principles into their operations. Their research identified the lack of comprehensive frameworks that holistically address curriculum integration, sustainability-oriented research, community engagement, and governance reforms. They argue that while ESG adoption is increasingly seen as a strategic necessity, many institutions lack the structured mechanisms and institutional capacity to embed these principles across all functions. This study highlights the need for context-specific ESG models tailored to higher education's unique challenges.
Dedaj et al. (2019) emphasized that one of the major challenges to ESG implementation is the absence of standardized reporting practices and comparable metrics for assessing ESG performance. Their study, focused on both corporate and academic sectors, found that without clear and consistent indicators, ESG reporting risks being fragmented, reducing its effectiveness as a tool for transparency and accountability. For HEIs, this lack of standardization leads to inconsistencies in sustainability disclosures and hinders benchmarking against peer institutions.
Zabiiaka et al. (2023) examined how ESG integration influences faculty recruitment and retention in higher education. They found that faculty members increasingly prefer institutions that align with their values, particularly regarding sustainability and ethical governance. Universities with robust ESG commitments not only attract high-caliber academic talent but also foster a more engaged and motivated workforce. This contributes to stronger academic performance and institutional prestige over the long term.
Chaudhary and Trivedi (2023) investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of sustainability-focused strategies in higher education. They argued that the crisis underscored the importance of adaptability, digital transformation, and sustainable operations. ESG adoption is positioned as a key driver of institutional recovery and long-term resilience. The authors concluded that HEIs prioritizing ESG principles in their strategic planning are better prepared to face future uncertainties and capitalize on new opportunities in global higher education.

3.RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1) **Examine** the role of ESG practices in enhancing university reputation and rankings.
2) **Analyse** ESG framework integration and alignment with ranking methodologies.
3) **Recommend** strategies for ESG adoption to improve competitiveness and sustainability.

4.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual and qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis. Data were collected from scholarly literature, global and national ESG reporting frameworks such as the GRI, SDGs, STARS, ISO 26000, SASB/ISSB Standards, and BRSR, as well as university ranking methodologies including the THE Impact Rankings, QS Sustainability Rankings, UI GreenMetric, and NIRF. A thematic analysis was conducted to map ESG framework elements to relevant ranking indicators and evaluate their potential impact on institutional performance, reputation, and competitiveness. The study focuses on Indian higher education institutions, while drawing comparisons with global best practices, and aims to provide conceptual insights rather than primary quantitative measurements.

5.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 History of ESG
The concept of ESG has developed over several decades, evolving from early ethical investment practices to globally recognized reporting and regulatory mechanisms. Its historical development can be divided into six distinct phases: early socially responsible investing, 1990s sustainability reporting, early 2000s ESG formalization, 2010s standardization, late 2010s–2020s regulation, and current integration.

Early Roots: Ethical and Socially Responsible Investing (SRI)
The origins of ESG can be traced to SRI, which gained significant traction during the 1960s–1970s. Faith-based and socially conscious investors began avoiding companies involved in tobacco, weapons manufacturing, apartheid-era South Africa, or other environmentally harmful activities. In 1971, the Pax World Fund was launched as the first mutual fund to adopt such ethical criteria, marking a key milestone in aligning investment with moral values . This shift demonstrated that investors were increasingly willing to balance ethical priorities with financial performance.

The 1990s: Sustainability Reporting and Corporate Accountability
The 1992 United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro highlighted the urgent need for corporate alignment with sustainable development principles . In 1997, the GRI was established to create a standardized sustainability reporting framework for organizations to disclose environmental, social, and governance performance. The following year, John Elkington introduced the Triple Bottom Line concept, measuring success in terms of profit, people, and planet, which helped embed sustainability into business thinking

Early 2000s: The Rise of ESG as a Standardized Framework
The acronym ESG first appeared in the 2004 United Nations "Who Cares Wins" report, which called on investors to systematically include ESG considerations in decision-making. In 2005, the Freshfields Report, commissioned by the United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative (UNEP FI), provided legal justification for integrating ESG factors into fiduciary investment duties. By 2006, the UN Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI) were launched, encouraging institutional investors worldwide to commit to ESG principles .

Growth and Standardization: 2010s Onward
The 2010s saw rapid expansion of ESG standards. In 2011, the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board was formed to establish industry-specific ESG disclosure protocols aligned with financial materiality. In 2015, two global milestones accelerated ESG integration: the United Nations SDGs and the Paris Agreement, both of which reinforced environmental and social responsibility in governance and investment. Around the same time, the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD) was launched to create a global climate risk reporting framework.

Institutional Momentum and Regulation: Late 2010s–2020s
By the late 2010s, ESG had entered the mainstream of institutional investment. In 2017, BlackRock CEO Larry Fink declared ESG central to long-term value creation, influencing global asset management priorities. Regulatory action followed: the European Union introduced the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR) and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), while in India, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) implemented the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) framework for listed entities .

ESG Today: Scale, Integration, and Institutional Expansion
In the 2020s, ESG has grown into a multi-trillion-dollar ecosystem encompassing investors, regulators, corporations, and academic institutions. Leading reporting initiatives—GRI, SASB, CDP, and TCFD—are converging to create harmonized global sustainability disclosure standards. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the need for ESG-driven resilience, highlighting the importance of social equity, governance transparency, and environmental stewardship in long-term institutional strategy .

5.2 ESG in Higher Education

5.2.1 Role of Universities in Promoting Sustainability and Responsible Governance

Universities play an essential role in advancing sustainability and responsible governance by embedding ESG principles across teaching, research, operations, and societal engagement.

Institutional Governance and Leadership
Effective governance structures are critical for embedding ESG across the institution. Mader et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of a dedicated sustainability coordination committee, chaired by senior leadership, to oversee planning, reporting, and cross-departmental alignment of sustainability initiatives Good governance also requires transparent decision-making, audit mechanisms, and accountability systems integrated into institutional planning and strategic management(Filho et.al.,2023).

Curriculum Integration and Experiential Learning
Integrating sustainability into curricula ensures that all students—regardless of discipline—acquire sustainability competencies. A global study by Cell.com (2024) found that curricula reorientation, experiential learning, and interdisciplinary teaching strongly enhance student awareness and engagement with sustainable development (Abo-Khalil,2024).

Research, Innovation, and Community Engagement
Universities serve as innovation hubs contributing to sustainable development beyond campus. Collaborative community projects and service-learning programs foster stakeholder engagement and drive real-world sustainability solution. Regional partnerships and co-creation mechanisms—particularly in low- and middle-income contexts—align universities more closely with Sustainable Development Goals and societal resilience.

Creating Sustainability Networks and Institutional Frameworks

Projects like Germany's HOCH-N initiative exemplify structured ESG networking: guidelines and good practice models across governance, reporting, teaching, and operations facilitate institutional cross-learning and system-wide change. Similarly, the Green Office model—originating in Maastricht University—empowers students and staff to lead sustainability efforts institutionally, bridging grassroots activism and formal governance

Living Labs and Transformative Governance

Case studies on University Living Labs (UniLLs) highlight governance as a key enabler of transformative sustainability innovation. UniLLs flourish when sustainability is institutionally mainstreamed, stakeholders are engaged across silos, and shared governance systems support long-term experimentation.

5.3. ESG and University Rankings

ESG in Global University Rankings

In recent years, leading global university ranking systems have progressively integrated ESG dimensions into their evaluation methodologies, reflecting the growing importance of sustainability, social responsibility, and governance transparency in higher education performance assessment.

THE Impact Rankings provide one of the most comprehensive ESG-aligned evaluation frameworks by assessing institutional contributions toward the United Nations SDGs. The methodology evaluates how universities address key sustainability challenges, including climate action (SDG 13), gender equality (SDG 5), quality education (SDG 4), and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17) (Times Higher Education, 2025). A distinctive feature of this ranking is the significant weighting assigned to SDG 17, which reflects the importance of partnerships and collaborations, combined with an institution's three highest-performing SDGs. This approach captures ESG-related impacts across the domains of teaching, research, and community engagement, positioning sustainability as a central driver of institutional performance.

The QS World University Rankings: Sustainability, launched in 2022, adopts an explicitly ESG-oriented framework. The methodology is organized into three overarching domains: Environmental Impact, Social Impact, and Governance. Assessment indicators include the existence of formal sustainability policies, equality and diversity initiatives, SDG-aligned research output, community outreach activities, and governance transparency measures (QS Quacquarelli Symonds, 2023). In addition to producing a dedicated sustainability ranking, the outcomes contribute to an institution's broader reputation within the overall QS rankings. This integration reinforces the incentive for universities to embed ESG principles into their institutional strategies to maintain global competitiveness.

The UI GreenMetric World University Rankings, initiated by Universitas Indonesia, focus primarily on environmental sustainability performance. The framework evaluates universities based on six criteria: infrastructure, energy and climate change, waste management, water usage, transportation systems, and sustainability-related education and research (Universitas Indonesia, n.d.). While the scope is narrower than that of THE Impact Rankings or QS Sustainability Rankings, UI GreenMetric serves as a valuable mechanism for encouraging operational implementation of sustainability-oriented practices in higher education institutions worldwide.

Overall, the inclusion of ESG criteria in global university rankings has shifted the strategic priorities of many higher education institutions. The pressure to perform well in these rankings has prompted universities to integrate sustainability and responsible governance more deeply into their operational policies, academic programs, and community engagement strategies, thereby reinforcing ESG as a key dimension of institutional excellence.

ESG in Indian University Ranking and Accreditation Frameworks

In India, ESG-related performance is reflected in national rankings and accreditation systems, though often indirectly rather than as explicit metrics.

The National Institutional Ranking Framework incorporates ESG-relevant elements through parameters such as Outreach and Inclusivity and Perception . These cover gender diversity, representation of disadvantaged groups, and institutional reputation among stakeholders (Ministry of Education, 2024).

The NAAC integrates ESG dimensions within Criterion VI (Governance, Leadership, and Management) and Criterion VII (Institutional Values and Best Practices). NAAC accreditation emphasizes inclusive education, ethical governance, environmental initiatives, and community engagement (NAAC, 2022).

The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), while not a ranking system, collects comprehensive ESG-related data such as gender parity, faculty diversity, and infrastructure indicators (AISHE, 2024). This data supports ESG benchmarking at the national level.

In addition to these primary global and Indian rankings, several other frameworks also incorporate ESG-related dimensions, either directly or indirectly. For instance, the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS) provides a comprehensive ESG evaluation used widely in North America and beyond, while the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and Webometrics Ranking of World Universities include governance transparency and public engagement elements. The World University with Real Impact (WURI) Rankings emphasize societal contribution and innovation, aligning closely with social and governance values. In the Indian context, rankings and recognition such as the Atal Ranking of Institutions on Innovation Achievements (ARIIA), Swachh Campus Ranking, and the Green University Award highlight aspects of environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and governance excellence. While these frameworks are not as widely used in global ESG benchmarking as THE, QS, and UI GreenMetric, they provide additional opportunities for universities to demonstrate ESG-aligned performance in both domestic and international contexts.

Influence of ESG on Institutional Branding and Reputation

The integration of ESG principles into ranking systems has profound implications for universities' branding and reputation. Institutions demonstrating strong ESG commitments often see measurable gains in global visibility, student attraction, and stakeholder trust. For example, The University of Manchester ranked among the global top 10 in the QS Sustainability Rankings 2025, with a score of 98.3, due to its extensive sustainability-focused research, community engagement programs, and transparent governance practices (University of Manchester, 2024). Similarly, Monash University rose to 23rd place globally in the QS Sustainability Rankings 2024 by implementing carbon neutrality initiatives, embedding SDG-aligned research into its academic agenda, and strengthening community outreach (Monash University, 2023).

Sustainability is also becoming a decisive factor for prospective students. QS research shows that over 68% of international applicants consider a university's sustainability performance to be "extremely important" in their decision-making process, while 82% actively research these factors before applying (QS Insights Magazine, 2024). This demonstrates that ESG-aligned strategies not only boost ranking performance but also enhance institutional appeal and global competitiveness.

5.4 Strategic Benefits of ESG Reporting for Indian Universities

The adoption of ESG reporting frameworks offers Indian universities significant strategic advantages that extend beyond compliance and sustainability commitments. By integrating global and national ESG disclosure standards into their operations, universities can position themselves as competitive, future-ready institutions. These benefits can be articulated across four key dimensions: global visibility, institutional reputation, accreditation performance, and talent/partnership attraction.

1. Improved Global Visibility

Engaging in structured ESG reporting allows Indian universities to appear in internationally recognized sustainability rankings such as the Times THE Impact Rankings, QS World University Sustainability Rankings, and UI GreenMetric. These rankings are increasingly monitored by students, faculty, research partners, and funding agencies worldwide. Universities with publicly available ESG reports and sustainability disclosures demonstrate alignment with global best practices, which not only elevates their standing in international databases but also positions them within the global dialogue on sustainable higher education. This global presence can help Indian institutions expand cross-border collaborations, joint research initiatives, and student/faculty exchange programs.

2. Enhanced Institutional Reputation

ESG reporting fosters a culture of transparency, accountability, and ethical governance. By systematically disclosing environmental initiatives, social outreach programs, and governance practices, universities strengthen stakeholder trust. A robust ESG narrative conveys that the institution is committed to values beyond academics, including social responsibility, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship. In turn, this reinforces a positive public perception, improving the institution's brand equity both domestically and internationally. Stakeholders such as alumni, local communities, industry partners, and regulatory agencies are more likely to engage with and support institutions perceived as responsible and future-oriented.

3. Stronger Accreditation Outcomes

In the Indian higher education context, ESG-aligned reporting directly supports **NAAC** accreditation and other evaluation systems by providing verifiable evidence of governance quality, social responsibility, and sustainability performance. NAAC's *Criterion VI* (Governance, Leadership and Management) and *Criterion VII* (Institutional Values and Best Practices) explicitly resonate with ESG principles. Similarly, the NIRF rewards performance in inclusivity, outreach, and perception—areas where ESG reporting provides measurable support. Furthermore, as regulatory and evaluation systems in India evolve, future-ready institutions that have already embedded ESG reporting will be better positioned to meet upcoming sustainability-related accreditation criteria.

4. Attraction of Talent and Partnerships

Institutions that can demonstrate a clear ESG commitment are more appealing to high-quality students, faculty, and research collaborators. Surveys from QS (2024) indicate that over two-thirds of prospective students actively consider sustainability performance when selecting a university. Likewise, faculty members, donors, and corporate partners increasingly seek affiliations with institutions that share their commitment to social and environmental responsibility. Universities with strong ESG reporting can showcase initiatives such as green campus programs, social outreach projects, and transparent governance, which not only appeal to prospective talent but also attract partnerships with NGOs, government agencies, and global academic networks.

6.ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 ESG Reporting Frameworks

Table 1 ESG Reporting Frameworks (National & International)

Framework	Authority	Scope (E, S, G)	Purpose	Applicability to HEIs
GRI (Global Reporting Initiative)	Global Reporting Initiative	E, S, G	Standardized ESG disclosures	Widely used by global universities
UN SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals)	United Nations	E, S, G	Global goals for sustainability alignment	Framework for aligning strategies, not for formal reporting
STARS (Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System)	AASHE (USA)	E, S, G	Sector-specific ESG self-assessment	Designed specifically for higher education
ISO 26000	ISO	E, S, G	Advisory standard for social responsibility	Helps guide ESG-aligned policies in HEIs
IR (Integrated Reporting)	IIRC (now part of IFRS)	ESG + Financial	Integrates ESG with financial performance	Useful for institutions with financial portfolios
UN PRI (Principles for Responsible Investment)	United Nations	E, S, G	ESG for ethical investment practices	Relevant for university endowments and finance policies
SASB Standards	IFRS Foundation	E, S, G	Industry-specific ESG metrics	Emerging relevance for finance and institutional reporting
TCFD (Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures)	Financial Stability Board	E, G	Climate-related risk reporting	Useful for green campus strategy and climate disclosures
CDP (Carbon Disclosure Project)	CDP (Non-profit)	E	Climate change, carbon emissions, energy use	Relevant for universities disclosing environmental data
BRSR (Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting)	SEBI, India	E, S, G	Mandatory ESG reporting for top 1,000 listed companies; voluntary for HEIs	National benchmark for Indian institutions aligning with ESG

Source: Authors' own compilation

The above table1 highlights that while these initiatives differ in scope, authority, and intended use, they collectively provide HEIs with a structured pathway to integrate sustainability, social responsibility, and governance excellence into their operations. Global frameworks such as the GRI and the UN SDGs offer broad alignment with international sustainability norms, while higher education–specific tools like STARS provide tailored self-assessment mechanisms to track progress in academics, campus operations, and community engagement. Standards such as ISO 26000 and Integrated Reporting (IR) strengthen governance transparency and link ESG performance to financial stewardship, and frameworks like the Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), SASB, and TCFD enable more specialized reporting on ethical investment and climate-related risks. Environmental disclosure tools such as the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) enhance credibility in sustainability-focused global rankings like UI GreenMetric, whereas in India, the BRSR framework offers a nationally recognized model for ESG disclosures, aligning institutions with evolving regulatory expectations. Adopting and adapting these frameworks can help universities not only improve sustainability performance but also strengthen their reputation, attract funding and partnerships, and enhance their position in both global and national university rankings, making ESG integration a strategic imperative for long-term competitiveness and institutional excellence.

6.2 ESG Factors in Global and Indian University Rankings

Table 2. ESG Factors in Global and Indian University Rankings and Accreditations

Framework	Type	ESG Dimensions Covered	Direct / Indirect ESG Indicators	Example Indicators

Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings	Global Ranking	Environmental, Social, Governance	Direct – Based on UN SDGs performance	Climate Action (SDG 13), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Partnerships (SDG 17), Quality Education (SDG 4)
QS Sustainability Rankings	Global Ranking	Environmental, Social, Governance	Direct – ESG categories explicitly scored	Sustainability policies, diversity & inclusion, SDG-related research, governance transparency
UI GreenMetric	Global Ranking	Environmental (mainly), Governance	Direct – Focus on operational sustainability	Energy efficiency, waste & water management, transportation systems, green campus initiatives
Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU)	Global Ranking	Social, Governance	Indirect – Through public health & social science research	Sustainability-related research output, public service contributions
Webometrics	Global Ranking	Governance, Social	Indirect – Based on transparency and public engagement	Web openness, governance transparency, global online visibility
World University with Real Impact (WURI) Rankings	Global Ranking	Social, Governance	Direct – Measures innovation & societal contribution	Social innovation, student employability, governance for social change
National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF)	Indian Ranking	Social, Governance	Indirect – ESG reflected in inclusion & outreach	Gender diversity, regional representation, disadvantaged group enrolment, public perception
National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)	Indian Accreditation	Social, Governance, Environmental	Indirect – ESG embedded in assessment criteria	Governance leadership, institutional values, environmental policies, community engagement
All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)	Indian Database	Social, Governance	Indirect – Provides ESG-relevant institutional data	Gender parity, diversity statistics, infrastructure availability, enrolment patterns
Atal Ranking of Institutions on Innovation Achievements (ARIIA)	Indian Ranking	Social, Governance	Indirect – Innovation for societal good	Entrepreneurship in sustainability, inclusive innovation, community problem-solving
Swachh Campus Ranking	Indian Ranking	Environmental	Direct – Campus sustainability performance	Cleanliness, waste management, water conservation, green landscaping
Green University Award (UGC/AICTE)	Indian Recognition	Environmental, Social	Direct – Recognition for sustainability excellence	Renewable energy use, biodiversity conservation, social inclusion projects

Source: Authors' own compilation

Above Table 2 compares how ESG factors are integrated into both global and Indian university ranking and accreditation systems. The table 1 demonstrates that while their primary objectives vary, most incorporate ESG dimensions either directly or indirectly. Global rankings such as the THE Impact Rankings, QS Sustainability Rankings, and UI GreenMetric explicitly integrate ESG indicators, with THE and QS aligning closely with the United Nations SDGs and UI GreenMetric focusing on operational environmental performance. Other global systems like ARWU and Webometrics measure ESG elements indirectly through research impact, transparency, and public engagement. Indian frameworks display a similar pattern: NIRF and NAAC incorporate ESG-linked criteria such as inclusion, governance leadership, and environmental responsibility, while AISHE serves as a national data repository providing ESG-relevant statistics for institutional benchmarking. Recognition schemes such as the Green University Award and rankings like the Swachh Campus Ranking directly emphasize environmental sustainability, while ARIIA and WURI highlight innovation, social responsibility, and governance for societal benefit. Collectively, these systems illustrate that improving performance in ESG-related metrics not only strengthens sustainability outcomes but also enhances institutional visibility, reputation, and competitive positioning in both national and global higher education landscapes.

6.3 Impact of ESG reporting on rankings and reputation

Table 3 How ESG Reporting Framework Enhances rankings

ESG Reporting Framework	How It Enhances Rankings
GRI Standards	Promotes transparency in sustainability performance, supports data-driven decision-making, and aligns with THE Impact Rankings through SDG-linked disclosures.
UN SDGs Alignment	Directly improves performance in THE Impact Rankings, which are based on SDG-related institutional contributions and community impact.
STARS	Offers detailed ESG benchmarking and certification; generates data useful for QS Sustainability Rankings and UI GreenMetric submissions.
ISO 26000	Enhances governance and social responsibility reporting, building stakeholder trust, strengthening NAAC accreditation scores, and supporting NIRF inclusivity measures.
BRSR (India)	Enables Indian universities to align with national ESG expectations, improving governance perception and ESG-readiness for potential NIRF reforms.
SASB / ISSB Standards	Provides industry-specific ESG metrics that align with international best practices, enhancing institutional credibility for QS Sustainability and global benchmarking.
TCFD (Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures)	Demonstrates proactive climate risk management and resilience planning, improving environmental performance scores in UI GreenMetric and sustainability rankings.
TNFD (Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures)	Highlights biodiversity and ecosystem impact management, strengthening environmental leadership image in THE Impact Rankings (SDG 15: Life on Land).
CDP (Carbon Disclosure Project)	Publicly reports carbon emissions and environmental impact data, boosting transparency and performance in UI GreenMetric environmental categories.
Integrated Reporting (IR)	Shows holistic value creation and integration of ESG with strategic management, improving governance perception in both QS and NAAC evaluations.
UN Global Compact (UNGC)	Demonstrates commitment to ethical governance and sustainability principles, enhancing institutional brand value and recognition in global sustainability rankings.

Source: Authors' own compilation

Table 3 of ESG reporting frameworks demonstrates that adopting structured sustainability disclosure systems can significantly improve a university's visibility, credibility, and performance in both global and national rankings. Frameworks such as the GRI and UN SDGs alignment directly influence outcomes in the THE Impact Rankings by providing transparent, SDG-linked performance data. Higher education–specific tools like STARS facilitate comprehensive ESG benchmarking that strengthens submissions to QS Sustainability Rankings and UI GreenMetric, while governance-oriented frameworks such as ISO 26000 and Integrated Reporting (IR) enhance accreditation scores in systems like NAAC and improve governance perception in rankings. Climate and environmental disclosure frameworks including SASB/ISSB Standards, Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD), and the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) contribute to stronger environmental impact ratings, particularly in UI GreenMetric and SDG-specific indicators. In the Indian context, BRSR aligns institutions with evolving regulatory expectations and positions them for potential future NIRF ESG-linked metrics, while participation in initiatives like the UN Global Compact (UNGC) reinforces ethical governance and global collaboration potential. Collectively, these frameworks not only ensure robust ESG integration but also strategically position universities to achieve higher rankings, improved stakeholder trust, and stronger institutional reputation in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Strengthen ESG Integration into Institutional Strategy

Universities should embed ESG principles into their core institutional policies, strategic plans, and operational frameworks. ESG should not be treated as an add-on initiative but as an integrated component influencing governance, teaching, research, community engagement, and campus operations. A dedicated Sustainability and ESG Steering Committee at the leadership level can oversee the alignment of all academic and administrative units with ESG objectives.

7.2 Adopt Recognized ESG Reporting Frameworks

Institutions should select and adopt globally recognized ESG frameworks such as GRI, STARS, SASB/ISSB Standards, ISO 26000, TCFD, and UN SDGs to standardize their ESG disclosures. Indian universities should also consider BRSR to align with national ESG requirements and prepare for potential ESG-linked reforms in NIRF. Adoption of these frameworks will enhance transparency, comparability, and credibility in both domestic and international contexts.

7.3 Leverage ESG for Ranking Improvement
To improve performance in THE Impact Rankings, QS Sustainability Rankings, UI GreenMetric, and other ESG-oriented rankings, universities should align their sustainability and governance initiatives with the ranking metrics. This involves systematically tracking performance against SDG targets, publishing annual ESG or sustainability reports, and ensuring data availability for ranking submissions.

7.4 Enhance Governance and Accountability
Strong governance mechanisms underpin successful ESG integration. Universities should adopt Integrated Reporting and ISO 26000 principles to demonstrate ethical leadership, stakeholder engagement, and social responsibility. Regular third-party audits of ESG performance and transparent public reporting can further enhance trust and accountability.

7.5 Foster Innovation and Sustainability Culture
HEIs should create Living Labs and sustainability-focused innovation hubs to encourage interdisciplinary research and practical implementation of ESG solutions. Recognition in awards such as the Green University Award (UGC/AICTE) or Swachh Campus Ranking can serve as tangible outcomes of these efforts. Such initiatives not only improve rankings but also attract international collaborations, research funding, and top talent.

7.6 Strengthen Capacity Building and Awareness
Faculty, staff, and students must be engaged in sustainability literacy programs to build a culture of ESG awareness. Training on ESG data collection, reporting, and ranking submissions should be institutionalized to ensure consistent, high-quality reporting and performance improvement.

8. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the strategic integration of ESG principles offers a significant opportunity for universities, particularly in India, to enhance their institutional reputation, competitiveness, and performance in both national and international rankings. The analysis reveals that global frameworks such as the GRI, UN SDGs, STARS, and ISO 26000, alongside Indian-specific frameworks such as BRSR, provide structured pathways for improving transparency, accountability, and sustainability performance. Furthermore, ESG-aligned strategies directly support higher ranking outcomes in systems such as the THE Impact Rankings, QS Sustainability Rankings, UI GreenMetric, and potentially in future NIRF evaluations.

By adopting recognized ESG reporting frameworks, aligning operations with ranking metrics, and fostering a culture of sustainability and responsible governance, universities can position themselves as leaders in ethical and sustainable higher education. The findings underscore that ESG integration should be viewed not merely as a compliance measure but as a strategic driver for institutional excellence, long-term resilience, and societal impact. In a rapidly evolving global education landscape, universities that proactively embed ESG into their governance, teaching, research, and community engagement will be best placed to achieve sustainable growth and international recognition.

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