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Entangled Accountability: Rethinking University Sustainability Reporting Through Posthumanism

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Abstract

University sustainability reporting has traditionally been framed within anthropocentric paradigms, emphasizing human-driven accountability, economic performance, and institutional responsibility. However, in an era of ecological crisis and technological entanglement, sustainability must be reimagined beyond human-centered frameworks. This study critically examines contemporary trends, opportunities, and challenges in university sustainability reporting through a posthumanist lens, arguing for a shift toward more-than-human accountability. By analyzing recent Scopus-indexed literature, we reveal how sustainability reporting is often limited by rigid frameworks, resource constraints, and a disproportionate focus on environmental metrics at the expense of social and technological dimensions. A posthumanist approach challenges these limitations by advocating for relational, dynamic, and multi-agential forms of sustainability reporting that recognize the agency of ecosystems, technologies, and non-human entities. Moving beyond static documentation, this paper proposes an alternative paradigm where universities function as posthuman institutions—co-evolving with planetary systems, artificial intelligence, and non-human stakeholders. Such an approach does not merely enhance sustainability reporting but reconfigures the university's role in shaping regenerative, post-anthropocentric futures.

Keywords: Posthumanism, University Sustainability Reporting, More-than-Human Accountability, Ecological Entanglement, Post-Anthropocentric Education.

Introduction

The discourse surrounding university performance, traditionally governed by conventional institutional accreditation mechanisms, has long been a subject of critique (Roman, 2024). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly drifting away from their public-sector vision, which historically emphasized service, public welfare, and socio-environmental concerns (Marginson, 2011). Instead, contemporary university governance has become entangled in rigid, human-centered paradigms that prioritize metrics, rankings, and market-driven accountability (Mok & Lo, 2002). In contrast, sustainability reporting (SR) in universities has emerged as an area of growing relevance in academic literature, reflecting heightened attention to transparency and accountability in higher education's engagement with sustainability issues (Peters, 2022). However, a critical gap remains: while SR has gained traction, it remains largely absent from the evaluative frameworks of institutional accreditation, which continue to operate under anthropocentric logics that fragment sustainability from broader educational performance indicators.

The implementation of SR in universities is not merely a response to regulatory pressures but also a strategic endeavor to enhance institutional reputation and stakeholder engagement (Rosa

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et al., 2024). According to legitimacy theory, aligning with regulatory expectations is essential for universities to maintain their credibility and social contract (Suchman, 1995). Similarly, from the perspective of stakeholder theory, engagement with sustainability concerns should not be treated as a mere formality but as an imperative for universities to integrate their mission with the well-being of both humanity and the planetary ecosystem (Freeman et al., 2018). However, the extent to which universities genuinely embody these principles remains contested, as the conventional structures of higher education continue to prioritize human-centered models of accreditation that often exclude the broader relationalities between institutions, ecosystems, and non-human agents (Braidotti, 2019).

As the body of research on SR in universities expands, it becomes imperative to analyze its evolution, challenges, and emerging opportunities (Ceulemans et al., 2018). This requires moving beyond the reductionist view of SR as a separate administrative function and instead situating it within a posthumanist framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors in shaping educational performance. One of the major impediments to effective SR in universities is the absence of standardized reporting frameworks, leading to inconsistencies in the quality and scope of reports (Sassen & Azizi, 2018). While some European universities have proactively adopted frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), others, particularly in the Global South, remain in the early stages of implementation (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015). Moreover, environmental dimensions of sustainability are reported more frequently than social and economic aspects, highlighting a persistent imbalance in HEIs' approach to sustainability (An et al., 2017).

This study aims to critically examine the current state of SR in universities through a systematic literature review, foregrounding its conceptual and practical developments. By engaging with posthumanist perspectives, we seek to challenge anthropocentric assumptions that continue to marginalize sustainability from core academic and institutional performance metrics. In doing so, this research advocates for a reconceptualization of SR as an integral, relational, and multi-agent practice that extends beyond human-centered accreditation logics, toward a more entangled, planetary vision of higher education accountability.

Literature Review: Sustainability Reporting in Universities Through a Posthumanist Lens

The discourse on sustainability reporting (SR) in universities has evolved alongside broader shifts in governance, accountability, and environmental ethics in higher education. While traditional SR frameworks emphasize regulatory compliance and institutional reputation, emerging critical perspectives suggest that such approaches remain constrained by anthropocentric assumptions that prioritize human agency over broader ecological and technological entanglements (Braidotti, 2019; Ferrando, 2019). This section critically examines the trajectory of SR in universities, highlighting its theoretical underpinnings, limitations, and the potential for a posthumanist reconceptualization.

Rethinking Sustainability in Higher Education: From Anthropocentrism to Posthumanism

Much of the existing literature on sustainability in higher education remains rooted in anthropocentric paradigms, where universities are seen as autonomous entities managing environmental and social impact through structured reporting mechanisms. This perspective positions sustainability as a challenge to be solved through human-led policies, overlooking the entangled nature of universities with their material, ecological, and technological surroundings (Latour, 2005).

Posthumanist theory challenges this reductionist approach by advocating for a relational understanding of sustainability, where universities are not merely observers or regulators of sustainability outcomes but active participants in a complex web of interdependencies. As Braidotti (2019) argues, posthumanism moves beyond human-centered perspectives by recognizing the agency of non-human actors—whether environmental systems, digital infrastructures, or biological networks—in shaping institutional sustainability practices. This shift requires universities to reconsider their role within planetary ecologies, moving beyond compliance-driven reporting towards more integrated and dynamic forms of sustainability engagement (Barad, 2007).

The Limitations of Conventional Sustainability Reporting in Universities

Despite the growing adoption of sustainability reporting frameworks, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS), critical research suggests that these models reinforce a quantitative, performance-driven logic that often fails to capture the relational and ethical dimensions of sustainability in higher education (Ceulemans et al., 2018).

One key critique is that SR in universities has increasingly been co-opted as a branding strategy, where sustainability commitments are framed in ways that enhance institutional prestige rather than drive substantive environmental and social change (Adams, 2013). This phenomenon, often described as greenwashing, manifests when universities selectively disclose sustainability achievements while neglecting deeper systemic issues, such as labor conditions, extractive research funding, or inequitable knowledge production (Sassen & Azizi, 2018).

Additionally, there is a notable imbalance in sustainability reporting, where environmental aspects—such as carbon footprints and energy efficiency—are more frequently emphasized than social and economic dimensions (An et al., 2017). This reflects a broader issue within sustainability governance, where measurable environmental indicators are prioritized over more complex, intersectional concerns related to equity, decolonization, and community well-being (Haraway, 2016). Posthumanist scholars argue that such imbalances reinforce human exceptionalism, where sustainability is framed as a resource management issue rather than as an opportunity to rethink the entanglements between human and non-human agencies within academic institutions (Ferrando, 2019).

Toward a Posthumanist Model of Sustainability Reporting

A posthumanist approach to SR challenges the prevailing assumption that sustainability can be fully encapsulated within numerical metrics and standardized frameworks. Instead, it calls for a more process-oriented and relational model, where universities actively acknowledge their interdependence with non-human actors—whether natural ecosystems, technological infrastructures, or policy regimes (Barad, 2007). This shift requires:

1. Rethinking SR as an entangled practice. Instead of treating SR as a retrospective documentation of sustainability efforts, universities should adopt narrative and participatory approaches that foreground the voices of diverse stakeholders, including marginalized communities and non-human ecosystems (Haraway, 2016).
2. Expanding sustainability indicators beyond anthropocentric metrics. Posthumanist sustainability frameworks advocate for the inclusion of qualitative, affective, and material dimensions in SR. For example, rather than solely reporting on energy consumption, universities

could document the lived experiences of students and faculty engaging with green infrastructures, or the shifting materialities of campus environments in response to climate change (Ferrando, 2019).

3. Recognizing the agency of non-human actors. In line with new materialist perspectives, sustainability reporting should move beyond human-centered decision-making to acknowledge the role of plants, animals, data systems, and atmospheric conditions in shaping academic environments. For instance, a university's ecological footprint should not merely be a measurement of emissions but an account of its entanglements with local water cycles, air quality, and biodiversity networks (Bennet, 2010).

Challenges and Future Directions

While posthumanist approaches to SR offer a radical rethinking of sustainability in higher education, several challenges remain:

- Institutional inertia and resistance: Universities operate within deeply embedded regulatory and accreditation structures that prioritize compliance over transformative sustainability practices (Adams & Larrinaga, 2019).
- The lack of interdisciplinary methodologies: Most SR frameworks are designed within the fields of business and environmental science, leaving little room for critical, philosophical, or relational perspectives that posthumanist scholars advocate (Braidotti, 2019).
- Difficulties in operationalizing posthumanist metrics: Unlike traditional SR indicators, which rely on quantifiable data, posthumanist sustainability models require new modes of assessment that incorporate narrative, affect, and non-human agency, which are not yet widely recognized within accreditation processes (Barad, 2007).

Addressing these challenges requires cross-disciplinary collaboration, where sustainability science, philosophy, digital humanities, and environmental justice converge to develop new models of sustainability reporting that move beyond human-centered metrics. By doing so, universities can reimagine their role as living systems embedded within planetary ecologies rather than as isolated entities pursuing competitive sustainability rankings.

Methodology

Review Protocol - PRISMA

This study employs the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure a rigorous and transparent systematic literature review (Gabriele & Martins, 2023; Noeikham et al., 2024). The PRISMA guidelines provide a structured approach to article identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion, thereby enhancing reproducibility and minimizing bias in the selection process (Moher et al., 2014). The continuous refinement of PRISMA over time has strengthened its applicability across diverse research domains, ensuring that systematic reviews maintain a high standard of reporting and reliability (Mishra & Mishra, 2023).

Formulation of Research Questions

The research questions were developed to systematically explore the trajectory of sustainability reporting (SR) in universities. The key inquiries guiding this study are:

1. What are the primary papers in the field of sustainability reporting in universities?

2. How has sustainability reporting in universities evolved?
3. What opportunities and challenges exist for sustainability reporting in universities? By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a critical synthesis of existing literature, identifying prevailing trends, theoretical approaches, and gaps that warrant further exploration.

Systematic Search Strategy

a. Identification

The identification phase involved a comprehensive search for relevant academic literature in the Scopus database (URL: <https://scopus.com/>) provided by Elsevier. Scopus was selected due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals, its strong indexing of sustainability-related research, and its inclusion of both open-access and subscription-based articles (Zahedi et al., 2014). The search query applied Boolean operators to capture relevant literature:

("university" OR "higher education") AND ("sustainability" OR "sustainable") AND ("reporting" OR "disclosure")

This search yielded 119 documents spanning from 2007 to 2025. To refine the selection, only journal articles published in English were considered, reducing the dataset to 83 articles. Furthermore, open-access availability was a key consideration, with 38 articles meeting this criterion. A deeper examination of abstracts and keywords resulted in a final selection of 16 articles that directly aligned with the research focus (Figure 1).

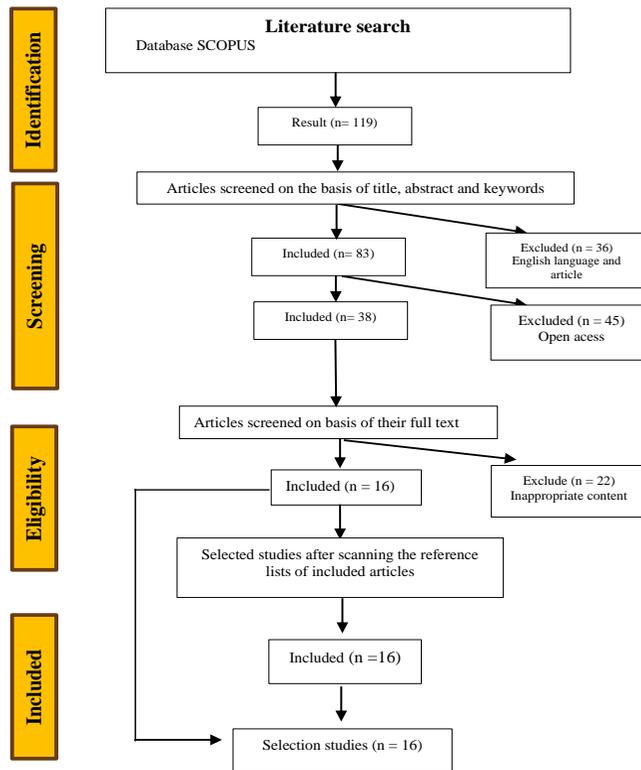


Figure 1 PRISMA

b. Screening

The screening process aimed to systematically filter the identified articles to ensure relevance and methodological rigor. Initial filtering was based on the publication year (2007-2025), journal impact, and thematic alignment with sustainability reporting in higher education institutions. Articles that did not explicitly address SR within university contexts or lacked empirical analysis were excluded. Additionally, duplicate records and articles focusing on corporate sustainability reporting rather than higher education institutions were removed.

c. Eligibility

To enhance the robustness of the study, articles selected during the screening process underwent further eligibility assessment through full-text review. Articles were evaluated based on their methodological soundness, theoretical framework, and relevance to the research objectives. Studies that lacked empirical evidence or failed to address SR within a posthumanist perspective were excluded. The final set of selected articles reflects a balanced representation of diverse geographical regions, institutional practices, and theoretical orientations in the sustainability discourse of higher education.

d. Quality Appraisal

Quality appraisal was conducted using the Mixed-Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) to ensure the methodological integrity of the included studies. The MMAT framework facilitated the assessment of research design, data collection, and analytical rigor, thereby strengthening the validity of the synthesized findings (Hong et al., 2018). Studies were evaluated based on their contribution to understanding the integration of SR within university performance metrics, institutional governance, and accreditation frameworks. This systematic evaluation ensures that the insights generated from this review are both credible and meaningful in advancing sustainability discourse within the higher education sector.

By adopting a rigorous methodological approach, this study aims to offer a comprehensive and critical assessment of sustainability reporting in universities, situating it within a broader posthumanist perspective that challenges conventional anthropocentric paradigms in higher education governance.

Finding and Discussion

The Role of University Sustainability Reporting in the Posthumanist Discourse

University sustainability reporting (USR) is increasingly becoming an essential tool for accountability, transparency, and policy formulation in higher education. However, in light of posthumanist perspectives, which challenge the centrality of the human subject and emphasize the entanglement of humans, non-human entities, and broader ecosystems, traditional approaches to sustainability reporting demand re-evaluation. Universities, as institutions of knowledge production, have the responsibility to not only report on sustainability but also reconceptualize sustainability as an embedded, relational, and post-anthropocentric practice (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2019).

Key Papers and Their Posthumanist Relevance

A review of key literature on USR highlights trends, opportunities, and challenges, many of which align with posthumanist critiques of sustainability frameworks. The following major studies contribute significantly to this discourse:

- a) Lopatta & Jaeschke (2014) discuss the infancy of sustainability reporting in German and Austrian universities. From a posthumanist perspective, their findings suggest the need for frameworks that incorporate non-human agencies, such as ecological systems, into reporting structures.
- b) Leal Filho et al. (2022) advocate for frameworks like the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) but remain within a human-centered paradigm. Posthumanist approaches would push these frameworks to move beyond anthropocentric performance indicators and integrate more-than-human actors.
- c) Fiorani & Di Gerio (2022) document the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Italian universities. A posthumanist reading of their study would critique the SDGs for their anthropocentric bias and advocate for a shift toward an ethics of care that includes multispecies justice (Haraway, 2016).

Development Trends and Posthumanist Considerations

a. Adoption of Reporting Frameworks: Toward More-Than-Human Accountability

The increasing adoption of reporting frameworks such as GRI and the SDG Accord represents a positive trend, yet these frameworks remain largely anthropocentric. A posthumanist approach would call for an expansion of sustainability indicators to account for the agency of non-human entities—rivers, forests, air quality, and animal populations—beyond mere instrumental value to human stakeholders (Wolfe, 2009).

b. Focus on Environmental Indicators: Beyond Resource Management

While universities emphasize environmental indicators in their reports, they often treat nature as a passive resource rather than an active participant. Drawing from Barad (2007) concept of agential realism, universities should consider environmental sustainability not merely as resource management but as co-constituted practices between human and non-human actants.

c. Integration with Strategic Objectives: Decentering the Human Subject

Successful sustainability reporting is linked to universities' strategic objectives, yet these objectives often prioritize economic and social benefits for human populations. Posthumanist critiques suggest reorienting these objectives toward a more relational ethics that includes non-human actors as stakeholders in university sustainability policies (Braidotti, 2019).

Opportunities: Expanding the Scope of Sustainability Reporting

a. Educational Integration: Posthumanist Pedagogies

USR can be leveraged to incorporate posthumanist pedagogies, where students engage with sustainability not only as an economic or ethical issue but as a fundamental shift in human-non-human relationality (Snaza et al., 2014). For instance, universities could develop curricula that examine sustainability from Indigenous ecological knowledge, multispecies ethnographies, and materialist ecologies.

b. Stakeholder Engagement: Including Non-Human Stakeholders

Traditional stakeholder engagement models in sustainability reporting focus on governments, industries, and communities. Posthumanist interventions would suggest the inclusion of non-human stakeholders, such as ecosystems and species impacted by university activities.

Universities could explore mechanisms for "voicing" these non-human agents, for example, through AI-driven environmental monitoring systems or proxy representation by ecological scientists (Plumwood, 2002).

c. **Benchmarking and Comparisons: Deconstructing Metrics**

Current benchmarking practices, while useful for comparability, reinforce a rigid human-centered logic of sustainability performance. Posthumanist perspectives challenge the quantification of sustainability and advocate for more qualitative, narrative, and relational methods that capture interspecies and ecological entanglements (Tsing, 2021).

Challenges: The Limits of Anthropocentric Metrics

a. **Lack of Standardization: The Need for Fluid and Situated Reporting**

The absence of standardized guidelines results in heterogeneity in university reports, which some view as a limitation. However, posthumanist thought values contextual, situated knowledge over universal metrics. Universities should explore adaptive, locally embedded, and flexible reporting practices that reflect their specific ecological and socio-political entanglements (Haraway, 2016).

b. **Resource Constraints: A Critique of Capitalist Logics**

Many universities cite financial and administrative constraints as barriers to comprehensive sustainability reporting. A posthumanist critique would argue that the commodification of sustainability itself—whereby institutions view it as a competitive advantage rather than an ethical imperative—reinforces neoliberal logics that undermine true sustainability (Braidotti, 2019).

c. **Balancing Dimensions: Overcoming Reductionist Approaches**

The common imbalance in sustainability reporting—where environmental aspects are emphasized over social and economic dimensions—mirrors the Cartesian dualisms that posthumanism seeks to dismantle. Universities must integrate holistic approaches that account for the interplay of environmental, social, and non-human factors in sustainability narratives (Barad, 2007).

Conclusion

University sustainability reporting, when reimagined through a posthumanist lens, is not merely an administrative tool for institutional transparency but a critical site for rethinking the university's entanglement with ecological, technological, and multispecies worlds. Conventional frameworks, rooted in anthropocentric assumptions, continue to position sustainability as a matter of human-centered governance, prioritizing quantifiable metrics over relational, embodied, and more-than-human forms of accountability. This paper argues that such an approach is no longer sufficient.

A posthumanist reconfiguration of sustainability reporting demands that universities recognize their role not as isolated entities managing sustainability efforts from above, but as embedded, co-evolving systems within planetary networks. This means moving beyond static reporting structures toward more adaptive, situated, and responsive modes of accountability—ones that acknowledge the agency of non-human actors, from artificial intelligence to microbial life, from ecosystems to material infrastructures.

However, realizing this shift is not without its challenges. Institutional inertia, disciplinary silos, and the entrenched logic of accreditation systems present significant barriers to posthumanist sustainability practices. Yet, these obstacles should not be seen as deterrents but as opportunities to reimagine the very function of the university. If universities are to take sustainability seriously, they must go beyond performative commitments and embrace a radical restructuring of knowledge production—one that dissolves human exceptionalism and fosters more entangled, multi-perspective ways of thinking, reporting, and acting.

This paper calls for universities to experiment with new sustainability metrics, ones that integrate narrative, affective, and ecological dimensions rather than relying solely on quantitative assessments. Moreover, it urges scholars and policymakers to challenge the epistemological foundations of sustainability reporting itself, pushing toward frameworks that reflect the complexities of living and learning in an era of planetary crisis. Rather than reinforcing the status quo, universities must engage in what Haraway calls “staying with the trouble”—embracing uncertainty, interdependence, and the ongoing negotiation of futures that are more-than-human. By embracing posthumanist sustainability reporting, universities can move from passive compliance to active world-making—no longer mere institutions of knowledge, but participants in the co-creation of regenerative, post-anthropocentric futures.

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