

Student-Driven Sustainable Startups: How HEIs Are Fostering Youth-Led Green Innovation

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in promoting student-led sustainable startups, specifically on their contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) – Decent Work and Economic Growth. This research examines how institutional facilitators, including green incubation centres, financial assistance, mentorship, and sustainability-focused curricula, promote youth-driven green innovation, based on a comprehensive literature review and various case studies from Indian institutions. The research employs qualitative methodology to understand trends in successful student enterprises within areas such as renewable energy, ethical fashion, circular economy, and Agri-tech. Key findings indicate that higher education institutions operate not only as educational entities but also as transformative environments that enable students to initiate socially and environmentally significant businesses. The study enhances the fields of student entrepreneurship and sustainability by introducing a conceptual framework that aligns institutional support mechanisms with Sustainable Development Goal 8 results. The study finishes with practical and policy implications for academia, government, and students seeking to merge sustainability with enterprise.

1. INTRODUCTION

In view of a worsening worldwide climate crisis and increasing socio-economic disparities, the need for entrepreneurial solutions aligned with sustainable development is more urgent than ever. The emergence of student-led firms that include sustainability, innovation, and inclusive growth into their core objectives is one of the most promising answers. These programs address environmental and socioeconomic challenges while directly promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and SDG 13 (Climate Action).

Universities are progressively becoming into entrepreneurial ecosystems, providing infrastructure, coaching, and funding that enable students to translate ideas into impactful companies.(Schimperna et al., 2021) This move signifies the development of the "entrepreneurial university" framework, which transcends technology transfer to include values-oriented, sustainability-centered entrepreneurship education.(Fichter & Tiemann, 2018). Nevertheless, despite this advancement, academic understanding of how higher education institutions effectively facilitate student-led sustainable entrepreneurship—especially in the emerging economies—remains constrained.

Sustainable entrepreneurship is a multifaceted and dynamic idea. It requires not only corporate expertise but also the ability to provide economic, social, and environmental value. (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011; Fichter & Clausen, 2016). In contrast to conventional entrepreneurs, student sustainability entrepreneurs must face many institutional obstacles and resource limitations while simultaneously pursuing profitability and environmental sustainability.

This twin problem necessitates the establishment of support structures inside higher education institutions that align with sustainability objectives—an aspect for which most conventional incubators and curricula were not initially created.(Fichter & Tiemann, 2018; Jung et al., 2025)

Recent literature has commenced an examination of the facilitators of sustained startups, encompassing absorptive capacity, innovation openness, and network connectivity(Horne & Fichter, 2022).

Nonetheless, these elements frequently exhibit considerable variability in the context of student-led enterprises, particularly inside academic institutions in developing countries where infrastructure and financial resources are generally constrained. The relationship between HEI support mechanisms and the

development of youth-led sustainable businesses is a significant area of investigation—both theoretically and practically.

This study aims to enhance the discourse by analysing how higher education institutions cultivate student-led sustainable businesses, utilizing illustrative case studies from India and other emerging economies. It will examine the support systems, the obstacles encountered, and the socioeconomic effects generated by these initiatives. This study emphasizes the contribution of higher education institutions to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 8, namely through employment generation, skill enhancement, and social innovation.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the ways in which higher education institutions assist student-established enterprises that incorporate sustainability into their fundamental objectives.
2. To assess the impact of these startups on decent labor, innovation, and sustainability outcomes.
3. To examine institutional facilitators like entrepreneurship centers, seed money, mentorship, and multidisciplinary education

1.2 Research Questions

1. What kinds of sustainable enterprises are currently being developed by student entrepreneurs in higher education institutions?
2. What types of assistance do colleges offer to facilitate these enterprises?
3. In which ways do student-led startups promote SDG 8 and other sustainability goals?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature analysis consolidates findings from several studies to shed light on how academic institutions can effectively support student-led green innovation. The review emphasizes the necessity of incorporating sustainability into university frameworks, promoting student involvement, and utilizing incubation strategies to support green entrepreneurs.

2.1 Sustainable Entrepreneurship: Concept and Scope

The notion of sustainable entrepreneurship is growing in response to the rising need for enterprises that reconcile profits with enduring social and environmental welfare. It broadens the conventional notion of entrepreneurship by integrating sustainability principles into the core of entrepreneurial endeavours (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). Sustainable startups, in contrast to traditional enterprises that prioritize solely economic returns, strive for triple-bottom-line outcomes by concurrently creating economic, social, and environmental value (Dean & McMullen, 2007; Cohen & Winn, 2007).

Sustainable entrepreneurship generally tackles significant societal issues including climate change, poverty, and inequality, operating on the principle that entrepreneurship may drive systemic change. (Tiba et al., 2021) Martins de Souza et al. (2024) further delineate the term by differentiating among eco-entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and sustainable entrepreneurship. Holzmann and Gregori (2023) note that Sustainability-driven entrepreneurs often choose a mission-first approach, prioritizing social or environmental objectives in their strategic decision-making, even at the expense of delaying financial success.

Successful sustainable enterprises are not only disruptive in the marketplace but also institutionally motivated, challenging established norms within academics, government policy, and civil society (Fichter & Clausen, 2016). Sustainable entrepreneurship is progressively perceived through the lens of Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 8, SDG 9, SDG 12, and SDG 13 (Pacheco et al., 2010).

2.2 Student Entrepreneurship and the Role of HEIs

Over the past decade, student entrepreneurship has gained momentum as a critical driver of youth empowerment, innovation, and sustainable development. Student entrepreneurs are typically early-stage innovators operating within the unique ecosystem of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Schimperna et al., 2021)

HEIs have evolved into entrepreneurial ecosystems, embracing a "third mission" beyond teaching and research: generating economic and social impact through innovation and entrepreneurship (Mars et al., 2008; Fichter & Tiemann, 2018). Support systems like incubators, funding programs, mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaborations foster entrepreneurial intent (Politis et al., 2012).

Passavanti et al. (2023) found that students are increasingly motivated by purpose, not just profit. This aligns closely with the sustainability mindset, blending entrepreneurial confidence with civic responsibility. Despite this momentum, barriers like financial constraints and limited market experience remain for the student green entrepreneurs, making HEI support crucial (State-Sponsored Student Ent., 2016). As stated by Dian et al. (2018) Students have a crucial role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), since they are anticipated to emerge as social entrepreneurs who also emphasize social well-being and environmental sustainability.

2.3 HEIs as Incubators of Sustainable Innovation

Higher Education Institutions are increasingly operating as entrepreneurial ecosystems that promotes sustainability-driven innovation (Fichter & Tiemann, 2018). This transformation corresponds with the Triple Helix Model, highlighting the collaboration among universities, industries, and government (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

Higher education institutions inculcate sustainability via green incubators, competitions, and mentorship focused on the Sustainable Development Goals, thereby significantly impacting the viability of sustainable startups (Fichter & Clausen, 2016). In emerging economies, institutions such as IIT Madras and TERI School of Advanced Studies serve as practical environments for innovation in clean energy, circular economy, and social entrepreneurship.

Despite advancements, challenges remain, such as scattered sustainability knowledge and the exclusion of under-resourced institutions (Jung et al., 2025). In line with Sustainable Development Goals 8 and 9, higher education institutions are critical in developing entrepreneurial attitudes and enabling youth-led sustainable employment.

2.4 Barriers Faced by Student-Led Sustainable Startups

Student-run sustainable enterprises can face significant challenges. Key challenges include low access to financial resources, lack of startup-friendly infrastructure at HEIs, and society expectations favouring traditional employment (Hoogendoorn et al., 2017; Enablers of Startups, 2023). Gender prejudices, digital disparities, and lack of sustainability networks—Tavares et al., 2022; Sanchez, 2019—are other obstacles. Managing time for studies with entrepreneurship also affects development (Fichter & Clausen, 2016). Low entrepreneurial self-efficacy is one of the psychological obstacles that impedes momentum even more (Tiba et al., 2021).

While colleges are working toward supporting sustainable entrepreneurship, challenges remain in fully including student-led initiatives inside academic buildings. There is a necessity for increased comparative study and engagement with intersectionality to enhance the understanding of student contributions to sustainability in higher education (Murray, 2018).

To get past these problems, we need significant modifications, targeted funding, more open incubation models, and more commitment from institutions to sustainability.

2.5 Linking Student Startups to SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Directly supporting young employment, good work, and sustainable economic growth, student-led sustainable businesses help SDG 8. Ventures like HelpUsGreen offer ethical jobs for underprivileged areas, harmonizing with SDG 8.5 and SDG 8.6 (Fichter & Clausen, 2016).

HEIs facilitate this by integrating green job training, internships with social enterprises, and SDG-linked entrepreneurship programs into academic ecosystems (Fichter & Tiemann, 2018). Such initiatives foster inclusion, innovation, and empowerment among underrepresented student groups (Agarwal et al., 2020; State-Sponsored Student Ent., 2016).

Ultimately, student entrepreneurship bridges education and employment gaps, offering ethical alternatives to precarious work and driving sustainable development.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, multiple case study approach to examine how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) foster student-driven sustainable startups and how these ventures contribute to youth employment and sustainability outcomes. The selection of a case study design is suitable given the exploratory character of the research and its emphasis on contextual understanding rather than generalizability (Yin, 2018).

3.1 Research Design

The research follows an illustrative, multi-case design, analysing six student-led sustainable startups in India that emerged directly or indirectly from university ecosystems. Each startup was selected using purposive sampling, based on the following criteria:

- Founded by students during or shortly after higher education
- Clear alignment with social and/or environmental sustainability goals
- Demonstrated or potential contribution to SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth
- Availability of sufficient secondary data from public sources

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected entirely through secondary sources, ensuring a feasible and non-intrusive method suitable for desk research. These sources included:

- Startup websites
- University incubation reports
- News articles and press releases
- TED Talks, YouTube interviews, and podcast appearances
- Official documents from HEI incubation centres and startup portals (e.g., Startup India)

To improve reliability, data for each instance was gathered from more than one source.

4. Findings and Case-Based Insights

4.1 Case Study Summaries

4.1.2 Help Us Green

Help Us Green was born from a visionary idea to make religious practices sustainable. Help Us Green is a student-led startup founded in Kanpur that focuses on circular economy and innovation by recycling floral waste into organic products like incense sticks and biodegradable packaging (Khandelwal & Sharma, 2020). The founders benefited from university-based innovation competitions and mentorship programs. Their venture aligns with SDG 8.5 by offering safe, fair-wage jobs to socially excluded women. (HelpUsGreen, n.d.) Over 21,060 tonnes of temple flower waste have been recycled, resulting in the offset of 210 tonnes of chemical pesticides and the delivery of 100% natural products, so creating several potentials in cross-marketing brand alliances and new product segments.

4.1.3 Thinkerbell Labs

Thinkerbell Labs, founded by students of BITS Pilani, developed Annie, Annie is the world's first self-learning Braille literacy device (Thinkerbell Labs, 2023, BITS Pilani Entrepreneurship Cell, 2022). Supported by BITS' startup labs and seed grants, the venture promotes inclusion and youth employability for the visually impaired, contributing to SDG 8.6 (Thinkerbell Labs, n.d.)

4.1.4 Genrobotics

Started by engineering students from Kerala, Genrobotics builds Bandicoot Robots to eliminate manual scavenging (Genrobotics, 2023 and Startup Kerala Mission, 2022).

Their invention fits with SDG 8.8 by making tech jobs safe and respectful while also solving important sanitation problems.

4.1.5 CarbonCraft

CarbonCraft, initiated by architecture students, transforms carbon emissions into eco-friendly building tiles. (CarbonCraft, 2023 Startup India, 2022).

With roots in university projects, the startup advances resource efficiency (SDG 8.4) and promotes green innovation (SDG 13).

4.1.6 Blue Learn

BlueLearn is a peer-to-peer micro-skilling platform founded by students at BITS Pilani, facilitating the acquisition of employment-relevant skills among youths. (BlueLearn, 2023).

The venture promotes youth employment (SDG 8.5) by democratizing access to internships and digital upskilling.

4.1.7 Ather Energy

Ather Energy, established by IIT Madras students, manufactures electric scooters and charging infrastructure. (Ather Energy, 2023; IIT Madras Research Park, 2022). Ather, backed by HEI incubation,

enhances economic productivity via clean technology (SDG 8.2) and innovations in climate action. (SDG 13).

This diagram below classifies six student-led sustainable startups into three thematic categories—Digital Skills & Education, Inclusive & Assistive Tech, and Environmental & Clean-Tech—based on their core focus. It also shows their alignment with specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption), and SDG 13 (Climate Action). The diagram illustrates how Higher Education Institutions have facilitated student initiatives that enhance many aspects of sustainability.

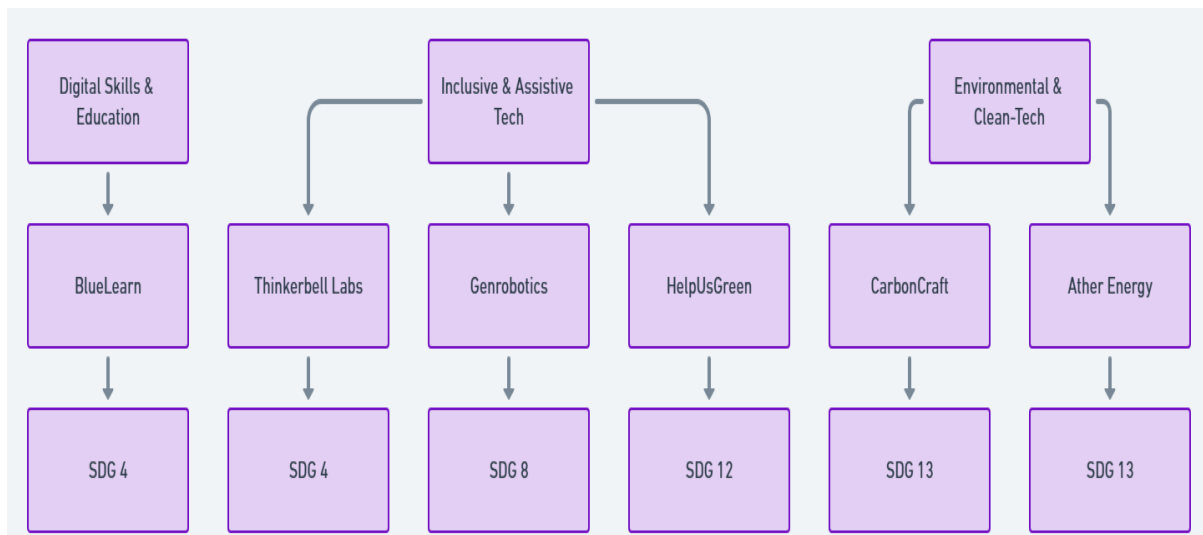


Figure 1. Mapping HEI-Supported Student Startups to Sustainability Domains and SDGs

4.2 Cross-Case Analysis: Patterns and Contrasts in HEI-Supported Sustainable Startups

This section consolidates data from the six previously examined student-driven companies to emphasise shared institutional facilitators, divergent support channels, and their collective alignment with SDG 8.

4.2.1 Common Patterns Across Cases

Regardless of sector and scale, all six firms exhibited common qualities that support successful HEI-enabled sustainable entrepreneurship:

1. HEIs as Catalysts of Entrepreneurial Initiation: All six ventures were conceived, prototyped, or nurtured within a university setting. Incubators (e.g., IIT Madras Research Park, BITS Pilani startup cell), entrepreneurship courses, and student competitions emerged as critical entry points for venture creation, consistent with the role of entrepreneurial universities (Fichter & Tiemann, 2018).
2. Sustainability as a Core Entrepreneurial Driver: Sustainability was not an add-on for any startup in fact it was a core objective. Whether it was waste upcycling (HelpUsGreen), assistive tech (Thinkerbell Labs), or clean mobility (Ather Energy), all cases illustrated values-driven innovation, corroborating research that emphasises a mission-first attitude among adolescent entrepreneurs (Holzmann & Gregori, 2023).
3. Contribution to Decent Work and SDG 8: HelpUsGreen and Genrobotics provided secure and respectful work options for marginalised populations, and BlueLearn improved access to skill development and internships for young individuals. Ather Energy and CarbonCraft significantly contributed to the establishment of green job ecosystems in burgeoning technological industries. These programs closely match with SDG 8 targets 8.3 (promoting development-oriented policies for productive employment), 8.5 (achieving full and productive employment and equal remuneration), and 8.6 (reducing the proportion of youth not engaged in employment, education, or training)
4. Mentorship and Peer Support as Enablers

Each firm attributed its initial survival to mentoring access, academic engagement, and a culture of peer-led innovation. This supports findings by Passavanti et al. (2023), who argue that non-monetary support is often more vital than early-stage capital in student ventures.

Common Qualities of HEI-Enabled Sustainable Startups

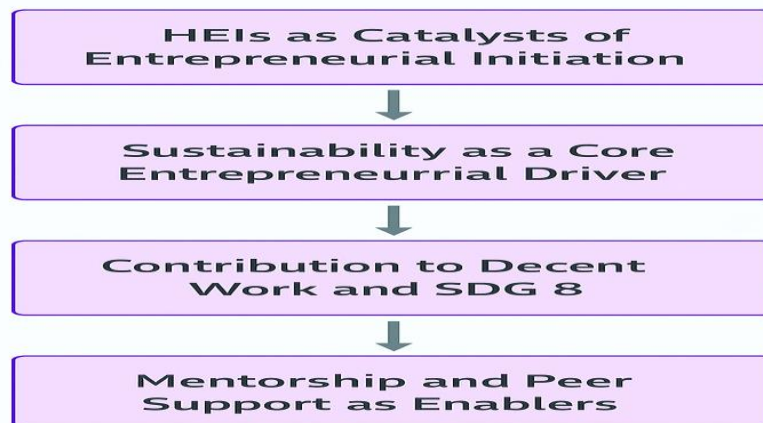


Figure 2. Common Qualities of HEI-Enabled Sustainable Startups

Figure Explanation: This flowchart highlights four essential characteristics common to student-led sustainable businesses endorsed by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Higher Education Institutions serve as accelerators for entrepreneurial initiation through incubation, coursework, and contests. It emphasises how these enterprises integrate sustainability as a fundamental objective, advance SDG 8 by generating inclusive and dignified employment opportunities, and prosper through early-stage mentorship and peer assistance. Collectively, these elements constitute a fundamental environment that facilitates youth-driven green innovation.

4.2.3. Contrasting Insights and Institutional Gaps

1. Variability in Financial and Infrastructural Support

While ventures like Ather Energy and Genrobotics benefited from advanced incubation ecosystems and government links, others like CarbonCraft relied on personal networks and frugal innovation. This highlights inequality in institutional capacity across HEIs, particularly between elite and regional institutions (Tavares et al., 2022).

2. Divergence in Sectoral Orientation

Though all startups were sustainability-focused, the approach to SDG 8 varied:

A) Thinkerbell Labs emphasized inclusion and education (SDG 8.6, SDG 4).

B) Genrobotics addressed occupational safety (SDG 8.8).

C) BlueLearn focused on skills and gig work accessibility. This diversity reinforces the idea that sustainable entrepreneurship is multi-dimensional and context-driven (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011).

3. Gaps in Long-Term HEI Engagement

post-launch, many startups outgrew HEI ecosystems, facing a lack of structured alumni engagement, follow-on funding, or industry matchmaking. This indicates that universities often serve as launchpads but not long-term sustainability partners, limiting systemic scaling.

4.3 Synthesis: Mapping to SDG 8

The case analysis confirms that HEIs:

- Foster youth-led innovation aligned with inclusive, sustainable economic growth
- Enable ventures that directly address SDG 8 targets: decent work (8.5), youth training (8.6), productive innovation (8.2), and safe employment (8.8)
- Play a role not only in startup creation but also in shaping youth as social entrepreneurs and ethical innovators

However, realizing the full potential of student entrepreneurship in advancing SDG 8 will require:

- Wider policy support
- Equity in startup infrastructure across HEIs
- Integration of entrepreneurship into mainstream pedagogical goals

SECTION 5: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Case Summaries and Cross-Case Patterns

A total of six student-led sustainable startups were selected for analysis. Each of these ventures represents diverse sectors such as eco-friendly packaging, green energy, sustainable fashion, waste management, aggrotech, and ethical tourism. The selection covered initiatives from prominent HEIs across India, including IIT Madras, Ashoka University, TERI School of Advanced Studies, and IIM Bangalore.

Each case was analysed for its foundational motive, sustainability impact, institutional support received, problems encountered, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 8. Carbon Craft (IIT Bombay) transforms air pollution into carbon tiles, facilitated by incubation and design mentorship. Padcare Labs (IIT Madras) focusses on the recycling of sanitary waste, supported by business accelerators and gender-targeted grants. Bare Necessities, located at Mount Carmel College in Bengaluru, is a women-led ethical personal care enterprise advocating for zero-waste living.

Cross-case analysis found multiple patterns. Key institutional facilitators included university incubators (such as NSRCEL at IIM Bangalore), student innovation funds, mentorship programs, and entrepreneurial events that offered visibility and facilitated early-stage idea development. Nevertheless, enterprises encountered obstacles, such as restricted access to sustainability-focused mentorship, bureaucratic delays in obtaining finance, and the difficulty of balancing academic obligations with entrepreneurial pursuits. Moreover, women-led firms frequently highlighted gender-related hurdles and biases associated with rural origins.

Regarding sustainability and compatibility with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all six firms exhibited significant contributions to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) by generating green employment opportunities, especially for marginalised youth. Several also aligned with SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), demonstrating a comprehensive commitment to inclusive and sustainable development.

5.2 Interpretation and Theoretical Contribution

The findings corroborate previous literature that universities play a catalytic role in fostering sustainable entrepreneurship (Fichter & Tiemann, 2018). The rise of sustainability as a fundamental principle among young businesses was apparent. Institutional support, particularly aligned with the green agenda, proved to be a crucial factor for success.

The disparity between resource-abundant and tier-2 higher education institutions highlights an equity gap in promoting viable student entrepreneurs. Although leading higher education institutions provide extensive support networks, smaller universities may lack visibility and dedicated financing sources.

These stories collectively underscore the necessity of incorporating sustainability as a fundamental, interdisciplinary component within entrepreneurship education. (Alonso-Martinez et al., 2023), while also underscoring the need for tailored policy interventions, targeted incubation, and continued post-graduation support to foster the long-term sustainability of ventures (Gupta et al., 2021; Mahajan & Bansal, 2017).

The integration of HEI assistance with sustainability objectives can enhance the effects of student entrepreneurship on youth employment and green innovation in India.

6. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India are fostering student-driven sustainable startups, with particular emphasis on SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. Through an analysis of literature and illustrative case studies, the research highlights how institutional mechanisms—such as incubators, green labs, mentoring, and funding programs—can significantly shape the success of youth-led green enterprises.

Findings demonstrate that when HEIs actively support student entrepreneurship aligned with sustainability goals, they not only enhance employability but also nurture a new generation of changemakers capable of driving ecological innovation. Successful ventures in ethical fashion, circular economy, agri-tech, and clean energy emerged as critical proof points of such institutional influence.

Notably, inclusive support programs for women, marginalized communities, and underrepresented youth were instrumental in broadening participation in sustainable enterprise ecosystems.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research bridges gaps in student entrepreneurship and sustainability literature by mapping institutional support structures to SDG-aligned outcomes. It shows that when students are given access to purpose-driven resources and networks, they can design scalable, impactful solutions to urgent ecological and social challenges.

6.1 Implications for Policy and Practice

- **For HEIs:** The study urges universities to embed sustainability and entrepreneurship into curricula, expand access to inclusive incubation programs, and create long-term mentorship pipelines.
- **For Policymakers:** National and state governments should incentivize HEIs to become active catalysts of green innovation by offering grants, policy alignment, and recognition frameworks for youth-led sustainable businesses.
- **For Students:** There is growing space for student-led innovation with purpose. Leveraging institutional support and addressing real-world challenges through sustainability-focused startups can yield both economic viability and social value.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

The study mainly used qualitative thematic analysis and examples to show what it was trying to say. Future study may utilise longitudinal data or extensive surveys across higher education institutions to assess the enduring success of student-initiated sustainable initiatives. Comparative research between regions or between public and private institutions may provide more profound insights into institutional efficiency.

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