

# From Policy to Practice: Examining Sustainability Implementation in UAE Secondary Schools

## (Executive Summary)

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### 1. Introduction

**Study Background:** The integration of sustainability in education has gained global attention as a critical component of achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Within the United Arab Emirates (UAE), significant efforts have been made to incorporate sustainability into national policies, reflecting the country's vision for sustainable economic, social, and environmental development. This study examines the extent to which sustainability policies are implemented in UAE secondary schools, highlighting gaps in communication, coordination, and awareness among stakeholders.

**Research Objective:** The primary goal of this research is to investigate the alignment between national sustainability policies and their practical implementation in secondary schools, with a focus on identifying barriers and proposing actionable recommendations to enhance the integration of sustainability into education.

## 2. Research Questions

1. How are sustainability policies defined and communicated at the national and local levels in the UAE?
2. To what extent are these policies implemented in secondary schools?
3. What are the key challenges and facilitators in integrating sustainability into secondary school curricula?
4. How can communication, training, and collaboration among stakeholders be improved to enhance sustainability education?

## 3. Research Methods

**Approach:** This study employs a qualitative case study design to analyze data from document reviews, interviews, and focus groups.

### Data Collection:

- **Participants:** A total of 21 participants, including teachers, school leaders, heads of departments, and government officials.
- **Methods:** Data was collected through two focus groups and five one-on-one interviews, alongside the review of 14 key policy documents.

**Analytical Techniques:** Content analysis was used to examine policy documents and participant transcriptions. Themes were identified and categorized to assess the alignment between policies and practical implementation.

## 4. Key Findings

1. **Policy-Implementation Gap:** While robust national sustainability frameworks exist (e.g., Environmental Sustainability Cross-Curricular Framework), their practical application in schools is inconsistent due to limited awareness and communication.
2. **Lack of Unified Framework:** Schools operate with fragmented guidelines, leading to varied definitions and approaches to sustainability integration.

3. **Resource Disparities:** Schools with higher tuition fees have better access to resources for sustainability initiatives compared to underprivileged schools.
4. **Barriers:** Challenges include insufficient training, lack of coordination among stakeholders, and over-reliance on individual initiatives.
5. **Facilitators:** Proactive leadership and interdisciplinary project-based learning were identified as enablers of sustainability integration.

## 5. Implications

- **For Policymakers:** Establishing a unified and contextually relevant framework for sustainability in education is crucial. Policies should include clear guidelines, monitoring mechanisms, and capacity-building programs for educators and administrators.
- **For Educators:** Training programs and workshops are needed to equip teachers with the skills to integrate sustainability across curricula. Collaborative opportunities with academic institutions could provide practical support and resources.
- **For Schools:** Implementing sustainability initiatives requires equity in resource allocation and structured support from government agencies to ensure consistency across schools.

## 6. Conclusion

**Summary of Impact:** This research highlights critical gaps between policy and practice in sustainability education in the UAE and offers actionable recommendations to bridge these gaps. By addressing these challenges, the UAE can strengthen its position as a leader in sustainability education, aligning with its national vision and global SDGs.

**Future Research:** Future studies should explore sustainability integration across other educational cycles and emirates to provide a comprehensive understanding. Research should also focus on developing and evaluating the impact of structured training programs for educators and the effectiveness of unified sustainability frameworks in improving student outcomes.