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## Exploring of the Role of Human Resources Management Practices towards Enhancing Sustainability in Egyptian Private Universities: A Qualitative Study

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### **Abstract:**

*The current study aims to explore the role of human resources management practices towards enhancing sustainability in Egyptian private universities. The study will highlight the role of human resources practices mainly; recruitment & selection, training, performance appraisal and compensation in the Egyptian private universities. How each practice will contribute to sustainability as well as the current sustainability initiatives in these universities. The study is exploratory in nature which follows the qualitative approach through carrying out in-depth interviews with a sample of four human resources specialists, twelve academic staff and four administrative staff from diverse faculties at four different private universities. The findings revealed that sustainability practices and initiatives exist in the Egyptian private universities; however, it diverges from a university to another. Furthermore, sustainability awareness and commitment are in primary stage at the Egyptian private universities. The national, international agreements, partnerships and protocols enhance the university commitment toward sustainability. HRM practices are transferring from traditional to green practices. Recruitment & selection as well as Performance appraisal have slightly role in enhancing sustainability, while, training has a very effective role in supporting and facilitating sustainability. Whereas, compensation has a minor role towards sustainability. This study contributes to literature through providing insights regarding HRM practices and sustainability in the Egyptian private universities.*

**Keywords:** Human resources management practices, sustainability, private universities

### **1. Introduction**

There has been growing interest among academics and practitioners on the topic of sustainability, which refers to the business performance that enhances the long-term economic, environmental, and social gains. Sharma & Henriques (2005) define sustainability as 'the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'. Cohen, et al (2010) highlight that many organizations start to pay attention to sustainability in order to meet government regulations and society pressures to become environmentally and socially responsible. Similarly, Capozucca and Sarni (2012) argue that sustainability turns out to be the main persuader for corporate creativity that will help in lowering costs, improve efficiency as well as reducing the negative impact on environment. Therefore, the idea of sustainability started to be implanted in all business activities and decisions, due to the environmental, societal and economic impact of these business decisions (Rodriguez, et al., 2018).

The literature highlights that sustainability has become a central area for HRM field. As an increasing number of researches and studies start to focus on how organizations can effectively utilize HRM practices to reach sustainability (Sharm&& Phil 2009; Cohen et al., 2010; Linnenluecke & Griffiths 2010; DuBois& Dubois, 2012; Langwell, 2013). The main justifications of this growing interest are that HRM practices can cooperate and contribute in achieving the social, environmental and ethical goals of the organization (Pintão et al, 2018). Furthermore, Guerci et al (2018) stress on the connection between HRM and Sustainability, offering a new HRM notion, labelled 'Sustainable HRM'. The new idea of 'Sustainable HRM' focuses on developing HRM strategies and practices which achieve the social, environmental and economic goals of the corporations. While Cohen et al (2010) argue that sustainable HRM is the utilization of HR tools to create a workplace where employees have trust, values, skills and incentive to achieve the social, environmental and economic goals in a profitable way.

From another viewpoint Cortese (2003) highpoint the important role of institutions of higher education in attaining sustainability in addition to help governments to solve related challenges. The role of Institutions of higher education is to endorse sustainability through implementing its features on campuses, additionally, boost sustainability culture in the whole society. Cortese (2003) claims that the size, population and activities of these universities significantly affect the society and environment directly and indirectly. Likewise, Institution of higher education started to associate

sustainability with human resources management by offering numerous programs and topics of Sustainable HRM. For instance, sustainability programs, curriculums, topics, tracks exist in numerous universities such as University of Stirling in UK, University of Antwerp in Belgium, University of Vienna in Austria, University of Bremen in Germany, and University of Saarland in Germany (Ehnert & Harry, 2012). Additionally, Millar & Gitsham (2013) reassure that institutions of higher education have to apply and carry out respectable sustainability management practices on their campuses and societies. These sustainability practices can be accomplished by the contribution of the internal stakeholders of students, instructors and staff, in addition to integrate and teach sustainability topics and programmes in all faculties and tracks.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Human Resources Management Practices

HRM practices have numerous definitions and facets. Minbaeva (2005) defines HRM practices as a set of practices that the organizations use to manage human resources by facilitating the advance of employees' competencies, generate multifaceted social relation and create institution knowledge to maintain competitive advantage. While, Lin (2009) theorized HRM practices as a set of internal planned policies and practices designed and executed to ensure the achievement of its organization goals through the contribution of its human capital. Whereas, DeNisi et al (2014) claim that the best HRM practices incorporate recruitment, training and development, compensation, performance appraisals, as well as diversity management. Likewise, Delery & Gupta (2016), state that HRM practices are detailed formal practices, policies, and values designed to attract, develop, encourage, and retain human capital to ensure the effectiveness of operations and functions which will achieve organizational survival. Consequently, the extensive review of literature highlights four main core HRM functions (Alajmi & Alenezi, 2016; Delery & Gupta 2016; DeNisi et al 2014; Yang, & Lin, 2009). These functions are (1) recruiting and selection, (2) training and development, (3) performance appraisal and (4) compensation.

### 2.2. Sustainability

There are several definitions of sustainability or sustainable development which is frequently used interchangeably. One of the most cited definition is Sharma & Henriques (2005) definition of sustainability which is extracted from Brundtland definition, stated that sustainability is 'Development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs and aspirations'. Bansal (2005) state that the main drivers behind sustainability are ranging from adhering to environment legislations and employment necessities, to environmental protection, and positive contribution to the environmental and societal welfare. Over the past few years, numerous researches address sustainability and CSR concepts, with some using the terms interchangeably. Still, the World Business Council of Sustainable Development (WBCSD) considers Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as the social dimension of sustainable development (Moon, 2007). The literature highlights three main areas of sustainability which are 'people, planet & prosperity' which later became known as the 'Three Pillars' of sustainability (White & Lee, 2009). Consequently, the majority of sustainability definitions incorporate the three main pillars' economics, environment, and society.' Numerous scholars (Bansal, 2005; Russell et al., 2007; Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010), underline that attaining sustainability requires corporates' commitment to all three key facets of sustainable: economic, environmental, and social. Correspondingly, Kolk et al., (2010) emphasize that sustainability is based on three principles, which are 'necessary conditions for sustainable development': (1) economic welfare by value creation (2) environmental honesty through environmental management and (3) Social justice through (CSR) corporate social responsibility.

There are various sustainability initiatives adopted by corporations include; modifying existing or developing new products, developing new processes for pollution reduction or resources usage, as well as programs to support societies (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). Gradually, organizations are expected shift from generating profits and creating jobs to additionally building a better society (Hediger, 2010). Similarly, Banerjee (2011) stress on not only balancing between economic development and environment and resources preservation but also social fairness and justice, for current and future generations. Consequently, various corporations started to voluntarily adopting social and environmental sustainability policies into their operation (Serafeim, 2013).

### 2.3. Human Resources Management Practices & Sustainability

Human resources management encompasses various functions, from recruitment and selection, training and development, performance appraisal to compensation and benefits. Various researches high light that institutions with effective HRM practices are associated with high productivity, low turnover and absenteeism rates (Kehoe & Wright, 2010). The several functions of human resource department make it responsible to top management, employees, associations, legislators and any other stakeholder inserted in the organization. Therefore, each institution selects and apply the HR activities and practices that will facilitate sustainability implementation (Cohen et al., 2010). Similarly, Sharma & Gupta (2015) emphasis that there are human resources practices that have a direct influence on sustainability as it become strategic goal for organization. Moreover, organization's structure and performance measures have to be changed and modified in order to generate the required behaviors that support sustainability. Furthermore, other changes in HRM practices can have positive effect on strategy change for sustainability which include changes in; job descriptions, recruitment and selection, orientation, training and development and compensation systems. Sharma & Tewari (2018) claim that the main responsibility of human resource department is to manage people and their behavior within the organization. Therefore, HR Managers are responsible to implement a sustainable culture through aligning HR strategies with the organization's recruitment and selection, training and development and compensation.

### 2.3.1. Recruitment and Selection & Sustainability

Recruitment and selection have a vital role on sustainability implementation as it identifies the main attributes and qualifications that should be exhibited in candidates and hiring candidates that have those qualifications (Colbert & Kurucz, 2007). Whereas, Shram and Phil (2009), claim that human resource practitioners have a good position in changing workplace culture through hiring candidates who have the required behaviors and knowledge of sustainability. Likewise, Cohen et al., (2011) highlight that the recruitment function helps in selecting and hiring candidates who have values and behaviors that are associated with the institution's sustainable goals. Furthermore, Recruitment function along side with a valid selection process have a noteworthy effect on the quality of newly hired and which generate considerable number of qualified employees. Consequently, through recruitment the HR department can highlight and communicate the sustainability values which will assist in attracting talented employees who will help in facilitating the required culture change for sustainability (Langwell, 2013). Therefore, DuBois & Dubois (2012) recommend that recruitment materials should be updated to highlight the corporate environmental sustainability initiatives, as well as use recruiters who promote the vital role of environmental sustainability and utilize online recruitment procedures that will help in decreasing resource usage. DuBois & Dubois (2012) also added selection assessments should be modified to address the required environmental sustainability activities and its related KSAOs, as well as hire employees who are committed to environmental sustainability and lastly adopt online selection procedures to reduce resource usage.

### 2.3.2. Training & Sustainability

Training and development have a substantial role in executing effective sustainability programs. As training qualifies employees to attain the performance measures listed in their job description such as environmental performance (Renwick et al. 2008). For instance, in a longitudinal study carried out on 308 firm over 22 years in the manufacturing field, the only factor that exhibited continuous development regarding environmental indicators was training (Birdi et al., 2008). While, Epstein et al (2010) stresses on the benefits of implementing sustainable social practices from reduce absenteeism and turnover, enhance staff satisfaction, and lowering overall costs. Whereas, Haugh & Talwar (2010) highlight that training facilitates employees to acquire practical experience, knowledge and commitment in carrying out new job processes such as sustainability practices. Therefore, when an organization wants to implement any changes such as sustainability practices, training can have an immediate impact to achieve these changes (Jackson et al., 2011). Training may cover various programs from regulatory requirements and technical standards, to employees' awareness regarding the impact of environmental goals on their jobs and organization products. Furthermore, Cohen et al (2011) suggest that training and development should be focus on both job requirements as well as enhancing employees' interpersonal skills. Thus, training has an important role in improving workforce awareness and understanding of sustainability notion which enhance assimilating and executing sustainability practices (Dubois and Dubois, 2012).

### 2.3.3. Performance Appraisal & Sustainability

The performance appraisal has a vital role in supporting sustainability practices as it is emerging from the collective daily efforts of workforce. Garavan & McGuire (2010) suggest to integrate social activities in the employee's appraisal which will enhance the organizational performance. Such social activities might comprise; enhancing the competences of organization leaders to attain sustainability as well as setting ethical goals; confirming that employee development emphasizes on human sustainability. While, DuBois & Dubois (2012) claim that in order to implement effective performance appraisal that support sustainability human resources should; integrate environmental sustainability practices into performance appraisal measures, measure and report the sustainability performance in addition to offer the required resources to facilitate sustainability activities and changes. Moreover, employees should be involved in setting sustainability goals as they will be more motivated and committed to achieve these goals. Accordingly, several organizations, such as UPS, set performance targets and objective for their employees and teams, and hold them responsible for achieving these goals (DuBois & Dubois, 2012).

### 2.3.4. Compensation & Sustainability

Compensation and benefits can facilitate sustainability by clearly outlining the relationship between employees' sustainable behaviour and the benefits associated with this behavior (Ramus 2007). Thus, compensation can boost the companies' efforts in implementing sustainable practices and initiatives. Compensation encompass financial and financial rewards such as; monetary incentives, flexible work schedule, profit-sharing, recognition, gift certificates and paid vacations (Mankelov, 2008). While, Linnenluecke & Griffiths (2010) state that reward system can reinforce employees' behaviors when it is properly planned and based on clear measurable outcomes. Additionally, incentives and rewards are frequently assumed to be the best motivational influence that effectively links the institutional interests with the employee interests (Jackson et al., 2011). Similarly, Jackson et al (2011) suggest that there is a positive relation between rewards and recognition to encourage environmental sustainability performance and innovation improvement. Therefore, DuBois & Dubois (2012) highlight that human resources should establish incentive systems that motivate environmental sustainability innovation and achievement, as well as publicly recognize the outstanding environmental sustainability accomplishments. Numerous corporations start to design and implement sustainability rewards. For example, Fairmount Minerals corporation recognizes their employees annually by awarding them 'Sustainable Development Employee of the Year'. While, there is another award given by the company founder Bill Conway for social sustainability related initiatives which recognize the employee's role in the community. Similarly, General Electric Corporation awards for their factories that decrease greenhouse gas emission by 5 percent that the last year (DuBois & Dubois, 2012).

#### 2.4. Human Resources Management Practices in Institutions of Higher Education

Studies of HRM practices determined the use of HRM practices increased firm financial performance, employee satisfaction, and lowered employee turnover (Minbaeva 2005). Would these same HRM practices also benefit institutions of higher education? According to Julius (2000), the HR department's essential function is to create value for the organization. While evidence proves HR is valuable to an organization, the HR function in institutions of higher education are thought of as an auxiliary service and not capable of handling issues affecting faculty (Julius, 2000). Often academic administrators believe only they know what is best for employees working in the academic units of institutions (Julius, 2000). Julius (2000) highlights that this belief typically leaves the HR staff unaware of potential issues concerning faculty members, which is common in institutions of higher education. HR managers within institutions of higher education routinely resolve staff issues and must employ influential strategies to ensure the same practices are implemented within the academic units (Julius, 2000). Cultivating relationships with academic administrators increases the chances the HR leader will have input in increasing faculty performance (Gwaltney, 2013).

In institutions of higher education, HR leaders are rarely invited to be involved in leadership decisions affecting the school's future (Patton, 2007). According to Butterfield, research conducted by the Corporate Leadership Council indicates that executives want HR initiatives to align with organizational strategy; yet, this aspiration is not always met in institutions of higher education (Butterfield, 2006). HR leaders in higher education are often tasked with resolving transactional issues as they arise and are rarely invited to discussions of a strategic nature concerning the university (Patton, 2007). Although many organizations have embraced HRM as an essential partner in their operations, institutions of higher education have been slow in accepting human resource officers as an equal partner at the executive level with many HR departments kept busy with a variety of transactional or administrative issues instead of focusing on strategy (Patton, 2007). Julius (2000) suggests that to be an effective HR leader in an institution of higher education one must recognize the social and political nature of colleges and universities. Julius (2000) also added that HR should develop strategies that will enable academic administrators and faculty to transcend their negative perception towards HR department in such institutions.

### 3. Research Objectives

After reviewing the existing literature on HRM practices and sustainability as well as the earlier explored research contexts, therefore, the current study aims to attaining the following objectives;

- R01: To explore the role of HRM practices in enhancing sustainability in the Egyptian private universities.
- R02: To identify the current sustainability practices and initiatives in the Egyptian private universities.

### 4. Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of the current study a qualitative study was adopted in order to gain deep understanding and insights of the required information and key issues, such design include in-depth interviews and focus groups which allow the participants to freely express their opinions in details (Saunders et al., 2009). The exploratory study was conducted on four private universities in Egypt which are; October University for Modern Sciences and Arts (MSA), British University in Egypt (BUE) and Misr University for Science & Technology (MUST) and American university in Cairo (AUC). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenient sample of four Human Resources specialists, twelve academic staff and four administrative staff from diverse faculties. Some on the interviews were held face to face while others via-teleconference. The interview questions were focusing on the study key issues such as staff awareness of corporate sustainability concept, sustainability initiatives, programs and policies carried out by the university, the HRM practices and HRM practices that support sustainability.

### 5. Results

Regarding sustainability at private universities, there is relative variance in sustainability awareness, initiatives, implantation, and commitment. There are universities with high level of awareness, involvement, implementation, and commitment to sustainability, while others are low. This variance is justified by the university's level of involvement in national and international agreements and protocols which contains sustainability dimensions. Recently, the majority of private universities seek to obtain accreditation regarding the quality of higher education from the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority (NAQAA) which contains sustainability dimensions in some of its main criteria. Furthermore, there are private universities that have partnerships and collaborations with other foreign universities, as in MSA and BUE, where they are required to fulfill the terms of collaborations that involve some of sustainability dimensions. For instance, the American University in Cairo has a high level of awareness and commitment towards sustainability as it performs a variety of sustainability initiatives. In addition, the AUC not only carries out sustainability initiatives but also offers post-graduate Diploma and MSc in sustainability development. While, the British University established 'Centre for Innovation, Governance, and Green Economy' (CIGGE), which aims to promote, facilitate, and fund academic staff researches and projects that serve the economy, environment, and society. Additionally, the academic staff states that there are topics of sustainability covered in various courses in addition to only one course for sustainability development but it is an optional not a mandatory one. On the other hand, it was noticed that some of the academic staff were confused with the concept of corporate sustainability and mix it with the concept of corporate social responsibility, although the literature indicates that CSR is the social component of corporate sustainability (Montiel, 2008).

The sustainability initiatives and policies carried out by their universities cover three main dimensions which are social, environmental and economic. For the social dimension there are various initiatives ranging from initiatives to enhance students' employability, sustainability topics integrated in some courses and curriculums, aids and assistance for

students with disabilities, work and life balance initiatives for staff. Additionally, there are initiatives for public benefits such as volunteering, financial donations to people in need, clothes donation, orphan day, delivering Ramadan food supplies to poor areas, building houses' roofs in poor villages, eradicating illiteracy in some villages, delivering clean water to such villages as well as transferring knowledge to the society. For the environmental dimension, there are initiatives covering recycling, paperless office, green-environment activities, environmental awareness, research funding for suitability related topics, educational and consultancy programs that support local community. For the economic dimension initiatives that focus on; establishing collaboration protocols between the university and companies which aim to share and transfer knowledge to society, consulting services to assist and advise newly startups companies, quality assurance and control units inside the university, continues evaluation of the undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, as well as adherence to the quality control comments and feedback.

The HR department at these universities highlight the existence of HR policies and practices that support sustainability; for example, carpooling initiatives to reduce pollution, paperless office, recycling initiatives, and go-green initiatives. The goals of these policies focus on enhancing efficiency, compliance to accreditation requirements, enhancing relationships with various stakeholders, university branding, corporate citizenship, and being the best employer of choice. Regarding recruiting, the majority of HR departments relies on web-based technology for job advertisement including the university website, online recruitment websites, and social media such as LinkedIn and Indeed; while others still rely on newspaper job advertisement. The entire recruitment process is paperless from filling online applications, uploading candidates' CVs, to applicants' screening and testing in order to decrease resources use, such as paper and regular mail.

Regarding training, the HR departments carry out several training programs for all academic staff to transfer from regular documentation and paper processes to paperless processes. Some training programs aim to training academic staff to upload all courses' material electronically on university E-learning website, so there is limited usage of paper textbook or assignments. Moreover, there is training to the academic staff to grade student's assignments online. Additionally, there are training programs that aim to train the academic staff to submit any requests online via the university's intranet such as, vacation requests, maintenance, meetings, announcements, and the like, which enhance efficiency and paperless processes.

Regarding performance appraisal, the entire process is done electronically through the university's intranet in order to eliminate the paper process. Thus, the direct supervisors, sections' heads, deans, and even students are required to evaluate the academic staff online via the university's website. Then the staff can receive their evaluation results online, additionally the staff can submit any enquiry or complain about the evaluation results. Regarding to the evaluation criteria, there were some criteria related to the role of academic staff in the social initiatives. However, such criteria do not exist in some universities' academic staff evaluation and if they do, their weight were not exceeding 5% of the total evaluation. As a result, some academic staff do not pay considerable attention to carrying out such social criteria.

Regarding compensation and benefits, the HR offers transportation as part of the compensation package to the university's staff to reduce pollution. Additionally, there are grants offer by the university for funding sustainability researches. On the other hand, there were little incentives related to the sustainability initiatives, they only exist in the social and voluntary activities. Some academic staff indicate that non-monetary incentives were given to the staff involved in such initiatives, ranging from certificates of appreciation to thank you memos on university's website or social media.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of the exploratory studies indicate that sustainability practices are exist in Egyptian private universities; yet, there is variance in the level of sustainability among these universities. Additionally, private universities in Egypt are in the primarily steps of sustainability adoption and commitment. The sustainability social dimension practices and initiatives is strongly existing where as environmental and economic dimensions are emerging. It was found that the reasons behind sustainability commitment at the Egyptian private universities is due to university involvement in local and international agreements and protocols that consider sustainability in its objectives. Regarding to the local level, the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority (NAQAA) has an important contribution in sustainability commitment and implementation. Each private university pursues to get accreditation from NAQAA regarding to the quality of higher education, which impose sustainability scopes among the main criteria for accreditation. Regarding the international Level, the private universities seek to establish partnerships with other foreign universities which requires universities fulfillment and commitment to sustainability. Furthermore, the ranking of the university is evaluated based on the university commitment to sustainability endeavors.

The human resources management practices (recruitment and selection, training, performance appraisal, and compensation) in Egyptian private universities are effectively and accurately executed. On the other hand, the role of these practices to enhance sustainability are still limited. The human resources department thrived to transfer all HRM practices to electronic online processes to decrease resource usage, still sustainable HRM practices are not existing yet. Consequently, it can be concluded that human resources management practices are transferred from traditional to green practices, as it did not reach the advance level of sustainable HRM practices. Recruitment and selection practice have amin or influence on sustainability. While training have effective role in supporting sustainability, through the variety of training programs aiming at transferring to paperless work environment which will save resources and reduce pollution. Performance appraisal has limited influence on sustainability as it is focuses only on sustainability social dimension such as voluntarily and social activities. Finally, the compensation and rewards for sustainability practices were slightly exists, as it takes forms of a non-monetary rewards for employees who are involved in sustainability in itatives. Additionally, there were limited fund for sustainability researches grants and if it exists it is difficult to obtain.

## 7. Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

The current study provides insights and deep understanding regarding the role of HRM practices in enhancing sustainability in the private universities in the context. Accordingly, the theoretical implication of this study would help in expanding the body knowledge regarding through providing detailed understanding of sustainability concept and initiatives in the Egyptian environment as an emerging economy. Likewise, it will reveal the nature HRM practices and its role in enhancing sustainability. Therefore, the importance of this study was to extend the research and the body of knowledge in the area of HRM in and corporate sustainability. While, there are practical implications of the current study which are; guidance for human resource practitioners regarding the required human resource practices that support the corporate sustainability. Additionally, this study will provide insights to human resource managers in private universities to proactively implement effective sustainability initiatives & policies that are required to respond to the market demand for sustainability. Likewise, the Human resources managers are required to regularly measure the level of sustainability performance and commitment which will enhance university ranking, efficiency, reputation, favorable image with all stakeholders.

The exploratory nature of the current study that doesn't permit generalization of the findings to the whole population of private university in Egypt. Consequently, this limitation can be avoided by carrying out quantitative research so as to generalize the results for the entire population. Another area of research can be tackled by exploring the HRM strategies and commitment to achieve sustainability. Additionally, the study was carried out on private universities, so there is limited knowledge regarding HRM practices and sustainability in public universities. Furthermore, a comparative study between Egyptian and British universities regarding HRM practices that support sustainability practices.

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