

Advancing Global Impact in Higher Education: A Framework for Synergizing UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Strategic Internationalization in Higher Education Institution Coupled with the CHED ACHIEVE Agenda

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 7 April 2026

Revised 27 May 2026

Accepted 27 June 2026

Keywords:

Sustainable
Internationalization;
UN Sustainable
Development Goals
(SDGs);
Higher Education
Institutions (HEIs);
CHED ACHIEVE Agenda
2030;
Global University
Rankings;
Collaborative Online
International Learning
(COIL);
Academic Governance

ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are increasingly evaluated on their contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria alongside traditional academic metrics. This paper examines how global sustainability and innovation ranking frameworks can serve as strategic diagnostic tools to bridge the historical administrative divide between UN SDGs and institutional internationalization, aligning closely with the newly mandated Commission on Higher Education (CHED) ACHIEVE Agenda 2030 in the Philippines. We analyze the methodologies of reputable Tier 1 benchmarks, specifically the QS World University Rankings: Sustainability—which weights Environmental Impact at 45%, Social Impact at 45%, and Governance at 10% and contributes a 5% overall weight to core global ranking scores—and the Times Higher Education (THE) Sustainability Impact Ratings, which utilize Scopus bibliometrics to evaluate institutions across four pillars (Research, Stewardship, Outreach, and Teaching) using a scoring structure combining a mandatory SDG 17 (22%) with an institution's top three performing SDGs (26% each). These are contrasted with specialized Tier 2 frameworks, including the infrastructure-focused UI GreenMetric Sustainable University Rankings and the qualitative, peer-blind-reviewed World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI). We identify a critical gap in literature and practice where SDGs and strategic internationalization have historically operated in isolated, parallel silos. In response, this paper proposes a unified model of 'Sustainable Internationalization,' showing how national policy instruments, particularly CHED's ACHIEVE Agenda (focusing on Harmonized SDG-based Research and Expanded Internationalization), can be operationalized hand-in-hand. This framework provides HEI leadership with an actionable, phased strategic roadmap (Mapping, Governance, Documentation, and Submission) to simultaneously secure global institutional visibility and deliver verifiable, localized societal impact.

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1. Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) globally find themselves at a historic crossroads. Historically, universities have been evaluated primarily through traditional academic and research prisms, such as scientific citation rates, peer reputation surveys, and student-faculty ratios. However, the twenty-first century has ushered in an era of heightened institutional responsibility, wherein universities are increasingly called upon to serve as active, primary catalysts for sustainable development and societal transformation. In this evolving context, global ranking bodies have introduced pioneering frameworks designed to measure the physical, social, and educational impact of universities. Understanding these ranking frameworks, and strategically aligning them with institutional operations, has become a core mandate for forward-looking educational administrators.

To benchmark these institutional sustainability efforts, several global ranking frameworks have emerged, each examining university performance through unique lenses. At the forefront of this movement are highly reputable and peer-recognized Tier 1 rankers, most notably QS World University Rankings: Sustainability and the Times Higher Education (THE) Sustainability Impact Ratings. Complementing these premier global systems are specialized Tier 2 frameworks, including the *UI GreenMetric Sustainable University Rankings* and the innovation-centric *World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI)*. While Tier 2 rankers provide valuable niche assessments, Tier 1 rankers like QS and THE enjoy widespread prestige and are globally recognized as the gold standards for evaluating institutional impact on society and the environment.

The QS World University Rankings: Sustainability [7], first launched in 2022 with a pilot cohort of 700 universities, has grown to encompass more than 1,700 institutions. This comprehensive framework evaluates university actions across three overarching categories: Environmental Impact (45%), Social Impact (45%), and Good Governance (10%). Within the Environmental category, QS assesses Environmental Education (17%), Environmental Sustainability (15%), and Environmental Research (13%). Within the Social category, it measures Equality (12%), Employability & Opportunities (11%), Knowledge Exchange (10%), Impact of Education (7%), and Health & Wellbeing (5%). Good Governance (10%) evaluates institutional practices like open decision-making, transparent financial reporting, and student representation. Its prestige is further cemented by its direct integration into the core QS World University Rankings, where sustainability metrics now hold an explicit 5% overall weight.

The Times Higher Education (THE) Sustainability Impact Rankings, launched in 2019 and now referred to as THE Sustainability Impact Ratings, stands as an equally prestigious framework, distinguished as the only global performance system that evaluates universities specifically against the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). THE evaluates performance across four core pillars: Research, Stewardship, Outreach, and Teaching, using a distinctive and flexible methodology. To receive an overall ranking, an institution must submit data for SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) and at least three other SDGs of its choosing. The overall score is calculated by combining the score for SDG 17 (weighted at 22%) with the top three performing SDGs (each weighted at 26%). This allows universities to showcase their specific institutional strengths, whether in Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), or Climate Action (SDG 13), without being penalized for regional resource constraints.

On the specialized, operational front, the UI GreenMetric Sustainable University Rankings [12], initiated in 2010 by Universitas Indonesia, provides a highly quantitative, infrastructure-focused assessment. Broadly structured around the concepts of Environment, Economy, and Equity, UI GreenMetric measures campus operations across six weighted categories: Energy and Climate Change (21%), Waste Management (18%), Transportation (18%), Education and Research (18%), Setting and Infrastructure (15%), and Water Management (10%). Meanwhile, the World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI) [13] evaluates higher education's real-world, tangible contributions to industry and society. Structured around three main axes—For Whom, How, and What to Innovate—spanning 24 distinct categories, WURI utilizes a collaborative peer blind review system. Experts evaluate submitted qualitative case studies based on three strict criteria: Innovativeness (originality of programs), Implementability (feasibility and cost-benefit ratio), and Impact (depth and scale of societal and institutional outcomes).

Despite the proliferation of these sustainability rankings and the widespread adoption of internationalization strategies among HEIs, a significant research and operational gap persist. Historically, universities have treated the UN SDGs and Strategic Internationalization as separate, parallel administrative tracks. Strategic Internationalization has been narrowly focused on outbound and inbound physical student/faculty mobility, recruiting high-paying international students, securing formal cross-border Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), and climbing global prestige lists. Conversely, SDG implementation has often been confined to campus operations such as lowering carbon emissions, moving toward paperless systems, and managing campus waste, or limited to small-scale community extension offices. This structural decoupling has blinded institutions to the immense, mutually-reinforcing potential of synergizing these two domains.

2. Research Methods

Policies and Rankers

This research paper addresses this critical gap by presenting a unified, synergistic model where UN SDGs and Strategic Internationalization work hand-in-hand to form a cohesive, future-ready institutional strategy—a paradigm we term "Sustainable Internationalization." By integrating the SDGs into the curriculum through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and "Internationalization at Home" (IaH), universities can democratize global competency and social responsibility for all students, bypassing the high carbon costs of physical mobility. Simultaneously, establishing international partnerships specifically aligned to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) allows institutions to co-create solutions to localized social and ecological challenges, utilizing international research networks to solve domestic problems. Leveraging global ranking frameworks not merely as competitive tools, but as diagnostic and strategic roadmaps, allows HEIs to systematically map local impacts onto global platforms, achieving heightened international visibility, financial sustainability, and true societal relevance.

Table 1. Comprehensive Overview of Sustainability and Innovation Rankings

Ranking System	Tier / Reputational Weight		Primary Analytical Focus	Core Evaluation Categories / Weightings	Core Pillars
QS Sustainability Ranking [7]	Tier 1 Very High (5% in core QS)		Institutional ESG performance and societal contribution	Environmental Impact (45%) Social Impact (45%) Governance (10%)	Education, Research, Operation
THE Impact Rankings [11]	Tier 1 Very High (Premier SDG ranker)		Institutional progress against the 17 United Nations SDGs	SDG 17 (22%) Top 3 selected SDGs (26% each, totaling 78%)	Research, Stewardship, Outreach, Teaching
UI GreenMetric [12]	Tier 2 Moderate (Specialized operational)		Physical campus sustainability, infrastructure & operations	Energy & Climate (21%), Waste (18%), Transportation (18%), Education (18%), Infrastructure (15%), Water (10%)	Environment, Economy, Equity
WURI Rankings [13]	Tier 2 Specialized		Tangible, non-traditional contributions to	24 categories across three axes: - For Whom to	Innovativeness, Implementability, Impact

(Innovation- focused)	industry society	& Innovate - How to Innovate - What to Innovate
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Policy and Legal Framework for Internationalization

The transition from localized education models to globally engaged institutions is not merely a discretionary strategic choice, but a formal mandate structured by national policy frameworks. In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has established robust guidelines and policies designed to govern, support, and accelerate the internationalization of domestic HEIs. These regulatory mechanisms provide both the quality assurance boundaries and the developmental incentives necessary to compete on a global scale.

Key CHED Memorandum Orders (CMOs) provide the foundational operational framework for this academic transformation [3,4,8 & 9]:

- **CMO No. 55, series of 2016 [3]:** Policy Framework and Guidelines on the Internationalization of Philippine Higher Education, which establishes the official national vision and strategic directions for integrating a global dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of domestic HEIs.
- **CMO No. 1, series of 2000:** Policies and Guidelines on International Linkages, providing the legal and procedural baselines for domestic institutions to establish cross-border academic agreements and collaborative research networks.
- **CMO No. 62, series of 2016 [4]:** Policies, Guidelines, and Procedures on Transnational Education (TNE), regulating the operations of foreign institutions in the Philippines and enabling local HEIs to co-develop dual-degree, joint-degree, and franchise programs with international partners.
- **CMO No. 7, series of 2017:** Guidelines on the Implementation of Student Internships Abroad Program (SIAP), securing quality assurance, physical safety, and educational alignment in overseas experiential learning.

Complementing these executive memoranda are landmark legislative acts passed by the Philippine Congress. **Republic Act No. 11448**, also known as the **Transnational Higher Education Act** [8], liberalizes and modernizes the higher education sector by allowing international universities to establish branch campuses, joint ventures, and off-shore academic operations within the country, directly fostering technology and knowledge transfer. Similarly, **Republic Act No. 10650**, the **Open Distance Learning Act** [9], institutionalizes distance education, setting the legal foundation for asynchronous, borderless digital learning models like Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which bypass physical mobility constraints.

The institutional benefits of navigating and aligning with this policy and ranking framework are multifaceted. Firstly, it unlocks significant financial capital and research grants, as national funding bodies and international consortiums (such as Erasmus+, the British Council, and SEAMEO) heavily prioritize institutions with demonstrated international collaborations and SDG alignment. Secondly, it elevates global competitiveness and institutional prestige, attracting high-quality international researchers, foreign faculty, and diverse student bodies. Thirdly, it guarantees institutional sustainability by diversifying revenue streams through international programs, dual degrees, and research commercialization. Finally, and most importantly, it drives overall academic quality by forcing HEIs to benchmark their curricula, pedagogy, and research outputs against stringent global standards, ultimately benefiting the domestic student population.

The National Strategic Anchor: CHED ACHIEVE Agenda 2030

While the legislative and policy framework establishes the legal boundaries for internationalization, the newly launched CHED ACHIEVE Agenda 2030 [2] provides the strategic, results-driven blueprint to operationalize these mandates across the sector. Officially launched under the leadership of CHED Chairperson Dr. Shirley C. Agrupis, the ACHIEVE Agenda 2030 [2] is designed to systematically dismantle the fragmentation that has historically characterized higher

education administration, addressing critical gaps in graduate employability, technology transfer, and institutional governance. The agenda outlines seven core strategic pillars:

- **Advanced and Accessible Lifelong Learning (A):** Fostering inclusive upskilling, flexible learning pathways, and continuous professional development to ensure Filipino learners remain highly adaptable in a rapidly changing global workforce.
- **Centralized One-Nation Human Capital Development Plan (C):** Aligning academic curricula, course offerings, and enrollment quotas with actual labor market demands to directly combat college graduate mismatch and rising underemployment.
- **Harmonized SDG-based Research and Innovation Agenda (H):** Consolidating and directing university research capacities toward the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, transforming academic knowledge into viable localized solutions for energy, climate, health, and economic growth.
- **Integrated Real-Time Data Collection and Analytics System (I):** Leveraging centralized digital platforms and analytics to ensure that higher education governance, funding distribution, and policy decisions are strictly data-driven.
- **Expanded and Impact-Driven Internationalization Strategies (E):** Moving higher education beyond symbolic memoranda of agreement toward active, measurable global partnerships, virtual collaborations, and transnational curricula that expand global competence.
- **Vitalized Policies, Internal Systems, and Governance (V):** Modernizing internal university systems, streamlining administrative workflows, and updating regulatory policies to support institutional flexibility and agility.
- **Effective and Efficient Public Service (E):** Ensuring transparent, accountable, and highly responsive service delivery across all CHED regional offices and partner public institutions.

The ACHIEVE Agenda 2030 [2] serves as the ultimate national policy anchor for 'Sustainable Internationalization.' Critically, the framework establishes a direct, synergistic link between the 'H' and 'E' pillars: the Harmonized SDG-based Research and Innovation Agenda and the Expanded and Impact-Driven Internationalization Strategies. By aligning these two mandates, CHED officially directs Philippine HEIs to leverage global networks to advance local sustainable development. Under this national policy mandate, international partnerships are no longer evaluated merely on the volume of physical student exchanges or reputational prestige. Instead, they are measured on their capacity to co-create sustainable research, attract international grant capital for local SDG projects, and implement inclusive, digital-first collaborative classrooms like COIL. The ACHIEVE Agenda 2030 [2] thus transforms global rankings from mere tools of prestige into systemic, diagnostic instruments that map national progress onto global frameworks.

Strategic Navigation of the Ranking Ecosystem

For higher education leaders, the global ranking ecosystem can appear overwhelming and highly competitive. However, CHED has formulated a clear, tiered ecosystem that categorizes these ranking frameworks, enabling HEIs to navigate them strategically. Under this classification, Tier 1 rankings (such as the core QS World University Rankings and Times Higher Education World University Rankings) represent premier global metrics focused heavily on academic and employer reputation, citation volume, and institutional prestige. Tier 2 rankings (such as the UI GreenMetric and WURI Rankings) evaluate specialized excellence, focusing on sustainable physical operations and non-traditional societal innovations, respectively. Additionally, diagnostic ratings like QS Stars provide a comprehensive, multi-dimensional audit of an institution, awarding star ratings (from 1 to 5+ stars) across core academic, operational, and social metrics, serving as an entry point for global benchmarking.

To effectively navigate this tiered landscape, HEIs can adopt one of three distinct institutional strategy models, aligned with their current resources and long-term vision:

- **The Prestige Model:** Aimed at well-established, resource-rich research universities. This model focuses heavily on climbing Tier 1 global rankings (QS and THE core tables) by aggressively building international research networks, recruiting globally recognized faculty, and maximizing scholarly citations. It seeks to establish absolute global reputation and prestige.
- **The Niche Excellence Model:** Suited for specialized or developing institutions. Rather than competing across all traditional academic metrics, the university focuses its strategic energy on specific, localized domains of excellence. This includes targeted participation in UI GreenMetric (for institutions with massive green campus assets) or WURI (for highly innovative, entrepreneurial, or community-impact programs). It leverages specialized strengths to carve out a distinct global identity.
- **The Holistic Development Model:** The most balanced and sustainable approach. Under this model, the HEI integrates both Tier 1 and Tier 2 objectives. It utilizes the UN SDGs as a unifying framework, using THE Impact and QS Sustainability rankings to drive institutional development across teaching, research, stewardship, and community outreach. This model ensures that global visibility is directly connected to localized societal progress and ethical campus operations.

A critical operational concept within these strategic models is **multi-dimensional mapping**. This process recognizes that a single institutional strength or initiative does not exist in isolation but can simultaneously feed into multiple rankings. For example, if a university develops a cutting-edge, community-based microgrid solar project, this single initiative contributes to: (1) UI GreenMetric (Energy and Climate category); (2) THE Impact Rankings (SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy, and SDG 11: Sustainable Cities); (3) WURI (Social Responsibility or Infrastructure categories); and (4) QS Sustainability (Environmental Sustainability lens). By systematically mapping and documenting these initiatives, HEIs can maximize their international ranking outcomes with highly efficient, centralized resource utilization.

3. Results and Discussions

Case Studies of Institutional Exemplars in the Philippines

The viability of synergizing SDGs and strategic internationalization is best demonstrated through the successful implementations of pioneering Philippine HEIs. To understand the operational viability of 'Sustainable Internationalization,' this work examines several Philippine universities that have successfully aligned their global strategies with sustainability frameworks, embodying the core spirit of the CHED ACHIEVE Agenda. These institutions have moved beyond theoretical alignment, demonstrating how diverse strategic models can be operationalized to achieve global visibility and localized impact:

Ateneo de Manila University (AdMU) [1] represents the premier exemplar of the *Holistic Development Model*. As a top-ranked institution in THE Impact Rankings, Ateneo has systematically aligned its Jesuit educational mission with the UN SDGs, particularly SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and SDG 4 (Quality Education). AdMU leverages its international partnerships not merely for mobility, but for collaborative research on disaster resilience, climate adaptation, and social governance. This integration has enabled the university to translate its deep commitment to social justice into a highly visible, globally recognized sustainability profile, elevating its standing in both THE Impact and QS core rankings.

Mindanao State University - Iligan Institute of Technology (MSU-IIT) [6] exemplifies the *Prestige and Niche Excellence crossover*. Situated in a region historically marked by socio-political complexity, MSU-IIT has leveraged its robust engineering, science, and technology assets to drive international research collaborations. By focusing on sustainable industrial technologies, renewable energy, and peace studies in Mindanao, the institution has successfully mapped its high-impact local research onto international publication networks. This strategic focus has enabled MSU-IIT to secure high placement in the QS Asia and World University Rankings, demonstrating how high-quality regional research can capture global academic attention.

Saint Louis University (SLU) [10] in Baguio City demonstrates the power of the *Niche Excellence Model* through targeted participation in the WURI rankings. SLU has gained international acclaim for its highly innovative, student-driven community extension projects. A prime example is 'Project IMPACT' (Investigating Modern and Practical Agricultural Composting Technique), which developed rotary barrel composting systems for urban agriculture in Baguio City. By submitting these practical, localized solutions as innovative case studies to WURI, SLU has secured top-tier global placements in individual categories (such as Social Impact and Curricular Innovation), proving that regional universities can establish global reputations through localized, creative problem-solving.

Ifugao State University (IFSU) [5] provides an inspiring model of *Niche Indigenous Excellence*. Located in the mountainous Cordillera region, IFSU has aligned its strategic internationalization with the preservation of the Ifugao Rice Terraces, a UNESCO World Heritage site. By establishing international academic partnerships focused on indigenous knowledge systems, sustainable agriculture, and heritage tourism, IFSU has attracted global researchers, secured international funding, and institutionalized the preservation of local ecosystems. This strategic alignment demonstrates that even remote, state colleges can achieve international relevance by embracing and elevating their unique cultural and ecological heritage.

Operationalizing the Synergy: A Phased Implementation Roadmap

Translating the theoretical synergy of SDGs and internationalization into institutional practice requires a structured, systematic roadmap. Successful HEIs operationalize this alignment through a clear four-phased implementation process:

Phase 1: Institutional Mapping & Alignment (The Diagnostic Phase)

The HEI conducts a comprehensive, multi-dimensional audit of all existing academic programs, research outputs, extension activities, and campus operations. This audit maps existing initiatives against the UN SDGs and specific ranking metrics (QS Sustainability, THE Impact, UI GreenMetric, and WURI). This phase establishes a clean, data-driven baseline and identifies critical gaps in data collection and reporting.

Phase 2: Establishing Cross-Functional Steering Teams (The Governance Phase)

To break down administrative silos, the university establishes a centralized Sustainability and Internationalization Office (or a joint steering committee). This committee brings together the Director of International Relations, the Director of Research, the Director of Community Extension, the Head of Physical Plant and Operations, and Student Union representatives. This cross-functional governance structure ensures that evidence gathering, and strategic planning are integrated across all university departments.

Phase 3: Systematic Evidence Gathering & Documentation (The Operational Phase)

The university designs and deploys a centralized, cloud-based data repository. Because rankings like THE Impact and QS Sustainability require public, verifiable evidence of policies and actions, the steering team systematically documents institutional policies (e.g., gender equality policies, non-discrimination statements, waste management protocols) and uploads them to the university website. It also establishes formal tracking of collaborative research papers, international co-authorships, and SDG-aligned curricula.

Phase 4: Phased Strategic Submission & Evaluation (The Continuous Improvement Phase)

Rather than attempting to submit massive data across all platforms simultaneously, the HEI executes a phased submission strategy. It begins by target-submitting to UI GreenMetric or WURI to build momentum, utilizing localized operational and social assets. It then progresses to THE Impact Rankings by selecting its absolute top three strongest SDGs alongside the mandatory SDG 17. The feedback reports generated by these ranking bodies are used as diagnostic audits to drive continuous, institutional improvement, feeding back into Phase 1.

Figure 1 depicts global ranking metrics translate directly into unified model for sustainable internationalization.

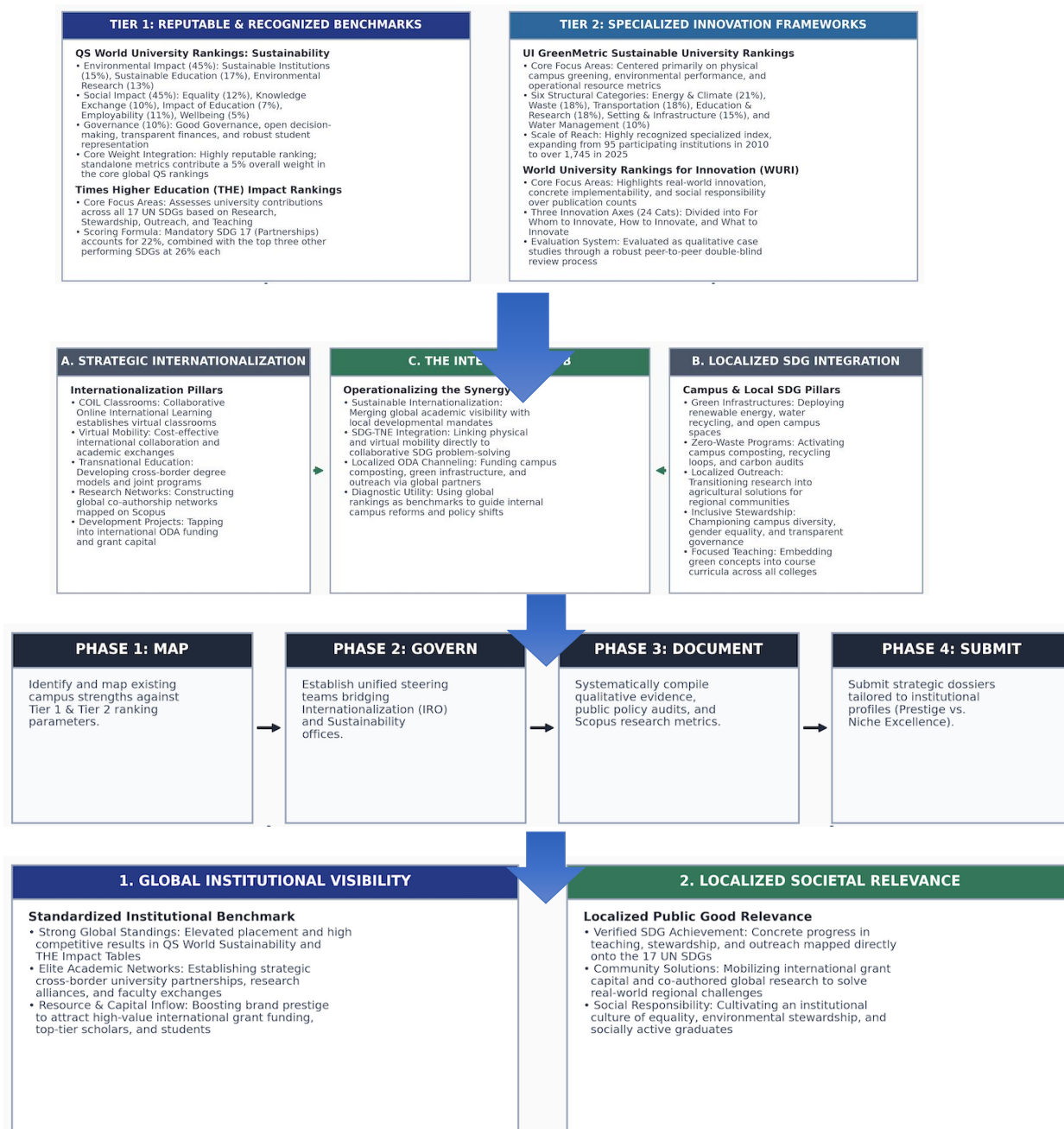


Figure 1. Global Ranking Metrics and its Activity and Policies Translation to Sustainable Internationalization

4. Conclusion

The alignment of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Strategic Internationalization represents a paradigm shift in how higher education institutions define and measure global success. By dismantling administrative silos and treating these two domains as a single, synergistic strategy, universities can transition toward a highly effective model of "Sustainable Internationalization." This approach ensures that global engagement directly fuels local development, and that local, high-impact solutions are given the international platform and visibility they deserve. Ultimately, global ranking frameworks like QS, THE, UI GreenMetric, and WURI should not be viewed merely as tables of competition or vanity metrics, but as powerful diagnostic instruments and strategic roadmaps. Navigating the ranking ecosystem strategically, whether through Prestige, Niche

Excellence, or Holistic Development, enables higher education institutions to pursue meaningful reforms, build global research partnerships, secure sustainable funding, and provide high quality education with global relevance. For higher education institutions in developing nations like the Philippines, this strategic synergy offers a unified, future-ready vision, ensuring that they can stand proud on the global stage while remaining deeply rooted in their service to society.

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