

RESEARCH REPORTS

## **Sustainability in Tourism Higher Education: Perspectives of Academics and Students, Pedagogical Approaches, and Institutional Priorities in a Neoliberal Context**

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**ABSTRACT** *This article investigates how sustainability education is conceptualised and implemented in tourism education at the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Studies (FHTS) of the Maldives National University. In this context, sustainability is significant yet underexplored in academic literature. This research utilized qualitative case study methodology, grounded in social constructionism and critical theory to investigate the perceptions and experiences of academics and students on Education for Sustainability (EfS). Data were generated via document analysis, semi-structured interviews with tourism academics and students, and classroom observations. The findings indicate that while individual commitment among faculty members is strong, there is a perceived absence of clear, long-term policy direction and insufficient institutional support for EfS. Students, on the other hand, appreciate the current focus on sustainability but call for more interactive and contextually relevant learning experiences. The tourism curriculum at FHTS includes sustainability content, notably in the Sustainable Tourism Development module. However, traditional pedagogical approaches limit opportunities for students to develop critical sustainability competencies. The study identifies tensions between neoliberal influences driving institutional priorities and the transformative pedagogies required for effective sustainability education. These findings emphasise the need for more integrated approaches to sustainability in tourism higher education, particularly in the context of Maldives where tourism development has a direct impact on environmental and social sustainability.*

**Keywords:** *Sustainable Tourism Education, Pedagogical Approach, Neoliberalism, Small-Island Developing States*

### **Introduction**

The Maldives has experienced remarkable national development over the past 50 years, driven mainly by the expansion of its tourism industry. This growth has brought significant economic and social benefits, including the development of infrastructure and higher living standards. However, like many Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the Maldives faces the ongoing challenge of balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability and social equity (Mohamed et al., 2019; Scheyvens, 2011; Waseema, 2017). While tourism has been a catalyst for development, it is acknowledged that the industry's rapid expansion has placed pressure on the delicate Maldivian environment. The Maldivian government, through processes such as Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) overseen by the Ministry of Tourism and the Environmental Protection Agency, aims to

mitigate these impacts and ensure responsible development (Waseema, 2017).

Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the distribution of economic benefits within the tourism industry necessitates careful consideration. The traditional 'enclave' tourism model, while initially successful, has limitations in terms of maximising local economic linkages and opportunities. To address this, the government has encouraged the development of guesthouses on inhabited islands, with the goal of diversifying the tourism industry and increasing economic participation. The difficulties associated with local employment within resorts, such as the need to improve skills and address cultural concerns about female participation, are acknowledged (Laidey & Imthinan, 2024). Efforts are underway to increase the capacity of Maldivian service providers and create more inclusive job opportunities (Ibrahim et al., 2024). A pressing challenge for hospitality and tourism education is to provide future professionals with the tools they need to reconcile neoliberal economic paradigms with the unique environmental vulnerabilities and social aspirations of Maldives. This study explores how sustainability education is framed and enacted within tourism higher education at FHTS, Maldives National University. The overarching research question asks: in what ways do academics, students, and institutional structures conceptualise and implement Education for Sustainability (EfS) within the context of tourism higher education? To address this, the study pursues three objectives: (i) Examine how academics and students conceptualise sustainability and EfS in relation to tourism, (ii) analyse the pedagogical approaches employed and their impact on students' development of sustainability competencies, and (iii) investigate how institutional priorities shape the integration of sustainability in the curriculum.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review examines the complex relationship between neoliberal ideologies and the pursuit of sustainability, specifically in the context of tourism and education. It begins by exploring the broader implications of neoliberalism for sustainability and environmental policies. Next, the implications of neoliberalism on education are reviewed. It then examines the specific sustainability challenges faced by the Maldives tourism industry and concludes with a review of the existing literature on sustainability education within tourism and hospitality.

#### **The Implications of Neoliberalism for Sustainability and Environmental Policies**

Sustainability faces significant challenges in a neoliberal environment, where market-driven ideologies dominate political and economic practices. According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism promotes individual entrepreneurial freedom, property rights, free markets, and free trade as the most effective ways to improve human well-being. However, this economic model poses a threat to sustainability by diverting capital and resources from public sectors to private enterprises. This has implications for social programmes such as public education and environmental regulation (Cachelin et al., 2015). In other words, neoliberal policies prioritise economic growth and consumption over social and environmental concerns (Cocklin & Stubbs, 2008).

The neoliberal ideology advocates limited government intervention and sees markets as the ultimate regulator of economic and social life. This approach

supports privatisation, deregulation, and the removal of trade barriers, often at the expense of environmental protections, labour regulations, and social welfare programmes (Evans, 2011). While liberalisation aims to enhance economic productivity, it frequently leads to job losses, wealth inequality, and the erosion of sovereign powers to enforce environmental and labour laws. The failure of markets to address environmental issues, such as climate change, highlights the inadequacy of neoliberalism in addressing sustainability challenges (Greenwood et al., 2015). Instead of promoting systemic change, neoliberal policies present environmental crises as opportunities for technological innovation and profit-making, further embedding market-based solutions into environmentalism (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004).

To address these challenges, capitalism must be reimagined by balancing market forces with democratic governance and a strong civil society (Henderson, 2021). In this regard, corporations should shift their focus away from maximising shareholder value to solving public problems profitably. Furthermore, rebuilding institutions that regulate the economy is essential for promoting just and sustainable societies. However, the entanglement of environmentalism with neoliberal ideologies complicates this transformation. For example, free market environmentalism, such as tradeable emission permits (which allow polluters to buy the right to emit greenhouse gases) and utility privatisation (which transfers environmental services from public to private control), has aided the expansion of neoliberalism rather than challenging its dominance (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004).

### **Impact Of Neoliberalism on Education**

Neoliberalism influences education by presenting it as a market-driven enterprise. Adhikary (2014) contends that education, within the context of neoliberal ideology, becomes a commodity designed to generate human capital for economic growth rather than promoting socio-political change. As such, this perspective shifts the focus of education policy from the teaching and learning process to measurable outcomes, encouraging transmissive rather than transformative pedagogies. Research shows that higher education institutions are not exempt from neoliberal influences. Critics argue that universities have increasingly adopted business-like models, prioritising financial efficiency, strategic planning, and market competitiveness over traditional academic values (Bessant et al., 2015; Jickling & Wals, 2008).

According to Farrell (2018), this commodification of education positions students and researchers as human capital, undermining academic identity and freedom. Research from New Zealand, Indonesia, and Australia shows the negative effects of neoliberal governance on academic workload, well-being, and the broader mission of universities (Miller, 2015; Gaus & Hall, 2015). Despite these challenges, there is a need for education to empower individuals as agents of sustainable development, promoting human rights, gender equality, global citizenship, and cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2018). Achieving these goals requires a transformative approach to education that encourages critical thinking, collaboration, and social responsibility. Furthermore, restoring academic freedom and reorienting education towards sustainability are essential steps in countering the adverse effects of neoliberalism and building a more equitable and sustainable

future (Taylor, 2017).

### **Sustainability Challenges and Market-Based Solutions**

As a nation reliant on its natural environment for tourism, the Maldives faces unique challenges in balancing economic growth with environmental preservation (Mohamed et al., 2019; Scheyvens, 2011; Waseema, 2017). In the Maldives, pollution and carbon emissions from tourism-related activities, including air travel, marine transportation, and resort operations, pose significant negative externalities at the local level. Several studies have examined market-based mechanisms for addressing sustainability challenges. Miller and Vela (2013) found that environmental taxation serves as an effective policy instrument for promoting sustainable practices. Their research demonstrated that fiscal measures targeting carbon-intensive activities, particularly those related to transport and energy consumption, can successfully incentivise businesses to adopt environmentally responsible alternatives. Miller and Vela (2013) also found a significant correlation between the implementation of environmental taxes and both decreased fossil fuel dependency as well as increased investment in renewable energy infrastructure. This suggests that fiscal policies targeting externalities can play an important role in advancing environmental sustainability in the tourism industry.

Several authors have critiqued prevailing approaches to sustainability in the tourism industry that mainly focus on mitigating negative externalities while maintaining profit-driven objectives. Grant and McGhee (2020) suggest that higher education institutions play a crucial role in fostering a “sustainability-as-flourishing” mindset among future tourism professionals, encouraging a paradigm shift towards addressing the root causes of sustainability challenges rather than merely managing their symptoms (p.1036). McPhail (2013) argues that comprehensive educational reform is necessary to move beyond traditional “business as usual” frameworks and advocates for tourism curricula that extend beyond traditional corporate social responsibility concepts to include critical sustainability aspects, such as human rights advocacy and community empowerment initiatives.

### **Sustainability In Tourism and Hospitality Education**

Sustainability remains a critical issue in tourism and hospitality education, with increasing recognition of the need to integrate EfS into curricula. However, the extent and effectiveness of EfS integration across different higher education systems vary significantly. While some institutions embed sustainability across multiple courses, others approach it as a stand-alone subject, creating inconsistencies in how students engage with sustainability concepts (Berjokkina & Melanthiou, 2021; Boyle, 2015).

Boyle (2015) found that Australian tourism curricula lack explicit EfS competencies, with academics demonstrating sustainability practices in their daily lives but struggling to systematically integrate these practices into the curriculum. A review of Japanese tourism course syllabi revealed that teaching sustainable event practises is not a priority, with only three courses nationwide addressing sustainable tourism events, and none of these offered at top-ranked universities (Handler & Tan, 2022). Similarly, Chawla (2015) reported that British universities have made progress in incorporating sustainability but still face significant fragmentation. The tendency to approach sustainability narrowly through environmental management

rather than through a holistic framework encompassing social, economic, and cultural dimensions further exacerbates this issue.

Conceptual models such as the Sustainability Knowledge, Education, and Industry (SKEI) model offer frameworks for linking students' sustainability knowledge, engagement, and career intentions (Kim, 2025). These models highlight the importance of enhancing students' knowledge and engagement as a means to foster their commitment to sustainable careers. Despite growing recognition of the need for EfS in tourism education, significant challenges remain in achieving more consistent and transformative integration. Addressing these challenges will require institutional support, greater interdisciplinary collaboration, and the development of innovative pedagogical approaches that prioritise critical thinking, active citizenship, and experiential learning.

### **Students' Perceptions and Engagement with Sustainability**

Studies have identified a gap between students' perceived importance of sustainability for their career prospects and their self-reported interest and perceived knowledge in this domain (Sharma & Srivastava, 2021; Zizka, 2018). Consequently, researchers have advocated for the implementation of more engaging and participatory pedagogical approaches, such as experiential learning, field trips, role-playing, and interactive methods, to enhance student involvement (Boyle, 2015; Teruel-Serrano & Viñals, 2020). However, the limited accessibility of these opportunities, especially within online learning environments, presents challenges to the successful integration of EfS. Furthermore, research indicates that gender and other demographic variables significantly influence students' sustainability-related attitudes and behaviours, with female students generally exhibiting more positive environmental attitudes and greater sustainability knowledge (Fuchs et al., 2024). Additionally, Çiçek et al. (2024) found that students' ecological citizenship is significantly influenced by family dynamics, educational experiences, and social media exposure, highlighting the role of broader societal factors in developing sustainability mindsets.

### **The Role of Industry Partnerships and Interdisciplinary Collaboration**

The role of industry partnerships and interdisciplinary collaboration has been identified as a critical strategy for enhancing sustainability education. Research indicates that engaging with industry professionals and integrating sustainability into all core courses can provide students with practical insights and a more comprehensive understanding of global sustainability challenges (Sharma & Srivastava, 2021; Boley, 2011). Moreover, collaboration with other academic disciplines, such as geography, ecology, and urban planning, can further enrich sustainability education by exposing students to diverse epistemological perspectives (Boley, 2011). Meanwhile, recent studies advocate for a shift towards more transformative and action-oriented approaches to EfS (Fernández-Villarán, 2024). Notably, Farsari (2022) emphasises the importance of citizenship education and community-based learning, while Prince (2020) calls for a move away from managerial solutions in favour of critical, reflective, and participatory approaches. Furthermore, incorporating ecocentric methodologies such as learning with nature, storytelling, and heritage interpretation can foster deeper emotional connections between students and the environment, promoting a stronger sense of

environmental responsibility (Teruel-Serrano & Viñals, 2020).

### **Methodology**

A qualitative case study approach was utilised to explore how sustainability education is conceptualised and implemented within tourism higher education. A qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study as sustainability is a complex and multi-dimensional concept with varied interpretations and practices (Besong & Holland, 2015; Jickling & Wals, 2008). The research was framed within social constructionism, recognising that participants' understanding of sustainability is socially constructed through their interactions with natural and social environments. Critical theory further informed the research approach, enabling the examination of how neoliberal forces impact tourism education and sustainable development in the Maldivian context.

### **Data Collection Methods**

*Content analysis:* A qualitative content analysis was conducted on institutional documents including the University Strategic Plans (2013-2017 and 2020-2025), course structures of undergraduate tourism programmes, and course outlines. Particular attention was paid to the Sustainable Tourism Development module offered in the Bachelor of Tourism program. Documents were analysed to identify how EfS is embedded within the tourism curriculum and to explore how institutional priorities impact the integration of sustainability education in tourism higher education.

*In-depth-interview:* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourism academics and final-year tourism students. A total of five academics and five students participated in the interviews. The interviews explored participants' understanding of sustainability, their perceptions of sustainable tourism, and their experiences with sustainability education. Interview questions were guided by the research objectives while remaining flexible enough to allow participants to contribute insights beyond the predetermined topics.

*Classroom-observations:* Two extended teaching sessions in the tourism programme were observed to gain contextual understanding of classroom dynamics and teaching approaches, complementing the data gathered through document analysis and interviews. Detailed field notes captured the physical settings, classroom arrangements, discussions, and interactions between lecturers and students.

### **Sampling Strategy**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide insights into sustainability education within tourism higher education. For academics, selection criteria included having taught for three or more years and involvement in tourism courses that addressed sustainability. Final-year undergraduate tourism students were selected to ensure they had sufficient exposure to the full curriculum and could reflect on their educational experiences comprehensively.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), with analysis beginning during the data collection process. Interview transcripts



and observational field notes were repeatedly read, with key themes identified inductively. The analysis focused on how participants conceptualised sustainability in tourism, the pedagogical approaches used to teach sustainable tourism, and the challenges and opportunities for sustainability education. Particular attention was paid to the tensions between neoliberal values and sustainability principles in tourism education.

### Findings

The findings are organised around the three research objectives that guided this study, presenting perspectives from both academics and students at the FHTS on sustainability and EfS within tourism higher education.

#### Academics' Conceptualisations of Sustainability and EfS

Academics at FHTS demonstrated understanding of sustainability that extends beyond environmental concerns, embracing the triple bottom line approach. A senior academic conceptualised sustainability as

*"Maintaining for the long term, to have a long-term direction within the context of the tourism industry" (A4).*

One academic emphasised the comprehensive nature of sustainability:

*"it's in three different dimensions, economic, environmental and even in the society we have a lot of social problems nowadays" (A5).*

Two senior academics emphasised sustainability as a commitment to a long-term and holistic approach encompassing environmental, social, and economic factors, positioning it as essential for the tourism industry's future viability. Academics also conceptualised sustainability within the specific context of Maldivian tourism challenges. They identified critical issues including the disconnect between tourism development and local communities, where few locals are employed in resort operations. Environmental concerns were also central to academics' conceptualisation of sustainability, particularly regarding waste management practices. For instance, academics described how resort kitchens generate significant waste, with cooking oil often improperly disposed of, and resort waste being discharged into the ocean. However, they noted that local communities remain silent on these issues due to fear of losing employment opportunities.

A tourism lecturer demonstrated broader understanding of EfS, explaining:

*"Education is important because I think this is how people really learn about these (sustainability) issues...education is how we really go in-depth". (A1)*

#### Students' Conceptualisations of Sustainability and EfS

Student perspectives on sustainability varied considerably. One student defined sustainability as: *"taking something to the future like what we have now passing it to the future generation"*.

Some students adopted environmental conceptualisations, relating sustainability directly with environmental protection. Others embraced economic perspectives, viewing sustainable futures as requiring increased income, equitable wealth distribution, and greater local employment opportunities. Students demonstrated

awareness of industry-specific sustainability challenges. One student expressed concerns about exceeding natural carrying capacity:

*“We don’t need all the uninhabited islands, all those lagoons, everything to be used up for tourism. To become sustainable, you should make the locals and the industry in harmony” (S1).*

However, some students revealed limitations in their conceptualisation of individual agency. One student acknowledged:

*“I will contribute as much as I can, but on a wider scale, I may not be able to do, because I am not in a decision-making position” (S2).*

This indicates that while sustainability education fostered awareness, it did not always translate into a sense of empowerment or clear understanding of how to enact change. Students also conceptualised sustainability through governance and policy lenses, raising concerns about conflicts of interest in tourism legislation and poor implementation of mandated policies, such as the 55% local workforce requirement. While students demonstrated basic sustainability awareness, they showed limited understanding of EfS as a pedagogical approach.

### **Curricular Integration and Pedagogical Approaches**

Academics and students acknowledged the comprehensive nature of sustainability content delivery within the tourism management programme. One academic described the in-depth coverage of the three pillars of sustainability:

*“We teach about the three pillars of sustainability in a lot of depth. About the impacts of tourism and poverty and how we can alleviate poverty and make sure that everyone gets the benefits of tourism” (A4).*

Similarly, a students observed that their tourism management course seemed to emphasise the importance of sustainability focus:

*“Tourism management, I think focuses more on sustainability than any other course... the trend is changing in tourism, so sustainability is really taken into account” (S5).*

Despite these perceptions, a review of curriculum reveals that at FHTS, sustainability education is mainly delivered through the “Sustainable Tourism Development” (TRS107) module in the first semester of the tourism management programme. This module demonstrates a comprehensive coverage of sustainability principles, addressing environmental, social, and economic dimensions through topics ranging from mass tourism impacts to biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. The curriculum specifically emphasises local contextualisation, with tutorials focusing on Maldivian tourism challenges and requiring students to apply theoretical frameworks to domestic scenarios. The module employs traditional assessment methods: 40% assignment, 20% presentation, and 40% final examination, emphasising theoretical frameworks and conventional evaluation approaches. However, as part of their coursework, students in this course conducted a study on the corporate social responsibility and sustainability measures implemented in several tourist resorts in the Maldives. By engaging in such inquiry-based learning activities, students have the opportunity to explore and discover knowledge on their own, which fosters critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities.



*“The lecturers encourage us to participate, to talk, to ask questions and sometimes answer when they ask the questions to check our knowledge level. Later, we are assessed through exams on how much we know the topic, so knowledge wise of course MNU has taught me many things like corporate social responsibility and how to spread awareness” (S2).*

Furthermore, FHTS provides internships to selected students where they learn about sustainable practices in tourist resorts. One student described the sustainability initiatives implemented in one of the Maldives’ most renowned resorts:

*“There is reef clean ups and single use plastic bottles and straws are banned in the resort plus the hot water that you get are actually heated from the heat from the sun so the energy is completely renewable” (S16).*

#### Gaps between preferred and actual pedagogical approaches

The findings reveal a disconnect between the lecturers’ preference for interactive, practice-based teaching and the reality of a curriculum reliant on theory. One lecturer described her pedagogy:

*“I try to include as many practical things as possible but with this module it’s a little bit difficult because it’s a lot of theory involved...most of the time I try to discuss with my students. We have debates in the class about the impacts of tourism” (A2).*

Classroom observations revealed pedagogical limitations that may constrain the development of sustainability competencies. During an observed lesson on biodiversity, the lecturer employed traditional transmission methods, with field notes indicating: “Throughout the lesson lecturer asked only knowledge level questions yet there was little input from students” and “Direct teaching one way flow of information from lecture to students.” Despite the lecturer’s evident passion for the subject, the observation documented limited student engagement, with students unable to provide clear definitions when asked about biodiversity, and “No response from students” when opportunities for questions arose. Teaching methods observed were largely lecture-based, relying on PowerPoint presentations.

This approach prioritises knowledge transmission over interactive learning, potentially limiting the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills essential for addressing sustainability issues.

Meanwhile, students expressed enthusiasm for group discussions and collaborative activities:

*I prefer Interactive lessons definitely, I am someone who talks a lot, so I like interactive ones which involves group of students and the teacher like sharing ideas” (S1).*

One lecturer noted that discussion-based and practical teaching methods are more engaging and effective for students, yet these approaches were not consistently implemented:

*“Sometimes I stop mid lecture just to start a discussion with them because I feel they are zoning out” (A2).*

Classroom observations further revealed disconnection between curriculum

content and local context. Field notes from the observation indicated that lecture materials largely presented general information rather than content specific to Maldives, suggesting breadth rather depth (classroom Observation A3). This contradiction between intended curriculum and actual delivery exemplifies the gap between policy intentions and classroom practice. Additionally, observations highlighted contradictions between sustainability education and daily practices within the learning environment itself. Field notes documented one student brought a single use plastic water bottle, plastic bag and canned drink into the classroom, suggesting limited integration of sustainability principles in everyday practices, even within sustainability-focused courses (Classroom Observation A5).

### **Influence of Pedagogical Approaches on Competency Development**

The current pedagogical approaches appear to have mixed effects on sustainability competency development. While students demonstrated awareness of sustainability concepts and challenges, they showed limited confidence in their ability to effect change. This may be due to the concentration of sustainability education in a single module, rather than integration across the curriculum. The curriculum structure reveals several competency development constraints. For example, critical thinking about sustainability issues is primarily developed through case study analysis in the sustainable tourism development module, but this approach is not sustained throughout the programme. Similarly, the development of systems thinking competencies which is essential for understanding complex sustainability challenges receive limited development beyond the foundational module. Meanwhile, strategic thinking about sustainability transformation is notably absent from higher-level strategic management courses.

One student criticised this limitation:

*“For example, sustainability was not included in our assignments. It could have been much better if our assignments focused on how sustainable practices can be implemented in a certain island, resorts, or guest house” (S3).*

Some academics also recognised this limitation, believing that sustainability competencies would be more effectively developed if every course integrated sustainability principles rather than confining discussion to a single module.

### **Institutional Priorities and their Impact on Sustainability Education Integration**

Analysis of MNU strategic plans reveals a gradual evolution in sustainability emphasis. The 2013-2017 plan focused primarily on energy management and environmental awareness (Goal 8, strategy 6). Meanwhile, the 2020-2025 plan demonstrates more comprehensive integration, aiming to leverage university strengths and resources to find and promote innovative and sustainable solutions to national and stakeholder needs and community challenges (MNU, 2020).

Despite strategic commitments, significant gaps exist between institutional priorities and practical implementation. The university’s sustainability policies, including comprehensive corporate social responsibility policies, remain in developmental stages:

*“MNU is still at infancy stage...I know that sustainable practices and CSR policy*

*should come but its taking time” (A1).*

The lack of faculty-specific sustainability plans creates challenges for effective integration. Academics demonstrate personal commitment to sustainability but face institutional constraints that limit their ability to implement sustainability education:

*“Although I may have certain goals or certain things that I want to do for the faculty, who knows there are lot of restrictions for you to exercise these things” (A4).*

Budget limitations further constrain sustainability initiatives:

*“We have organised so many things, I mean among our students and staff as well doing ‘green days’ and a variety of things despite having zero budgetary allocation” (A4).*

Resource constraints impact lecturers’ pedagogical choice. One lecturer explained:

*“It’s not easy to take fifty students on field trips here and then we are here from morning till twelve noon undertaking classes so it’s not easy for us to take the students on field trips” (A5).*

Institutional priorities remain heavily influenced by immediate industry needs. The curriculum is described as ‘industry oriented’, with the primary objective of equipping graduates with skills demanded by tourism employers:

*“The faculty itself we are very skill-based, and we know exactly what the industry is looking for from our faculty” (A3).*

While this ensures employment readiness, it may limit the integration of broader sustainability perspectives that extend beyond immediate industry requirements.

Despite institutional limitations, some academics demonstrate commitment to sustainability education beyond formal requirements. One academic noted:

*“I try a lot to pass this to the students even though this does not come under any of our module, curriculum or objectives” (A2).*

This suggests that while institutional priorities may not fully support comprehensive sustainability integration, individual academic agency plays a crucial role in promoting sustainability education within existing constraints.

## **Discussion**

This study examined the integration of EfS within tourism and hospitality education at the Maldives National University (MNU), revealing a complex interplay between neoliberal influences, sustainability imperatives, and educational practices. The findings highlight several important tensions and opportunities that merit further discussion.

### **Neoliberal Constraints on Sustainability Education**

The research findings reveal tensions between neoliberal influences and comprehensive sustainability education. The fact that academics claim their courses are industry-oriented and focused on meeting employers’ skill needs suggests that the FHTS appears to prioritise industry needs over transformative sustainability education. The result is a curriculum that is mostly business-centric and places

sustainability behind profit-driven goals, echoing the concerns raised by Grant and McGhee (2020). This finding aligns with the critique that neoliberalism reframes education as primarily serving economic growth rather than promoting socio-political change (Adhikary's, 2014). The interviews with students further shed light on this tension. While students recognise the importance of environmental conservation for the Maldivian tourism industry, their perspectives often reflect market-based considerations. For instance, students' justification of food waste as an unavoidable consequence of operating in the premium tourism market exemplifies how neoliberal values can shape perceptions of sustainability challenges. This finding supports the notion that environmental concerns have become entangled with market logics, potentially limiting the scope for transformative change (McCarthy & Prudham, 2004).

Academics and students admit that tourism development in the Maldives has sometimes overlooked environmental and social considerations, leading to issues such as inadequate waste management and the marginalisation of local communities. This reinforces the argument that neoliberal policies, while promoting rapid economic growth, often lead to environmental degradation and social inequality (Harvey, 2005).

### **Institutional and Structural Barriers**

The research identifies institutional barriers to the effective implementation of education for sustainability at FHTS. For instance, academics reported operating with "zero budget" for sustainability initiatives and noted the university's "infancy stage" in developing comprehensive sustainability policies. This reflects the broader impact of neoliberalism on higher education described by Bessant et al. (2015) and Jickling and Wals (2008), where market pressures and financial constraints often undermine academic values and educational mission. While individual commitment among faculty members is strong, there is a perceived lack of clear, long-term policy direction and adequate institutional support for sustainability initiatives. This gap hinders the effective implementation of comprehensive sustainability education and practices, echoing broader concerns about the need for regulatory frameworks and institutionalised CSR policies. The lack of faculty-specific sustainability plans, despite the existence of university-wide strategic frameworks, further highlights the disconnect between institutional rhetoric and operational practice. Structural issues within the tourism industry further complicate sustainability education. Students' observations about weak implementation of local employment regulations and potential conflicts of interest in tourism governance highlight how power imbalances can undermine sustainability efforts. These findings correspond with Scheyvens' (2011) concerns about the challenges of balancing economic growth with environmental preservation in tourism-dependent economies, like the Maldives.

### **Pedagogical Approaches and their Limitations**

The findings reveal a disconnect between students' preferred learning experiences and actual teaching methods. Although students prefer interactive, discussion-oriented learning, interviews and classroom observations indicate a predominance of traditional lecture-based instruction. This approach, focusing on knowledge transmission rather than critical engagement, limits opportunities for developing

the complex thinking skills necessary for addressing sustainability challenges.

This gap between aspirational and actual pedagogical practices highlights the fragmented integration of sustainability in tourism curricula observed by Boyle (2015) and Chawla (2015) in other national contexts.

The confinement of sustainability to a dedicated module rather than its integration across the curriculum represents another limitation. This compartmentalisation reflects the narrow environmental management approach to sustainability that Chawla (2015) identified as problematic, rather than a holistic framework that includes social, economic, and cultural dimensions. A significant finding from this research concerns students' sense of agency in contributing to sustainability reforms. One student's statement that he is willing to contribute as much as he can, but on a wider scale, he may be unable to do, because he is not in a decision-making position, reveals a limitation in current sustainability education approaches. This perceived powerlessness suggests that while EfS may successfully create awareness and theoretical understanding, it does not instil confidence in students' capacity to effect meaningful change. Student comments highlight the need for a more integrated strategy that moves beyond mere awareness to active empowerment and critical engagement, in line with calls for transformative educational approaches (UNESCO, 2018; Taylor, 2017).

### **Gender Dimensions and Cultural Contexts**

An important finding is the gendered aspect of sustainability engagement. The focus of female academics on sustainability leadership corresponds with previous findings regarding gender disparities in sustainability involvement (Fuchs et al., 2024). However, cultural barriers to women's employment in resorts, along with the social issues resulting from male-dominated labour movement to resorts, highlight how neoliberal tourism frameworks exacerbate gender-based disparities. As noted by one academic, that local islands are *"left with only women and children, leading to many social issues,"* revealing the profound social consequences of current tourism development models. FHTS's involvement in contesting these norms through awareness campaigns and public participation may establish the university as a catalyst for inclusive growth, reconciling global sustainability discussions with local cultural contexts. This potential role aligns with broader scholarly calls for transformative and action-oriented approaches to sustainability in tourism higher education (Prince, 2020; Farsari, 2022).

### **Potential for Transformative Education**

Despite these challenges, the findings indicate promising avenues for more transformative approaches to sustainability education. For instance, inquiry-based learning activities, such as studies on corporate social responsibility at local resorts, align with the recommendations for more engaging and participatory pedagogical approaches (Teruel-Serrano & Viñals, 2020). Similarly, internships that provide hands-on experience with sustainable practices offer valuable opportunities for experiential learning, which are effective in fostering student engagement with sustainability concepts (Boyle, 2015). Several participating academics demonstrated a personal commitment to sustainability education, despite institutional constraints. They incorporated sustainability principles even when they were not included in the curriculum objectives. This commitment

suggests the potential for more transformative and action-oriented approaches to EfS (Fernández-Villarán, 2024).

The overwhelming consensus among students regarding environmental protection demonstrate a growing awareness of the complex relationship between ecological conservation and sustainable tourism in the Maldives. This recognition aligns with contemporary sustainable tourism discourse that emphasises the preservation of natural resources as fundamental to long-term economic viability rather than viewing conservation and development as competing interests. Particularly noteworthy was students' concerns regarding carrying capacity, which represents a clear understanding that sustainability extends beyond mere environmental protection to encompass the delicate balance between development, local community interests, and ecological preservation. Furthermore, students' critical comments on industry practices, such as questioning resort waste management approaches, indicate an emerging capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving that is essential for addressing sustainability challenges (McPhail, 2013).

### **Reimagining Tourism Education in a Neoliberal Context**

The findings highlight the need to reimagine tourism education in ways that balance industry relevance with critical sustainability perspectives. To this end, FHTS could provide students with a framework of values and ethics that emphasises environmental and social wellbeing alongside profitability (Morand, 2012). Specifically, by incorporating sustainability throughout tourism and hospitality curricula, students can become advocates for sustainable practices within their organisations once they enter the workforce (Bridges & Wilhelm, 2008). Furthermore, a holistic approach to sustainability education, blending EfS with entrepreneurship training, can equip future leaders in the tourism industry with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to promote sustainable business practices (Strachan, 2018). Given that the tourism sector continues to be a cornerstone of the Maldivian economy, a reorientation toward more inclusive and environmentally responsible practices is imperative. This necessitates not only curricular reform but also strategic partnerships between academia, industry stakeholders, and local communities to foster sustainable development that benefits all sectors of society.

### **Conclusion & Recommendation**

This study reveals a complex landscape where both academic and student perspectives highlight the challenges of integrating sustainability into tourism higher education. The research identified institutional barriers hindering effective EfS implementation, including budgetary constraints, limited policy direction, and insufficient structural support. This research emphasises the need to address policy shortcomings and environmental mismanagement while also advocating for a more integrated approach to sustainability education. While acknowledging the current emphasis on sustainability, this research suggests the need for more interactive, and contextually relevant learning experiences in EfS. The curriculum should incorporate local case studies highlighting both successful initiatives and ongoing challenges within Maldivian tourism, addressing issues such as waste management, community integration, gender equity, and carrying capacity. Together, these insights highlight an urgent need to bridge the gap between industry-oriented



teaching and the broader sustainability imperatives that are crucial for sustainable tourism development in the Maldives.

Moving forward, it is essential to continue strengthening policies and practices that promote sustainable tourism, ensuring that the benefits of this vital industry are shared equitably and that the natural beauty of the Maldives is preserved for future generations. Future research should focus on developing and evaluating the effectiveness of transformative pedagogies in the Maldivian context, as well as exploring strategies for enhancing industry partnerships and community engagement to promote sustainable tourism practices. By addressing these challenges, the Maldives can leverage its tourism industry to achieve a more just and sustainable future.

### **Limitations**

As with all case studies, the findings of this research are specific to the context of MNU and the Maldivian tourism sector. However, this in-depth exploration provides insights that may be applicable to similar contexts, in particular other Small Island Developing States with tourism-dependent economies.

### **Declaration**

This research was conducted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Data collection was conducted following approval from the University of Canterbury's Educational Research Human Ethics Committee and the MNU Research Ethics Committee (2018/54/ERHEC).

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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