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Sustainability Performance Differences between Public and Private Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether the Sustainability Performance of Indonesian higher education institutions registered in UI GreenMetric differs significantly between public universities and private universities. Utilizing a comparative quantitative design, the research analyzes a population of 196 institutions, comprising 104 public and 92 private universities. After conducting Shapiro Wilk normality tests, the study applied the Mann Whitney U test, supported by Welch's independent samples t test, to evaluate the overall sustainability scores across six sub dimensions. The findings reveal that public universities scored significantly higher than private universities on the aggregate sustainability score as well as across all six sub dimensions: Setting and Infrastructure, Energy and Climate Change, Waste, Water, Transportation, and Education and Research, with the narrowest gap observed in Education and Research. Theoretically and practically, this study extends prior sustainability reporting research by introducing institutional status as a comparative lens grounded in institutional isomorphism theory, offering new insights into structural inequalities in university sustainability. However, limitations include classifying institutional status based on the governing body rather than an official registry and relying on a single year UI GreenMetric dataset without incorporating separate sustainability report disclosure scores.

Keywords: Private Universities; Public Universities; Sustainability Performance; Sustainability Reporting; UI GreenMetric

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly regarded as key actors in advancing sustainable development, not only through teaching and research but also through the way their campuses are managed (Alonso et al., 2015; Helfaya et al., 2023). As universities are hubs of economic, technological, and social knowledge development, they have increasingly adopted metric based strategies to guide resource management and monitor institutional growth toward the United Nations Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (Domingos et al., 2024). Superior Sustainability Performance (SP) has, as a result, become an important source of institutional legitimacy, prestige, and competitiveness among universities (Sassen et al., 2022). In Indonesia, the UI GreenMetric World University Ranking has become the most widely used benchmark for assessing university sustainability, evaluating institutions across six dimensions: Setting and Infrastructure, Energy and Climate Change, Waste, Water, Transportation, and Education and Research. Since its founding by Universitas Indonesia, this ranking has been adopted by universities worldwide as a practical and transparent framework not only for external benchmarking but also for internal environmental management planning (Tiyarattanachai & Hollmann, 2016). What began as a domestic initiative has grown into a global sustainability network spanning universities across dozens of countries, with participating institutions using the ranking's six category structure to diagnose specific operational weaknesses, from water reuse efficiency to campus transportation emissions, rather than relying on generic sustainability rhetoric. Beyond providing a comparative score, participation in UI GreenMetric has been shown to shape institutional behavior directly: universities that adopt its six category framework tend to translate abstract sustainability commitments into concrete, auditable indicators, ranging from campus energy consumption to water reuse targets, that can be tracked over time (Domingos et al., 2024). This operational specificity is part of what distinguishes UI GreenMetric from purely narrative sustainability disclosures and is one reason the ranking has attracted sustained academic interest as a measurable proxy for institutional sustainability performance. Recent research on Indonesian HEIs has examined how the disclosure of Sustainability Reports (SR), guided by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework, affects Sustainability Performance. Fitriani and Sari (2025), analyzing 138 Indonesian universities registered in UI GreenMetric, found that the general and environmental dimensions of SR disclosure, as well as aggregate SR disclosure, significantly improved SP, while the economic and social dimensions did not. However, that study treated all universities as a single homogeneous population, without accounting for a fundamental structural distinction that separates Indonesian HEIs: institutional ownership status, namely public (Perguruan Tinggi Negeri/PTN) versus private (Perguruan Tinggi Swasta/PTS) institutions. This distinction matters conceptually. PTN institutions are funded through the state budget (APBN), bound by government strategic mandates, key performance indicators, and accreditation requirements, and are directly supervised by national regulators. PTS institutions, in contrast, are managed by private foundations (yayasan) and rely heavily on tuition revenue, positioning their sustainability efforts within a more market and reputation driven logic. According to institutional isomorphism theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), organizations operating under stronger coercive pressures from a regulator, and with greater access to resources, tend to converge more readily toward the mandated standard of practice than organizations facing predominantly mimetic or normative pressures. This suggests that PTN and PTS institutions may systematically differ in their sustainability performance, independent of their SR disclosure behavior. This reasoning is not confined to the higher education sector. Comparable evidence from the corporate sector shows that ownership structure shapes both the quantity and quality of sustainability related behavior. Using data from Chinese A share heavily polluting firms, Long et al. (2022) found that state owned equity significantly improves the level of

corporate environmental information disclosure, even though this influence is concentrated in financially oriented rather than purely descriptive disclosure. Complementing this firm level evidence, Li et al. (2025) show that private enterprises with state ownership participation exhibit significantly higher levels of environmental information disclosure and stronger sustainable development orientation than fully private firms, attributing this pattern to heightened public scrutiny and internal governance pressure associated with state involvement. A parallel pattern has also been documented outside the corporate context: in a comparative study of public and private universities in Pakistan, Iqbal et al. (2023) found that public universities scored significantly higher than private universities on both perceived quality culture and service quality, despite private universities showing a stronger internal relationship between the two constructs. Although these studies originate from different institutional settings, they converge on a consistent pattern: entities with closer ties to the state tend to exhibit stronger externally oriented accountability behavior than their private counterparts, a pattern this study investigates specifically for university sustainability performance in Indonesia. Despite the growing body of SR SP research in Indonesian HEIs (Pramono Sari et al., 2023), very few studies have empirically tested whether institutional ownership status produces a measurable gap in sustainability outcomes. This study addresses that gap by modifying the comparative focus of prior research: instead of testing the effect of SR disclosure on SP, this study directly tests for a statistically significant difference in Sustainability Performance between PTN and PTS institutions, using publicly available UI GreenMetric data. This shift in focus also reflects a practical data constraint, as GRI based SR disclosure scores are not readily available for a large cross section of Indonesian universities, whereas UI GreenMetric performance scores are transparently published for every registered institution. Accordingly, this study aims to (1) examine whether aggregate Sustainability Performance differs significantly between PTN and PTS institutions, and (2) examine whether this difference is consistent across all six UI GreenMetric sub dimensions or concentrated in specific dimensions only. Answering these questions matters beyond academic curiosity: if the sustainability performance gap between PTN and PTS institutions is confirmed and found to be broad based rather than confined to a single dimension, this would imply that structural, resource based barriers, rather than a simple lack of awareness or reporting effort, are the primary constraint facing many private universities. Conversely, if the gap is concentrated in capital intensive dimensions while narrowing in dimensions such as Education and Research, this would suggest that policy interventions targeting research collaboration, curriculum integration, and knowledge sharing between PTN and PTS institutions could be a cost effective way to close the gap without requiring large capital transfers. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically, by extending institutional isomorphism theory to the context of Indonesian higher education sustainability, and practically, by informing policy discussions on how to narrow the sustainability performance gap between public and private universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy theory explains organizational behavior as an attempt to ensure that an entity's actions are perceived as appropriate within a socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs (Ortiz Martínez et al., 2023). Universities, as social institutions dependent on public trust, demonstrate their legitimacy by fulfilling an implicit social contract with stakeholders, including students, government, and the wider community (Sun et al., 2024; Tuo et al., 2024). Prior research shows that universities actively reporting on their environmental and social performance tend to receive greater stakeholder support, which in turn strengthens their sustainability performance (Al Shaer & Hussainey, 2022; Atici et al., 2021).

Institutional Isomorphism

While legitimacy theory explains why organizations pursue sustainability performance, institutional isomorphism theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) explains why organizations facing similar institutional fields converge toward similar practices, and why some converge faster than others. Three isomorphic mechanisms are commonly identified: coercive isomorphism, arising from regulatory pressure and resource dependence; mimetic isomorphism, arising from imitation of successful peers under uncertainty; and normative isomorphism, arising from professionalization and shared standards. PTN institutions in Indonesia are subject to strong coercive pressure: they are funded by the state budget, bound by the Ministry of Higher Education's strategic plans and key performance indicators, and required to meet institutional accreditation standards that increasingly incorporate sustainability criteria. This coercive pressure is compounded by a resource advantage, as PTN institutions generally possess larger campuses, greater capital budgets, and more established research infrastructure. PTS institutions, in contrast, are governed by private foundations and are more exposed to mimetic and normative pressures, such as imitating high ranking peer universities or adhering to professional accreditation norms, but typically operate with more constrained capital resources for large scale infrastructure investment. This reasoning is consistent with evidence from the corporate sector showing that state ownership is systematically associated with different sustainability behavior than private ownership. Cross country comparisons show that state owned entities tend to disclose broader and more comprehensive sustainability information than their private counterparts, reflecting stronger public accountability obligations (Adebayo & Ackers, 2025; Li & Sasaki, 2024). Similarly, firm level studies indicate that state ownership participation is associated with higher levels of environmental information disclosure and sustainable development orientation (Li et al., 2025), even though the strength of this relationship can vary with institutional context and governance structure (Lazzarini & Musacchio, 2018; Dewenter & Malatesta, 2001). Extending this logic to the higher education sector, PTN institutions' closer resemblance to state owned entities, in terms of funding source, regulatory exposure, and public accountability, provides an additional theoretical basis to expect higher sustainability performance relative to PTS institutions. Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: There is a significant difference in aggregate Sustainability Performance between PTN and PTS institutions, with PTN institutions exhibiting higher performance.

H2: There is a significant difference between PTN and PTS institutions on each of the six UI GreenMetric sub dimensions: (a) Setting and Infrastructure, (b) Energy and Climate Change, (c) Waste, (d) Water, (e) Transportation, and (f) Education and Research.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative, causal comparative design, as institutional ownership status is a naturally occurring grouping variable rather than one manipulated by the researcher. The population comprises all Indonesian higher education institutions registered in the UI GreenMetric World University Ranking (N = 196). Each institution was classified into one of two independent groups based on its governing body: PTN (public institutions under the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Religious Affairs, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Health, or Ministry of Industry, n = 104) and PTS (private institutions under a foundation/yayasan, n = 92). The dependent variable is Sustainability Performance (SP), operationalized as the total score published by UI GreenMetric together with its six constituent sub scores: Setting and Infrastructure (SI),

Energy and Climate Change (EC), Waste (WS), Water (WR), Transportation (TR), and Education and Research (ED). The independent (grouping) variable is institutional status (PTN = 1, PTS = 0). Data were analyzed in four stages. First, descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation) were computed for each group. Second, the Shapiro Wilk test was used to assess normality within each group for every variable, in order to select an appropriate test of difference. Third, given that most variables violated the normality assumption in at least one group, the non parametric Mann Whitney U test was used as the primary test of difference, supplemented by Welch's independent samples t test (which does not assume equal variances) for comparison. Fourth, the rank biserial correlation was computed as a measure of effect size to complement statistical significance with an indication of practical magnitude. All tests were conducted at a significance level of α = 0.05.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of Sustainability Performance and its six sub dimensions for the PTN and PTS groups.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by Institutional Status (N = 196)

Construct	Group	Min.	Max.	M	SD
Sustainability Performance (Total Score)	PTN (n=104)	372.5	9262.5	5636.1	2325.9
	PTS (n=92)	785.0	8800.0	4708.2	2189.0
Setting & Infrastructure	PTN	265	1450	880.8	292.8
	PTS	95	1425	732.9	294.3
Energy & Climate Change	PTN	55	1975	1184.8	488.0
	PTS	55	1850	996.5	463.5
Waste	PTN	0	1800	916.6	495.6
	PTS	0	1800	747.8	443.9
Water	PTN	20	1000	533.9	284.2
	PTS	20	1000	426.7	275.0
Transportation	PTN	10	1725	1027.0	423.8
	PTS	10	1675	855.8	431.9
Education & Research	PTN	20	1800	1093.0	547.8
	PTS	62.5	1800	948.5	490.0

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation.

Shapiro Wilk tests indicated that the majority of variables were not normally distributed in at least one group ($p < .05$); therefore, the Mann Whitney U test was adopted as the primary test of difference, with Welch's t test reported for comparison. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2. Mann Whitney U Test Results: PTN vs. PTS

Construct	M PTN	M PTS	U	p (M W)	p (t test)	r
Sustainability Performance	5636.1	4708.2	5898.5	.005**	.005**	.23
Setting & Infrastructure	880.8	732.9	6036.5	.002**	.001**	.26
Energy & Climate Change	1184.8	996.5	5831.0	.008**	.006**	.22
Waste	916.6	747.8	5762.0	.014*	.013*	.20
Water	533.9	426.7	5813.0	.009**	.008**	.22
Transportation	1027.0	855.8	5855.5	.007**	.006**	.22
Education & Research	1093.0	948.5	5597.0	.040*	.053	.17

Note. r = rank biserial correlation (effect size). *p < .05, **p < .01.

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As shown in Table 2, PTN institutions scored significantly higher than PTS institutions on the aggregate Sustainability Performance score ($p = .005$) and on all six sub dimensions at $\alpha = .05$, with effect sizes ranging from small to moderate ($r = .17$ .26). The largest gap, both in mean difference and effect size, was observed in Setting and Infrastructure, while the smallest and only marginally significant gap was observed in Education and Research, where the Welch's t test result ($p = .053$) fell just short of conventional significance. These results provide support for H1 and H2.

Figure 1. Mean Sustainability Performance by Dimension: PTN vs. PTS

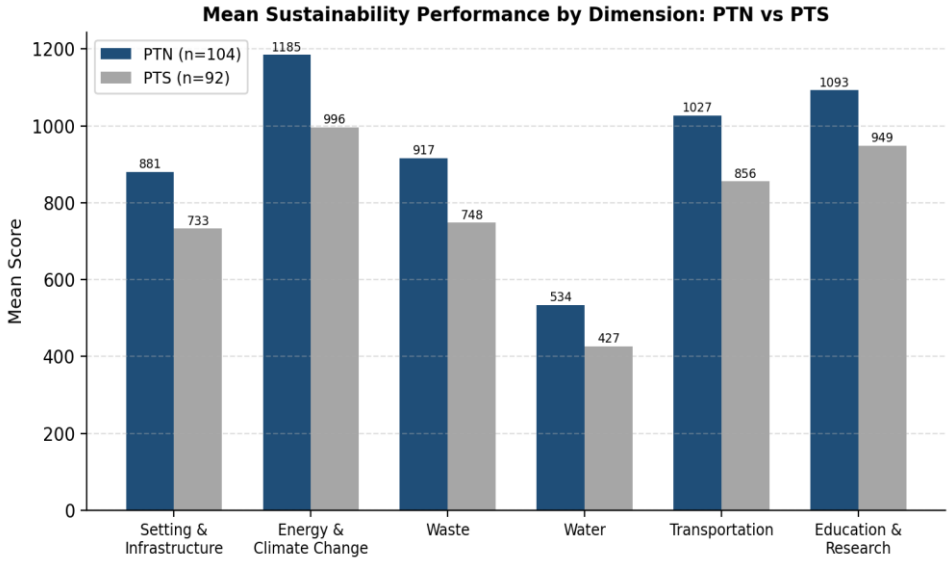


Figure 1 illustrates that the gap between PTN and PTS is visually consistent across all six dimensions, with PTN institutions outperforming PTS institutions in every category, and the widest absolute gap occurring in Energy and Climate Change.

DISCUSSION

The finding that PTN institutions significantly outperform PTS institutions across the aggregate Sustainability Performance score and all six sub dimensions is consistent with the institutional isomorphism argument advanced in this study. PTN institutions operate under stronger coercive pressure from the national regulator, including mandatory reporting obligations, accreditation criteria that increasingly weigh sustainability indicators, and strategic performance targets set by the Ministry of Higher Education. At the same time, PTN institutions typically command larger state funded capital budgets, larger campuses, and more established research infrastructure, all of which facilitate investment in the physical and managerial changes that UI GreenMetric measures.

This pattern is most visible in the Setting and Infrastructure dimension, which recorded both the largest mean difference and the largest effect size. This dimension is closely tied to capital expenditure on green space, energy efficient buildings, and campus master planning, expenditures that are structurally easier for large, state funded PTN institutions to undertake than for many small to medium PTS institutions that depend on tuition based revenue. A similar logic applies to Energy and Climate Change and Transportation, both of which require sustained capital investment in infrastructure such as renewable energy systems, low emission vehicle fleets, and pedestrian friendly campus design.

In contrast, the Education and Research dimension exhibited the weakest, only marginally significant, difference between PTN and PTS institutions. This dimension emphasizes curriculum content, research output, and community outreach related to sustainability, activities that depend less on physical capital and more on academic culture, faculty initiative, and institutional priority setting. This suggests that well resourced or reputation driven PTS institutions are able to compete with PTN institutions on dimensions where sustainability performance is decoupled from large capital investment, echoing prior findings that non financial forms of legitimacy seeking behavior can substitute for resource intensive investment (Lee & Raschke, 2023). These findings extend the SR SP literature in Indonesian higher education (Fitriani & Sari, 2025; Pramono Sari et al., 2023) by demonstrating that institutional ownership status is itself a meaningful explanatory factor for sustainability performance, independent of sustainability reporting behavior. This implies that studies modeling the relationship between sustainability reporting and sustainability performance in Indonesian HEIs should consider institutional status as a relevant control variable, or even a moderating variable, rather than assuming a homogeneous population of universities.

CONCLUSION

This study examined whether Sustainability Performance, as measured by UI GreenMetric, differs significantly between public (PTN) and private (PTS) higher education institutions in Indonesia. Using data from 196 registered institutions and non parametric comparative statistics, the results show that PTN institutions significantly outperform PTS institutions on the aggregate Sustainability Performance score and on all six UI GreenMetric sub dimensions, with the smallest and only marginal gap occurring in Education and Research. These findings support institutional isomorphism theory as a complementary lens to legitimacy theory in explaining sustainability performance differences among Indonesian universities: PTN institutions stronger regulatory exposure and greater resource endowment jointly drive higher sustainability outcomes relative to PTS institutions. The study contributes to the higher education sustainability literature by shifting the unit of comparative analysis from sustainability reporting disclosure to institutional ownership structure, offering a novel empirical account of structural inequality in university sustainability performance in a developing country context.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations. First, the dataset used does not include Sustainability Report (GRI based) disclosure scores, meaning this study could not simultaneously test the effect of SR disclosure and institutional status within a single regression model; future research is encouraged to combine this comparative design with the original SR SP regression model (Fitriani & Sari, 2025) by introducing institutional status as a moderating variable. Second, the PTS group is institutionally heterogeneous, ranging from large well established private universities to small specialized colleges, which may introduce within group variability that a simple two group comparison cannot fully capture. Finally, this study relies on a single year, cross sectional dataset; a multi year panel design would allow examination of whether the PTN PTS sustainability performance gap is converging or widening over time.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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