Sustainable Futures through Waqf: A Review of Higher Education Practices and Pathways

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions (HEIs) continue to struggle with ensuring sustainable funding to support teaching, research, and community engagement. This challenge is particularly pronounced in developing countries, where universities often depend heavily on government allocations and student tuition fees, leaving them financially vulnerable. Traditional financing models are also limited, as they frequently overlook principles of sustainability and inclusivity, which are essential for broadening equitable access to education. Against this backdrop, waqf (Islamic endowment) has gained renewed attention as an alternative model of financing. Beyond preserving Islamic heritage and values, waqf is increasingly viewed as a mechanism that can strengthen long-term institutional resilience and promote sustainable futures in higher education. This study examines the contribution of waqf to sustainable development in higher education by exploring practices, models, and pathways that support institutional sustainability. Using a Scopus-based AI-assisted review method, the research combined bibliometric mapping, summary analysis, concept mapping, expert insights, and emerging theme identification. This layered approach provided a systematic understanding of how waqf is linked to sustainability practices, educational outcomes, and innovative funding strategies in HEIs. The findings show that waqf consistently emerges as a dependable instrument for financing scholarships, supporting underprivileged students, expanding institutional resources, and fostering inclusive access to higher education. A key theme is the role of waqf-driven initiatives in integrating sustainability into university curricula. Recent discussions also point to the potential of digital platforms and artificial intelligence in improving transparency, governance, and stakeholder engagement in waqf management. Overall, the results illustrate the evolving role of waqf—from a traditional charitable practice to a strategic enabler of sustainable higher education. The study not only adds to the growing body of literature on Islamic social finance but also provides practical guidance for policymakers, waqf managers, and university leaders who are exploring innovative approaches to educational sustainability.

Keywords: Waqf, Higher Education, Sustainable Development, Islamic Social Finance and Educational Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has long been regarded as a cornerstone of human capital development, social progress, and sustainable economic growth. Yet, its role is not merely technical. It is also cultural and moral, shaping societies in ways that are often more difficult to measure. In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on quality education, higher education institutions (HEIs) are under increasing pressure to secure funding models that go beyond simply keeping the lights on. They must be sustainable, inclusive, and resilient enough to survive long-term shifts in politics, demographics, and economics (Usman & Ab Rahman, 2023).

It is worth recalling that in many Muslim-majority contexts, the waqf institution, an Islamic endowment founded on the principle of perpetual charity, has historically served as a backbone of education, healthcare, and community welfare (Mahamood & Ab Rahman, 2015). Centuries ago, it was not uncommon for entire schools, hospitals, or even towns to be maintained through waqf. One could argue that its re-emergence today is less of an innovation and more of a rediscovery, offering higher education a pathway that aligns both with sustainability values and with deeply rooted faith traditions.

Still, there is a catch. Despite this impressive history, the use of waqf in modern higher education faces persistent challenges. Weak governance structures, ambiguous legal frameworks, and, perhaps most importantly, the underutilization of waqf assets continue to limit its impact (Hussin et al., 2021; Sulaiman & Zainuddin, 2023). Financial technology tools and digital fundraising platforms are beginning to reshape this landscape, yet their adoption in universities remains fragmented, uneven, and in some cases merely experimental (Mohamed & Akande, 2025).

Scholars have examined waqf across diverse contexts, including Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, documenting its role in funding infrastructure, scholarships, and community programs (Kasdi, 2018; Elmahgop et al., 2025; Usman & Rahman, 2021). What remains absent, however, is a comprehensive review that connects these findings. What patterns are emerging? Which practices demonstrate long-term sustainability? And how might these lessons inform the future of higher education globally?

This gap makes a systematic review not only timely but also essential. The present study seeks to map the intellectual and practical landscape by conducting a Scopus-driven review of waqf in relation to sustainable development in higher education. Put simply, the study asks: How can waqf be optimized as a sustainable financing mechanism for higher education institutions facing current and future pressures? To answer this, the study builds a conceptual map of the field, highlights recurring pathways and practices, and identifies contributions from leading scholars and practitioners.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it provides a structured synthesis of waqf-related practices in higher education, particularly in governance, resource mobilization, and technology integration. Second, it highlights emerging innovations, including green waqf infrastructure and potential connections to social security systems, that could redefine how waqf supports sustainable education. Third, it situates waqf within the broader debate on sustainable financing, offering both theoretical insights and practical guidance for policymakers, academics, and practitioners.

The rest of the paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 sets out the methodology used for the Scopus-based review. Section 3 presents the main findings, organized around recurring practices and pathways of waqf in higher education. Section 4 discusses these findings with a focus on governance dilemmas, socio-economic implications, and innovation gaps. Finally, Section 5 concludes by suggesting directions for future research, policy reforms, and hands-on applications of waqf to strengthen higher education sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a Scopus-driven systematic review method to analyze the body of scholarly work on waqf and sustainable development within higher education. The methodological rigor of this synthesis stems from the integration of bibliometric and thematic analyses conducted through Scopus AI tools. Data were collected on 25 September 2025 to ensure the inclusion of the most recent publications and to capture current scholarly trends.. The review utilized the following search string: ("waqf" OR "endowment" OR "charitable trust" OR "waqf fund") AND ("higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "post-secondary" OR "university") AND ("funding" OR "finance" OR "support" OR "resources") AND ("impact" OR "role" OR "contribution" OR "benefit") AND ("sustainability" OR "development" OR "growth" OR "expansion").

An extensive collection of peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, and review articles available through Scopus was reviewed. The Scopus AI application was utilized for a multifaceted evaluation involving five core functions: Summary, Expanded Summary, Concept Map, Topic Experts, and Emerging Themes. The Summary function was first used to provide a brief domain overview within a broad research scholarship on waqf, sustainability, and higher education. This enabled the capture of the core issues within the discourse such as governance frameworks, resource-based waqf, and technology (Hussin et al., 2021; Mohamed & Akande, 2025).

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Next, the Expanded Summary function was used to extract contextual details and deeper insights, which provided the framework for thematic clusters that discussed conventional waqf practices (e.g., provision of scholarships, and funding for waqf construction) as well as modern innovations (e.g., green waqf, and fintech-augmented management). This feature was particularly useful to the domain of literature which clearly distinguished the well-established and the more research-need areas of the literature (Usman & Ab Rahman, 2023; Elmahgop et al., 2025).

The Concept Map, in the third instance, illustrated the key themes and practices and the relationships linking them. The mapping exercise illustrated four linked areas: governance and legal reforms, integration of technology, socio-economic characteristics, and cross-border cooperation. This form of visualization supported the organization of the review while facilitating the identification of important connections that could easily be missed in a narrative synthesis (Sulaiman & Zainuddin, 2023).

Fourth, The Topic Experts function identified leading scholars and influential institutions in this domain, notably Usman, Ab Rahman, and Mahamood, whose works have been pivotal in shaping discourse on waqf and sustainable higher education. The recurrence of these contributors across publications indicates both the field’s maturity and its intellectual coherence (Mahamood & Ab Rahman, 2015; Usman & Rahman, 2021).

Finally, the Emerging Themes function highlighted new and evolving trajectories within the literature, including social security-linked waqf funds (Putra et al., 2025), waqf-based green infrastructure (Mohamed & Akande, 2025), and digital fundraising platforms for university financing. These developments underscore the dynamism of the field and outline promising directions for future research.

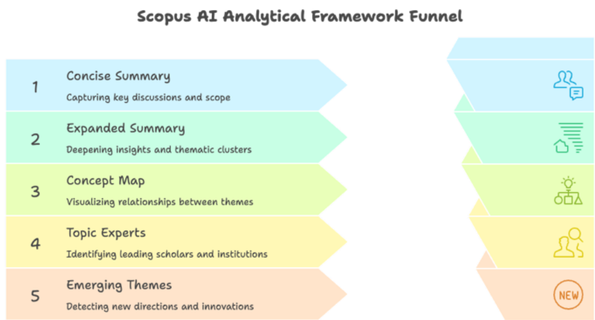

Figure 1: Scopuus AI Analytical Framework

This methodological approach guarantees that the review systematically fulfills the study's objective of analyzing the research landscape pertaining to waqf and sustainable development in higher education. Integrating bibliometric mapping with thematic synthesis and expert identification, the study constructs a comprehensive concept map of the domain, revealing the fundamental practices and pathways while acknowledging the contributions of prominent scholars. Such diligence improves the study's validity, thoroughness, and proactive stance, thus constructively enhancing the discourse on sustainable futures in higher education and contributing to the review's scholarly and policy relevance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this Scopus-driven review are presented and discussed through four complementary lenses generated by Scopus AI: (i) Summary and Expanded Summary, (ii) Concept Map, (iii) Topic Experts, and (iv) Emerging Themes. Together, these analytical outputs provide both a descriptive overview and an interpretive synthesis of the research landscape on waqf and sustainable development in higher education.

Summary and Extended Summary

The literature indicates that waqf is an intelligent way of funding higher education institutions (HEIs) and offers a pathway to a sustainable future. Synthesized studies indicate waqf offers both socio-economic development

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and sustainability that fulfill the objectives of inclusiveness and community empowerment (Mohamed & Akande, 2025; Usman & Ab Rahman, 2023). Unlike conventional funding, waqf is a non-exhaustive and everlasting funding source. Waqf can be strategically allocated in HEIs for infrastructure development, scholarships, and extensive capacity building (Mahamood & Ab Rahman, 2015).

Findings also emphasize the need for governance and transparency as the most important facilitators of waqf in higher education. Governance frameworks that encourage accountability and professional management foster trust within communities and stakeholders and guarantee the effective use of donated waqf assets (Hussin et al., 2021; Sulaiman & Zainuddin, 2023). These governance frameworks become most critical and, at the same time, most bearable in the face of governance challenges, such as the legal relics of ownership, registration lags, and the absence of a waqf land code (Sulaiman & Zainuddin, 2023). Thus, governance remains a primary practice and a challenge in waqf leverage for sustainable futures in higher education.

The review also highlights the increasing incorporation of waqf with contemporary technologies and advanced frameworks. The use of financial technologies (FINTECH) and the digitalization of waqf activities have strengthened transparency, optimized waqf fundraising activities, and enabled the diversification of waqf investments (Mohamed & Akande, 2025). Moreover, the adoption of blockchain technology to waqf management systems has been suggested to mitigate inefficiencies of management and mismanagement risks (Elmahgop et al., 2025). Also, the integration of waqf with renewable energy initiatives and social security frameworks (Putra et al., 2025) serves to extend the innovative financial waqf. The benefits of waqf use to environmental sustainability, social protection, and beyond educational purposes.

From a developmental perspective, waqf has shown significant socio-economic implications. In Malaysia and Turkey, waqf funds have helped finance educational infrastructure and scholarships, lessening the burden on the government and the students, and promoting equitable access to quality education. (Usman & Ab Rahman, 2023; Kasdi, 2018). In addition, there is evidence that waqf investment funds positively affect personal income, health, and other community welfare, reinforcing waqf's dual functionality as a tool for social welfare and development (Elmahgop et al., 2025; Yusuff et al., 2016). This shows that waqf contributes to the financial needs of HEIs and positively impacts the communities where the HEIs are situated.

The review highlights multiple challenges but also existing opportunities. The primary challenges identified include legal limitations, inefficient bureaucratic structures, and stakeholders' low comprehension of the continuous nature of waqf assets. These factors inhibit the effective application of endowed assets and ultimately lead to waqf estate underutilization. Despite such challenges, HEIs, governments, and other international entities have opportunities to collaborate on resource and impact-sharing initiatives which address both waqf use and educational resource challenges. The role of waqf in education also contributes to the broader alignment of initiatives with the SDGs, especially to targets of climate action, poverty and inequality reduction, and education quality (Lestari et al., 2023).

Concept Map

The concept map presented in Figure 2 below illustrates the interconnected dimensions of Sustainable Futures through Waqf in Higher Education, highlighting two major domains: Sustainability Practices and Waqf Models.

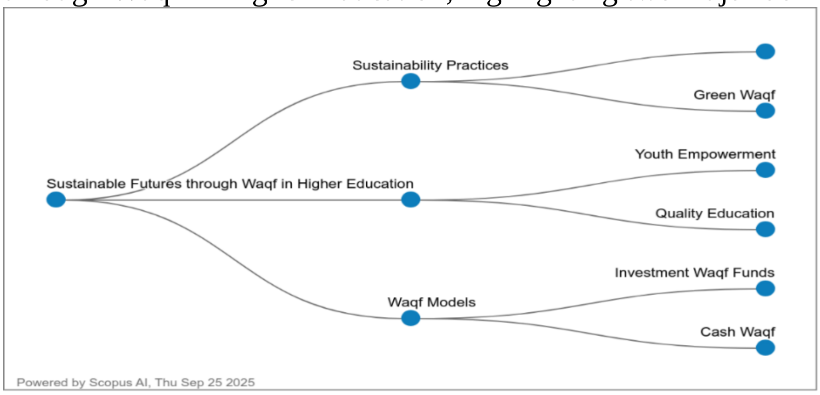

Figure 2: Concept Maps of Sustainable Futures through Waqf in Higher Education

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A Review of Sustainable Futures through Waqf in Higher Education

The role of waqf in higher education institutions (HEIs) has a potential transformative impact. Unlike traditional financing options that depend on government budgets, tuition revenues, and private donations, waqf can be a sustainable financing alternative. As Shamsudin et al. (2015) noted, resource-based corporate waqf financing models can function as substitutes to conventional endowments and lessen universities' reliance on dwindling public funds. This sustaining characteristic of waqf makes it a unique tool in undergirding sustainable futures in higher education.

The other key aspect of the good governance of waqf funds is that it helps ensure and sustain the effective management of waqf funds. The absence of inefficient and poorly coordinated governance systems will severely undermine the potential of waqf to deliver perpetual and ongoing funding benefits. As noted by Hussin et al. (2021), institutions of higher education that have good governance models in place are more effective in the use of waqf funds in advancing the goals of the institution particularly in the areas of infrastructure, student support, and research expansion. Therefore, governance is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable futures through waqf, and not solely an operational necessity.

The influence of waqf investment funds illustrates their importance in the other dimensions encompassing socio-economic sustainability. Outside of the aforementioned higher education level benefits, these funds expand to other societal benefits including health care and poverty alleviation, which intersects with the SDGs. In the case of Saudi Arabia, waqf investment funds have to some extent been able to improve, and measure, personal income and social welfare, with the provision of education also directly available (Elmahgop et al, 2025). This embodies the concept of waqf in its dual economic and socio-economic developmental roles, signalling the potential of shifting the discourse from academia to the community in its full range of development.

Moreover, the direct financing of higher education through waqf has been documented. Waquf initiatives directly subsidize the costs of education, scholarships, and range of other educational benefits. They improve the academic offerings of institution through financing facilities and funding for research programs. For instance, Mahamood and Ab Rahman (2015) observed that waqf endowments have historically been pivotal in supporting the educational offerings of institutions such as Al-Azhar University, and their resurgence in modern times presents novel prospects for the provision of education of enhanced quality. The structural challenges of the lack of a coherent legal arrangement and the lack of state support, among others, usually limit that potential (Usman & Rahman, 2021). Proposed solutions to these challenges entail the enactment of regulatory frameworks and the establishment of trilateral partnerships between the state, the institution of higher learning, and the waqf boards.

In the field of engineering and infrastructure systems, waqf contributes to new development pathways, which illustrates the deepening scope of waqf within the field of applied and technical education. As noted by Alasmari and Al-Daeir (2025), waqf can sponsor the development of sustainable infrastructure, the ongoing maintenance of publicly accessible facilities, and the engineering education target program's accompaniment. Every use of waqf illustrates how far it can stretch, transcending its traditional use as a philanthropic sponsor to an imperative sponsor of modernization and an eco-friendly radical change in higher education. This is the first use of waqf, in the context of enduring scholarship and education, to focus on the sustainable aspects. Overall, waqf shows the extent to which it can stretch, all while adhering to the principles of good governance and innovative approaches and legal backing in scholarship systems, as a pathway to hope in higher education.

Linkages Between Sustainable Futures through Waqf in Higher Education and Sustainability Practices

To become more sustainable, higher education institutions (HEIs) are starting to include and consider the environmental, social, and economic pillars. While educating and offering services, universities are also expected to become the driving force for the achievement of SDGs (Atakan & İşcioğlu, 2019). Their integrated role makes HEIs distinct and influential to drive long-lasting social change by providing students the skills and knowledge to support and advocate for sustainability in their jobs and voluntary activities. Integrating waqf in this context is another new opportunity for universities, since it will combine financially sustainable social and institutional practice.

The idea of waqf, especially resource-based or corporate waqf, can offer a new way of providing perpetual financing which can help sustain higher education in the long run (Shamsudin et al., 2015). In contrast to traditional funding, which is highly dependent on shifting budgets, waqf offers self-sustaining funding. Good governance is positioned as an important part of waqf management as it secures oversight, accountability, transparency, and the efficient use of funds (Hussin et al., 2021). With appropriate governance, HEIs can use waqf funds for socially responsible and sustainable purposes, whether it be providing scholarships, building socially responsible infrastructure, funding environmentally sustainable community programs, or sponsoring innovative projects in the community.

Even with the benefits, there are difficulties in integrating waqf with the practices of sustainability in higher education. Research indicates a lack of government incentives and policy frameworks as a hindrance to the adoption of sustainability in HEIs (Drahein et al., 2019). In the same way, the long-term sustainability of these institutions can be compromised by a lack of insight, inadequate financial planning, and governance or management frameworks for the waqf funds. Nonetheless, the use of waqf in sustainable initiatives will give these institutions some buffer to lessen volatile government or donor funding. This shows the need for establishing frameworks and engagements that supported the use of waqf in sustainability efforts in higher education institutions.

Management and innovative human capital development practices, towards sustainability, would encompass things like Green Human Resource Management (GHRM). GHRM has been identified as a catalyst for the swift implementation of environmental management within higher educational institutions (Singh & Sihmar, 2024). When paired with waqf funding, GHRM can help staff and students with training, awareness, and capacity-building initiatives, creating a culture of sustainability within the institution's various functions. Also, sustainability-focused policies with waqf-based funding help the university resource and compete in the university market.

The future of higher education sustainability has to do with the integration of new waqf financing and sustainability practices at the institution. As Vidrevich and Pervukhina (2023) put it, universities, in addition to teaching about and practicing sustainability, must also prepare future graduates with the knowledge and skills and values about sustainability and, at the same time, be practicing sustainability. Properly governed and aligned with global sustainability standards, waqf has the potential to promote education, eliminate poverty, and build resilience. This combination not only guarantees higher education institutions financial autonomy but also aligns with their primary social mission of producing educated graduates who can help the world become a better, more sustainable place.

Linkages Between Sustainable Futures through Waqf in Higher Education and Educational Impact

Waqf is becoming increasingly recognized for its educational impact for helping higher education to become a transformative force in constructing sustainable futures. With waqf investment funds serving as a model for perpetual financing construction, waqf funds become resources for assisting students, staff, and institutional growth. Waqf funds have the potential to support personal welfare, healthcare, and educational resources such as student housing and living services. By reducing financial burdens and improving access to essential support, such initiatives can enhance students' academic success and strengthen waqf's role as a sustainable enabler of education.

Waqf's support for education sustainability extends beyond financial resources. The framework for Sustainable Futures prioritizes the preparation of disciple-integrated curricula to foster future leaders for net-zero and sustainable development goals. Integration of environmental engineering, science, management, and business is the starting point, as highlighted in Nyhan et al. (2025). With waqf financing, these interdisciplinary programs become sustainable for the long term, therefore, allowing universities to innovate and provide transformative education, hands-on learning, and research rooted in sustainability. Consequently, waqf funds the preservation of conventional education and the provision of radical interdisciplinary education needed for the societal change.

Evaluating the educational impact offered by HEIs indicates the necessity of capabilities looking into the future. Lewis et al. (2025) outlines a framework focusing on transdisciplinary and community engagement for assessing the contribution of higher education programs to societal change. Waqf has the potential to support the transformative educational model which Lewis et al. are proposing by financing educational programs that cross disciplines, support community engagements, and provide Waqf-seed innovative hubs. This clearly demonstrates that programs embracing educational waqf will not only target educational outcomes but will achieve sustainable societal equity and transformation and address the challenges of global sustainable development. Thus, waqf in funding education pivot towards a societal change.

The educational role of waqf is sustained through the commitment of the donors. Philanthropic traits of waqf donors explored by Khadijah et al. 2017, highlights egoistic and altruistic motives as well as religiosity as the factors shaping the commitment of waqf donors towards higher education. These motives also cement the social and moral aspects of waqf and illustrate that it is a value-adding practice which not only finances education but builds social capital in the form of community solidarity and social accountability for the education of individuals. This also ensures a dynamic form of educational disposability for waqf, which is towards the sustainable development of societies.

Nonetheless, to fully understand the educational value of waqf, one must examine the implications of governance, accountability, and diversification of investments. Elmahgop et al. (2025) clarify that to achieve and optimize the social, economic, and educational value of waqf, effective governance must be put in place. Absent clear and decisive governance frameworks and creative and effective investment mechanisms, waqf resources can remain underutilized. These challenges provide an opportunity for HEIs to enhance the sustainability of their programs while maintaining the role of waqf in promoting educational quality and enduring social value.

Linkages Between Sustainable Futures through Waqf in Higher Education and Waqf Models

Numerous research-focused models have shaped the role of waqf in higher education while focusing on sustainability, inclusiveness, and socio-economic development. Zawawi et al. (2023) elaborate on research comparing the role of waqf in higher education and sustainable development (poverty alleviation, hunger, and decent work) in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. The models demonstrate the wide range of benefits waqf can provide beyond financial assistance, making it a crucial factor for advancing education and improving social welfare.

The resource-based corporate waqf model is one of the most innovative approaches and it provides a new paradigm for securing perpetual and self-sustaining financing. The inter-state corporate waqf model proposed by Shamsudin et al. (2015) provides a new paradigm for securing perpetual and self-sustaining financing. Endowed resources, in this model, are managed as corporate assets that generate income for higher education. Besides securing financial autonomy to universities, this model provides opportunity for resource cross-border collaboration and inter-institutional resource pooling.

Investing waqf funds can create sustainable futures in higher education. In Saudi Arabia, the socio-economic benefits of waqf investment model returns include improvement in income, healthcare, and education (Elmahgop et al., 2025). When invested in universities, those waqf funds can grow facilities, sustain research, and create more scholarships, further proving the waqf's inclusiveness in educational development. These funds are innovative in transforming charitable donations of the past and integrating them as sustainable investments.

Other places have suggested hybrid models which integrate waqf with other-neighboring frameworks of Islamic social finance. In Northern Nigeria, an educational-integrated-waqf-zakat microfinance model serves the purpose of addressing educational-kaaba (Muhammad & Al-Shaghdari, 2024). The combination waqf and zakat in this model serves as funding for education in both an immediate and sustainable manner. This shows the ingenuity of waqf models to adapt to different socio-economic challenges providing relevance to different areas.

Finally, the degree of effectiveness of any given waqf model is correlated with the degree of governance attributed to it. Research conducted in Malaysia highlights the critical importance of good governance in the sustainability of waqf within higher education institutions, particularly with regards to accountability, transparency, and trust (Hussin et al., 2021). While waqf is predominantly defined as an act of philanthropy, modern governance expectations associated with financial instruments will serve to redefine its governance complexities, particularly with regards to the digital world and diverse portfolios. The transformed role of waqf in Malaysia is indicative of the governance, innovation, and social construct integration that can bolster the impact of waqf within higher educational institutions (Mohamed Nor & Yaakub, 2017).

Topic Expert

Identifying noteworthy scholars in the context of the Scopus AI database, as of September 25, 2025, points out the works of Marta Yu Barna, Tetyana T. Lepeyko, and Catherine C. Shikovets. These three gather insights at the intersection of corporate social responisibility (CSR), innovations in education, and the finances of higher education. Their works are foundational for understanding the discourse of waqf as a tool mechanisms for sustaining higher education.

Marta Yu Barna is the most accomplished amongst the three, with 92 citations and an h-index of 5, showing her influence in the field, Barna's recent scholarship highlights the role of financially innovative and responsible practices in the enhancement of sustainability of educational institutions (Barna, 2023). This is most relevant to waqf in higher education, where waqf based funds are innovative socially responsible finances. Barna's works on digital marketing strategies for educational institutions also illustrates for waqf institutions and universities how to improve their outreach and attract donors to engage with the institution on a socially responsible, financially sustainable, and innovative focus.

In addition to Barna's contributions, Tetyana T. Lepeyko places a strong emphasis on embedding CSR into financial management within the educational settings, evidenced by 20 citations and an h-index of 2. Lepeyko (2022) outlines the importance of educational innovators in implementing responsible practices within institutions. This aligns with the waqf discourse since universities funded by waqf can showcase CSR by adjusting their financial and operational frameworks to social and community development. Lepeyko's perspective indicates that waqf in higher education is not simply a funding source, but a governance model that can fortify the institutions' ethical and social responsibility.

Similarly, although in the early stages of her academic career, with 3 citations and an h-index of 1, Catherine C. Shikovets adds to the discourse by discussing the importance of CSR and digital tools in facilitating educational institutions to practice sustainability (Shikovets, 2024). Shikovets' position enhances the discourse by demonstrating how fledgling institutions and younger scholars can be agents of change in the waqf field. Her focus on responsible values and digital methodologies for educational institutions and younger scholars outlines the potential of waqf-based higher education models to implement technology in donor management systems to improve financial sustainability and transparency.

The integration of the Waqqf system with Barna, Lepeyko, and Shikovets' scholarship underscores the emerging consensus of the importance of corporate social responsibility and innovative financing in developing a sustainable future for higher education. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, to advance sustainable development in a university context, the mobilization of endowment funds should be complemented with the responsible governance and innovative disengagement, along with transparent financial management and strategic engagement. Ethical, responsible financial innovation, digital transformation, and corporate social responsibility will ensure the Waqqf system promotes educational sustainability.

Emerging Theme

Themes identified through Scopus AI (25 September 2025) demonstrate distinctive patterns at the cross-section of waqf, sustainable development, and higher education. These themes indicate alternating periods of consolidation and innovation across the scholarship.

One theme that has stood the test of time has been the incorporation of waqf within sustainable educational ecosystems. This has remained the case due to the growing recognition of waqf as an effective tool for resolving socio-economic problems and the provision of uninterrupted quality education (Hasan, 2021). Scholarship consistently shows that waqf scholarship has the potential to solve the higher education resource problem, especially for the economically marginalized, while also contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Shaikh, Ismail, & Shafiai, 2017). Additionally, the persistent presence of this theme through the ages exemplifies waqf not only as a charitable tool but also as an economically viable and complementary modern sustainable financial resource (Kuran, 2019). The position of waqf within educational systems demonstrates its importance in building inclusive and resilient higher education systems.

Having incorporated the foregoing, the increasing attention toward the development of sustainability education supported by the waqf system bridges interest for the integration of sustainability within the education system and institution practices. There has been positive movement within the scholarship regarding the ways the waqf system could support the sustainability of educational practices with the development of green campus initiatives and research centers focused on waqf sustainability (Ismail & Possumah, 2020). The rise of this scholarship stream responds to increasing global trends on the adoption of sustainability tenets to be incorporated within the education system (Lozano et al., 2015). Waqf initiatives develop community and are thus able to synergize efforts of higher learning institution with community stakeholders toward education for sustainability (Rahman & Ahmad, 2019). Given this movement, there are strong indications within the scholarship to model sustainability focus waqf to support transformational change to the curriculum and extra curriculum.

In addition to this, a new emerging theme has been the Exploring Innovative Educational Practices in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This stream seeks to re-evaluate the approaches to teaching, curriculum, and the strategies of institutions to find an alignment with sustainability. Some argue for the adoption of interdisciplinary curriculum integration, the principles of universal design for learning (UDL), and for the integration of inclusive and effective sustainability education (Wals, 2020). The connection between waqf and ESD is where financially endowed resources can support new experiments in teaching, interdisciplinary collaboration, and sustainability focused pedagogy (Abdullah, 2022). This illustrates how ESD waqf has the potential to shift the focus of teaching within higher education systems.

Aspects of the digital innovations and artificial intelligence paradigm in education focused on the novel integration of emerging technologies in teaching and learning education for sustainability embodies new inquiries of broader importance in the field of educational technologies. The deployment of educational artificial intelligence (AI) technologies like chatbots and adaptive learning systems offers new avenues for automating interaction for educational instruction in sustainability—for personalizing instruction and for expanding the reach of sustainability education (Holmes et al., 2019). In the case of waqf-funded educational establishments, AI tools focused on educational technologies may improve communication with waqf donors, automate and enhance stakeholder accountability transparency, and optimize learning outcomes of students in programs relating to sustainability (Al-Ansari & Hamed, 2023). While this is an emerging area, it constitutes a gap in research, most prominently on the design of operational models for the integration of AI into waqf-affiliated institutions of higher education. The integration of financial innovation with digital innovation as an emerging area of research adds considerable potential to redefine the teaching and learning of the principles of sustainability in new and innovative ways.

Overall, the key trends within the research landscape reflect both continuity and change. The most prominent theme continues to recognize the function of waqf in supporting educational sustainability, while the increasingly prominent themes indicate a growing integration of sustainability within the focus of educational practice and institution-wide commitment. The most innovative theme speaks to a new potential for the intersection of waqf, education, and sustainability to be reshaped through digitalization and AI technologies. Taken together, these insights demonstrate that waqf has transitioned from an economically passive charitable instrument to a transformative facilitator of educational sustainability and its integration into higher education.

CONCLUSIONS

This study used a Scopus-driven review approach (25 September 2025) to examine the research landscape on waqf and sustainable development in higher education. The study produced a few notable insights. First, research has shown that waqf continues to serve as a stable and sustainable financial model for higher education, especially in the critical areas of improving institutional access for underrepresented groups and long-term institutional sustainability. Second, new and emerging thematic areas indicate that waqf is more closely integrated with initiatives in the pedagogy of education for sustainability, and with the use of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) to amplify impact. Third, the contribution of subject matter experts underscored the importance of CSR, financial stewardship, and digital tech as important drivers of waqf educational construct. Overall, waqf is transitioning from being a purely charitable mechanism to becoming a significant driver of long-term strategic sustainability in higher education.

With this review, I hope to add to the literature on the Islamic social finance system, positioning waqf as both a historical social institution as well as a modern tool to advance sustainable development goals. The incorporation of waqf within the educational system sustains the theories on resource-based financing and the institutional sustainability of the framework, thereby presenting a unique Islamic position on the financing of higher education. It advances the theory of education for sustainability, illustrating how sustainability within the governance and culture of a social institution or educational institution can be integrated through waqf-centered drivens initiatives.

For waqf practitioners, to meet this goal, there will need to be a shift toward the adoption of the new financing digital technologies and corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks. This will radically transform the impact and social value of waqf, promoting greater funding autonomy within educational institutions, thus decreasing the reliance on government support and higher tuition fees. This study also seeks to provide a framework for the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, more specifically the goal of sustainable social financing. I hope this sustained the value of waqf by presenting it as an innovative funding system.

Remember some of the boundaries of the research have been discussed. First, the study used only the database Scopus and, as a result, relevant works in other non-English and regionally published sources may have been overlooked. Second, while the Scopus AI analysis provided some insightful summaries and concept maps, emerging themes and frameworks, the specifics of certain socio-cultural and policy contexts of the various countries where waqf operates may have been lost. Third, the study narrowed its consideration mainly to higher education, thus leaving the relationships of waqf and other pivotal areas of the system like health, environment, and ecologically sustainable development largely unstudied.

Addressing these gaps might involve the use the use of multiple bibliometric databases in order to present a more comprehensive image of waqf related scholarship Constructive comparative country studies could be developed to study the cultural, legal and governance frameworks of waqf in education. Furthermore, the use of empirical research to study the impact of AI and other digital technologies on waqf based sustainability education, on the other hand, would be useful to practice. Lastly, more research could be done on cross-cutting frameworks to promote social equity on education and other social sectors based on integrated Islamic social finance (waqf, zakat and sadaqah).

This review shows that waqf is still an active and changing institution and can shift the way higher education is financed, governed, and sustained. By combining basic Islamic principles with contemporary financial and technological advancements, the waqf can help construct strong and flexible higher education systems that will meet future demands.

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