Article

Journal of International Students
Volume 16, Issue 13 (2026), pp. 193-218
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)
jistudents.org
https://doi.org/10.32674/tkvyx710

Sustaining International Schools in a Changing Policy and Market Environment: Stakeholder Perspectives from Shanghai, China

Yihong Peng
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Jalan Temuan, Malaysia
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1609-3846

Bity Salwana Alias
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Jalan Temuan, Malaysia
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8769-9341

Xinyu Wan*
Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jiangxi, P.R. China
*Corresponding author**
Email: wanxinyu2311@gmail.com
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4257-233X

Azlin Norhaini Mansor
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Jalan Temuan, Malaysia
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8769-9341

ABSTRACT:

This study examines the sustainability challenges facing international schools in Shanghai, China, within a rapidly evolving policy, demographic, and market context. Drawing on qualitative data from administrators, teachers, and parents, the study employs qualitative content analysis to explore stakeholder perspectives on the key factors influencing institutional sustainability. The findings reveal that challenges are multifaceted and interconnected, including financial pressures, regulatory uncertainty, difficulties in talent recruitment and retention, and complexities related to cultural integration within diverse school communities. Guided by sustainable leadership theory, the study proposes a context-sensitive framework that emphasizes leadership adaptability, integrated curriculum and

learning environments, stakeholder collaboration, strategic resource management, and responsiveness to external market dynamics.

Keywords: *challenges, educational leadership, international schools, student mobility, stakeholder perspectives, sustainability, qualitative content analysis*

Received: August 29, 2025 | **Revised**: March 24, 2026 | **Accepted:** April 6, 2026

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, international schools in Shanghai have witnessed rapid expansion, driven by globalization, the increasing demand for internationalized education, and policy reforms (Jin, 2022). As a vital component of China's diversified educational landscape, international schools cater to both expatriate and domestic students seeking globally oriented learning experiences (Blatti et al., 2019). However, their sustainability has become increasingly precarious amid shifting demographics, regulatory tightening, and heightened competition (Furstenau et al., 2020). Despite the sector's significant growth, research on the sustainability challenges faced by international schools, particularly from the perspectives of internal stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, and parents, remains limited (Bunnell, 2019; Arar & Oplatka, 2022).

The literature often focuses on curriculum models, leadership approaches, and market positioning (Bunnell, 2019; Bourgeois et al., 2025), with comparatively little attention given to systemic analyses of stakeholders' perceptions and experiences with respect to sustainability. Moreover, few studies have contextualized these challenges within specific urban environments, such as Shanghai, where global–local dynamics and unique regulatory conditions shape school operations (Navarro et al., 2024). Furthermore, there is fragmented knowledge of how leadership practices impact sustainability concerns in international school contexts since previous research has seldom combined stakeholder perspectives with a well-articulated theoretical framework. This lack of stakeholder-centered and context-specific analysis reveals a critical gap in the scholarly landscape (Han et al., 2024).

This study seeks to address this gap through two primary contributions. First, it systematically captures and analyzes stakeholder perspectives to identify critical barriers to sustainable development among international schools in Shanghai. Second, it closes the gap between abstract leadership theory and context-specific practice by clearly connecting these empirically obtained difficulties to a theoretically grounded framework. This study specifically expands upon sustainable leadership theory (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004, 2012), which highlights

important concepts such as diversity (context sensitivity), justice (equity and inclusion), longevity (long-term impact), breadth (distributed leadership), depth (meaningful learning), and resourcefulness (adaptive capacity). To understand stakeholder interactions, leadership reactions, and institutional sustainability plans, these principles are operationalized as analytical lenses in this study. To investigate how schools react to changing market and policy situations, the study also identifies and applies key concepts from the theory, such as stakeholder involvement, collaborative leadership, long-term capacity building, and flexibility to external change.

By doing so, the study contributes in two ways: (1) it offers empirically supported insights into sustainability issues from a multiple stakeholder perspective in a highly dynamic urban setting, and (2) it suggests a sustainability framework informed by stakeholders that expands sustainable leadership theory into the field of international education. By integrating theoretical reflection with empirical insights from stakeholders, this study aims to extend existing theories and provide actionable strategies to foster resilience, adaptability, and collaborative engagement. Consequently, the research offers both practical solutions for leadership practice and theoretical advancements that enrich the understanding of educational sustainability within dynamic, globalized contexts.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1) What are the challenges faced by international schools toward sustainability in Shanghai, China?

RQ2) To what extent can a new sustainability framework for international schools be developed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainability in education refers to an institution's ability to maintain operational viability, relevance, and educational excellence over time (Askell-Williams & Koh, 2020). For international schools, sustainability encompasses financial stability, consistent enrollment, regulatory compliance, and adaptability to diverse cultural environments (Hatziconstantis & Kolympari, 2021). In an increasingly globalized and policy-sensitive context, achieving sustainability requires balancing these factors while remaining resilient in the face of external disruptions (Bailey & Gibson, 2020). Crucially, new research highlights that sustainability is a dynamic process influenced by stakeholder involvement, leadership styles, and contextual responsiveness rather than just an organizational result.

As a global metropolis, Shanghai has witnessed a surge in international and bilingual schools in response to the growing demand for internationalized education (Poole, 2019). However, this growth has been accompanied by new challenges, such as shifting government regulations on admissions policies, curriculum standards, and teacher employment (Jin & Chen, 2023). Such regulatory volatility introduces significant uncertainty, necessitating schools to develop flexible and proactive strategies to ensure their sustainability (Ma & Wright, 2023). In this sense, a particularly complex environment is created by the

interplay between local legal frameworks and global educational models, necessitating leadership methods that are both flexible and sensitive to context.

Sustainable leadership theory (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004, 2012) offers a conceptual framework for understanding leadership practices that support long-term school sustainability. The theory is based on a number of fundamental ideas, such as diversity (responding to contextual and cultural differences), justice (promoting equity and inclusivity), longevity (ensuring long-term impact beyond short-term gains), breadth (promoting distributed leadership across stakeholders), depth (fostering meaningful and lasting learning), and resourcefulness (improving adaptability and efficient use of resources). This theory emphasizes enduring commitment, stakeholder relationships, social justice, and moral purpose (Tideman et al., 2013) while also advocating for leadership that balances diverse stakeholder needs amidst external pressures such as policy shifts and funding limitations (Iqbal & Ahmad, 2021). Together, these ideas present sustainable leadership as a multifaceted concept that incorporates the ethical, social, and organisational aspects of school development.

To understand how stakeholder relationships and leadership practices influence the sustainability issues seen in international schools, this study uses sustainable leadership theory as an analytical lens. In particular, by directing the identification of patterns pertaining to stakeholder involvement, long-term institutional capability, and leadership effectiveness, its fundamental ideas guide the interpretation of qualitative data.

Nevertheless, critiques highlight the practical difficulties of maintaining long-term sustainability when faced with short-term performance demands (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). While subsequent studies have applied sustainable leadership theory across various educational contexts (Day et al., 2020; Leithwood, 2021), several important concepts drawn from the theory have been identified in the current research, including stakeholder involvement, distributed and collaborative leadership, long-term capacity building, and flexibility to change. According to empirical research, schools that implement these strategies are better equipped to manage policy ambiguity, maintain initiatives for reform, and develop institutional resilience. Scholars such as Murtada and Al-Zar'ah (2022) argued that sustainable leadership must be adapted to local contexts, particularly within international schools where cultural and regulatory factors significantly influence leadership practices.

Building on these discoveries, this study uses certain constructs, such as collaborative leadership, adaptability, and stakeholder engagement, to understand the empirical results and guide the creation of the suggested sustainability model. In this sense, the theory serves as both a framework for the study and a conceptual foundation for connecting issues raised by stakeholders to more general ideas of sustainable school leadership.

Despite these developments, few studies clearly link sustainable leadership theory to empirical data from stakeholders in international school settings. Additionally, little research has investigated how the fundamental ideas of the theory are applied in highly regulated and quickly evolving urban settings such as Shanghai. This study contributes to the literature by incorporating stakeholder

perspectives within the unique context of Shanghai's international schools, offering a context-sensitive sustainability framework that connects empirical findings with theoretical principles from sustainable leadership theory. By doing so, the study not only applies but also extends the theory, demonstrating how its constructs operate in practice within international education settings.

METHOD

This qualitative study, conducted across diverse international schools in Shanghai, employed purposeful sampling, maximum variation and snowball sampling to recruit 16 participants (eight administrators, five teachers, and three parents), ensuring a broad representation of stakeholder perspectives. Professional networks and institutional contacts, including email invitations and direct approaches to school administrators, were used to recruit participants initially. Additional participants were recruited through referrals, providing access to cases with a wealth of information. To capture a range of perspectives on sustainability, the recruitment process placed a strong emphasis on variance in school type, role, and experience. Data collection spanned six months and utilized semistructured and unstructured interviews, guided by flexible protocols that encouraged open and in-depth dialogue.

Based on participants' availability and preferences, the research team conducted all interviews in person or via video conferencing platforms. A semistructured interview technique that focused on participants' experiences, perceived sustainability issues, and strategies implemented within their schools guided each 45–90 minute interview. Open-ended inquiries were part of the interview technique, and deeper insights were obtained by using follow-up probes. The interviews were audio recorded with informed consent and then transcribed verbatim for analysis. There was no payment for participation, and it was entirely voluntary. To consider how the researchers' backgrounds in international education might have affected data collection and interpretation, a researcher positionality statement was also created. Transparency in the interpretation of stakeholder perspectives was improved by this reflective consideration.

Qualitative content analysis was applied to systematically identify and categorize the challenges faced by international schools. The analysis followed a rigorous multiple-step process, including (1) data familiarization through repeated readings of transcripts, (2) initial open coding to identify meaningful units of data, (3) category development by grouping similar codes, and (4) theme refinement to generate higher-order thematic structures. To guarantee uniformity and lessen subjective bias, several transcripts were coded separately during the coding process and then compared within the research team. Software for qualitative data analysis was used to facilitate coding to improve data transparency and organization. To guarantee analytical consistency and depth, codes and categories were regularly examined and improved using an iterative constant-comparison approach. Eleven fundamental thematic groups based on the data emerged as a result of this procedure.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed an interview protocol refinement framework, expert review processes, a pilot study, and member checks to validate the data accuracy and credibility. Furthermore, when no new themes emerged from additional interviews, data saturation was deemed achieved. Additionally, steps were taken to minimize potential biases, such as cautious interpretation to lessen social desirability bias and impartial questioning to lessen interviewer effects. Confirmability was enhanced by transparent recording of analytical judgments, reliability by methodical coding techniques, and credibility by member checking. Together, these tactics improve the dependability, trustworthiness, and transparency of the research process.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the interview data revealed a complex and nuanced understanding of the challenges perceived by administrators, teachers, and parents regarding the sustainability of international schools. A total of 116 specific challenges were identified and categorized into 11 major categories, as summarized in Table 1 (see Appendix for full details). These categories provide not only a descriptive classification of challenges but also reveal underlying patterns related to institutional sustainability.

Table 1: Major Categories of Challenges Identified by Stakeholders

	Main categories	Frequency	Participants
1	Student-related Challenges	21	A2, A3, A8, T1, T3. T4, T3, T5
2	Leadership-related Challenges	14	A1, A2, A4, A5, A7, A8, T1, P1
3	Parent-related Challenges	13	A1, A2, A4, A5, A7, T5, P3
4	Innovation & Competition-related Challenges	13	A1, A2, A3, A7, A8
5	Teacher-related Challenges	12	A5, A7, A8, T2, T3, T4
6	External Environment-related Challenges	9	A1, A2, A3, A5, A8, T4
7	Educational sustainability-related Challenges	9	A2, A3, A5, A8
8	Support Systems and Resources-related	8	A1, A3, A8, T5, P2

	Challenges		
9	Curriculum and Content-related Challenges	7	A4, A5, A8, T5, P2
10	School Culture and Climate-related Challenges	6	A2, A5, A7, P1
11	International Education-related Challenges	4	A8, T2, T3
	Total Frequencies	116	

Student-related Challenges

This category appeared 21 times across eight interviews and includes five dimensions: high expectations, academic difficulties, future preparedness, emotional support, and student classification.

High expectations led to stress and challenges in self-regulation (A4; T1). Academic difficulties, particularly language barriers, affected subject performance (A2; T5). A8 noted low student motivation, while stakeholders emphasized future preparedness beyond academic success. Emotional support was also critical for confidence and social development (A8; T4). A3 highlighted the need to better align student needs with support systems.

These findings indicate that student-related challenges extend beyond academics to include emotional, developmental, and structural dimensions.

Leadership-related Challenges

This category appeared 14 times and includes staff management, leadership gaps, philosophical conflicts, and management design.

Staff turnover and recruitment difficulties undermined stability (A1; P1). The leadership gaps included inefficient processes and short-term priorities (A4; A5). Conflicts between leadership teams and educational philosophies were also reported (A2; A7; A8). A7 further noted the absence of coherent top-level management.

These findings suggest that leadership challenges are both operational and strategic, affecting institutional coherence and long-term direction.

Parent-related Challenges

This category appeared 13 times and includes parental involvement, expectations, attitudes, and parent–child interaction.

Limited engagement and communication barriers were common (A1; A5), with P3 noting risks of miscommunication. Expectations often conflict between

academic performance and well-being (A2; A4). A7 highlighted entrenched parental perceptions, whereas P3 described tensions arising from mismatched expectations.

These findings highlight the importance of aligning school–family expectations to support sustainability.

Innovation & Competition-related Challenges

This category appeared 13 times and includes market competition, technological change, and financial constraints.

Market pressure required continuous innovation and differentiation (A1; A3). Technological challenges, including AI and slow digital transformation, were noted (A2; A7; A8). Financial constraints limit innovation capacity (A8).

These findings indicate that sustainability depends on balancing innovation demands with financial capacity.

Teacher-related Challenges

This category appeared 12 times and includes teacher–student relationships, instructional challenges, instability, and teacher quality.

Instructional challenges included language barriers and ineffective classroom management. High turnover disrupted continuity, whereas gaps in training and emotional competence affected quality. T3 noted tensions between flexibility and academic rigor.

These findings underscore the central role of teacher stability and quality in sustaining educational effectiveness.

External Environment-related Challenges

This category appeared nine times and includes system adaptation (8-1), political instability (8-2), market change (8-3), and regulation (8-4).

Resistance to pedagogical change was noted (A1), alongside tensions between tradition and innovation (A5). A8 highlighted geopolitical risks. A2 stated that "the era of traditional international schools has passed," reflecting market shifts. Regulatory uncertainty was emphasized by A2 and A3.

These findings indicate that external challenges are largely structural and require adaptability and strategic foresight.

Educational Sustainability-related Challenges

This category appeared nine times and includes future needs (9-1), globalization (9-2), and ecosystem limitations (9-3).

A8 questioned future global uncertainties: "What are the geopolitical developments actually?" A2 noted shifting language value, while A3 highlighted challenges in maintaining quality. A5 emphasized increasing demand for global literacy. A3 and A5 identified weaknesses in the broader educational ecosystem.

These findings suggest that sustainability requires looking forward to strategies addressing global change and systemic constraints.

Support Systems and Resources-related Challenges

This category appeared eight times across five interviewees and includes three issues: limited funds and materials (7-1), insufficient resources (7-2), and unequal distribution (7-3).

Budget constraints limited resource allocation (A1), whereas T5 noted equipment shortages: "It is difficult to buy the ideal laboratory equipment in the market at present." Resource limitations, including space and infrastructure, also affected competitiveness (A8; P2). Unequal distribution further led to disparities in educational quality (A3).

These findings indicate that both resource scarcity and allocation inefficiencies constrain sustainability.

Curriculum and Content-related Challenges

This category appeared seven times and includes four issues: curriculum integration (5-1), design difficulty (5-2), local–global disconnect (5-3), and program suitability (5-4).

Challenges include integrating sustainability into curricula (A1), balancing global and local demands (P2), and aligning curricula with institutional goals (A5). A8 noted limited global perspectives, whereas T5 highlighted increasing subject complexity. A5 further emphasized the tensions between international and local implementation. A4 identified A-Levels as relatively adaptable.

These findings reflect the tensions between global standards and local implementation in curriculum design.

School Culture and Climate-related Challenges

This category appeared six times and includes cultural integration (6-1), assessment (6-2), educational goals (6-3), and value systems (6-4).

Cultural differences between Eastern and Western education systems were highlighted (A2; A7), alongside the need to preserve local identity (P1). Assessment pressures from parents were also noted (A2). A5 questioned the balance between academic and emotional development and emphasized prioritizing long-term student growth.

These findings suggest that a misalignment in values and expectations can undermine institutional cohesion.

International Education-related Challenges

This category appeared four times and includes global–local gaps (11-1), criticism of traditional education (11-2), and educational comparisons (11-3).

T3 highlighted differences between employment-oriented Chinese education and broader international approaches. A8 criticized rote learning, whereas T2 and T3 noted differences in curriculum depth and student adaptation challenges.

These findings reflect ongoing tensions between global educational models and local realities.

This analysis identified 11 main categories, providing a comprehensive perspective on the obstacles stakeholders perceive as hindering the sustainability of international schools. Instead of operating as separate realms, these difficulties are intricately linked, creating a complex system in which the curriculum, leadership, resources, and outside circumstances constantly interact.

The results highlight three broad aspects of sustainability challenges: (1) internal organisational capability (e.g., leadership, instructors, and resources); (2) stakeholder alignment (e.g., parents, students, and school culture); and (3) external pressures (e.g., policy, market, and globalization).

These difficulties highlight the important obstacles that must be removed to guarantee the long-term survival and success of foreign schools and reflect the complex nature of running them.

DISCUSSION

Through the analysis of emerging patterns, inconsistencies, and unanticipated insights, this discussion advances our understanding of the challenges confronting international schools in Shanghai.

Challenges Faced by International Schools for Sustainability

The analysis identified 11 principal categories and 41 subcategories of challenges, referenced 116 times across stakeholder interviews. These challenges offer a comprehensive understanding of the barriers hindering the sustainability of international schools. Key domains of difficulty include leadership, teaching quality, student development, curriculum and content integration, school culture, and the broader external environment. These categories show a system of sustainability challenges that are structurally interconnected rather than distinct problems.

Leadership challenges frequently involve the need to ensure effective decision-making, foster innovation, and address diverse stakeholder needs. Teacher-related challenges primarily concern the recruitment and retention of qualified educators, the provision of ongoing professional development, and the maintenance of high teaching standards. Student-related challenges include academic achievement, social adaptation, and managing diverse cultural backgrounds within the classroom. Parent-related challenges underscore the importance of effective school–family communication and collaboration in supporting student engagement and success.

Curriculum and content challenges revolve around balancing global educational standards with local cultural and legal requirements, ensuring

relevance and academic rigor. Challenges related to school culture and climate underscore the need to foster inclusivity, align values and educational goals, and address concerns regarding assessment systems. Successfully addressing these challenges contributes to the creation of a cohesive and supportive school environment, which is essential for long-term sustainability.

Moreover, challenges associated with the external environment, such as navigating evolving governmental regulations, market competition, and global educational trends, underscore the importance of strategic adaptability. Sustainability-related challenges further emphasize the need for resilience and long-term growth strategies. Innovation and competition-related issues underscore the need for a dynamic and forward-thinking approach. Finally, international education challenges reflect tensions between traditional and progressive educational models.

Furthermore, these realms interact dynamically rather than being isolated. For instance, external policies limit institutional decision-making and resource allocation, whereas leadership practices influence curriculum implementation and teacher stability. Because of this interconnectivity, sustainability issues should be viewed as systemic rather than discrete.

Overall, the results go beyond descriptive classification by showing that persistent mismatches between stakeholder expectations, institutional capabilities, and external environmental demands determine sustainability in international schools. In the following section, this synthesis serves as the analytical basis for connecting the results to sustainable leadership theory.

Linking to the Sustainable Leadership Theory

Sustainable leadership theory provides a valuable framework for interpreting and addressing these multifaceted challenges. Linking the difficulties identified to sustainable leadership reveals that effective leadership within international schools requires a long-term, adaptable, and inclusive approach.

More specifically, each category of challenges reflects tensions, gaps, or limitations in one or more core principles of sustainable leadership theory, including depth, breadth, longevity, justice, diversity, and resourcefulness (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004, 2012). For example, student-related challenges highlight the importance of "depth," emphasizing the need for holistic student development that integrates academic achievement with emotional well-being and long-term personal growth. However, the findings suggest that current practices often prioritize short-term academic outcomes over sustained developmental support, indicating a gap in the realization of this principle.

Leadership-related challenges, including fragmented governance, short-term decision-making, and philosophical conflicts, reveal limitations in "breadth" and "longevity." While sustainable leadership advocates distributed leadership and long-term vision, the findings indicate that leadership practices in some international schools remain centralized and reactive, thereby constraining institutional sustainability. Similarly, parent-related challenges reflect insufficient

stakeholder engagement, further underscoring gaps in "breadth," particularly in fostering collaborative and participatory leadership practices.

Teacher-related challenges and issues of staff instability also relate to the principle of "longevity," as high turnover undermines continuity, institutional memory, and long-term capacity building. This implies that sustainable leadership needs to go beyond strategic planning and incorporate human capital development and retention as a fundamental aspect of sustainability.

Challenges associated with curriculum design, school culture, and international education highlight the importance of "diversity" and "justice." Sustainable leadership requires sensitivity to cultural differences and equitable educational practices; however, the findings reveal tensions between global curricula and local cultural expectations, as well as inconsistencies in aligning educational values across stakeholders. These tensions demonstrate that achieving equity and inclusivity in international schools requires specific adaptations to context rather than uniform implementation of global models.

External environment-related challenges, along with innovation and competition pressures, are closely linked to the principle of "resourcefulness." Schools must navigate regulatory uncertainty, technological disruption, and market competition, all of which demand adaptive and strategic leadership. The results show that although some schools exhibit new adaptive tactics, many are still hindered by a lack of flexibility and a slow reaction to changes in the outside world.

Taken together, the results of the analysis reveal that sustainability concerns in international schools are more than just operational problems; rather, they are a reflection of deeper misalignments between leadership practices and the fundamental ideas of sustainable leadership theory. By systematically mapping empirical findings onto theoretical constructs, this study extends the application of the theory and provides a more nuanced understanding of how sustainable leadership operates in complex, globalized, and educational environments sensitive to policy.

Significantly, the results indicate that rather than being used in a vacuum, the concepts of sustainable leadership theory need to be constantly balanced and contextually adjusted. This emphasizes the necessity of an integrated leadership strategy that concurrently addresses several aspects of sustainability, such as long-term institutional resilience, cultural responsiveness, and stakeholder alignment.

International School Sustainability Model

Drawing on these findings, this study proposes the International School Sustainability Model (Figure 1), which offers an integrated framework for sustaining the success and viability of international schools in Shanghai. The model focuses on key domains—leadership resilience, curriculum integration, stakeholder collaboration, resource management, and external engagement—to maintain educational excellence and adaptability in the face of global change.

Additionally, each component of this approach is based on difficulties reported by stakeholders rather than abstract conceptualizations because it is

expressly drawn from the 11 theme categories found through qualitative analysis. In particular, the model components were constructed inductively by grouping related challenge categories into higher-order domains, which allowed for conceptual integration while maintaining the data's empirical structure.

Through ongoing evaluation and refinement, schools can ensure their continued relevance and effectiveness.

Furthermore, by converting theoretical concepts such as depth, breadth, longevity, diversity, and resourcefulness into practical domains within international school contexts, the model acts as a link between sustainable leadership theory and empirical data. Through empirically observed problems and practices, this integration guarantees the operationalization of theoretical ideas.

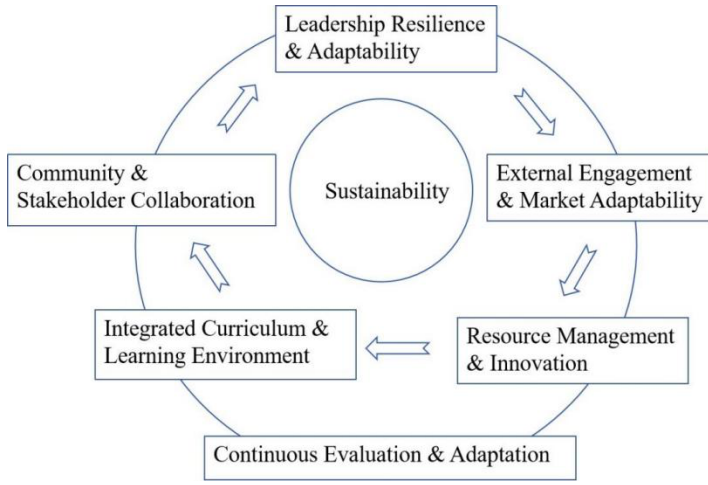

Figure 1: International School Sustainability Model

Sustainability as the Central Value Core

At the core of the model lies the principle of sustainability, ensuring that all institutional actions and decisions are aligned with the overarching goal of long-term success. The surrounding components are interconnected, reflecting the integrated nature of sustainable school development. This focal point highlights that sustainability is a guiding concept that influences all organisational procedures and stakeholder interactions rather than being a standalone result.

The results, which demonstrate that sustainability issues are integrated into all categories rather than limited to a particular domain, support this centrality.

Key components of the model

The model delineates five key components essential for sustainability:

Table 2: Key Components of the Model

	Key Components	Focus
1	Leadership Resilience & Adaptability	Responding effectively to changing educational needs, technological advances, and market shifts.
2	Integrated Curriculum & Learning Environment	Balancing academic excellence with social-emotional development, addressing both local and global needs.
3	Community & Stakeholder Collaboration	Building robust partnerships among school leaders, staff, parents, and the broader community.
4	Resource Management & Innovation	Managing resources efficiently while fostering innovation for financial and educational stability.
5	External Engagement & Market Adaptability	Adapting to market pressures, regulatory changes, and global trends.

Leadership resilience emphasizes proactive and responsive leadership that can aid in navigating a rapidly changing educational landscape. Integrated curriculum strategies promote academic rigor while fostering critical thinking, problem solving, and intercultural competence.

Community and stakeholder collaboration focuses on fostering active partnerships to support a shared vision and sustainable practices. Resource management and innovation stress financial prudence coupled with a culture of innovation. Finally, external engagement and market adaptability emphasize responsiveness to external pressures and opportunities.

Every element of the suggested model has a distinct data-driven basis since it is directly based on the empirical problem categories observed in the results. Leadership resilience and adaptability, which reflect concerns about strategic direction, staff stability, and adaptive capacity, are generated from challenges related to innovation and competition as well as leadership. The Integrated Curriculum & Learning Environment captures conflicts between global standards, local relevance, and future-oriented competences. It is based on difficulties related to the curriculum and content as well as educational sustainability. Challenges pertaining to parents, students, school culture, and climate give rise to community and stakeholder collaboration, emphasizing the significance of alignment, communication, and shared expectations. Resource Management & Innovation reflects limitations in terms of finances, infrastructure, and human capital and is associated with difficulties connected to teachers, support systems, and resources. With a focus on market rivalry, regulatory restrictions, and global-local dynamics,

external engagement and market adaptability are drawn from difficulties related to the external environment and international education.

This clear mapping shows that the model is methodically built from the empirical data rather than being imposed a priori.

Interconnections between Components

These five components are deeply interdependent. For instance, leadership resilience enhances curriculum development and resource management, whereas community collaboration strengthens both external engagement and the relevance of the curriculum. The interplay among components generates a dynamic cycle of continuous improvement, reinforcing institutional sustainability.

These components work as a systemic network rather than as separate parts, with changes in one domain having the potential to have a domino effect on others. The interconnectedness of the sustainability issues identified in the research is reflected in this view, which is based on systems.

The empirical finding that problems seldom arise in a vacuum but rather cooccur across many stakeholder and organisational areas is supported by these links.

Continuous Evaluation & Adaptation

Surrounding the model is a continuous evaluation and adaptation feedback loop, ensuring that all strategies are regularly assessed and refined in response to internal developments and external changes. This fosters a culture of ongoing improvement and strategic agility, which is crucial for sustaining success over the long term.

By highlighting iterative learning, ongoing reflection, and the ability to adapt to changing internal and external circumstances, this feedback loop operationalizes the concept of "longevity" in sustainable leadership theory.

Implications and Limitations

The development of the international school sustainability model has significant implications for policymakers, school leaders, and educators. It offers a structured approach to addressing the challenges identified in this study, emphasizing adaptive leadership, integrated curricula, community engagement, efficient resource management, and market responsiveness. For policymakers, the model serves as a guide for crafting supportive educational policies; for school leaders, it provides actionable strategies for operational and strategic improvement.

In addition, the model improves its applicability in actual educational contexts by converting abstract and complicated sustainability issues into useful domains of intervention.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The model is derived from a sample of international schools in Shanghai, and its applicability to other

cultural, political, or economic contexts may require adaptation. Additionally, while grounded in sustainable leadership theory, the model may not fully encompass the complexities of all educational environments, suggesting the need for further theoretical integration. Moreover, successful implementation depends on leadership commitment, resource availability, and contextual factors unique to each school. Therefore, to improve the model's generalizability and robustness, future research is needed to empirically test, improve, and validate it in a variety of settings.

Theoretical Contributions and Reflections

This study offers significant theoretical contributions by extending and contextualizing Hargreaves and Fink's Sustainable Leadership Theory within the unique environment of international schools in Shanghai, China. Through qualitative analysis of administrators', teachers', and parents' perspectives, the findings deepen the understanding of sustainable leadership by broadening the conception of "depth" to encompass not only academic achievement but also students' emotional well-being, intercultural adaptability, and future career readiness.

Moreover, the study advances the principle of "breadth" by emphasizing the critical role of engaging multiple stakeholders (staff, parents, and students) in distributed leadership practices that enhance institutional sustainability within a competitive and culturally diverse context. This demonstrates that rather than depending exclusively on hierarchical decision-making structures, leadership in international schools is fundamentally relational and necessitates ongoing alignment among many stakeholder groups.

The dimension of "length" is similarly reinforced, with findings underscoring the importance of succession planning that proactively integrates innovation to preserve the continuity of school missions amid technological and market-driven disruptions. In this way, sustainability is referred to as a dynamic and forward process that requires leaders to anticipate and solve long-term structural changes rather than as a static goal.

While sustainable leadership theory highlights diversity and justice, this study reveals that, within international school settings, these ideals must be anchored in cultural sensitivity, multilingual communication, and the accommodation of diverse educational expectations. This broadens the theory by demonstrating that the ideas of equality and inclusion must be operationalized through particular practices to context influenced by interactions between global and local.

Additionally, the notion of "resourcefulness" is expanded to recognize adaptability as a critical resource; effective school leaders must demonstrate agility in response to external political, regulatory, and global market pressures. The results also imply that resourcefulness involves strategic responses to uncertainty and quick change in addition to effective resource allocation.

Finally, the study enriches the principle of "conservation" by introducing the concept of "localizing the global," wherein schools selectively preserve global

educational ideals while tailoring them to the local Shanghai context, thus achieving a dynamic balance between tradition and innovation. This work offers a sophisticated perspective on how foreign schools manage conflicts between local relevance and global standardization.

More generally, by illustrating how sustainable leadership theory functions in situations of market competitiveness, cultural hybridity, and regulatory uncertainty, which are contexts that have not received enough attention in previous studies, this work contributes to the theoretical literature. By empirically anchoring the theory in stakeholder experiences, the study goes beyond abstract conceptualization and provides a more oriented practice and sensitive interpretation to the context of sustainable leadership.

These contributions refine sustainable leadership theory, offering a more nuanced understanding of what sustainability demands in the evolving landscape of international education. They underscore the need for leadership practices that are emotionally intelligent, culturally responsive, strategically innovative, and profoundly adaptable to both local and global shifts.

Limitations

This study offers valuable insights into sustainability challenges in Shanghai's international schools; however, several limitations should be noted. First, the purposive and relatively small sample may limit generalizability and the diversity of perspectives. Second, the reliance on self-reported interview data introduces potential social desirability bias. Third, interviewer effects may have influenced the responses, although they were mitigated through consistent protocols and neutral questioning.

In addition, the study focuses primarily on challenges rather than best practices, suggesting the need for more balanced approaches in future research. Its cross-sectional design also limits the understanding of how challenges evolve over time, highlighting the value of longitudinal studies. Finally, while grounded in sustainable leadership theory, further integration with frameworks addressing cross-cultural leadership, digital innovation, and environmental sustainability could provide a more comprehensive understanding of international school contexts.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should expand comparative studies across different Chinese cities and international school types, such as British, American, international baccalaureate (IB), and bilingual schools, to capture the contextual variations that influence sustainable leadership practices, as suggested by Sakr (2021). The adaptability and transferability of the suggested sustainability framework across various institutional and regulatory contexts will be ascertained through such comparative investigations.

Adopting mixed methods approaches is also recommended. Combining qualitative depth with quantitative validation would enhance the robustness and

generalizability of the findings, providing more comprehensive insights into the dynamics of sustainable leadership (Venkatesh et al., 2013). To objectively assess the connections between leadership practices and sustainable results, future research could specifically create measurement scales based on the thematic categories found in this study.

Furthermore, deeper investigations into leadership strategies that balance innovation with long-term sustainability under global pressure are critical for informing future school leadership practices (e.g., Macur, G. M. A., & Macur, J. J., 2025; Acharya, 2025; Aliari, 2025). This involves examining how school administrators put important ideas such as flexibility, stakeholder involvement, and resourcefulness into practice in quickly evolving settings.

Research should also prioritize the exploration of student voices and broader stakeholder engagement in shaping sustainable leadership, an area that remains underexplored but is vital for fostering authentic community participation (Peng et al., 2024, 2026). A more thorough grasp of sustainability in education would result from including students as active contributors rather than as passive recipients.

Longitudinal studies are especially necessary to investigate how leadership practices and sustainability strategies change over time, particularly in reaction to governmental changes, technology advancements, and shifting global dynamics. Such studies offer crucial evidence for the long-term effectiveness of sustainability initiatives (Verhelst et al., 2023).

Finally, future research could further refine and validate the international school sustainability model proposed in this study through empirical testing, case studies, and cross-contextual applications, thereby strengthening its theoretical robustness and practical applicability.

CONCLUSION

This study explored sustainability challenges in international schools in Shanghai through a qualitative analysis of stakeholder perspectives guided by sustainable leadership theory. The findings reveal a set of interconnected challenges across leadership, teaching quality, student development, parent engagement, the curriculum, school culture, resources, and external pressures. Rather than isolated issues, these challenges form a dynamic system in which weaknesses in one domain can intensify others, highlighting sustainability as a systemic and relational process.

Through empirical evidence, the study contributes theoretically by extending sustainable leadership theory within the international school context and operationalizing key principles, such as depth, breadth, longevity, diversity, justice, and resourcefulness. It further emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity, stakeholder alignment, and adaptive capacity in navigating global–local complexities.

An empirically grounded international school sustainability model is proposed, linking key domains (leadership resilience, curriculum integration, stakeholder collaboration, resource management, and external adaptability) to the

identified challenges. This model connects theory and practice by offering a structured framework for addressing sustainability in international schools.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for collaborative and adaptive leadership, stronger stakeholder alignment, investment in teacher development, and a balanced focus on student well-being and academic outcomes. These are essential for institutional resilience in a competitive and policy-sensitive environment.

While limited by sample size and contextual scope, the study provides a foundation for future research and application. Overall, it demonstrates that sustaining international schools requires integrated, adaptive, and context-responsive leadership that aligns global standards with local realities.

Acknowledgment

In the preparation of this manuscript, we utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation with the following capacity:

- ☑ *None*
- ☐ *Some sections, with minimal or no editing*
- ☐ *Some sections, with extensive editing*
- ☐ *Entire work, with minimal or no editing*
- ☐ *Entire work, with extensive editing*

REFERENCES

Acharya, C. N. (2025). Justice-oriented tourism education: Advocacy for reforming Global North curricula with Global South knowledge for sustainability. *Journal of International Students, 15*(10), 41-60. https://doi.org/10.32674/hhs39r16

Aliari, S. (2025). Balancing grit and ground: Cultural sustainability and resilience among marginalized scholars in academia. *Journal of International Students, 15*(11), 55-76. https://doi.org/10.32674/nfq0qt74

Arar, K., & Oplatka, I. (2022). *Advanced theories of educational leadership.* Switzerland: Springer.

Askell-Williams, H., & Koh, G. A. (2020). Enhancing the sustainability of school improvement initiatives. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 31*(4), 660–678. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2020.1767657

Bailey, L., & Gibson, M. T. (2020). International school principals: Routes to headship and key challenges of their role. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 48*(6), 1007-1025. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219884686

Blatti, T., Clinton, J., & Graham, L. (2019). Exploring Collective Teacher Efficacy in an International School in Shanghai. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 18*(6), 214–235. https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.18.6.13

Bourgeois, N., Ledger, S., & Harris, J. (2025). Leadership in international schools: A scoping review. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 0*(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432251330773

Bunnell, T. (2019). Developing and institutionalising the 'Internationally-Minded School': The role of the 'Numerous Fs'. *Journal of Research in International Education, 18*(2), 186–198. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240919865792

Day, C., Sammons, P., & Gorgen, K. 2020. *Successful School Leadership*. Education development trust.

Furstenau, L. B., Sott, M. K., Kipper, L. M., Machado, E. L., Lopez-Robles, J. R., Dohan, M. S., Cobo, M. J., Zahid, A., Abbasi, Q. H., & Imran, M. A. (2020). *Link Between Sustainability and Industry 4.0: Trends, Challenges and New Perspectives.* IEEE Access, 8, 140079–140096. https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2020.3012812

Han, B., Coghlan, S., Buchanan, G., & McKay, D. (2025). Who is helping whom? Student concerns about AI-teacher collaboration in higher education classrooms. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 9*(2), 1-32. https://doi.org/10.1145/3711104

Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. (2004). The seven principles of sustainable leadership. *Educational leadership, 61*(7), 8-13. https://facilitatoru.com/data/guides/SL%20Principles.pdf

Hargreaves, A., & Fink, D. 2012. *Sustainable leadership.* John Wiley & Sons.

Hatziconstantis, C., & Kolympari, T. (2021). School climate in international school settings: Differences in teacher perceptions among international and domestic-oriented departments. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 24*(1), 108–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1623916

Iqbal, Q., & Ahmad, N. H. (2021). Sustainable development: The colors of sustainable leadership in learning organization. *Sustainable Development, 29*(1), 108–119. https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2135

Jin (金津), J., & Chen (□佳□), J. (2023). Experimenting With International Curricula in Shanghai: Policies, Practice, and a Network Ethnography Analysis. *ECNU Review of Education, 6*(4), 623–645. https://doi.org/10.1177/20965311231201429

Jin, J. (2022). Ambivalent governance and the changing role of the state: Understanding the rise of international schools in Shanghai through the lens of policy networks. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 114. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2022.102004

Kalkan, Ü., Altınay Aksal, F., Altınay Gazi, Z., Atasoy, R., & Dağlı, G. (2020). The relationship between school administrators' leadership styles, school culture, and organizational image. *Sage Open, 10*(1), 2158244020902081.

Leithwood, K. (2021). A Review of Evidence about Equitable School Leadership. *Education Sciences, 11*(8), 377. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080377

Leithwood, K., & Sun, J. (2012). The nature and effects of transformational school leadership: A meta-analytic review of unpublished research.

Educational administration quarterly, 48(3), 387-423. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X11436268

Ma, Y., & Wright, E. (2023). Expanding flexible citizenship: Chinese international school students and global mobilities for higher education. *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies, 19*(2), 101–114. https://doi.org/10.1108/STICS-05-2022-0010

Maak, T., & Pless, N. M. (2006). Responsible Leadership in a Stakeholder Society–A Relational Perspective: Thomas Maak and Nicola M. Pless. *Journal of business ethics, 66*(1), 99-115. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-006-9047-z

Macur, G. M. A., & Macur, J. J. (2025). Designing Effective Leadership Structures in International Schools: Roles, Strategies, and Implementation. In Issues and Trends in International School Leadership (pp. 133-168). *IGI Global Scientific Publishing*. https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-4342-5.ch004

Murtada, A. B. S. B., & Al-Zar'ah, H. A. (2022). The Degree of Practicing Sustainable Leadership among High School Leaders in West of Dammam from the Teachers' Perspective. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 18*(4), 12-31. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1379513.pdf

Navarro, J. A., Saking, M. B., Mateo, M. W., Ramos, M. B., & Banggawan, E. K. (2024). EXPLORING HOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS USE SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT TO LEAD ADAPTIVELY. *Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies, 4*(3), 228–243. https://doi.org/10.47760/cognizance.2024.v04i03.021

Peng, Y., Alias, B. S., & Mansor, A. N. (2024). Application of Stakeholder Theory in Education Management: A Comprehensive Systematic Literature Review (SLR). *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research, 23*(6), 1-31.https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.23.6.1

Peng, Y., Alias, B. S., Wan, X., & Mansor, A. N. (2026). The impact of parental involvement on sustainable school in improving educational quality: a systematic review. *Discover Sustainability*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-026-03011-4

Poole, A. (2019). *How internationalized school teachers construct cross-cultural identities in an internationalized school in Shanghai, China* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham).

Sakr, W. E. A. E. (2021). International Schools and National Culture: A Comparative Study in The Arab Republic of Egypt, and Some Other Countries. *Egyptian Journal of Educational Sciences, 1*(1), 139-152.

Tideman, S. G., Arts, M. C., & Zandee, D. P. (2013). Sustainable leadership: Toward a workable definition. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, (49), 17-33. http://www.jstor.org/stable/jcorpciti.49.17

Tran, L. T., & Nghia, T. L. H. (2020). Leadership in international education: Leaders' professional development needs and tensions. *Higher Education, 80*(3), 479-495. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00494-1

Venkatesh, V., Brown, S. A., & Bala, H. (2013). Bridging the qualitative–quantitative divide: Guidelines for conducting mixed methods research in

information systems1. *MIS quarterly, 37*(1), 21-54. https://doi.org/10.25300/MISQ/2013/37.1.02

Verhelst, D., Vanhoof, J., & Van Petegem, P. (2023). School effectiveness for education for sustainable development (ESD): What characterizes an ESD-effective school organization? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 51*(2), 502–525. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220985196

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Categories Related to the Interviewees' Views

Main categories	Categories	Subcategories	F	Participant
1:Leadership-related Challenges			14	A1, A2, A4, A5, A7, A8, T1, P1
	1-1:Difficulties in staff management		3	A1, P1, T1
		Difficulty in staffing 1-1-2:High staff turnover		
	1-2:Gaps in leadership & management		8	A2, A4, A5, A7, A8
		1-2-1:Difficulties in admission & enrollment 1-2-2:Inefficiency leadership 1-2-3:Difficulties in student management		
	1-3:Conflict of educational philosophy		1	A8
	1-4:High demands on management design		2	A7
2:Teacher-related Challenges			12	A5, A7, A8, T2, T3, T4
	2-1:Teacher–Student relationship		2	T3, T4
	2-2 Classroom & Teaching Challenges		7	A7,T2, T3, T4
		2-2-1:Teaching & Learning inefficiency 2-2-2:Lack of feedback & support 2-2-3:Language barrier 2-2-4:Time management		

2-3:Teacher instability	1	A5
2-4:Teacher quality	2	A5, A8
2-4-1:Emotional intelligence 2-4-2:Lack of training infrastructure		
3:Student-related Challenges	21	A2, A3, A4, A8, T1, T3. T4, T3, T5
3-1:High demands on student development	5	A4, T1, T3
3-2:Academic difficulties of students	9	A2, A8, T4, T5
3-2-1: Language requirements 3-2-2: Motivation to learn 3-2-3: Level of learning ability		
3-3:Future Preparedness	4	A8
3-4:Emotional Support	2	A8, T4
3-5:Selection Criteria classification	1	A3
4:Parent-related Challenges	13	A1, A2, A4, A5, A7, T5, P3
4-1:Parental Involvement	6	A1, A5, P3
4-1-1:Parent Engagement 4-1-2:School--home communication 4-1-3:Parent-school roles		
4-2:Parent Expectation	5	A2, A4, A5,T5, P3
4-3:Parent Attitudes and Perception	1	A7
4-4:Parent–child interaction	1	P3
5:Curriculum and Content-related Challenges	7	A4, A5, A8, T5, P2

5-1:Curriculum integration	2	A1, P2
5-2:Curriculum difficulty in design	3	A5. A8, T5
5-3:Disconnect between global and local implementation	1	A5
5-4:Programme suitability	1	A4
6:School Culture and Climate-related Challenges	6	A2, A5, A7, P1
6-1:Cultural & Global Integration	3	A2, A7, P1
6-2:Assessment & Evaluation	1	A2
6-3:Educational Goals	1	A5
6-4:Value system	1	A5
7:Support Systems and Resources-related Challenges	8	A1, A3, A8, T5, P2
7-1:Limited funds & materials	3	A1, T5
7-2:Limited Resources	3	A5, P2
7-3:Unreasonable distribution of resources	2	A1, A3
8:External Environment-related Challenges	9	A1, A2, A3, A5, A8, T4
8-1:Adaptability and Reform in Education Systems	4	A1, A5,T4
8-2:Global & Political Instability	1	A8
8-3:Changes in market conditions	1	A2
8-4:Government Restrictions and Policy	3	A2, A3

9:Educational sustainability-related Challenges	9	A2, A3, A5, A8
9-1: Future needs to be sustainable	6	A2, A3,A5, A8
9-1-1:Future Opportunities 9-1-2:Educational Trends 9-1-3:Ensuring education quality		
9-2:Internationalization & Globalization	1	A5
9-3:Underdeveloped educational ecosystem	2	A3,A5,
10:Innovation & Competition-related Challenges	13	A1, A2, A3, A7, A8
10-1: Market Competition	2	A1, A3
10-1-1:Need to meet external demands 10-1-2:Need to enhance brand recognition		
10-2 Technological innovation	10	A2, A7, A8
10-2-1:Impact of AI 10-2-2:Technological adaptation 10-2-3:Technological creativity		
10-3:Financial investment in innovation	1	A8
11:International Education-related Challenges	4	A8, T2, T3
11-1:Global vs Local Gaps	1	T3
11-2:Critique of Traditional Education	1	A8
11-3:Educational Comparisons	2	T2, T3

Note. F=frequency.

Author bios

Yihong Peng is a senior researcher in China's international education industry and has been in the industry for more than 10 years. She received her M.Ed. from Shanghai Normal University, China; an MBA from East China Normal University, China; and an EMBA from the University College of Yayasan Pahang, Malaysia, and she is currently pursuing her Ph.D. at Universiti Kebangsaan, Malaysia. She is committed to in-depth research on China's international education industry and contributes to the development of the industry. She can be connected at email: p127601@siswa.ukm.edu.my

Bity Salwana Alias served in the Planning and Research Division of Education Policy, Commentary on Education Malaysia, from 2009 to 2018 after graduating from Doctor of Philosophy Degree as Assistant Director in the Research and Evaluation Sector. She started serving as a Senior Lecturer at UKM in 2018. The study specializes in the field of administration and noble values, including unity and integrity. She can be contacted at email: bity@ukm.edu.my

Xinyu Wan is currently studying product design at Jingdezhen Ceramic University. With a fervent dedicated to the confluence of art, education, and sustainable development, Xinyu Wan's research pursuits revolve around pioneering approaches to embed sustainable practices into art and design education. She has engaged in comprehensive literature reviews and data analysis concerning sustainable design methodologies. She can be connected at email: wanxinyu2311@gmail.com

Azlin Norhaini Mansor received her Ph.D. in Educational Administration from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and a Master of Education and Bachelor of Science (Biology) from New York State University at Albany, New York, USA. She is currently an Associate Professor and a member of the Centre for Shaping Advanced and Professional Education (UKMShape). Her publications and research interests include educational leadership, educational management, policy evaluation, and various fields involving teaching and learning. She can be contacted at email: azlinmansor@ukm.edu.my /azlinmansor@gmail.com