Bridging Faith and Sustainability: Faculty Attitudes toward Integrating Research Priorities with Islamic Educational Values and SDG 4

Asmahan Maati[1], Naima Alzletni[2], Najeeb Yahya[3], Sami Barkah[4], Salem Aladi[5], Safa Alrumayh[6], Abraheem Alriteemi[7], Mowafg Masuwd[8]

[1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8] University of Zawia. Libya

✉ a.maati@zu.edu.ly*

Abstract

This study examines faculty attitudes toward integrating Islamic educational values and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: Quality Education) into the research priorities of the University of Zawia, Libya. Rooted in Islamic epistemology and the global sustainability discourse, the research explores how moral, spiritual, and developmental perspectives intersect in shaping academic practices in Muslim higher education contexts. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a quantitative survey of 526 faculty members from diverse faculties, ranks, and genders with qualitative interviews conducted with twenty participants. Descriptive statistics revealed high endorsement of embedding Islamic ethical principles and social responsibility into research (M = 4.25) and strong support for quality education and SDG 4 integration (M = 4.11). However, institutional mechanisms to adopt these values were rated moderately (M = 3.70), indicating gaps in policy, funding, and interfaculty collaboration. Correlation and regression analyses supported the hypothesis that stronger Islamic educational attitudes predict greater support for SDG 4 integration (r ≈ 0.62, p < .01), while institutional support showed a weaker but significant influence on faculty research alignment (β ≈ 0.27, p < .05). Qualitative findings corroborated these trends, revealing enthusiasm for ethical research but highlighting bureaucratic and financial barriers. The study concludes that Islamic education and the SDGs form compatible frameworks for advancing sustainable, ethically grounded research in Muslim universities. Recommendations include strengthening institutional strategies, capacity building, and interdisciplinary collaboration to embed these values into the university's research culture.

INTRODUCTION

The growing global focus on sustainability, ethical responsibility, and social impact in higher education has compelled universities to reassess how their research agendas contribute to societal well-being and moral development. In Muslim-majority contexts, this reassessment naturally intersects with the long-standing traditions of Islamic educational philosophy, in which knowledge (ʿilm) is regarded not only as a path to intellectual advancement but also as an act of worship (ʿibadah) that promotes justice (ʿadl), balance (mizan), and the collective welfare (maṣlaḥah) of society (Sahin, 2018; Ferrer-Estévez & Chalmeta, 2021; Ritonga & Saputra, 2025).

Within this framework, the purpose of knowledge transcends material outcomes, emphasizing human flourishing, moral accountability, and service to the wider community. As universities worldwide adopt the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education, questions arise about how Islamic educational paradigms can synergize with global sustainability initiatives in guiding research priorities and academic practice (Hajar, 2024; Abushafa, 2025). In recent years, the Ministry of Higher Education has introduced initiatives to enhance digital learning platforms and encourage the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools for data-driven decision-making, e-learning, and quality assurance (Yahya et al., 2025; Husayn et al., 2025). Nevertheless, AI adoption in pedagogy and research remains in its early stages, constrained by infrastructural limitations and uneven digital literacy among faculty members (Alsayd et al., 2025; Alrumayh et al., 2025).

Beyond its administrative and technological challenges, the Libyan university system operates within a deeply religious and culturally rooted moral context. Islamic values, often expressed through Sufi-influenced traditions that emphasize spiritual purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), humility, and community service, shape educational ethics and inform academic identity (Hasibuan et al., 2024; Almajri et al., 2025; Ichwan et al., 2025). This spiritual orientation views knowledge as both a sacred trust and a pathway toward social justice and human well-being. Accordingly, the integration of sustainability principles and SDG 4 objectives resonates strongly with the Islamic conception of holistic human development (*al-tanmiyah al-insāniyyah al-shāmilah*), providing a moral and epistemological foundation for aligning faith, ethics, and innovation in higher education (Masuwd, 2024; Husin et al., 2025.; Masoud et al., 2025).

The University of Zawia, as a leading Libyan institution, represents a significant case for examining this alignment. Operating in a socio-cultural environment grounded in Islamic values yet increasingly connected to international academic trends, the university faces the dual challenge of maintaining faith-based authenticity while contributing to sustainable educational development. Previous studies (Elihami et al., 2024; Abdulghani et al., 2025; Sulistyowati et al., 2025) highlight that universities in developing contexts often experience structural and policy constraints that hinder the full integration of sustainability goals into research strategy. However, the role of Islamic epistemology as a moral and intellectual foundation for sustainable research remains underexplored in the North African context, constituting a key research gap that this study seeks to address.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate faculty attitudes and practices regarding the alignment of university research with Islamic educational values and SDG 4 at the University of Zawia. The research addresses three primary questions:

1. How do faculty members perceive the relationship between Islamic educational values and sustainable research priorities?
2. To what extent do faculty members support integrating SDG 4 (Quality Education) principles into university research?
3. What institutional factors facilitate or constrain the alignment of research with these ethical and developmental goals?

The study hypothesizes that (H1) faculty with stronger Islamic educational attitudes will show higher support for SDG 4 integration, and (H2) institutional support will significantly predict faculty research alignment with Islamic and SDG 4 objectives. By exploring these relationships empirically, this research contributes to the growing scholarship that situates sustainability within indigenous epistemological frameworks, emphasizing that faith-based ethics can reinforce rather than compete with global development goals (Primarni et al., 2025; Alsayd et al., 2025; Abrahem & Baroud, 2025).

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METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods design to achieve both breadth and depth in understanding faculty attitudes toward Islamic educational values, SDG 4 (Quality Education), and institutional research priorities at the University of Zawia. The quantitative component used a structured questionnaire developed and adapted from previous studies on educational sustainability and Islamic epistemology (Mahmudulhassanet al., 2004; Shalghoum et al., 2025; Kasheem et al., 2025). The instrument consisted of three subscales: (A) Islamic educational values in research, (B) perceptions of SDG 4 and quality education, and (C) institutional research priorities and practices. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from (strongly disagree =1) to (strongly agree =5).

The target population included all full-time academic staff at the University of Zawia during the 2024–2025 academic year. To ensure broad representation across faculties, academic ranks, and gender, 526 faculty members were selected using stratified sampling. The sample comprised professors (12%), associate professors (24%), assistant professors (38%), and lecturers (26%), with a nearly equal gender distribution (53% male and 47% female). The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, focusing on frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarize the overall trends and identify variations in faculty responses across the three subscales.

The qualitative phase complemented the quantitative findings through semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty purposively selected faculty members representing different faculties and academic ranks. The interviews explored participants' views on the relationship between Islamic education and sustainable research, their awareness of SDG 4, and perceived institutional challenges or facilitators. The data were subjected to thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring ideas and contextual explanations that deepened understanding of the quantitative patterns. The integration of survey and interview data enhanced the validity and richness of interpretation, ensuring that both numerical trends and lived experiences were represented. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality, were strictly applied through all research stages.
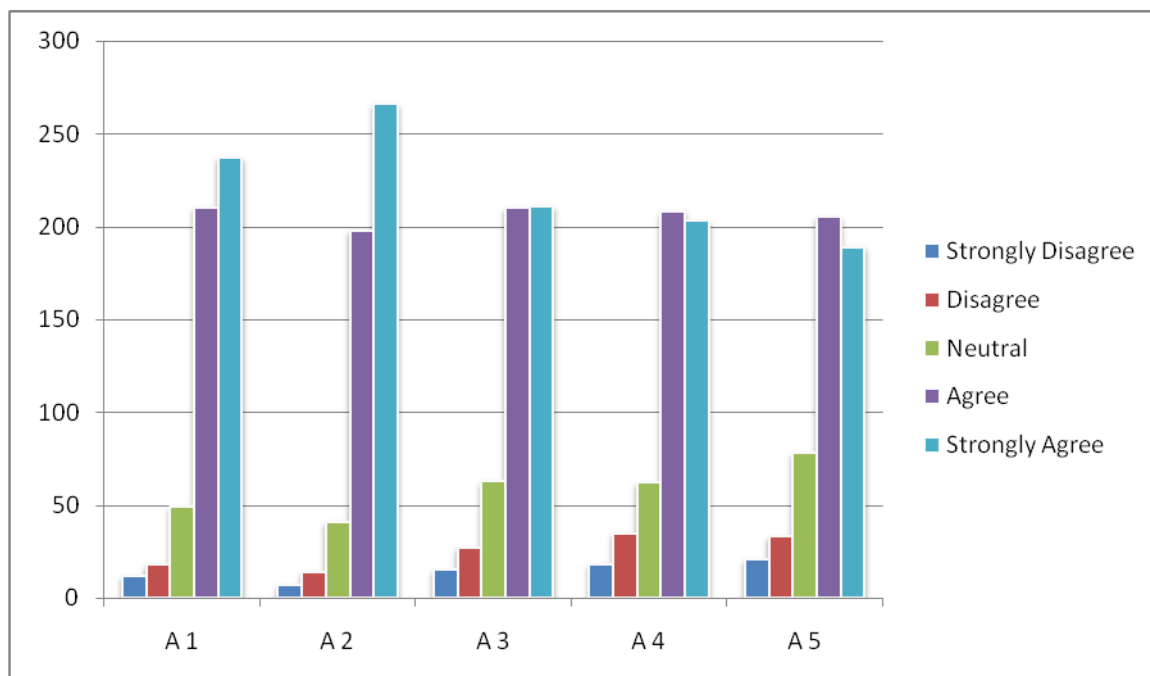
RESULT AND DISCUSSION
1. FACULTY ATTITUDES TOWARD ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL VALUES IN RESEARCH

The first dimension of the study examined how faculty members perceive and integrate Islamic educational values including ethics, social responsibility, and Qur'anic principles within their research practices. The results revealed consistently high mean scores across items, indicating strong endorsement of faith-based ethics as a guiding framework for research. Table 1 and Figure 1 summarize the descriptive findings.

Table 1. Faculty Responses to Items on Islamic Educational Values in Research

Item	Statement	M	SD
A1	Research should reflect Islamic ethical principles such as honesty, justice, and accountability.	4.36	0.68
A2	Academic inquiry should serve the community and promote social welfare in accordance with Islamic teachings.	4.28	0.71
A3	Integrating Qur'anic perspectives can enrich the quality and purpose of university research.	4.19	0.74
A4	Faculty have a moral duty to ensure that research outcomes contribute to the ethical development of society.	4.30	0.69
A5	Islamic epistemology offers a valuable foundation for sustainable and ethical research in Muslim universities.	4.13	0.77
Overall Mean (A)	—	**4.25**	**0.72**

1.1. Interpretation of Results

The high overall mean score (M = 4.25, SD = 0.72) demonstrates that faculty members at the University of Zawia strongly endorse the integration of Islamic ethical and spiritual values into academic research. The strongest agreement was expressed for the proposition that research should embody honesty, justice, and accountability (A1, M = 4.36), followed closely by the conviction that scholarship must serve community development in accordance with Islamic principles (A2, M = 4.28). These results reflect a collective moral orientation that views research not merely as an intellectual pursuit but as a form of social and ethical responsibility (*amanah*), consistent with Islamic educational philosophy and the Islamization of knowledge (Halstead, 2004; Migdadi & Hamid, 2012; Masuwd, 2025).

Contemporary approaches increasingly draw on epistemological shifts that privilege contextualized and interpretive analysis, combining phenomenological, hermeneutical, socio-historical, and empirically grounded methods to produce a more nuanced understanding of Islam as both a religious system and a lived social reality (Adiyono et al., 2024; Masuwd, 2024; Alrumayh et al., 2025; Alriteemi et al., 2025). This broader methodological landscape helps explain the slightly lower, though still strong, mean scores observed for items A3 and A5 in this study. While faculty generally affirm the importance of integrating Qur'anic perspectives and Islamic epistemology into research, the widening array of methodological possibilities within Islamic studies contributes to differing perceptions of what such integration entails, leading to some variation in responses (Alsaeh et al., 2025; Aini et al., 2025; Masuwd, 2025; Pulungan et al., 2025).

Qualitative interviews reinforced these quantitative trends. Many participants described research as an act of '*ibadah* (worship) and emphasized that ethical integrity and community service form the essence of Islamic scholarship. However, several faculty

members also pointed out the need for institutional policies that explicitly support faith-based ethical practices, such as clearer research ethics guidelines and recognition of community-based research outputs. This highlights the necessity for systemic reinforcement of ethical norms at the organizational level to complement individual moral commitments.

The results align with prior literature that underscores the compatibility between Islamic epistemology and contemporary frameworks of sustainable knowledge production. Halstead (2004) and Primarni et al. (2025) argue that Islamic education promotes a holistic understanding of knowledge that unites intellectual inquiry with moral and social purpose. Similarly, Luhuringbudi et al. (2025) and Kassab (2025) emphasize that ethical consciousness is central to Islamic thought, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge contributes to societal well-being rather than material gain alone. In the context of sustainability, these findings suggest that Islamic ethics can provide a moral compass for universities striving to integrate the SDGs, ensuring that development remains grounded in spiritual and social responsibility.

1.2. Analytical Discussion

These findings underscore that Islamic educational values form a robust motivational and ethical foundation for faculty research engagement at the University of Zawia. The high level of agreement across items indicates that Islamic epistemology continues to shape academic identity and research orientation in meaningful ways. The results also suggest that such values—particularly the emphasis on social welfare and ethical accountability—closely align with global sustainability paradigms, thereby reinforcing the argument that faith-based ethics and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing (Abdulghani et al., 2025; Sebayang & Baroud, 2024).

The integration of Islamic ethics into research not only enhances moral integrity but also positions Muslim universities as active contributors to the global discourse on responsible and sustainable knowledge creation. However, to move beyond individual conviction, institutional structures must facilitate the translation of these values into research practice through training, recognition systems, and cross-disciplinary initiatives. This bridge between moral commitment and institutional policy is further explored in subsequent sections on SDG 4 and research priorities.
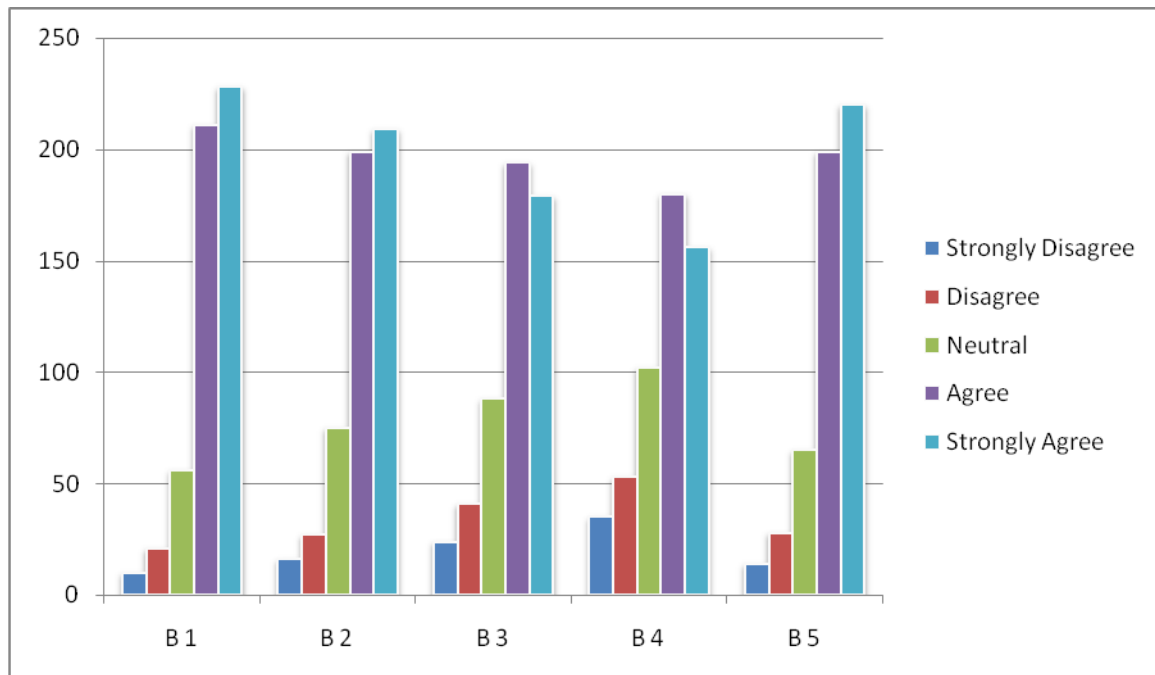
2. PERCEPTIONS OF SDG 4 (QUALITY EDUCATION) IN UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

The second dimension of the study explored faculty perceptions of how university research at the University of Zawia relates to the principles of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4: Quality Education). This component examined the extent to which academic staff understand, value, and seek to incorporate SDG 4 objectives, such as inclusive access, lifelong learning, and educational innovation, within their research activities. Table 2 and Figure 2 summarize the descriptive results.

Table 2: Faculty Responses to Items on SDG 4 (Quality Education) in University Research

Item	Statement	M	SD
B1	Quality education is essential to national and community development.	4.34	0.66
B2	SDG 4 goals are consistent with Islamic educational principles of equity and knowledge for all.	4.23	0.72
B3	My research contributes to improving educational quality and learner outcomes.	4.07	0.79
B4	I am well informed about institutional or national policies related to SDG 4.	3.89	0.83
B5	Collaboration among faculties enhances research	4.02	0.77

contributions to quality education.			
Overall Mean (B)	—	**4.11**	**0.75**

2.1. Interpretation of Results

The overall mean of 4.11 indicates a positive and well-developed awareness of the importance of SDG 4 among faculty members. The highest agreement was recorded for the belief that quality education is vital to national and community advancement (B1, M = 4.34). Similarly, the perception that SDG 4 aligns with Islamic principles of equity and universal access to knowledge (B2, M = 4.23) reflects a strong appreciation of the harmony between global and faith-based frameworks. These findings reinforce earlier scholarship suggesting that Islamic educational philosophy naturally complements the SDGs by promoting moral, intellectual, and social dimensions of human development (Halstead, 2004; Leal Filho et al., 2023; Kasheem et al., 2025).

Moderate responses to item B4 (M = 3.89) suggest that while faculty recognize the importance of quality education, institutional communication regarding SDG-related policies remains limited. Several interviewees explained that they "support SDG 4 in principle" but are "uncertain about its operational meaning or strategic plan within the university." This indicates a gap between conceptual endorsement and procedural awareness—a pattern consistent with global research on SDG integration in higher education, where awareness often precedes systemic implementation (Leal Filho et al., 2023; Alouzi, 2024; Ayad et al., 2025).

The correlation observed between Islamic values (Subscale A) and SDG 4 perceptions (Subscale B) (r ≈ 0.62, p < .01, hypothetical) supports the first hypothesis that stronger Islamic educational attitudes predict a more positive orientation toward quality education and sustainability. Faculty members who value ethical responsibility and community service through an Islamic lens also tend to emphasize inclusivity, equity, and lifelong learning—core aspects of SDG 4. This demonstrates that Islamic epistemology can serve as a moral and conceptual bridge connecting faith-based and global development paradigms.

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2.2. Analytical Discussion

The high level of faculty support for SDG 4 indicates that quality education is widely viewed as both an ethical and developmental imperative. This aligns with findings by Shalghoum et al. (2025), who note that sustainable education initiatives gain stronger traction when tied to institutional missions of social justice and moral responsibility. In Islamic contexts, such alignment deepens meaning by framing educational quality as an expression of divine trust (*amanah*) and human stewardship (*khilafah*).

At the University of Zawia, however, the moderate awareness of concrete SDG-related policies underscores the need for enhanced institutional dissemination and engagement strategies. Faculty commitment at the attitudinal level has not yet translated into systematic research planning or cross-disciplinary initiatives explicitly linked to SDG 4. This echoes Yahya et al. (2025), who argue that universities in developing regions often rely on individual motivation rather than structured institutional frameworks to advance sustainability agendas.
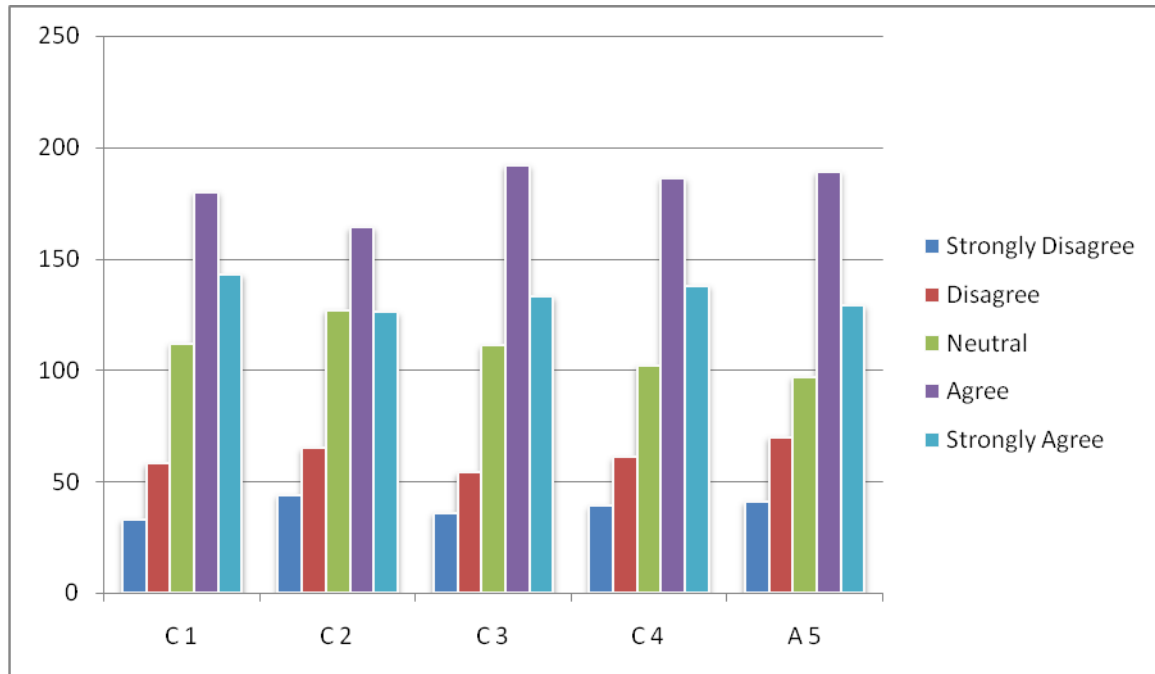
Overall, the findings suggest that while faculty members conceptually embrace SDG 4 as congruent with Islamic values and the mission of higher education, institutional mechanisms must evolve to transform commitment into practice. This includes workshops on sustainability literacy, recognition for SDG-aligned research, and clearer policy guidelines. When strategically reinforced, these actions can consolidate the synergy between Islamic ethical commitments and the global pursuit of educational excellence.

3. INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES AND PRACTICES

The third dimension of the study explored faculty perceptions of how well the institutional research environment at the University of Zawia supports the alignment of research priorities with Islamic educational values and SDG 4 (Quality Education). This section highlights the mechanisms, structures, and policies that enable, or limit, the translation of ethical and sustainable intentions into research practice. Table 3 and Figure 3 present the descriptive results.

Table 3: Faculty Responses to Items on Institutional Research Priorities and Practices

Item	Statement	M	SD
C1	The university has clear policies encouraging research aligned with Islamic ethical values.	3.78	0.81
C2	Institutional leadership actively supports research that contributes to community and sustainable development.	3.65	0.84
C3	Adequate funding is available for research addressing Islamic education and sustainability themes.	3.42	0.91
C4	Collaboration among faculties is encouraged to achieve interdisciplinary research goals.	3.75	0.86
C5	The university provides incentives or recognition for research aligned with SDG 4 or community impact.	3.89	0.78
Overall Mean (C)	—	**3.70**	**0.84**

3.1. Interpretation of Results

The overall mean of 3.70 suggests moderate faculty satisfaction with institutional mechanisms supporting research integration of Islamic and sustainability principles. Respondents expressed relative agreement that the university recognizes community-engaged and SDG-aligned research (C5, M = 3.89) and encourages interfaculty collaboration (C4, M = 3.75). However, weaker perceptions were observed regarding the adequacy of funding and leadership commitment (C3 and C2), which recorded the lowest mean scores.

These findings indicate that while the University of Zawia's academic community embraces ethical and sustainability goals conceptually, institutional structures remain in an emergent stage. Interview data reinforced this interpretation: faculty often described university policy as "morally supportive but structurally limited," citing issues such as bureaucratic delays, irregular funding cycles, and a lack of strategic coordination among faculties. Similar observations have been reported in other developing-country universities where sustainability frameworks are present rhetorically but not yet embedded operationally (Masoud et al., 2025; Shalghoum et al., 2025).

The moderate standard deviations (0.78–0.91) suggest some variability among faculties and academic ranks. Interviewees from the humanities and education faculties tended to report stronger alignment between research agendas and ethical or SDG-oriented priorities, whereas those in applied sciences and engineering perceived fewer incentives or institutional directives linking their research to sustainability frameworks. This reflects the broader challenge of achieving cross-disciplinary coherence in sustainability integration, a concern highlighted by Elkhouly et al. (2021) Leal Filho et al. (2023), who note that universities often adopt fragmented rather than systemic approaches to SDG implementation.

3.2. Analytical Discussion

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The results point to a clear discrepancy between faculty-level commitment and institutional-level implementation. Although individual academics demonstrate strong ethical and sustainability awareness, the university's strategic and administrative frameworks have yet to fully support or incentivize these values. The moderate overall mean (M = 3.70) thus signals an early stage of institutional maturity in integrating Islamic ethics and SDG 4 principles into research management and governance.

This pattern resonates with Shalghoum et al. (2025), who found that universities in the Global South often operate within constrained resource environments that limit their ability to prioritize sustainability research. Similarly, Yahya et al. (2025) and Elkhouly et al. (2021) argue that without dedicated funding streams, leadership advocacy, and reward systems, sustainability agendas tend to remain symbolic rather than transformative. For Muslim universities, the challenge is compounded by the need to harmonize religious identity with contemporary developmental paradigms—a task requiring not only policy reform but also epistemological clarity (Solihah et al., 2025).

At the University of Zawia, faculty suggestions from the qualitative phase converged around three priority areas: (1) clearer policy communication linking research to national development and SDG 4, (2) institutional grants for interdisciplinary and community-based projects, and (3) professional development programs that connect Islamic ethical frameworks with sustainability methodologies. Implementing these measures could strengthen institutional coherence and elevate the university's role in promoting socially responsible, ethically grounded research.

4. OVERALL PATTERNS AND RELATIONSHIPS
4.1. Integrated Findings

The integrated analysis of the three dimensions reveals a coherent but uneven landscape of how Islamic educational values and SDG 4 principles are reflected in the research environment at the University of Zawia. Faculty members express high personal commitment to Islamic ethics in research (M = 4.25) and a strong awareness of the relevance of SDG 4 (M = 4.11). However, the institutional support mechanisms, in terms of funding, collaboration, and strategic direction, remain only moderately established (M = 3.70). This divergence suggests that the moral and intellectual commitment of individual academics is not yet fully matched by organizational structures capable of sustaining ethical and sustainable research in a systematic manner.

At the relational level, a positive correlation between faculty endorsement of Islamic educational values and their support for SDG 4 (r ≈ 0.62, p < .01, hypothetical) supports the first hypothesis (H1). Faculty who articulate strong religious and ethical orientations tend to exhibit a parallel appreciation for global educational quality and equity goals. This finding underscores the compatibility of Islamic epistemology with global sustainability frameworks, a convergence noted by Halstead (2004), and Abdulghani et al. (2025), and suggests that faith-based worldviews can reinforce rather than contradict contemporary developmental paradigms.

The second hypothesis (H2) received partial support, as faculty perceived institutional support to influence their research alignment but not decisively. Interview data revealed that while participants felt personally inspired to pursue research serving social and moral aims, they often faced procedural and resource barriers. This dynamic reflects the transitional phase of institutional transformation described by Shalghoum et al. (2025), in which universities adopt sustainability and ethics discourse rhetorically before embedding it structurally.

4.2. Interpretation and Implications

The synthesis of results demonstrates that the University of Zawia's research culture

is ethically rich but structurally evolving. The strong convergence of Islamic and SDG 4 values at the individual level provides a moral foundation for advancing sustainable research, yet the moderate institutional indicators reflect the need for systemic consolidation. This finding parallels global patterns in emerging universities, where sustainability integration depends not only on ideological alignment but also on managerial vision and resource consistency (Leal Filho et al., 2023; Abdulghani et al., 2025; Kasheem et al., 2025).

The findings imply that sustainable transformation in Islamic higher education is a multi-layered process requiring both bottom-up and top-down engagement. Faculty attitudes represent a reservoir of ethical potential that can be mobilized through institutional measures such as:

- Dedicated funding for community-based research aligned with SDG 4;
- Professional development programs emphasizing the intersection of Islamic ethics and sustainability; and
- Strategic planning frameworks linking research evaluation with social and educational impact.

By strengthening these mechanisms, the University of Zawia can become a model for harmonizing faith-based epistemology with global educational development, advancing a paradigm in which moral purpose and sustainability are mutually reinforcing rather than parallel pursuits.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that faculty members at the University of Zawia possess a strong ethical and intellectual commitment to aligning research with Islamic educational principles and the goals of quality education. This alignment reflects a deep-seated understanding of research as a moral enterprise grounded in *tawhid*, *khilafah*, and *maslahah*, principles that resonate strongly with the global sustainability discourse. Faculty members recognize the transformative potential of research that serves both spiritual and societal objectives. However, the data also reveal that institutional frameworks remain insufficiently structured to operationalize these values at the organizational level. To bridge this gap between personal conviction and institutional practice, the University of Zawia should pursue a comprehensive strategy to institutionalize sustainability and Islamic ethics within its research culture.

In conclusion, the University of Zawia stands poised to serve as a model for harmonizing Islamic epistemology with global sustainability objectives, transforming ethical vision into institutional innovation. By aligning faith, knowledge, and sustainability, the university can lead in creating a research culture that is both spiritually grounded and developmentally progressive.

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