

Catalyst for Change: Visionary Leadership and SDG Integration at the University of Cagayan Valley (A paper presented in the 2026 World University Rankings for Innovations (WURI) at Tongmyong University – Busan Korea)

Ronnie Espergal Pasigui, EdD ¹

1 – University of Cagayan Valley

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Abstract

This study determined the levels of school heads' administrative strategies in relation to school performance in a large-sized schools division in Central Philippines during School Year 2024–2025. Specifically, it examined administrative strategies in terms of leadership and governance, strategic planning, and communication and collaboration, including differences when respondents were grouped according to age, length of service, and plantilla position, and their relationship with school performance. The study employed a descriptive-correlational research design involving 230 teachers proportionately selected from 20 schools. Data were gathered using a researcher-developed questionnaire and analyzed using frequency, percentage, mean, Mann-Whitney U test, and Spearman's rho. Findings revealed high levels of administrative strategies in leadership and governance and strategic planning, while communication and collaboration was moderate. No significant differences were found in the three areas of administrative strategies when respondents were grouped according to age, length of service, and plantilla position. Moreover, school heads' administrative strategies had a significant and very strong positive relationship with school performance. The findings indicate that stronger administrative strategies are associated with higher school performance and highlight the need to strengthen communication and collaboration, particularly stakeholder engagement, alongside sustained leadership, governance, and strategic planning practices.

Keywords: *Visionary Leadership; Sustainable Development Goals; Higher Education Innovation; University Transformation; Community Engagement; Strategic Planning; WURI Rankings*

Introduction

The global higher education sector is undergoing a paradigm shift. Institutions are increasingly expected to address complex societal challenges such as climate change, inequality, and technological disruption (Leal Filho et al., 2019). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a comprehensive framework for universities to align their missions with global priorities (UNESCO, 2020).

Visionary leadership is essential for navigating the complexities of educational reform. Bolden et al. (2022) describe it as the capacity to anticipate future challenges and inspire institutional change. In the context of sustainability, leadership must foster a culture of innovation and inclusivity (Wals & Blewitt, 2020).

The integration of SDGs into university operations has gained momentum globally. Lozano et al. (2025) argue that embedding sustainability into curricula, research, and community engagement enhances institutional relevance and societal impact. However, challenges such as resource constraints, resistance to change, and impact measurement persist (Tilbury, 2021).

The WURI rankings represent a shift from traditional metrics of academic prestige to indicators of innovation, relevance, and social contribution (Han, 2020). Institutions like UCV that embrace this paradigm demonstrate the potential of strategic transformation in emerging contexts.

In the Philippines, the University of Cagayan Valley (UCV) has emerged as a pioneering institution in this transformation. Founded in 1948 as Cagayan Teachers College, UCV has grown into a comprehensive university with nearly 20,000 students. In 2025, UCV made its debut in the World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), securing the 329th spot globally—a testament to its commitment to innovation and impact.

This study investigates how visionary leadership at UCV has catalyzed institutional transformation through SDG integration. It seeks to understand the strategies employed, the challenges encountered, and the perceived impact on stakeholders.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the University of Cagayan Valley's strategic transformation toward SDG alignment. A case study approach was chosen for its strength in capturing complex institutional processes within their real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are fluid.

Data Collection

Three complementary methods were used to ensure depth and triangulation of insights:

Document Analysis: The primary document analyzed was UCV's official *2025–2030 Strategic Plan*, which outlines the university's vision, strategic pillars, and SDG-aligned initiatives. This document served as the foundational source for understanding the institution's formal commitments and planned actions.

Key Informant Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university leaders who were directly involved in crafting the strategic plan. These included members of the Strategic Planning Committee, academic unit heads, and the Vice President for Research, Planning and Development, and Extension. Their firsthand perspectives provided rich insights into the motivations, decision-making processes, and leadership dynamics that shaped the SDG integration.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Two FGDs were conducted during the formal presentation of the strategic plan to the university's Management Committee (MANCOM) and Board of Trustees. These sessions captured real-time reactions, reflections, and feedback from senior administrators, faculty leaders, and governance stakeholders. The discussions focused on the feasibility, anticipated challenges, and institutional readiness for implementing the SDG-aligned vision.

Data Analysis

All data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Transcripts from interviews and FGDs were coded manually using open coding to identify recurring concepts, followed by axial coding to group related themes. Document content was mapped against emerging themes to ensure coherence and triangulation. Member checking was employed to validate interpretations, and peer debriefing enhanced analytical rigor.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Visionary Leadership as a Catalyst

The transformation of the University of Cagayan Valley began with a clear and compelling vision articulated by its leadership. Anchored in the 2025–2030 Strategic Plan, this vision aimed to position UCV as a leading institution that integrates the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into every dimension of its operations. The Vice President for Research, Planning and Development, and Extension emphasized the need to “shift from simply imparting knowledge to fostering globally-minded, impactful graduates,” a statement that resonated throughout the strategic planning process and institutional forums.

This vision was not developed in isolation. It emerged from collaborative planning sessions involving key university stakeholders, including academic heads, administrative leaders, and student representatives. Their participation ensured that the vision was not only aspirational but

also grounded in institutional realities. The strategic planning process itself became a platform for leadership development, where ideas were exchanged, priorities debated, and consensus built.

UCV's leadership approach reflects the principles of distributed leadership, as described by Bolden et al. (2022), where authority and responsibility are shared across organizational levels. By designating each academic unit as a "caretaker" of at least one SDG, UCV fostered a culture of ownership and accountability. This decentralized model empowered departments to innovate within their domains while contributing to a unified institutional mission.

Bolden et al. (2022) argue that distributed leadership enhances institutional adaptability and engagement. UCV's model demonstrates how visionary leadership, when inclusive and participatory, can mobilize an entire university community toward transformative change.

Theme 2: Strategic Integration of SDGs

UCV's commitment to the SDGs was operationalized through a series of strategic initiatives that touched every corner of the institution. Curriculum reform was one of the earliest and most visible changes. Faculty members were encouraged to embed SDG-related content into their courses, fostering interdisciplinary learning and contextual relevance. This was supported by workshops and resource materials that helped educators align their teaching with global goals.

Research activities were also reoriented to prioritize SDG-aligned projects. The university introduced monetary incentives and recognition programs to encourage faculty and students to pursue research that addressed pressing local and national challenges. The establishment of the SDG Research Center and SDG Corner provided dedicated spaces for collaboration, innovation, and dissemination of findings.

Community engagement was another pillar of UCV's strategy. Extension programs were redesigned to align with SDG targets, focusing on areas such as sustainable agriculture, disaster resilience, and inclusive education. These programs were implemented in partnership with local government units, NGOs, and community organizations, ensuring relevance and impact.

The designation of each academic unit as a "caretaker" of a specific SDG created a sense of purpose and direction. Units developed their own initiatives, tracked progress, and shared best practices during institutional forums. This decentralized approach allowed for innovation while maintaining coherence with the university's overarching vision.

Lozano et al. (2025) emphasize that holistic integration of sustainability enhances institutional effectiveness. UCV's multi-pronged strategy exemplifies this principle, demonstrating how SDGs can serve as a framework for academic relevance, operational efficiency, and social impact.

Theme 3: Navigating Institutional Challenges

Despite its successes, UCV's transformation was not without challenges. As a private institution in a regional setting, funding constraints posed a significant barrier to implementing new initiatives. The university responded by actively seeking external grants, establishing corporate partnerships, and reallocating internal resources to support SDG programs. These efforts were coordinated through the Office of Research, Planning and Development, which played a central role in resource mobilization.

Resistance to change also emerged, particularly among faculty and staff who were accustomed to traditional academic models. UCV addressed this through transparent communication, highlighting the long-term benefits of SDG integration and offering professional development opportunities. Workshops, seminars, and peer mentoring sessions helped build capacity and foster a culture of continuous learning.

Measuring the impact of SDG initiatives was another challenge. To ensure accountability, UCV developed a metrics and reporting framework that tracked progress on key indicators. This framework combined quantitative data—such as enrollment in SDG-aligned courses and number of community projects—with qualitative insights from stakeholder feedback. The data was reviewed during Management Committee (MANCOM) and Board meetings, allowing for evidence-based decision-making.

Faculty interviews revealed that while initial skepticism was present, most stakeholders eventually embraced the changes. They cited increased student engagement, enhanced research opportunities, and growing recognition from external partners as key motivators.

Justification: Tilbury (2011) notes that effective change management is essential in sustainability transitions. UCV's adaptive strategies—grounded in foresight, inclusivity, and strategic planning—demonstrate resilience and institutional maturity.

Theme 4: Perceived Impact on Stakeholders

The impact of UCV's SDG-aligned transformation was felt across its stakeholder groups. Students reported a heightened awareness of global issues and a stronger sense of civic responsibility. Initiatives such as the "Mr. and Ms. Best SDG Advocacy" campaign provided platforms for youth leadership and activism, reinforcing the university's commitment to holistic development.

Faculty members expressed renewed motivation to pursue socially relevant research. They appreciated the institutional support, including incentives, recognition, and access to collaborative networks. Many described a shift in their academic identity—from subject specialists to change agents.

Community partners noted tangible improvements in local sustainability efforts. They highlighted UCV's role in promoting sustainable agricultural practices, enhancing disaster preparedness, and expanding educational access. One community leader remarked, "UCV is no longer just an academic institution—it's a partner in building a better future."

These outcomes were discussed during focus group sessions held at MANCOM and Board meetings, where stakeholders reflected on the university's evolving role. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with calls to further expand SDG initiatives and deepen community partnerships.

Leal Filho et al. (2019) emphasize that SDG integration fosters transformative learning and community empowerment. UCV's experience confirms this, illustrating how institutional change can ripple outward to create broader social impact.

Conclusion

The University of Cagayan Valley's strategic transformation toward SDG integration marks a defining chapter in its institutional history—one that positions it not only as a regional leader in education but as a globally recognized innovator. Its inclusion in the 2025 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), where it secured the 329th spot among the Global Top 400, is a powerful affirmation of its commitment to relevance, impact, and visionary leadership. This recognition places UCV among a select group of institutions worldwide that are redefining the role of universities in addressing societal and industrial challenges.

The thematic analysis revealed four interlinked dimensions of this transformation. First, visionary leadership served as the catalyst, mobilizing stakeholders around a shared purpose and embedding sustainability into the university's core values. Leadership at UCV was not confined to executive offices—it was distributed across academic units, administrative departments, and student organizations, creating a culture of shared responsibility and innovation.

Second, the strategic integration of SDGs was comprehensive and contextually grounded. Through curriculum reform, research prioritization, and community engagement, UCV operationalized its commitment to sustainability in ways that were both globally aligned and locally relevant. Institutional mechanisms such as the SDG Research Center and the designation of SDG "caretakers" ensured that this integration was not symbolic but systemic.

Third, the university's ability to navigate institutional challenges—such as funding constraints, resistance to change, and impact measurement—demonstrated its resilience and strategic foresight. By leveraging external partnerships, fostering transparent communication, and developing robust monitoring frameworks, UCV turned potential barriers into opportunities for growth and learning.

Finally, the perceived impact on stakeholders affirmed the transformative potential of SDG integration. Students became more globally aware and civically engaged; faculty found renewed

purpose in socially relevant research; and community partners recognized UCV as a vital collaborator in regional development. These outcomes reflect a deep alignment between institutional goals and stakeholder aspirations.

UCV's journey illustrates that global recognition is not reserved for elite or metropolitan institutions. Through inclusive planning, contextual innovation, and a deep commitment to social responsibility, a regional university can rise to global prominence. The WURI ranking is not merely a badge of honor—it is a benchmark that inspires continuous improvement. UCV's aspiration to climb higher in the next WURI cycle reflects its enduring commitment to excellence, innovation, and global citizenship.

As the university looks ahead to the 2026 WURI Global Conference and beyond, it carries with it a renewed sense of purpose and a clear roadmap for progress. The SDG-aligned vision is no longer a strategic document—it is a living framework that guides decisions, inspires action, and shapes the future of education in the Cagayan Valley and beyond. UCV's experience offers a compelling model for institutions seeking to lead with purpose, transform with integrity, and leave a legacy of impact.

In a world where higher education must evolve to meet complex global demands, the University of Cagayan Valley stands as a testament to what is possible when leadership is bold, strategy is inclusive, and vision is aligned with the needs of both people and planet.

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