"Plastic-Free" University: An Analysis of Student Feedback on Plastic-Free Approach to University Life

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Abstract

The transition toward a plastic-free university environment is often surrounded by a complex discussion of individual ethics, infrastructural limitations, and impact of mass culture and market dynamics of available sustainable offers and innovative products. The primary objective of this research is to map the systemic determinants and inter-dependencies that govern the transition toward a plastic-free university ecosystem. By utilizing a "living laboratory" research framework during sustainability study modules at Vilniaus kolegija, this study explores the "green gap" by analyzing student feedback on their daily consumption behaviors. This in-depth longitudinal research was conducted in early 2026 to represent the emerging key thematic clusters in the discussion of sustainability at university campus: social individual responsibility, the necessity of supportive infrastructure, the impact of mass culture, and the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for creating sustainable supply. This paper argues that while individual agency is a critical starting point, however, the systemic change is achievable through a synchronized effort between institutional university policy and producer-led innovation.

Key words: Sustainability, university, plastic-free, corporate social responsibility, CSR

Anotacija

Perėjimas prie plastiko nenaudojančios universiteto aplinkos dažnai yra lydimas sudėtingų diskusijų apie asmeninę etiką, infrastruktūros apribojimus, masinės kultūros įtaką bei rinkos dinamiką, susijusią su prieinamais tvariais pasiūlymais ir inovatyviais produktais. Pagrindinis šio tyrimo tikslas – nustatyti sisteminius determinantus ir tarpusavio priklausomybes, lemiančias universiteto ekosistemos transformaciją į aplinką be plastiko. Pasitelkiant „gyvosios laboratorijos“ (angl. living laboratory) tyrimo modelį Vilniaus kolegijos darnios plėtros studijų modulių metu, šiame darbe analizuojamas „žaliasis atotrūkis“ (angl. green gap), tiriant studentų grįžtamąjį ryšį apie jų kasdienio vartojimo įpročius. Tyrimas išskiria pagrindines temines sritis diskusijoje apie tvarumą kolegijoje: individualią atsakomybę, palaikančios infrastruktūros būtinybę, masinės kultūros poveikį ir įmonių socialinės atsakomybės (ĮSA) vaidmenį kuriant tvarią pasiūlą. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad nors individo iniciatyva yra kritiškai svarbus atspirties taškas, sisteminis pokytis yra pasiekiamas tik per sinchronizuotas pastangas tarp institucinės universiteto politikos ir gamintojų diktuojamų inovacijų.

Raktiniai žodžiai: *tvarumas, universitetas, be plastiko, įmonių socialinė atsakomybė, ĮSA.*

Introduction

Today university campuses should serve as complex, lead-by-example space for the advancement of sustainability culture. However, despite that many lectures are filled with sustainability information and sustainability-oriented courses, students behaviour on campus is not always reflective of their curriculum implications on sustainability. The current institutional posture toward plastic consumption in higher education reveals a profound structural paradox: a disconnect between pedagogical rhetoric and operational reality. Dixon and Parker (2021) investigated student perceptions of recycling to determine whether a university's strategy helped or hindered student recycling behavior in residence halls. Many authors investigated the complex dynamics of waste management at university setting. (Enbarna et al., 22; Amaral et al., 2020; Bahçelioğlu et. Al , 2020; Dahlawi et al., 2021; Fagnani et al., 2017; Gallardo et al., 2016). One notable research, focusing on the university setting and the critical role of student perspectives, was presented by Zen et al. (2016) to conceptualize waste minimization through a "living lab" framework that bridges the gap between administrative operations and the student experience. This model transforms the campus into a participatory environment where research and "learning by doing" are integrated into daily waste management practices. Central to this approach is the co-production of knowledge, where students are not merely subjects of policy but active partners in implementation and monitoring. The authors argue that successful sustainability requires a hybrid governance model-

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blending top-down institutional support with bottom-up student initiatives. By focusing on the governance of people rather than just infrastructure, the university can foster a culture of shared responsibility. This process is sustained through continuous dialogue and a collective effort to build institutional trust and social capital, ensuring that waste reduction measures are deeply embedded in the campus community's behavior. This analysis scope is worth investigating because it challenges the traditional hierarchy of university management, suggesting that sustainability is a co-produced outcome rather than a service delivered to students. The implications suggest that without institutional trust and active student partnership, even the most advanced waste management systems will fail to achieve long-term behavioral change.

In addition to investigation of institutional frameworks and student-centered strategies, Ebrahimi and North (2017) identified scalable waste management (WM) solutions by benchmarking top-tier US universities. They found that while high-level waste diversion often mirrors financial investment, medium-sized campuses can achieve significant results through strategic, low-cost initiatives that prioritize community engagement over high capital. Within the university setting, the most critical investments are visible infrastructure- such as bins- and targeted advertisements designed to capture student attention. The study highlights that a successful campus program is rooted in a formal commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainable procurement, particularly in high-traffic student areas like food services. To foster a culture of sustainability, institutions should implement a transparent WM plan with clear milestones for achieving zero-waste status. Central to this approach is the inclusion of students in regular waste audits, which serves the dual purpose of reducing operational costs and providing students with hands-on involvement in the university's ecological goals. Ultimately, long-term success depends on involving all campus stakeholders and launching behavior-change campaigns that resonate with the entire student body to ensure sustainable habits become the campus norm.

Research within the university setting increasingly recognizes that students are not merely passive subjects of waste management policies, but active stakeholders whose internal motivations drive the success of sustainability initiatives. Analysis of student opinions is vital here to determine if campus-based habits have the "reality" required to influence life outside the university. This focus helps researchers understand the student as a "catalyst" for wider societal change, assessing the potential for a university-led ripple effect in waste separation behaviors. Several scholars have focused their investigations on the unique environment of the university campus to better understand how student perspectives influence broader environmental goals. For instance, Zhou et al. (2022) highlighted that university students are pivotal catalysts in promoting household waste separation. Their research suggests that sustainability initiatives established within the university setting can effectively transcend campus boundaries, positively impacting residential areas and urban centers. However, the study emphasizes that simply providing infrastructure is insufficient; there is a critical need to actively motivate students to adopt these practices. By fostering strong waste-sorting habits on campus, students are more likely to transfer these behaviors to their families and wider social circles, creating a significant ripple effect for waste collection across society.

This study was conducted during Sustainable development module courses in the period of 2026 January - April at Vilniaus kolegija. The researcher's dual role as the presiding lecturer is considered a methodological advantage in this context as it facilitated practitioner inquiry via internal participant observation, where the researcher functions as an organic element of the environment to capture genuine, unfiltered perspectives. This study employed a participatory action research framework, utilizing the university classroom as a '*living laboratory*' where student insights directly informed the iterative development of the research narrative. By gathering data during live lecture sessions, the study captures genuine, unfiltered student insights. This approach ensures that the findings reflect real perceptions and attitudes, rather than artificially constructed responses, which enhances the authenticity and reliability of the data. In this respect, through a lens

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of classroom ethnography, the researcher acts as a participant-observer, documenting spontaneous student dialogues regarding the 'green gap' and consumer indifference. In formal interviews or surveys, students frequently project a "green-washed" persona- a curated version of themselves that aligns with academic expectations and environmental virtues. However, the classroom setting, when used as a "living laboratory" through ethnography and participant observation, allows for the collection of spontaneous, peer-to-peer discourse. In these informal settings, students feel empowered to contradict, argue, or express cynicism- behaviors that reveal the authentic "truth" of their motivational dynamics. This qualitative approach captures the raw tension between knowledge and action, providing a professional standard of data that reveals not what students should feel, but the pragmatic indifference and frustrations they actually experience in their daily lives.

Ongoing scholarly research places a high premium on *authentic* student feedback because it bridges the gap between theoretical policy and practical compliance. Adopting this participant observation method within a *"living lab*" framework allowed the researcher to integrate seamlessly into the natural educational setting. This methodology was purposively selected to minimize the reactivity effect (or Hawthorne effect), a common phenomenon in traditional surveys where respondents tend to provide socially desirable answers. To contextualize the relevance of this topic, student feedback gathered during this field study illustrates this pragmatic and realistic view, which echoes in many similar opinions: "*I have no time for "green games" as I run everywhere, and I need the most convenient and fast solutions."* Indeed, this sentiment is echoed across many students, revealing that the "green gap" is not a result of their lack of knowledge, but a direct consequence of available infrastructure, mass culture, and even "imposed new reality". Indeed, the commercialization of campus dining halls has led to a standardization of disposability, as many students note "*It's faster for the students to toss it in the bin and leave. Our world is designed for speed, not for the planet".* Investigating the "pragmatic" student view is essential to understanding the economic and temporal barriers to sustainability. This research focuses on the reality that for a modern student, time and financial survival are often higher priorities than ecological ethics, revealing a conflict that cannot be solved by education alone.

Furthermore, the economic layers of this issue cannot be ignored. Single-use plastics remain the most cost-effective vessel for the university's retail partners. When students were asked about their indifference, a common response was rooted in financial survival. *"I don't care if it's plastic; I just need quick products that I can afford"*. In this line of thought, this paper seeks to analyze the intricate sociological and economic layers of this institutional dynamics by asking: *What are the most culturally and economically acceptable alternatives to single-use plastics in a high-speed campus environment*? *What options are feasible?* By analyzing student feedback, this papers aims to demonstrate that the removal of plastic is not just a logistical challenge, but a cultural one that requires the university to realign its commercial "grab-and-go" logic with its academic and ethical foundations along with new infrastructural advancements. "Plastic-Free university" is not just a logistical goal, but a competence-building exercise that requires systemic structure and systems thinking (Brazdauskas, 2019).

Indeed, it may be further argued that until the campus landscape reflects the values taught in the lectures, the "green gap" will remain a barrier for a modern, speed-oriented student. In this respect, this paper outlines the key emerging thematic clusters in the discussion of sustainability at university campus based on student feedback: social individual responsibility, the necessity of supportive infrastructure, the impact of mass culture (especially social media) and the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for creating sustainable supply. In addition, by integrating and citing the most recent research insights on the topic, this paper argues that while individual agency is a critical starting point, however, the systemic change is achievable through a synchronized effort between institutional university policy and producer-led innovation.

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This analysis is vital in the current sustainability discourse because it highlights that individual behavior is heavily predicated on "systemic convenience." Such research is relevant because it identifies that the "green gap" is often a structural failure rather than a personal one, providing a shield against the "shaming" of students who are simply reacting to a plastic-dependent environment. To improve this situation, solutions must involve a "contextual shift" where the university re-negotiates its contracts with retail partners to favor sustainable vessels as the default choice. By implementing producer-led innovation- such as reusable container deposit systems or high-speed water refill hubs- the university can align its commercial logic with its ethical mission, making sustainability the fastest and most affordable option for the student body.

Individual Social Responsibility: Student Feedback on Personal Accountability

This section analyzes the intersection of Individual Social Responsibility (ISR) and the psychological constraints of the student experience.Understanding student opinions on ISR is vital to this trajectory because it reveals whether sustainability is being internalized as a core value or merely performed as a social requirement. By examining these personal reflections, researchers can determine the threshold at which individual agency is overwhelmed by external pressures. It is important because sustainable transition on campuses often fails not due to a lack of knowledge, but due to a misalignment between institutional offerings and student realities. The feedback was gathered to identify the internal motivations, moral negotiations, and behavioral triggers of the "citizen-student," providing a research scope that moves beyond simple compliance metrics to generate insights into the authentic barriers to long-term habit formation.

In a university context, Individual Social Responsibility represents a shift from being a passive consumer to an active "citizen-student" who recognizes that their personal choices have a cumulative effect on the campus ecosystem. This means a student doesn't just recycle because there is a bin; they recycle because they feel a personal sense of ownership over the waste they generate. In our field study, this was evidenced by students who felt "*eco-guil*t". Many students tend to view waste not as an abstract industrial problem but as a reflection of their character and even identity "*I am green. I try to save the planet", "I try to be sustainable. I like to be green. Its a kind of lifestyle. Maybe even a fashion."* However, some students tend to show the opposite sentiment *"I'm the kind of person who doesn't care about the future. It's all green washing."* "*With wars in the world, usage of a sustainable straw looks ridiculous, isn't it"*. This analysis scope is worth investigating because it highlights the fragility of individual commitment when faced with global instability or perceived corporate insincerity. The implications suggest that "green" identities may be superficial or easily discouraged, meaning institutions cannot rely on personal fashion or guilt alone to sustain a long-term waste management strategy.

Do lectures of sustainability change the attitude and sense of individual social responsibility? As one student noted "*I feel guilt when I use those disposable plastic items just because my curriculum is so focused on that. I feel a hypocrite"*. Indeed, some students emphasized that when a university's infrastructure favors plastic (e.g., vending machines as the primary source of hydration in the corridors), it forces a constant moral negotiation upon the student: "*vending machine are everywhere, options are evident"*. Furthermore, despite that majority of students agreed that it is up to each student to bring their own bottles, still many claimed that the university was "offloading" the responsibility and effort of sustainability onto them. One student argued, "*They tell us to be responsible, but they make plastic-only vending machines available everywhere.", "I am fed up with all this save-the-world idea. Business has to present new good solutions*", *"I get angry when they make me be sustainable though the market does not care. Why should I?*" This tension indicates that while individual social responsibility is a powerful motivator, it is currently being used as a substitute for systemic change, leading to a frustrated and "guilt-ridden" student body rather than an empowered one. Indeed, as some note with a rhetorical question: "The available infrastructure is making it my 'choice' to be unsustainable and then making me feel bad about it?" Examining this

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tension is crucial because it proves that education without supporting infrastructure is counterproductive. The implication is that universities must align their "hidden curriculum"- the physical environment- with their taught curriculum to avoid fostering a cynical and disengaged student population.

Despite that most students have courses on sustainability and understand the need to be sustainable, this sustainability-oriented decision-making is exhausting, leading to what several students described as "*green burnout*" where the effort to remain plastic-free simply becomes too much to manage alongside academic expectations. Many students argue that environmental concern frequently remains "inactive" or "dormant" during high-stress periods, as the brain prioritizes immediate survival and performance over long-term ethical considerations. "*I want yo save the planet maybe for a minute. Maybe after a sustainability lecture. The rest of the time I live as it is: convenience, speed, whatever.*" Therefore, it is important to analyze student opinions during *high-stress periods* to understand the limits of human "bandwidth" for ethical decision-making. This focus allows the research to move toward a more compassionate and realistic model of waste management that accounts for the biological and psychological rigors of student life. The feedback analysis provided a stark confirmation of this theory: during the peak of the midterm season, students reported an increase in the consumption of plastic-bottled beverages with no ethical sentiment: "*When I have an exam, my brain just doesn't have time or space or care about the plastic at that moment.", "When I want to drink, I don't care. I take what is available. I am aware its not green, but... "* This scope is worth analyzing because it identifies "convenience" not as a lack of ethics, but as a survival mechanism during stress. The implications suggest that for a waste management plan to be truly effective, it must be designed to be the easiest possible path during midterms and finals, rather than a task that requires active mental energy.

Need for Green Infrastructure

This section provides a thematic analysis of the critical relationship between physical campus infrastructure and the actualization of pro-environmental behaviors. It is important because it identifies the "value-action gap"- where a student's desire to be sustainable is undermined by the logistical failures of their environment. The feedback was targeted to gather insights into the "choice architecture" of the university, moving the research scope beyond academic knowledge to understand the physical and psychological friction points that prevent a plastic-free campus from becoming a reality. Analyzing student opinions on the availability of green solutions is vital because it redefines sustainability as a structural issue rather than just a personal moral one.

A recurring theme identified during student feedback analysis is the need for proper infrastructure to be "green". Indeed, while the university's pedagogical mission successfully instills environmental values, the physical campus environment often acts as a counter-force to these values if no appropriate infrastructure is offered with sustainability-oriented solutions and products. Despite that University bathrooms provide access to potable water of good quality, many students consider it not a proper solution. Many students argued that "to be green, you must have infrastructure for that. "*Give me infrastructure to be green, Where is it?"* Students argued with significant conviction that a plastic-free campus is not an example of pro-environmental willpower but a logistical or infrastructural impossibility. This paradigm shift requires the university to invest heavily in "choice architecture"- the practice of influencing student decisions by organizing the context in which those decisions are made. One student summarized this structural failure: "*If high-quality filtered water is not available on campus, what options do I have?*" For some students, the psychological barrier is rooted in a lack of trust and a preference for established consumer habits; as one noted: "*I don't trust tap water, and I won't be carrying my refill bottle."* Others find that their internal habits are at odds with the "green" ideal, suggesting that without external structure, intent fades: *"I tried to use a refill bottle, but somehow I forget... Being green is like some dream. My habits are somehow different."* This analysis scope is worth investigating because it highlights that

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education alone cannot override deep-seated habits or safety concerns regarding public utilities. The implications suggest that unless the university provides a "gold standard" of infrastructure that rivals commercial bottled water, the mental effort required to be sustainable will remain a barrier for the average student.

Investigating student views on the reliability of facilities is essential to understanding the consistency of habit formation. This focus allows researchers to identify the specific triggers- such as cleanliness and convenience- that move a student from a "disposable" mindset to a "reusable" one. The feedback data suggests a direct correlation between the perceived reliability of campus infrastructure and the consistency of student "green" habits. A significant portion of surveyed students mentioned that they would carry a reusable bottle daily if refill stations were modernized and maintained. However, the feedback regarding current facilities was overwhelmingly blunt and characterized by a sense of systemic neglect. One respondent noted, *"The campus needs more quality water refill stations in every building"*. Students suggest that the physical visibility of a functional refill station acts as a powerful "nudge," significantly reducing the purchase of plastic bottles. The presence of these stations provides a visual cue that reinforces the social norm of re-usability. Without this reliability, students revert to the "safe" convenience of sealed plastic. As one focus group participant argued: "*Without proper water available, I buy the plastic. If the university wants us to stop using plastic, give us high-quality sustainable substitutes*" The demand for quality is a significant hurdle, as some students view the current refill movement as a passing trend that lacks the premium feel of commercial products: *"All these carry-with-you bottles are some fad. I prefer mineral water and any tap water can't provide me with that. And I won't pay more money for a glass bottle. No way."* However, there is a clear opening for behavioral change if the infrastructure meets high expectations: *"It university installed high-quality water dispensers, that could make me use them. If they had sparkling water as a free dispenser, even better"*. Analyzing this feedback is crucial because it demonstrates that "green" infrastructure must compete with the private market in terms of quality and variety. The implication is that a successful strategy must treat the student as a "customer" of sustainability, providing high-value incentives like sparkling or chilled water to disrupt traditional purchasing patterns.

Focusing on the transition from "guilt" to "access" is critical for developing a sustainable model that respects student autonomy while guiding choice. One student's final comment serves as a key reminder: "*Stop telling us "plastic is bad" in the lecture if you're only going to sell us plastic in the hallway*." This tension between choice and imposition is a delicate balance; as one student remarked: *"I don't like to be imposed to do something. It's my personal choice to chose what I want from where I want."* Yet, others recognize that systemic changes would force a necessary re-adjustment: *"if they removed plastic bottles and plastic glasses, of course that would make us re-adjust. Maybe some would feel angry, or maybe just go to the nearby store..."* Ultimately, the goal may be to make sustainability invisible through sheer convenience: "*It would be very nice if university has green solutions for water as water dispensers on every corner where we can refill, Yet, that would be convenient and probably would not mean we are green, we just use what is convenient. Maybe that's how it should be'"* This scope is worth analyzing because it reveals that the most effective environmental policies are those that fade into the background of daily life. The implications indicate that the university should focus on "convenience-led" sustainability, where the right choice is so easy it requires no conscious moral effort. By making the sustainable option the most convenient and high-quality "path of least resistance," the university can foster a culture where being "green" is not a chore or a fashion statement, but a seamless part of the campus experience.

Mass Culture and Its Reflections at University

The third thematic pillar of this analysis moves beyond the university gates to address the broader societal context, exploring how external cultural forces dictate internal university behaviors. A significant majority of students voiced a pragmatic, if not cynical, view of the current

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environmental landscape: "*Until mass culture shifts, reducing plastic on campus will be a superficial struggle."* This sentiment highlights the "culture of convenience" that is deeply rooted in modern society. This culture operates as a silent baseline, where the default mode of existence is predicated on disposability. For the average student, the university is not an isolated bubble but a reflection of a global economy that prioritizes speed over sustainability.

Students emphasize that "*popular trends still favor disposable products,*" noting that social media influencers often showcase lifestyle aesthetics - such as colorful "grab-and-go" beverages or unboxing videos - that are heavily reliant on single-use plastics. One student participant remarked: "*We are bombarded with ads for 'instant' solutions, and none of those solutions come in a reusable glass jar*." Indeed, analysis of student feedback suggests that mass advertising normalizes plastic consumption, hindering efforts to reduce it. One respondent poignantly stated: "*I try to refuse plastic cups or plates, but when everyone else in the group is just grabbing them without thinking, you feel like you're not making a difference anyway.*" This highlights a critical sociological barrier: the fear of social isolation or being labeled as "pretentious" or "high-maintenance." Students reported that "*until plastic use becomes socially looked down, change will be slow*". Some even argue that "*sustainability became like a fad. Either you follow this fad, or you just go with the flow what reality has to offer*."

As regards the relationship between individual behavior and the overarching influence of mass culture, social media, and global economic shifts, it is important to analyze these external pressures because students do not exist in an academic vacuum; their environmental choices are often a byproduct of the "cultural baseline" established by digital platforms and societal norms. The feedback was targeted to capture how trends, celebrity influence, and economic anxiety shape the perceived "coolness" or "utility" of sustainability. This research scope aims to generate insights into why pedagogical efforts often fail when they compete with powerful market ideologies and social signaling. In an attempt to address the broader societal context, exploring how external cultural forces dictate internal campus behavior, a significant majority of students voiced a pragmatic, if not cynical, view of the current environmental landscape: *"Until mass culture shifts, reducing plastic on campus will be a superficial struggle.*" This sentiment highlights the "culture of convenience" that is deeply rooted in modern society. This culture operates as a silent baseline, where the default mode of existence is predicated on disposability. For the average student, the university is not an isolated bubble but a reflection of a global economy that prioritizes speed over sustainability. For many, this has led to a sense of exhaustion with the "green" aesthetic, as one student noted: *"Being green is fashion, and an old one. Sometimes it even irritates already."* Others pointed to the saturation of these messages in digital spaces: *"I unfollowed all those green-obsessed influencers on my social media. I just got bored. Too much."* Investigating this "irritation" is a worthy research scope because it identifies the point where environmental messaging becomes counterproductive. The implications suggest that "green-washing" or over-saturation in media can lead to active avoidance, meaning universities must find ways to ground sustainability in something more permanent than digital trends. Capturing student views on celebrity and influencer culture is vital here because it highlights the "authenticity gap" in modern advocacy. This focus helps researchers understand the difference between inspiration and performance, and how students distinguish between genuine commitment and publicity stunts: "*Many world stars took greenness as their cover-up for publicity. Maybe right, maybe just cheap and artificial. For me it feels not authentic."* Another observed: "*Very few celebrities take sustainability seriously. For real. Others just show off as some superiority."* However, the power of these figures remains undeniable: *"If my favourite celebrities promoted green living, I guess that would influence me as well... Maybe as inspiration, or a fad*".

This trajectory of analysis is worth pursuing because it demonstrates that while students are cynical about "show-off" sustainability, they still crave authentic leadership. The implication is that

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sustainability initiatives must prioritize transparency and genuine action over high-profile, superficial endorsements to gain student trust. As one participant put it: *"For some people, being green is like being some kind of a green hero. But I'm not into that."* Students reported that "*until plastic use becomes socially unacceptable, change will be slow*". Indeed, "*greeness became like a fad. Either you follow this fad, or you just go with the flow what reality has to offer.*" Analyzing the "green hero" stigma is crucial because it reveals a significant barrier to entry for the average student. The implication is that sustainability needs to be framed as an invisible, effortless standard rather than a "heroic" or "fashionable" act that invites social scrutiny.

Furthermore, the sustainable shift is complicated by the current economic climate: *"I believe that economy and sustainability are were very interconnected. No good economy, no one cares of sustainability if they have to pay more money*." Indeed, global instability creates a sense of futility: *"Green culture was far more popular somehow before, but now in the face of wars, it gets somehow ironically weird. And people don't want to pay for greenness, especially when prices go up."* Others question the impact of local action: "*Some world countries are very pro-green, some are not. And then thinking globally 'what's the point?' I may act locally, but the question remains.*" As one student summarized: "*Being green must somehow transform into something more foundational not just "don't buy a plastic bottle". No matter how much you romantisize those actions, it needs something deeper and on global scale as joint effort*." Until that messaging becomes the dominant "mass culture," the campus will remain a site of friction between what is taught and what is practiced. ·

Corporate Social Responsibility and the "Offers" Problem

Perhaps the most vocal students shifted the blame for plastic proliferation entirely to the "supply side" or corporate social responsibility. The primary argument of students was rooted in a foundational market reality: the consumer can only choose from the inventory provided. As one student succinctly put it *"I buy what's offered; if only plastic options are available, I use them. It isn't a lack of ethics; it's a lack of options."* By reframing the plastic crisis as a failure of the producer rather than a failure of the consumer, these students highlight a critical systemic bottleneck in campus sustainability. This demand for a top-down solution is clearly echoed in student expectations: *"It's a responsibility of university vendors to provide us with sustainable solutions if they want the university to be green.*" Furthermore, there is a strong belief that the burden of change lies with the private sector's presence on campus, as one participant noted: *"It's a matter of businesses to create a market for sustainable products and push them everywhere, including university corridors".* This analysis scope is worth investigating because it challenges the traditional "consumer-blame" narrative in waste management. The implications suggest that unless universities hold their commercial partners to strict sustainability standards, student-led initiatives will remain trapped by the lack of physical alternatives.

Many students insist that the burden of innovation must lie squarely with the producers, not the end-users: "*I like to be green when its convenient for me, I mean when many green and affordable products are available to me, but when they are expensive, I become just an ordinary, non-green shopper"*. Capturing these insights is worth analyzing because it highlights that convenience is the primary driver of student behavior. The implication for university policy is that sustainable solutions must be engineered to be the most "effortless" path available to the student body. "*Business need really try to innovate to make green products cheaper that existing ones. Then this might work. If more expensive, I don't know."*

Focusing on the economic reality of the student experience is paramount, as it identifies the "price-point" of sustainability. Researching these financial constraints allows for a more grounded, realistic approach to environmental policy that acknowledges the precarious financial status of many higher-education participants. One students respondent noted: *"I'm mostly driven by price and availability."* Indeed, research implicates that students are exceptionally sensitive to "green

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premiums" - the additional cost often associated with sustainable packaging. Their data suggests that while students value the environment, their primary loyalty remains to their precarious financial balances. Students were incredibly direct about this hierarchy of needs: "*Green product usually cost more. And students will buy every time cheaper. Because they need money for their life, entertainment and even basic needs.*" This sentiment was reinforced by others who viewed expensive eco-options as a form of exclusion: "*If sustainable products won't be cheaply priced, I don't believe in their future among students".* Another participant added: "*Students are financially vulnerable, so either you offer them some free green solutions or cheaper than other market offers".* Ultimately, for many, the bottom line is non-negotiable*: "I understand that to be green is important, but my finances play a bigger role in my decision making.*" This analysis is crucial because it demystifies the idea of "apathetic" students, revealing instead a "financially rational" population. The implication is that "green" initiatives that ignore the student's wallet are destined to fail, as most will not prioritize the planet at the cost of their basic survival. Student feedback suggests a growing resentment toward being the ones to pay for systemic change: *"If going green means more expensive, then I am against it. Enough is enough. I don't want the planet to saved at my expense."* Analyzing the potential for institutional economic intervention is the final necessary step in a transition trajectory. By understanding that students will resist "saving the planet at their own expense," researchers can provide evidence for the necessity of subsidies and collective bargaining to equalize the market on campus.

Modelling Systemic Determinants and Interdependencies

Based on the trajectories of student feedback, the preliminary model below (**Figure 1**) illustrates a systemic framework for plastic-free university transition. This model serves as a preliminary, tentative, and abstract framework designed to map the complex inter-dependencies within a university ecosystem. Rather than offering a final data set, it functions as a relational blueprint to visualize how shifting one variable necessitates adjustments across the entire system to make transition more effective and streamlined.

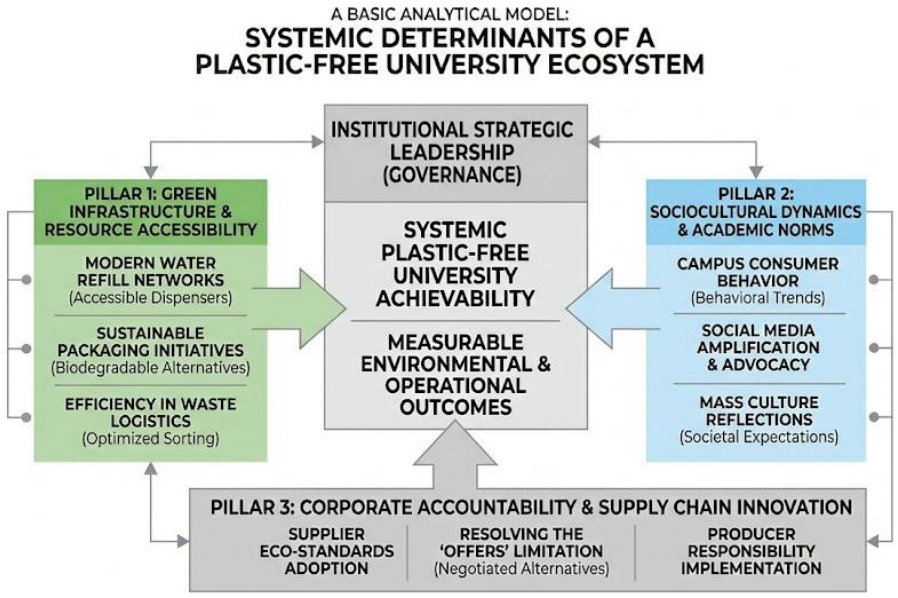

Figure 1. *Systemic framework for plastic-free university transition.*

The first pillar of the model, *Infrastructure and resource accessibility,* establishes the physical parameters of the transition. It focuses on the physical environment of the university and

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availability. It involves practical steps like installing plenty of water refill stations and switching to recyclable and sustainable packaging in vending machines. While the university may provide the water station, the individual must take the personal initiative to carry a reusable bottle. This pillar succeeds when the institution's physical "offer" meets the individual's sense of duty to reduce their own plastic footprint, which takes us to the next second pillar.

The second pillar, *Sociocultural dynamics & academic norms,* accounts for the human variables identified through the *"living laboratory*" methodology. This is where the "*living laboratory*" comes in, capturing real, unfiltered student opinions and habits. This pillar tracks how social media trends and personal values grow into a shared "green identity". Without this cultural support, any new rules or initiatives from the university will feel forced and will likely be ignored. When individuals take responsibility for their waste, they influence their peers, creating a bottom-up pressure. Furthermore, if this pro-environmental behavior is supported by influencers on social media or other celebrities, students feel more stimulus and motivation to support and adapt such behaviors due to their popularity.

The third pillar, *Corporate accountability & supply chain innovation,* identifies the external structural constraints that often dictate the limits of internal policy. This axis addresses the "*offers*" problem, acknowledging that a university's sustainability is inextricably linked to the inventory of external vendors. Often, a university wants to go plastic-free but finds that its suppliers simply don't "offer" any alternatives. This is a major bottleneck. The university must use its power as a large buyer to demand that these corporations change their ways.

The central convergence zone of this model is identified as *systemic achievability* as an emergent outcome rather than a static goal. In this framework, achievability is defined by the successful alignment of all three pillars; if one axis fails, the entire system reaches a bottleneck. The model illustrates that the intersection of these determinants creates the necessary conditions for institutional transition. By summarizing these complex interactions or inter-dependencies into an abstract yet relational schema, the research provides a simplified lens through which institutions can map their current status, identify friction points, and strategically coordinate a path toward a holistic, plastic-free reality.

Conclusions

By analyzing authentic student feedback during lectures, this analysis identified key critical thematic clusters: individual social responsibility, supportive infrastructure, mass culture, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). The research concluded that while individual agency is a necessary spark, true systemic change requires a synchronized alignment between top-down institutional policy and bottom-up, producer-led innovation. Ultimately, closing the "green gap" depends on shifting the burden of sustainability from the student's conscience to a redesigned, restorative campus ecosystem.

This study employed a participatory action research framework, utilizing the university classroom as a 'living laboratory' where student insights directly informed the iterative development of the research narrative. Quantitative surveys and one-on-one interviews often fail to capture the "truth" of student dynamics because participants tend to perform a socially desirable, "greenwashed" version of themselves to please the researcher. By "silently" collecting feedback during live classroom discussions- where students feel free to contradict, provoke, and tease one another- the professor acts as a participant-observer in a naturalistic setting. This approach is superior because it captures the raw, argumentative energy and cognitive dissonance that only emerges during spontaneous debate. These unfiltered provocations provide a level of qualitative depth and honesty that structured instruments cannot reach, revealing the genuine psychological barriers and frustrations that drive student behavior.

By designing a model to map the complex inter-dependencies within a university ecosystem, this research implies that a plastic-free campus is not a "project" to be completed, but a dynamic

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equilibrium that requires constant pressure across physical, social, and corporate domains. It moves the conversation away from "banning plastic" as a simple rule and redefines it as a multifaceted, multi-systemic organizational transition. This investigation discloses many insights into the dynamics of student behaviour related to sustainable practices. While students possess the internal motivation to act as stewards of the environment, this agency is frequently stifled by the second cluster: the necessity of supportive infrastructure. Research consistently shows that the cognitive load of a rigorous academic environment leaves little room for "sustainability obstacles." Therefore, individual intent only translates into action when the physical campus- through water stations, visible sorting systems, and "reinforcement" architecture- makes the sustainable choice the path of least resistance. This focus allows the research to move toward a more sophisticated critique of how external market forces and university procurement policies dictate the boundaries of what is possible for a student on campus. Furthermore, the impact of mass culture serves as the atmospheric pressure under which these choices are made. As long as global mainstream media and social norms continue to prioritize "fast-convenience" and disposability, the university campus remains an uphill battleground for behavioral change.

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Universitetas „be plastiko“: studentų grįžtamojo ryšio apie gyvenimo be plastiko principų taikymą universitete analizė

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Santrauka

Šiame tyrime universitetas analizuojamas kaip vientisa ekosistema, kurioje sėkmingas plastiko atsisakymas priklauso ne nuo pavienių draudimų, o nuo kompleksinės fizinių, socialinių ir ekonominių veiksnių dermės. Metodologiniu požiūriu tyrimas išsiskiria dalyvaujamojo veiksmo arba “*gyvosios laboratorijos”* strategija. Pasitelkus

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auditorijos etnografiją ir dalyvaujamąjį stebėjimą, pavyko išvengti „socialinio pageidaujamumo šališkumo“, būdingo tradicinėms apklausoms. Spontaniškos studentų diskusijos leido fiksuoti tikruosius psichologinius barjerus, pragmatišką abejingumą ir kognityvinį disonansą, kylančius dėl studentų požiūrio sukurti universitetą be plastiko.

Perėjimas prie plastiko nenaudojančios universiteto aplinkos dažnai yra lydimas sudėtingų diskusijų apie asmeninę etiką, infrastruktūros apribojimus, masinės kultūros įtaką bei rinkos dinamiką, susijusią su prieinamais tvariais pasiūlymais ir inovatyviais produktais. Pagrindinis šio tyrimo tikslas – nustatyti sisteminius determinantus ir tarpusavio priklausomybes, lemiančias universiteto ekosistemos transformaciją į aplinką be plastiko. Esminė darbo įžvalga – „žaliasis atotrūkis“ tarp studentų teorinių žinių ir realių veiksmų dažniausiai atsiranda ne dėl sąmoningumo trūkumo, o dėl sisteminių trikdžių, kuriuos lemia greito vartojimo kultūra ir infrastruktūros ribotumas. Transformacijos sėkmę lemia trys neatsiejami procesai: institucinis pasirengimas užtikrinti fizinį išteklių prieinamumą, studentų bendruomenės kultūrinė transformacija ir verslo grandžių įtraukimas. Tyrime nustatyta, kad studentų asmeninė motyvacija realų pokytį sukuria tik tada, kai universiteto aplinka – per patogią vandens infrastruktūrą ir tvarią pakuočių pasiūlą – paverčia ekologišką pasirinkimą lengviausiu ir pigiausiu sprendimu kasdienybėje. Šiame procese kritinį vaidmenį atlieka socialinė dinamika: „gyvosios laboratorijos“ metodu užfiksuoti nefiltruoti studentų įpročiai rodo, kad „žalioji tapatybė“ efektyviausiai formuojasi per bendraamžių įtaką ir skaitmeninės kultūros tendencijas, o ne per prievartines taisykles.

Tyrimas taip pat išryškina universiteto, kaip stambaus pirkėjo, galią daryti įtaką išorės tiekėjams. Kadangi plastiko atsisakymas dažnai atsimuša į ribotą rinkos pasiūlą, institucinis spaudimas korporacijoms ir tiekimo grandinių inovacijos yra būtinos, kad tvarumas peržengtų teorines ribas. Galutinė išvada suponuoja, kad tikrasis sisteminis lūžis pasiekiamas tada, kai tvarumo našta nuimama nuo individualios studento sąžinės ir perkeliama į strategiškai perprojektuotą universiteto struktūrą. Tokiu būdu perėjimas prie aplinkos be plastiko tampa ne baigtiniu projektu, o nuolatine, dinamiška organizacine evoliucija, kurioje sinchronizuotai veikia administracinė politika, vartotojų elgsena ir gamintojų atsakomybė.

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