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Perspective

Meritocratic governance in higher education institutions: A prerequisite for sustainable development?

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Abstract: Sustainable development frameworks are largely reliant on sector-specific outcomes. This approach overlooks the governance of higher education institutions (HEIs)—the very establishments that generate knowledge, expertise, and human capital upon which the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs') outcomes ultimately depend. This *Perspective* aimed to advance the following argument. Meritocratic governance in HEIs is a structural determinant of sustainable development. HEIs constitute a core intellectual infrastructure which shapes workforce competence, capacity for innovation, and the basis of policymaking across several SDGs domains. These relevant SDGs domains entail health, education, economic productivity, technological advancement, equity, and institutional integrity. When HEIs recruitment, promotion, and selection of leadership are weakly aligned with established competence, the consequences extend beyond academic underperformance. It undermines SDGs via systemic inefficiencies, including suboptimal allocation of human capital, compromised research quality and innovation, and erosion of trust in institutions. These negative impacts weaken the intergenerational transmission of institutional capacity. In turn, the lack of meritocratic governance in HEIs is expected to constrain the progress toward SDGs. This *Perspective* draws on governance theory, development economics, and higher education research to reformulate meritocracy as institutional infrastructure in HEIs rather than a normative aspiration. In this formulation, meritocracy functions as a mechanism that governs talent allocation efficiency, strengthens professional legitimacy, and eventually facilitates the sustainable development. Thus, a transparent, accountable, and context-sensitive merit-based governance in HEIs is proposed as a key yet an overlooked pillar of the broader development architecture necessary to achieve SDGs.

Keywords: Institutional governance; higher education; transparency; professional competence; organizational policy; Sustainable Development Goal

1. Introduction

Sustainable development can be defined as the capacity to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [1–3]. This principle which is articulated in the foundational United Nations (UN) frameworks and subsequent related research, underpins the contemporary sustainable development dialogue [4,5]. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) operationalize the principle of sustainable development across several domains including poverty reduction, health, education, equity, and institutional resilience [6]. Although the SDGs provide a comprehensive framework for defining the desired sustainable development outcomes in the 2030 Agenda via 169 targets, they are mainly outcome-oriented [7,8]. Notably, the SDGs are less

explicit regarding the institutional conditions required to produce and sustain the implementation outcomes [9,10].

It is important to highlight that the achievement of SDGs depends on policy intent, allocation of proper resources, and crucially on the institutional capacity [11]. These factors enable societies to design, implement, and adapt complex interventions for SDGs' achievement over time [12,13]. Notably, the institutional capacity is shaped by how societies generate knowledge, cultivate expertise, and select individuals for positions of responsibility [14–16]. Therefore, the governance quality of institutions responsible for achievement of SDGs is expected to be a central factor of long-term developmental trajectories [17,18].

Accordingly, when leadership selection procedures are weakly aligned with demonstrated competence, the institutional performance is negatively affected [19–21]. Specifically, the non-meritocratic leadership would lead to reduced job satisfaction and performance, sub-optimal decision-making, and compromised adaptability to evolving challenges [21–24]. Conversely, prioritization of competence in leadership selection, staff recruitment and promotion are more likely to result in the effective implementation and sustained achievement of complex development goals, including those embedded in the SDGs [25–27].

Among the institutions that shape the societal capacity to design, implement, and adapt complex SDGs interventions, the higher education institutions (HEIs) occupy a central role [28,29]. HEIs act as the primary sites for the development of advanced human capital, the generation of new knowledge and technological innovation, and the promotion of expert authority that informs public policy and societal norms [30,31]. Through these interrelated functions, HEIs actively structure the epistemic and professional foundations upon which the SDGs depend [32].

The performance of HEIs depends on a condition so fundamental that it is often assumed rather than critically examined, namely the integrity of meritocratic governance [33]. Within the governance theory, meritocratic governance refers to the formation of decision-making processes such that authority, opportunity, and promotion are systematically aligned with competence through transparent and accountable procedures [34–36].

Research conducted across diverse national contexts (e.g., Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East) indicated that the formal procedures intended to ensure competence-based leadership selection are sometimes perceived to be bypassed in practice [37–41]. In these cases, institutional appointment and promotion decisions have been shown to be influenced by various forms of favoritism. These include family-based favoritism (nepotism), friend-based favoritism (cronyism), political affiliation, network-based favoritism, clientelism, and the concentration of discretionary authority [37–42]. Consequently, these practices weaken the alignment between institutional roles and professional competence, thereby reducing organizational efficiency [43–45]. They also adversely affect employees by lowering morale, limiting career advancement, and decreasing professional engagement [46–48].

Notably, in settings with distorted meritocratic governance, appointments may prioritize loyalty over demonstrated expertise [49,50]. This creates self-reinforcing cycles in which subsequent selections follow similar non-meritocratic criteria [51,52].

Such governance distortions often persist due to regulatory frameworks that concentrate discretionary authority while lacking robust transparency and independent oversight [53–55]. Eventually, this process can consolidate decision-making within closed networks and lead to the ostracism of highly qualified individuals [55–57]. In the context of HEIs, such practices erode institutional credibility, diminish research and educational quality, and impair the capacity to fulfill their societal mission [58–60].

Implementing meritocratic principles can provide an institutional counterbalance to the aforementioned governance distortions. Meritocracy refers to the systematic allocation of roles based on demonstrated competence, achievement, and potential [61]. Although often framed as an ethical ideal and at times criticized as a normative construct with practical limitations, meritocracy has been shown to shape how effectively societies identify, cultivate, and deploy cognitive capital [39,62,63]. It also strengthens perceptions of procedural fairness and institutional credibility [64]. Despite these recognized benefits, meritocratic governance in HEIs remains relatively underexamined in the empirical literature. This gap likely stems from the following issues: (1) the methodological challenges of measuring informal governance processes; (2) the political sensitivity of examining institutional power structures; and (3) the tendency of sustainable development research to prioritize sectoral outcomes over upstream institutional mechanisms.

At this point, it is important to emphasize that meritocratic governance is particularly critical in HEIs relative to sectors where performance depends less on advanced knowledge production, such as routine administrative or standardized operational systems. This is related to HEIs unique role as knowledge gatekeepers and the long-term impact they have on social mobility [60,65]. Ideally, within HEIs, decisions regarding recruitment, promotion, resource allocation, and leadership selection determine how expertise is distributed across research, teaching, and governance functions [60,66,67]. When these processes are guided by transparent and performance-based criteria, they reinforce cumulative cycles of learning, innovation, and institutional trust [68,69].

Conversely, when meritocratic governance in HEIs is distorted by patronage, favoritism, or other non-meritocratic practices, systemic misallocation of talent occurs. This is a phenomenon widely recognized in economic theory as a driver of productivity loss, reduced innovation, and long-term developmental stagnation [70,71]. The consequences extend beyond institutional performance. Through their "third mission," HEIs contribute to societal development by preparing professionals, generating relevant knowledge, and informing policy as reviewed by Compagnucci and Spigarelli [72,73]. Moreover, when HEIs operate on non-meritocratic criteria, the diffusion of reduced competence into the broader social, economic, and political domains would be expected [38,74]. Furthermore, evidence suggested that students' perceptions of teaching quality and competence-based progression influence their trust in faculty promotion systems [75]. Ultimately, misalignment between roles and expertise triggers systemic effects, including diminished research credibility, reduced innovation, erosion of institutional trust, loss of high-performing individuals, and, over time, weakened state capacity [23,76,77].

Importantly, non-meritocratic practices in HEIs are expected to undermine progress across multiple SDGs, particularly those related to health and well-being (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), economic productivity (SDG 8), innovation capacity (SDG 9), and institutional integrity (SDG 16). These domains mainly depend on the sustained production of knowledge, skills, and institutional capability. In that sense, sustainability may be understood as contingent on the intergenerational transmission of institutional competence. Thus, meritocracy functions as a form of institutional infrastructure—often implicit when effective, yet consequentially destabilizing when weakened.

Recent empirical assessments of sustainable development increasingly rely on composite indices integrating economic, environmental, and outcome indicators, often analyzed using econometric methods [78–81]. For example, Ülger and Kasap constructed a Sustainable Development Index (SDI) for BRICS-T countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—plus Türkiye) and identified differentiated effects of key factors such as renewable energy consumption and research and development (R&D) expenditures [82]. However, such frameworks give limited attention to upstream institutional determinants, particularly those governing the production and allocation of human capital.

This *Perspective* aimed to advance the argument that meritocratic governance in HEIs is a structural determinant of SDGs. Herein, meritocratic governance refers to the alignment of recruitment, promotion, resource allocation, and leadership selection with competence through transparent and accountable processes. Rather than a normative ideal, meritocracy is conceptualized as institutional infrastructure that enables the efficient allocation of human capital, supports knowledge production, and reinforces institutional legitimacy. Therefore, this *Perspective* aimed to highlight a critical but often underexamined dimension of sustainability; the ability of HEIs to identify, develop, and transmit competence across generations. Grounded in governance theory and empirical evidence, this *Perspective* aimed to highlight that progress toward the SDGs depends on the integrity of institutional processes within HEIs.

2. HEIs as infrastructures of sustainable development

The SDGs implicitly assume the existence of functional knowledge systems capable of generating expertise, innovation, and evidence for decision-making. Progress toward SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) depends on medical and biomedical research and the clinical training of health professionals [83]. SDG 4 (Quality Education) requires the preparation of qualified teachers, curriculum development, and pedagogical research [84]. SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) depends on a workforce equipped with advanced skills and on the commercialization of knowledge through innovation [85]. SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) presupposes scientific research and engineering expertise that underpin technological development and innovation [86]. SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) relies on legal scholarship, policy analysis, and data systems that inform governance and institutional design [87]. Across these SDGs, HEIs constitute the core intellectual infrastructure that enables societies to

generate and apply knowledge [88,89]. The linkages between SDG requirements and HEIs-based capacities are summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Higher education institutions (HEIs) as intellectual infrastructure supporting SDGs.

Sustainable development goal (SDG)	Developmental requirement	Knowledge / expertise capacity needed	Role of HEIs
SDG 3 – Good health and well-being	Effective health systems and disease control	Biomedical research, epidemiology, clinical training	Produce medical professionals, conduct health research, support surveillance and evidence-based treatment
SDG 4 – Quality education	Access to effective learning systems	Teacher preparation, curriculum design, pedagogical research	Train educators, develop curricula, advance education research
SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth	Productive employment and economic innovation	Advanced workforce skills, entrepreneurship, knowledge commercialization	Prepare skilled graduates, foster innovation ecosystems, enable industry partnerships
SDG 9 – Industry, innovation, and infrastructure	Technological development and industrial capacity	Scientific research, engineering expertise, research and development (R&D) capacity	Generate scientific knowledge, train engineers, support technological advancement
SDG 16 – Peace, justice, and strong institutions	Effective governance and institutional integrity	Legal scholarship, policy analysis, data systems	Produce legal and policy experts, support evidence-informed governance

Unlike physical infrastructure, intellectual infrastructure is maintained by the accumulation and effective deployment of human expertise developed through long-term investment in education, research, and the continuous improvement of institutional practices [90]. In HEIs, the intellectual infrastructure performance depends on the degree of alignment between institutional roles and professional competence—i.e., whether individuals with the highest levels of relevant expertise are systematically recruited, retained, and empowered across research, teaching, and governance functions.

Meritocratic governance provides the mechanism of alignment between institutional roles and competence by linking opportunity and advancement to demonstrated ability. Comparative evidence suggests that establishments with stronger merit-based selection achieve greater administrative efficiency, professional integrity, and developmental performance. On the other hand, those shaped by patronage or political influence are more prone to fragility, reduced autonomy, and governance distortions [45,91–93]. Subsequently, downstream effects are observed including diminished research and educational quality, erosion of trust in institutional processes, and increased outward migration of highly skilled individuals [77]. Over time, such effects degrade the knowledge base and professional capacity upon which sustainable development depends.

3. Meritocracy and the production of human capital

The human capital theory, though often articulated in economic terms, reflects a broader social reality; societies prosper when individuals with knowledge and skills are able to apply them effectively within institutional systems [94]. HEIs serve as the primary sites of advanced human capital formation, where faculty competence directly shapes the training of future professionals, including physicians, engineers, educators,

and public-sector leaders [95–97].

When academic recruitment and promotion are influenced by favoritism, patronage, or opaque criteria, the quality of instruction and mentorship is progressively undermined. This erosion is often gradual and not immediately visible. HEIs may continue to function administratively, and credentials continue to be awarded, yet the cumulative effect is a workforce less equipped to address increasingly complex societal challenges [98]. Non-meritocratic leadership appointments can further amplify this decline by distorting organizational dynamics [21,99]. When leadership selection is weakly aligned with demonstrated competence, it may foster environments characterized by reduced accountability, constrained intellectual independence, and diminished incentives for excellence [60,100]. Such conditions can marginalize highly qualified individuals, discourage constructive dissent, and promote organizational behaviors that prioritize positional security over institutional advancement [77,101]. Over time, these dynamics contribute to the loss of human capital through disengagement or outward migration, weaken institutional reputation and credibility, and impair the capacity of HEIs to meet the societal expectations [102].

Addressing these challenges requires strengthening governance structures that align institutional roles with competence. Transparent recruitment processes, clearly defined performance criteria, independent oversight mechanisms, and protected channels for reporting governance irregularities can help mitigate the influence of patronage and favoritism [103–105]. Academic leadership development that emphasizes accountability, professional integrity, and evidence-based decision-making may further support HEIs resilience [106].

The positive impact of meritocratic governance in HEIs is evident in the expansion of research-intensive universities across Europe, North America, and East Asia, where competitive hiring, peer review, and performance-based evaluation became institutionalized [107,108]. Although imperfect, these mechanisms created durable incentives for productivity and innovation. The resulting advances in science, medicine, and economic development were not incidental but reflected the alignment of institutional reward systems with competence as opposed to other less developed regions [109]. The implication is structural rather than cultural: where meritocratic governance is sustained, the production and application of knowledge are more likely to accelerate, reinforcing long-term sustainable development trajectories.

4. Meritocratic governance in HEIs as a cross-cutting determinant of SDGs

HEIs function as core intellectual infrastructure underpinning multiple SDGs by generating the knowledge, expertise, and professional capacity required to sustain complex societal systems. This role depends on aligning institutional positions with competence. When meritocratic governance is weakened, this alignment deteriorates, with domain-specific consequences that extend across health, education, economic development, innovation, and institutional integrity as follows.

4.1. SDG 3 — Good health and well-being: Erosion of clinical and public health capacity

Health system performance is not determined solely by infrastructure or funding, but by the quality of clinical judgment, research capacity, and decision-making embedded within health institutions [110,111]. These, in turn, are shaped by the governance of HEIs, where health professionals, researchers, and health leaders are trained and selected [112,113]. When academic appointments are driven by non-meritocratic factors rather than demonstrated clinical and research competence, individuals in leadership and teaching roles may lack the expertise to evaluate evidence, guide clinical training, and set research priorities. This misalignment weakens the intellectual foundation of health education.

Faculty with limited background in evidence-based medicine and biomedical research are less able to cultivate analytical reasoning, interpret emerging data, or rigorous clinical decision-making [114]. The consequences are structural rather than incidental. Training environments shaped by such leadership tend to place less emphasis on scientific rigor, critical appraisal, and continuous updating of knowledge. As a result, the production of high-quality clinical research declines, and the translation of scientific advances into practice becomes slower and less consistent.

In addition, non-meritocratic leadership may sideline highly competent individuals who could otherwise drive innovation and improve standards of care [115]. When expertise is not recognized or rewarded, the institutional capacity to generate and apply new knowledge is diminished [116]. Over time, this weakens the ability of health systems to respond effectively to complex and emerging health challenges [117,118]. In this sense, the impact of non-meritocratic governance in HEIs is not confined to academic performance; it directly affects the quality of care delivered within health systems. By undermining the alignment between expertise and responsibility, it constrains the production, transmission, and application of medical knowledge—thereby limiting progress toward SDG 3 as illustrated in **Figure 1**.

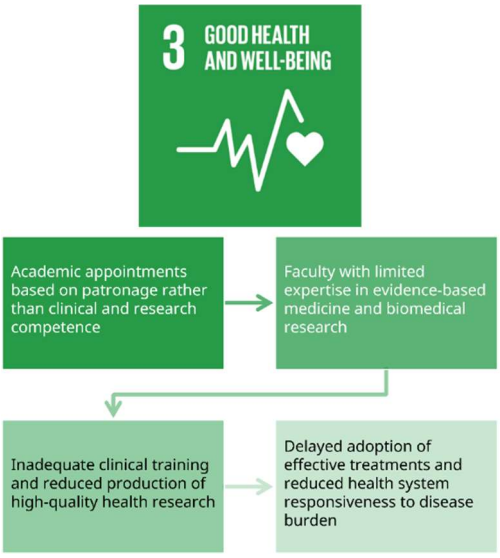

Figure 1. Negative impact of non-meritocratic governance sustainable development goal (SDG) 3. The icon representing SDG was adapted from United Nations SDG resources at: https://sdgs.un.org, accessed on 7 April 2026.

4.2. SDG 4 — Quality education: Decline in pedagogical standards and learning outcomes

The effectiveness of education systems depends on the preparation of competent educators and the continuous refinement of curricula and pedagogical methods. HEIs are central to this process. Meritocratic governance in HEIs ensures that faculty responsible for teacher training and educational research possess the expertise required to deliver high-quality instruction and innovate in curriculum design. When recruitment and promotion are not aligned with demonstrated teaching and scholarly competence, instructional quality deteriorates as shown in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2. Negative impact of non-meritocratic governance on sustainable development goal (SDG) 4. The icon representing SDG was adapted from United Nations SDG resources at: https://sdgs.un.org, accessed on 7 April 2026.

In HEIs where governance standards have not kept pace, declines in faculty preparedness and digital transformation have been observed [119]. Faculty selected without rigorous evaluation of pedagogical competence may rely on outdated teaching methods, with limited use of evidence-based instructional approaches [77]. In parallel, bureaucratic governance structures and ineffective leadership can restrict institutional flexibility, hinder collaboration, and limit the adoption of digital innovations. As reported by Singun [120], such conditions may impede bottom-up innovation, reduce staff engagement in transformative processes, and constrain the implementation of effective digital strategies.

As a result, graduates entering the education workforce may lack both subject mastery and effective teaching skills. These deficiencies propagate through the education system, contributing to persistent gaps in student learning outcomes and

reduced returns on educational investment. Over time, weakened human capital formation constrains societal capacity for knowledge acquisition and innovation. Such dynamics may also affect teaching quality through reduced faculty engagement as shown by Amadhila [121].

4.3. SDG 8 — Decent work and economic growth: Misallocation of skills and reduced productivity

Sustained economic growth depends on the efficient allocation of human capital and the development of a workforce capable of adapting to evolving technological and market demands [70]. HEIs play a central role in preparing this workforce and supporting knowledge-based economic activity. Meritocratic governance aligns educational and research opportunities with demonstrated ability, thereby optimizing the deployment of talent. When non-meritocratic practices shape academic recruitment and advancement, high-performing individuals may be overlooked or underutilized, while others advance without corresponding competence, leading to inefficiencies in workforce allocation and reduced overall productivity as illustrated in **Figure 3**.

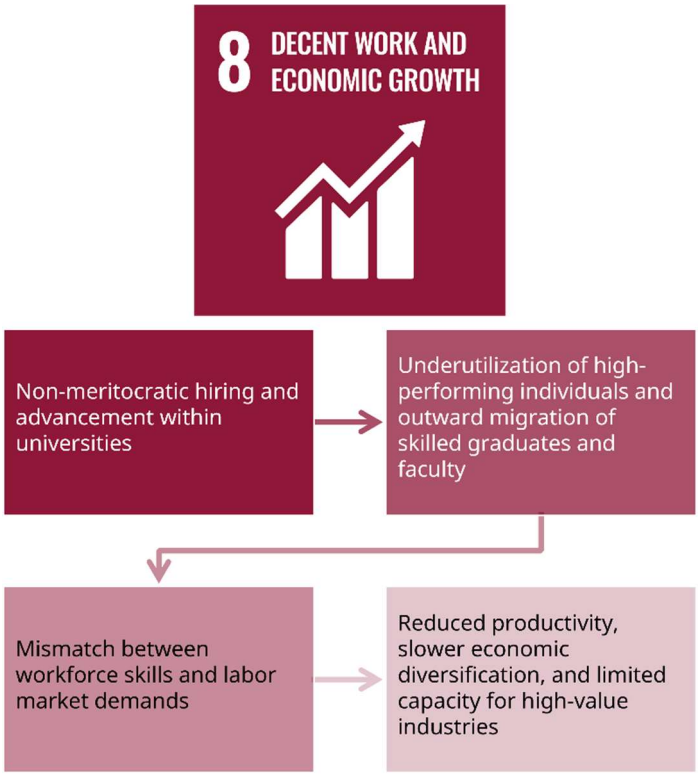

Figure 3. Negative impact of non-meritocratic governance on sustainable development goal (SDG) 8. The icon representing SDG was adapted from United Nations SDG resources at: https://sdgs.un.org, accessed on 7 April 2026.

Patterns such as skilled migration from less competitive systems to environments with stronger merit-based incentives illustrate how governance quality influences the distribution of human capital [122]. Although debated, evidence suggests that this dynamic can reduce the availability of highly skilled professionals and weaken

innovation and productivity in the origin country [123,124]. For example, Labrianidis et al. [125] reported that the large-scale emigration of highly educated scientists during Greece's decade-long recession adversely affected the country's innovation performance. The resulting mismatch between workforce skills and labor market demands constrains economic diversification, limits the development of high-value industries, and reduces long-term growth potential. Consistent with this mechanism, Akyildiz et al. [126] demonstrated that institutional quality was a critical determinant in reversing brain drain, with transparent and accountable governance structures playing a central role in rebuilding trust, retaining skilled individuals, and sustaining human capital formation.

4.4. SDG 9 — Industry, innovation, and infrastructure: Suppression of research and technological advancement

It is well established that technological advancement depends on the sustained production of high-quality research and the effective translation of knowledge into innovation [127,128]. HEIs are central to this process, serving as hubs for scientific discovery and engineering expertise [129]. Meritocratic governance ensures that research leadership and funding decisions are aligned with scientific competence and innovation potential [130]. When research positions and resources are allocated on the basis of non-meritocratic criteria, the quality and impact of scientific output may decline as illustrated in **Figure 4**.

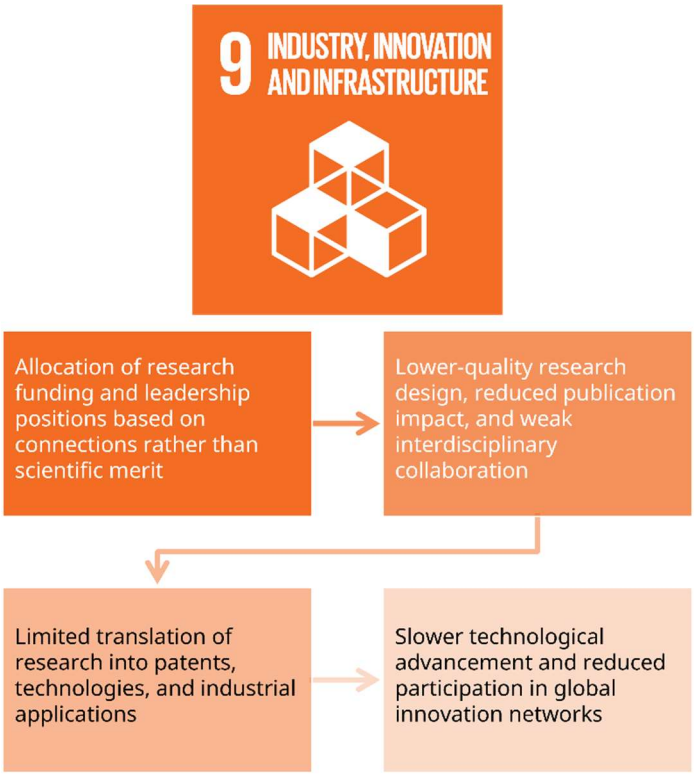

Figure 4. Negative impact of non-meritocratic governance on sustainable development goal (SDG) 9. The icon representing SDG was adapted from United Nations SDG resources at: https://sdgs.un.org, accessed on 7 April 2026.

This misalignment between expertise and leadership can lead to poorly designed studies, limited interdisciplinary collaboration, and reduced competitiveness in securing international research funding. Conversely, environments characterized by competitive peer review and performance-based advancement tend to produce higher levels of publication impact and technological innovation. By contrast, systems shaped by patronage or opaque decision-making often exhibit reduced research productivity, limited patent generation, and weaker integration into global innovation networks. Over time, these constraints collectively slow technological progress and diminish the capacity for industrial development. Additionally, deficiencies in leadership can perpetuate institutional stagnation and limit the capacity of HEIs to contribute to broader innovation environments [120].

These patterns are further reinforced by the erosion of relational social capital. For example, Karadag and Ciftci [131], in a study of 9,499 scientists in Türkiye, demonstrated that relational social capital—defined by trust, shared norms, and expectations among organizational members—was the strongest predictor of research productivity, highlighting the central role of trust-based institutional environments in sustaining scientific output. On the other hand, despite recognized limitations, Hicks has shown that performance-based research funding systems—through competitive evaluation frameworks combining peer review, metrics, and transparency—create strong incentives for research productivity and institutional performance [108].

Historical evidence further supports this relationship. Analyses of pre-industrial Europe demonstrate that periods of scientific advancement, including the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, were associated with reduced nepotism in universities and scientific academies, whereas periods of stagnation were characterized by higher levels of preferential appointment as elaborated by Croix and Goñi [132].

4.5. SDG 16 — Peace, justice, and strong institutions: Weakening of governance capacity and institutional trust

Effective governance in HEIs depends on the availability of legal, administrative, and policy expertise, as well as on public trust in institutional processes [133]. HEIs contribute to both by training professionals and modeling standards of fairness, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making. Meritocratic governance within HEIs reinforces these functions by aligning authority with competence and ensuring procedural integrity.

When HEIs operate under non-meritocratic practices—such as preferential admissions, nepotism, or academic mismanagement—their legitimacy as institutions dedicated to knowledge and objective evaluation is undermined [134]. Empirical studies in higher education contexts have shown that informal systems of preferential treatment are associated with diminished trust, weakened social cohesion, and reduced confidence in institutional processes [135–137].

For example, Assefa et al. [138] demonstrated that deficiencies in distributive, procedural, and interactional justice—manifested as inequitable resource allocation, lack of transparency and participation in decision-making, and disrespectful leadership behaviors—are associated with reduced faculty trust, motivation, and engagement.

Another study by Bekesiene et al. [139] showed that that nepotism as a form of corruption is associated with internal conflict, erosion of trust, deterioration in organizational performance, and loss of skilled professionals, highlighting its broader implications for institutional effectiveness and sustainable development.

Additionally, graduates emerging from HEIs that lack meritocracy may carry forward inconsistent standards of professional conduct and decision-making [23]. These effects extend beyond academia. When institutions responsible for training future leaders are perceived as lacking fairness and accountability, broader societal trust in governance structures may erode [140,141]. This, in turn, limits the effectiveness of policy implementation and institutional reform as illustrated in **Figure 5**.

Figure 5. Negative impact of non-meritocratic governance on sustainable development goal (SDG) 16. The icon representing SDG was adapted from United Nations SDG resources at: https://sdgs.un.org, accessed on 7 April 2026.

5. Recommendations: Policy pathways toward meritocratic sustainability

Across the domains examined, a consistent mechanism emerges. The misalignment between HEIs roles and professional competence leads to the progressive degradation of knowledge systems, professional standards, and organizational effectiveness. Because HEIs operate upstream in human capital formation and knowledge production, distortions in their governance propagate downstream across sectors central to several SDGs. Meritocratic governance, therefore, is not confined to academic performance but constitutes a systemic determinant of a society's ability to achieve and sustain SDGs outcomes.

Strengthening meritocracy in HEIs does not require a uniform institutional model. Instead, it depends on adherence to core governance principles that ensure alignment between roles and demonstrated competence. Although meritocracy is often treated as a qualitative construct, its institutional expression can be operationalized through measurable indicators [142]. At the institutional level, transparent and publicly articulated criteria for recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection are foundational [143]. These criteria should reflect the multidimensional mission of HEIs, incorporating rigorous evaluation of research quality, teaching effectiveness, and societal engagement [144,145].

To support implementation and accountability, HEIs may develop composite indicators of meritocratic governance analogous to established sustainability indices that integrate multidimensional indicators and are amenable to quantitative analysis [78–82]. Such a framework—conceptualized here as a Meritocratic Governance Index (MGI)—would integrate measurable dimensions. Conceptually, the MGI may be structured across core domains reflecting key governance processes, including transparency of recruitment and promotion criteria, independence and composition of selection bodies, alignment between stated evaluation standards and observed outcomes, and accountability mechanisms. Each domain may be represented through observable indicators—such as the proportion of positions filled through open competition, the presence of external review in appointments, or the consistency between performance metrics and advancement decisions. While the specific weighting and aggregation of these indicators may vary depending on institutional and national contexts, the framework provides a structured basis for assessing the degree to which governance processes align with meritocratic principles. Additional indicators, such as patterns of academic mobility, retention of high-performing faculty, and distribution of research productivity, may serve as indirect measures of alignment between competence and advancement.

Critically, incorporating meritocratic governance metrics into university ranking systems represents a high-leverage mechanism for reform. Rankings exert substantial influence over institutional behavior, resource allocation, and reputational incentives; however, they currently emphasize outputs such as publications, citations, and internationalization while largely overlooking the governance processes that generate these outcomes [146]. Integrating an MGI or comparable composite measure into ranking methodologies would shift incentives toward strengthening the integrity of recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection systems. HEIs would be incentivized to demonstrate that such outputs arise from transparent, competitive, and competence-based processes.

Public reporting of governance indicators—including promotion patterns, committee composition, and adherence to stated criteria—would further enable stakeholders to assess procedural fairness and institutional consistency. Importantly, the quantification of meritocratic governance must remain context-sensitive and resistant to over-mechanization. On the other hand, metrics can inform evaluation but should not substitute for expert judgment, as rigid indicator-based systems risk incentivizing superficial compliance rather than substantive excellence [147].

Meritocracy, in this sense, is not reducible to a technocratic scoring system but represents a governance commitment to principled, evidence-informed evaluation that

balances institutional autonomy with accountability. Measurement frameworks should therefore be designed to complement, rather than replace, peer-based academic judgment. When effectively implemented, such reforms can restore alignment between competence and responsibility, reinforce institutional legitimacy, and improve the capacity of HEIs to meaningfully contribute to SDGs.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the relationship between meritocratic governance and sustainable development varies across national contexts [148–150]. In high-income countries, better alignment between skills and job requirements—supported by stronger institutions and advanced technology—enables more efficient use of human capital and higher productivity [148]. In lower-income settings, however, the benefits of improved matching are constrained by weaker skill endowments and technological limitations. As a result, strengthening meritocratic governance alone may not yield substantial gains unless accompanied by broader improvements in education, skills, and productive capacity [151]. While the underlying link between governance and development remains consistent, its impact depends on these structural conditions, requiring context-specific policy approaches.

5. Conclusion

The SDGs articulate a vision of societies that are healthy, educated, equitable, innovative, and supported by effective institutions. The realization of this vision depends on the attainment of sector-specific outcomes as well as the integrity of the governance structures within HEIs, which serve as the primary engines for the production of knowledge, the cultivation of expertise, and the formation of professional capacity. HEIs occupy a central position within this architecture of sustainable development, operating as upstream determinants of human capital formation, scientific advancement, and institutional capability. Their ability to fulfill this role depends on governance systems that align opportunity, authority, and advancement with demonstrable competence. When HEIs function without such alignment, the consequences accumulate across domains, manifesting as diminished research quality, weakened workforce preparedness, erosion of institutional trust, and inefficient use of public resources. As demonstrated across multiple SDGs, these effects are not isolated but systemic, constraining the capacity of societies to generate, apply, and sustain the knowledge required for sustainable development. Conversely, HEIs that maintain transparent, performance-based, and accountable governance reinforce the conditions necessary for sustainable development. Meritocratic governance in HEIs is therefore not a peripheral administrative concern but a structural component of the development architecture embedded within the SDGs. The sustainability of social progress ultimately depends on whether societies preserve institutional systems capable of reliably identifying, cultivating, and advancing professional competence within the very organizations responsible for producing knowledge and shaping future generations.

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