

Original Article

Examining occupational therapy students' awareness of United Nations sustainable development goals

Examinando a consciência dos estudantes de terapia ocupacional sobre os objetivos de desenvolvimento sustentável das Nações Unidas

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Abstract

Introduction: Sustainable development remains one of the most significant global challenges of the 21st century. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to reduce the impact of environmental change, social inequalities, and economic structures on human life, which are closely related to the concept of occupation. In this context, occupational therapists are expected to integrate sustainability principles into both their professional practice and educational processes. **Objectives:** To examine occupational therapy students' awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). **Method:** A total of 145 students (mean age: 20.91±3.43) studying at a state university completed the SDGs Awareness Scale and were compared based on sociodemographic variables using the Mann-Whitney U test (for two-group comparisons) and the Kruskal-Wallis H test (for multiple group comparisons). **Results:** Students demonstrated high overall awareness (150.38±13.19), with the highest scores in social sustainability (4.61±0.55), followed by environmental (4.04±0.36) and economic sustainability (4.03±0.36). A significant difference was found in awareness scores by academic year ($p=0.005$), with second-, third-, and fourth-year students scoring higher than first-year students. **Conclusion:** Occupational therapy students demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding sustainable development. However, integrating sustainable development topics—particularly economic and environmental sustainability—into occupational therapy curricula may better prepare future therapists for effective community-based practice.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Global Health, Professional Training, Study Programs.

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Resumo

Introdução: O desenvolvimento sustentável continua sendo um dos desafios globais mais significativos do século XXI. Os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS) das Nações Unidas visam mitigar o impacto das mudanças ambientais, das desigualdades sociais e das estruturas econômicas sobre a vida humana, fatores estes intimamente relacionados ao conceito de ocupação. Nesse contexto, espera-se que os terapeutas ocupacionais integrem os princípios da sustentabilidade tanto na prática profissional quanto nos processos educacionais. **Objetivos:** Examinar a consciência dos estudantes de terapia ocupacional em relação aos ODS. **Método:** Um total de 145 estudantes (idade média: $20,91 \pm 3,43$) de uma universidade pública completaram a Escala de Consciência sobre os ODS. Os estudantes foram comparados com base em variáveis sociodemográficas por meio do teste de Mann-Whitney U (para comparações entre dois grupos) e do teste de Kruskal-Wallis H (para comparações entre múltiplos grupos). **Resultados:** Os estudantes demonstraram um elevado nível geral de consciência ($150,38 \pm 13,19$), com a pontuação média por item mais elevada na sustentabilidade social ($4,61 \pm 0,55$), seguida pela sustentabilidade ambiental ($4,04 \pm 0,36$) e pela sustentabilidade econômica ($4,03 \pm 0,36$). Foi observada uma diferença estatisticamente significativa nas pontuações de consciência conforme o ano acadêmico ($p=0,005$), com estudantes do segundo, terceiro e quarto anos apresentando pontuações mais altas do que os do primeiro ano. **Conclusão:** Os estudantes de terapia ocupacional apresentaram um alto nível de consciência sobre o desenvolvimento sustentável. No entanto, a integração de temas relacionados ao desenvolvimento sustentável—especialmente sustentabilidade ambiental e econômica—no currículo da terapia ocupacional pode preparar melhor os futuros terapeutas para uma atuação eficaz baseada na comunidade.

Palavras-chave: Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Saúde Global, Formação Profissional, Programa de Estudo.

Introduction

Sustainability is a multidimensional concept that refers to the capacity of systems and processes to be maintained over the long term (Robertson, 2017; Ruggerio, 2021). It is grounded in the responsible management of natural resources to meet present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own (Henderson & Loreau, 2023). Today, sustainability extends beyond environmental degradation, as escalating climate impacts, widening economic inequalities, and social injustices have made it an urgent global political and ethical concern (Al-Makhzoumi & AbuAbdoun, 2026; Nilipour, 2019; Smol, 2022). Global warming, extreme weather events, and ecosystem losses pose direct threats to human health and quality of life, while income disparities, poverty, and unequal access to essential services increase societal vulnerabilities (Hu et al., 2024; Sarlio, 2018). In this context, the sustainable development approach seeks to redefine economic growth within environmental limits, strengthen social equity, and promote long-term societal resilience (Schaefer et al., 2015).

In response to global challenges, sustainable development has been operationalized at the international policy level (Sachs, 2012). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, have emerged as a comprehensive global action plan that addresses the environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability through an integrated framework (Hák et al., 2016). These goals provide

a structured framework for understanding the complex interconnections among these global problems and promote holistic, systemic approaches rather than fragmented solutions. Grounded in the awareness of finite resources and intergenerational responsibility, this approach serves as a universal guide for communities worldwide due to its adaptable and inclusive nature (Anstey, 2013). The SDGs encourage the active participation of all individuals and communities in development processes, aiming to strengthen social equity and justice while ensuring that no one is left behind. The 17 SDGs adopted in 2015 include targets such as no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, among others (Hák et al., 2016). Achieving these goals requires coordinated and collaborative action among governments, international organizations, and civil society. Moreover, this collective effort must also involve scientists, engineers, policymakers, and health professionals—including occupational therapists (Kundzewicz et al., 2014).

Occupational therapy is based on the belief that every individual has the right to engage in meaningful occupations that promote health and well-being (Kielhofner, 2009). Sustainability-related global challenges such as environmental degradation, overpopulation, and climate change constitute significant barriers that directly affect and limit individuals' participation in occupations (Anstey, 2013; Lieb, 2022). For this reason, there is a multidimensional relationship between sustainability and occupational therapy (Dieterle, 2020; Garcia Diaz & Richardson, 2023; Roberto et al., 2018). Occupations can be understood as fundamental elements that both contribute to and are affected by ecological crises (Dennis et al., 2015; Turcotte & Drolet, 2022). In contrast, climate change-related disasters, water and food insecurity, and forced migration directly affect individuals' fundamental occupations, such as education, work, self-care, and social participation (Drolet & Lafond, 2025; Smith et al., 2020). In this context, occupational therapists are well positioned to address the occupational dimensions of the environmental and social challenges that underpin the SDGs (Dieterle, 2020; Dutra et al., 2018). Especially strengthening the resilience of vulnerable individuals and communities, promoting health and well-being, and encouraging sustainable living practices are among the areas of intervention in occupational therapy (Craik et al., 2024; Kiepek, 2024; Taff et al., 2025).

Together with all these considerations, educating occupational therapy students about sustainability is not a new area of debate. As early as 1972, Hooker argued that occupational therapy education and professional priorities should be restructured in order to respond more effectively to emerging environmental crises and ecosystem degradation (Hooker, 1972). Following this approach, Wilcock (1993) emphasized that our understanding of human needs should be reconsidered within broader ecological and social contexts (Wilcock, 1993). Over time, this theoretical foundation has become more visible, and particularly in recent years, the integration of sustainability principles into occupational therapy has attracted increasing attention (Drolet et al., 2020; Hess & Rihtman, 2023; Pollard et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2025). In addition, various policy documents and education-focused technical reports published by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) have emphasized the importance of integrating sustainability into professional practice and educational processes (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2018). Nevertheless, the integration of sustainability into occupational therapy education involves various structural and pedagogical

challenges (Santos et al., 2025). In particular, the uncertainty surrounding students' levels of awareness and competence in this area constitutes a significant gap in planning sustainability-oriented educational approaches (Drolet & Lafond, 2025; Santos et al., 2025). Despite the growing theoretical and policy-level emphasis on sustainability within occupational therapy, empirical evidence regarding how occupational therapy students understand and engage with the SDGs remains limited. The aim of this study is to examine the level of awareness of occupational therapy students regarding the SDGs.

Materials and Methods

Positionality statement

Author OA is a faculty member who has been working in the education of occupational therapy students for over 10 years. She is involved in the development of occupational therapy education curricula and has been conducting research on sustainability in particular in recent years. Author MNOD is a research assistant in the occupational therapy department. She conducts research on occupational therapy and sustainability.

Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive-comparative design to assess occupational therapy students' awareness of the SDGs at a single point in time and to examine potential differences across academic year levels. A cross-sectional design was considered appropriate because the aim was to evaluate existing awareness levels without implementing any intervention.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Hacettepe University Non-Interventional Ethics Committee (project number: GO 20/140) and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were not subject to any form of obligation. To prevent any perception of pressure, recruitment announcements were not made directly during class sessions but were distributed through flyers posted on notice boards within the faculty building. Students were clearly informed that participation or non-participation would not have any impact on their academic standing. No personal identifying information (such as names or student numbers) was collected, and all data were obtained anonymously.

Participants

The study sample consisted of undergraduate occupational therapy students enrolled at a state university in Türkiye. Participants were recruited via public announcements. Based on an a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.4, a minimum of 145 participants was determined to be sufficient to achieve a statistical power of 95% ($1 - \beta = 0.95$, $\alpha = 0.05$). Inclusion criteria were being currently enrolled in an undergraduate occupational therapy program in Türkiye. Exclusion criteria included

studying in other departments or having received prior education, training, or participated in any project/workshop related to sustainable development awareness.

Procedure

Participants were invited through online announcements shared on social media platforms. Those who agreed to participate accessed a Google Form that included detailed information about the study procedures, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. The form also contained a sociodemographic information questionnaire and the Sustainable Development Awareness Scale, which participants completed. To ensure anonymity, no personally identifiable information was collected. The entire assessment process took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Measures

Demographic information form

The demographic form was developed by the researchers and included questions regarding age, gender, academic year level, and place of residence. These variables were collected to describe the sample and to examine potential group differences.

Sustainable development awareness scale

The scale was developed in Turkish by Atmaca et al. (2019) to measure university students' awareness of SDGs (Atmaca et al., 2019). The scale includes three sub-dimensions: economic sustainability (13 items), social sustainability (9 items), and environmental sustainability (14 items), comprising a total of 36 items. The total score ranges from 36 to 180. Higher scores in each sub-dimension and in the total score indicate greater awareness of sustainability. In the original study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.91 for the total scale, 0.77 for economic sustainability, 0.87 for social sustainability, and 0.82 for environmental sustainability. In the present study, internal consistency was found to be 0.93 for the total scale, 0.74 for economic sustainability, 0.94 for social sustainability, and 0.85 for environmental sustainability.

Statistical analysis

The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Descriptive statistics were presented as minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation for normally distributed numerical variables, median for non-normally distributed numerical variables, and frequency and percentage for categorical variables. The normality of the variables was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. For comparisons, the Mann-Whitney U test was used for two-group comparisons, and the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used for multiple group comparisons. A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

A total of 145 students (mean age = 20.91 ± 3.43 years) were included in the study. Of the participants, 91% (n = 132) were female, and the majority (n = 121) reported

having a moderate level of income overall. Detailed demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants.

Variable	n	%
Gender		
Female	132	91.0
Male	13	9.0
Year of Study		
1st year	30	20.7
2nd year	35	24.1
3rd year	51	35.2
4th year	29	20.0
Place of Residence		
Alone	12	8.3
With family	28	19.3
In a dormitory	68	46.9
With friends	37	25.5
Income		
Income>expenses	7	4.8
Income=expenses	121	83.4
Income<expenses	17	11.7
Have you heard of Sustainable Development Goals before?		
Yes	114	78.6
No	31	21.4
Do you have any idea about the relationship between sustainable development goals and occupational therapy?		
Yes	106	73.1
No	39	26.9

n: number of participants; %: percentage of participants.

The results regarding the participants' awareness of the SDGs are presented in Table 2. According to the mean per item results calculated by dividing the mean score in each sub-dimension by the number of related questions, occupational therapy students received the highest score in the area of social sustainability (mean=4.61).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Sustainable Development Goals Awareness Scale.

	Min-Max	Mean ± SD	Mean per Item
Economic sustainability (13-65)	38-65	52.38±4.66	4.03 ±0.36
Social sustainability (9-45)	13-45	41.49±4.94	4.61 ± 0.55
Environmental sustainability (14-70)	35-70	56.50±5.10	4.04 ± 0.36
Total Score (36-180)	91-177	150.38±13.19	Not applicable

Max: maximum; Min: minimum; SD: Standard Deviation.

Comparisons of students' awareness based on different variables revealed a significant difference according to the year of education. Third- and fourth-year students reported significantly higher awareness of economic sustainability compared to first-year students ($p = 0.008$). Similarly, second-, third-, and fourth-year students had significantly higher levels of social sustainability awareness than first-year students ($p = 0.019$), and a similar trend was observed for total SDG awareness, with all upper-year students scoring higher than first-year students ($p = 0.005$). However, no significant differences were found between the groups in terms of environmental sustainability awareness ($p = 0.233$). Additionally, students who had previously heard about the SDGs and were aware of their relevance to occupational therapy demonstrated significantly higher awareness levels across all sustainability domains ($p < 0.001$). A detailed breakdown of SDG awareness by demographic and educational variables is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results on the comparison of Sustainable Development Goals awareness according to different variables.

Variables		Economic sustainability		Social sustainability		Environmental sustainability		Total Score	
		Median	Test	Median	Test	Median	Test	Median	Test
Gender	Female (n=132)	51	$p>0.05$	42	$p>0.05$	55	$p>0.05$	151	$p>0.05$
	Male (n=13)	53		44		58		155	
Year of Study	1st year (n=30)	50	$p=0.008$ 3rd>1 st 4th>1 st	40	$p=0.019$ 2nd>1 st 3rd>1 st 4th>1 st	55	$p=0.233$	146	$p=0.005$ 2nd>1 st 3rd>1 st 4th>1 st
	2nd year (n=35)	52		43		58		154	
	3rd year (n=51)	53		42		57		153	
	4th year (n=29)	55		43		58		157	
Place of Residence	Alone (n=12)	51	$p>0.05$	43	$p>0.05$	54	$p>0.05$	151	$p>0.05$
	With family (n=28)	55		44		57		156	
	In a dormitory (n=68)	52.50		42		56		152	
	With friends (n=37)	53		44		57		155	
Income	Income>expenses (7)	50	$p>0.05$	42	$p>0.05$	55	$p>0.05$	149	$p>0.05$
	Income=expenses (121)	53		44		58		155	
	Income<expenses (17)	53		44		59		152	
Have you heard of Sustainable Development Goals before?	Yes (114)	54	$p<0.001$	44	$p<0.001$	58	$p<0.001$	156	$p<0.001$
	No (31)	48		37		52		133	
Do you have any idea about the relationship between sustainable development goals and occupational therapy?	Yes (106)	54	$p<0.001$	45	$p<0.001$	59	$p<0.001$	157	$p<0.001$
	No (39)	49		36		52		136	

Mann-Whitney U test was used for two-group comparisons, and Kruskal-Wallis H test was used for multiple group comparison.

Discussion

This study examined undergraduate occupational therapy students' awareness of the SDGs and demonstrated three core findings. First, students reported a high overall level of SDG awareness, with the highest scores in the social sustainability domain, followed by environmental and economic sustainability. Second, SDG awareness differed by academic year, with upper-year students generally scoring higher than first-year students, particularly in total awareness as well as social and economic sustainability. Third, prior exposure to the SDGs (having heard about them and recognizing their relevance to occupational therapy) was associated with higher awareness across sustainability domains.

Findings in relation to previous literature

Occupational therapists are expected to promote goal-directed occupational engagement in order to support disadvantaged groups in adapting to environmental and climate-related changes (Rushford & Thomas, 2015; Yoo et al., 2025). Although the literature emphasizes that occupational therapy plays a critical role in sustainability, empirical evidence regarding how occupational therapy curricula are structured and how students' preparedness for sustainability is developed remains limited (Blaskowitz et al., 2021; Valderrama Núñez et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2025). In a study conducted with occupational therapy students in the United Kingdom, 94% of students reported concern about climate-related issues, 84% stated that sustainability is important in healthcare, yet only 18% felt adequately prepared in relation to sustainability (Murray et al., 2025). Similarly, curriculum evaluations conducted in the United States indicate that sustainability is not addressed in a consistent and systematic manner within occupational therapy education (Santos et al., 2025). In the present study, occupational therapy students were found to demonstrate a generally high level of SDG awareness, with the highest awareness concentrated in the domain of social sustainability. This finding is consistent with the conceptual overlap between occupational therapy and SDG priorities related to equity, inclusion, and well-being (Albuquerque & Farias, 2022; Hocking & Townsend, 2015). Although environmental and economic sustainability scores were also relatively high, they were lower compared to social sustainability. This is important, as environmental degradation and economic structures are increasingly recognized as key determinants of health, participation, and occupational opportunities. Climate change-related disasters, forced migration, water and food insecurity, and environmental exposures can directly restrict fundamental occupational domains such as self-care, education, work, and social participation (Drolet & Lafond, 2025; Smith et al., 2020; Turcotte & Drolet, 2022). This finding suggests that, alongside the profession's historical emphasis on social participation and justice, greater attention to ecological literacy and economic systems perspectives within educational processes may represent an important necessity (Hess & Rihtman, 2023; Pollard et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2025). To address this need, it may be recommended that sustainability—beyond its social dimension—be addressed within occupational therapy curricula through a more structured and integrative approach that also encompasses environmental and economic perspectives. Rather than being treated as elective or marginal content, these dimensions should be embedded longitudinally across coursework and fieldwork experiences. Integrating environmental themes into occupational science courses, community-based practice modules, and clinical reasoning

discussions may support students in recognizing the relationships between ecological systems and occupational participation.

The observed increase in SDG awareness across academic years—particularly in the domains of social and economic sustainability as well as in total awareness—suggests that students progressively develop sustainability-related knowledge and understanding throughout their education. This growth may reflect cumulative exposure to course content, community-based learning experiences, clinical placements, and processes of professional identity formation, all of which provide opportunities to engage more deeply with sustainability-related concepts in practice contexts. In contrast, the absence of a statistically significant difference in environmental sustainability awareness by academic year is a noteworthy finding. This may indicate that environmental content is not systematically and progressively scaffolded throughout the curriculum. If environmental themes are addressed in a fragmented or isolated manner rather than through a coherent and longitudinal learning trajectory, it is less likely that students' awareness will demonstrate a clear educational progression. Consistent with the literature, sustainability education may need to move beyond sporadic coverage and instead be intentionally integrated into occupational therapy reasoning, fieldwork experiences, and professional practice expectations (Drolet & Lafond, 2025; Turcotte & Drolet, 2022).

Finally, the strong association between prior familiarity with the SDGs and higher awareness across all domains has important educational implications. The findings suggest that even basic orientation and explicit conceptual framing can produce measurable differences in awareness levels. This supports the argument that sustainability is not merely a values-based orientation but also a teachable knowledge and competency domain that benefits from deliberate and structured curricular integration, rather than being left solely to implicit professional socialization (Santos et al., 2025; World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2018).

Strengths and limitations

This study contributes empirical evidence to a growing area of interest in occupational therapy education by quantifying SDG awareness across sustainability domains and examining differences according to academic year and exposure to the SDGs. Nevertheless, several limitations should be considered. The cross-sectional design captures awareness at a single point in time and does not allow for causal inferences; for example, higher awareness observed among upper-year students cannot be attributed solely to curriculum progression. Moreover, awareness levels may vary over time due to increasing awareness initiatives and the growing prominence of the SDGs as a global agenda. Therefore, up-to-date and repeated studies are recommended to identify current trends and possible temporal changes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the occupational therapy students included in this study demonstrated a generally high level of awareness of the SDGs, with the strongest awareness observed in the domain of social sustainability. Awareness levels differed according to academic year and were higher among students who had prior knowledge of the SDGs and their relevance to occupational therapy. However, comparatively lower scores in environmental

and economic sustainability, along with the absence of significant differences between academic years in environmental awareness, indicate the need for a more deliberate and systematic integration of these domains into the curriculum. Explicit and structured incorporation of sustainability into coursework and fieldwork, along with opportunities to link SDG concepts to occupational therapy practice, may better equip future occupational therapists to respond effectively to contemporary global challenges and to support equitable, resilient, and sustainable participation in everyday occupations.

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Author's contributions

Onur Altuntaş and Medine Nur Özata Değerli contributed jointly to the conception and design of the study, data collection and analysis, drafting of the manuscript, and critical review and revision of the text. All authors approved the final version of the text.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

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