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Youth Union work and Sustainable Development: Case study of the Summer Volunteer Program “Em Hoi Nhap”

Nguyen Thi Thuy Linh*, Phuong Hoang Yen, Le Thanh Thao, and Tran Ngoc Bao Chau

School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University, Viet Nam

*Corresponding author (thuylinh@ctu.edu.vn)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the importance of the Youth Union's efforts in encouraging the sustainable development of educational institutions, with a particular focus on the summer volunteer program “Em hoi nhap” involving students from the School of Foreign Languages. Qualitative research was conducted with nine participants who were program volunteers, using semi-structured interviews, to study the effects of The Youth Union activities on the formation of soft skills and social awareness, and students' ability to integrate into society. The research also evaluated the contributions of the Youth Union's work to sustainable development in the higher education environment in general and Can Tho University in particular.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development has emerged as a fundamental objective within modern education, emphasizing the need for institutions to not only impart knowledge but also to cultivate skills, attitudes, and social awareness that empower students to contribute positively to the long-term development of their communities (UNESCO, 2016; Quiroz-Niño & Murga-Menoyo, 2017; UNESCO, 2017; Rieckmann, 2018; Agbedahin, 2019; Chang et al., 2022). This holistic approach to education is crucial in addressing global challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality (UNESCO, 2017). However, the integration of sustainable development principles into higher education remains an ongoing challenge (Milutinović & Nikolić 2014; Faham et al., 2017; Abo-Khalil, 2024).

In this context, the role of extracurricular activities, particularly those organized by the Youth Union, is increasingly recognized as pivotal in promoting sustainable values among students

(Youth Union, 2018; Nguyen, 2021). The Youth Union, an influential organization within Vietnamese universities, offers a dynamic environment where students can develop essential soft skills, social awareness, and a sense of civic responsibility through participation in various activities (Ta, 2014; Ly, 2023). These activities are designed not only to enhance students' academic experience but also to prepare them for future roles as responsible citizens who are aware of and actively engaged in addressing societal and environmental issues (Phuong, 2023; Pham, 2024; Tran, 2024). In fact, students who actively participate in the Youth Union activities tend to demonstrate higher levels of maturity and social awareness than students who participate less (Nguyen, 2015; Chang et al., 2022; Tran, 2024).

One of the most prominent initiatives of the Youth Union is the “Em hoi nhap” (“EHN”) program, an annual summer volunteer activity organized by the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University. The program is designed to offer meaningful and productive summer activities for

secondary school students in the local area. Volunteers participating in this initiative will assist with free English and French language instruction and review sessions for the students. Additionally, volunteers will facilitate a range of activities, including quizzes, cultural exchanges, group exercises, singing, dancing, public speaking, and cartoon dubbing (Department of Information and Communications, 2023; Pham, 2024). This program provides students with opportunities to engage in community service, improve their communication and integration skills, and contribute to the sustainable development of local communities (Pham, 2024). Despite the recognized benefits, there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific impact of such programs on student development and their role in promoting sustainable development within educational settings.

This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing and evaluating the role of the Youth Union in promoting sustainable development, using the “*Em hoi nhap*” program as a case study. Through qualitative data collected from interviews with students who have participated in this program as volunteers, the research aims to clarify how Youth Union activities contribute to the formation of soft skills, social awareness, and integration abilities. Additionally, the study will identify potential areas for improvement, providing recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Youth Union activities in promoting sustainable development in the future.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. *How do the Youth Union activities, especially the summer volunteer program “Em hoi nhap”, influence the development of soft skills and social awareness of students of the School of Foreign Languages?*
2. *How do students evaluate the role of the volunteer program “Em hoi nhap” in improving their integration ability into society?*

By addressing these questions, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of extracurricular activities in higher education and their potential to advance sustainable development goals.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Theory of Sustainable Development

The current study adapts the theory of sustainable development to investigate the impact of the “EHN” summer volunteer program on students’ soft skills, social awareness, and integration into society.

Originating from the Brundtland Report (also called *Our Common Future*) in 1987, the theory of sustainable development emphasizes the need to balance economic development, environmental protection and social development, to ensure that future generations can meet their needs without compromising the ability of subsequent generations (Brundtland, 1987; UNESCO, 2007; UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2016; UNESCO, 2018; When applied to the educational context, this theory asserts that student training should not only focus on imparting professional knowledge but also aim to develop them into responsible citizens, conscious of environmental protection and capable of making positive contributions to the community (UNESCO, 2018).

In education, sustainable development theory promotes the integration of sustainable values and practices into the curriculum and extracurricular activities, aiming at the comprehensive development of students (Cebrián et al., 2020; Fredriksson et al., 2020; Winstone et al., 2022). In fact, education for sustainable development needs to include raising awareness of environmental issues, developing problem-solving skills, and building a sense of social responsibility in students (Garrecht et al., 2018; Glavič, 2020). This training helps students better understand the connection between their actions and their impact on society and the environment (Khataybeh et al., 2010; Fujii et al., 2022).

From the above theoretical foundations, the theory of sustainable development in the university’s educational context, (adapted from Cebrián et al., 2020; Fredriksson et al., 2020; Winstone et al., 2022), is summarized through the following diagram:

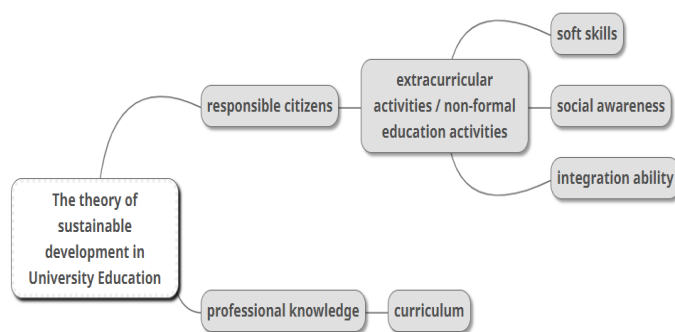


Figure 1. The Theory of Sustainable Development in University Education

Thus, through the theoretical basis of sustainable development in the educational context, the principles and values of sustainable development are integrated into various aspects of education. Through the higher education environment and volunteer activities, which are a part of extracurricular activities, students' soft skills, social awareness, and integration capabilities are facilitated and improved (Lau et al., 2013; Chapman et al., 2023; Ribeiro et al, 2023). In this context, the “EHN” summer volunteer program can be seen as an extracurricular activity that embodies the principles of sustainable

development by promoting social development alongside educational goals (Pham, 2024).

2.2. Experiential Learning Theory

David Kolb's experiential learning theory is an educational model that emphasizes the importance of practical experience in the learning process and personal development (Kolb, 1984). According to Kolb (1984), learning is a continuous process in which learners develop knowledge through experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and experimenting. Kolb's model includes four main stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

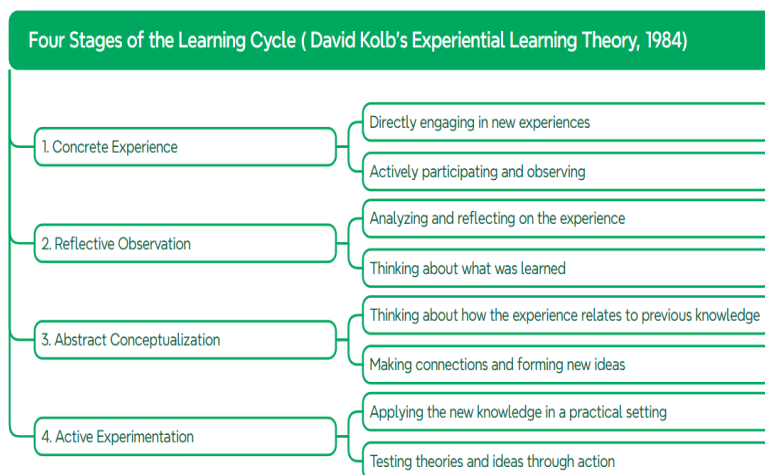


Figure 2. Four stages of the Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984)

By applying this theory to the activities of the Youth Union, students can gain valuable learning opportunities and develop critical thinking abilities through the practical experiences these

activities provide. In the concrete experience stage, students engage in volunteer work, community projects, or other social programs organized by the Youth Union. These activities not only offer practical experiences but also present

real-life situations and specific challenges for students to confront (Nguyen, 2015; Tran (2024) Following their participation, students enter the observation and reflection stage, where they critically analyze the events, assess what they have learned, and reflect on the difficulties encountered. In the subsequent abstract conceptualization stage, students apply the theories, principles, and knowledge they have acquired to better understand and explain their real-life experiences (Tran, 2024). Finally, during the active experimentation stage, students utilize their learning to address new situations, create innovative solutions, and enhance the outcomes of future activities (Nguyen, 2015; Nguyen, 2021).

Kolb's experiential learning theory elucidates how Youth Union activities serve not merely as experiences but as valuable opportunities for students to develop essential skills, enhance their sense of responsibility, and cultivate leadership capacities. These experiences, therefore, contribute to a robust foundation for both personal and social development (Nguyen, 2015; Youth Union, 2018; Buckley & Lee, 2021)

3. METHODS

3.1. Participants

The interviewees in this study included 09 volunteers who were second and third-year students of the School of Foreign Languages. These students were selected to participate in the "EHN" summer volunteer program as volunteers through a thorough interview process, in which they presented their thoughts, attitudes, reasons for participating, as well as their strengths.

The selection of interviewees was carried out using the convenience sampling method because of the limited time. Nine students volunteered (VOL) varied in major, year of study, and gender. This diverse group provided a range of perspectives for the study on the impact of the "EHN" summer volunteer program. Before participating in the interview, the volunteers were informed in detail about the purpose of the interview and related aspects. All participants were voluntary and agreed to participate after clearly understanding their rights and responsibilities during the research process. To ensure privacy, all personal information of respondents was kept confidential and used for research purposes only.

Table 1. Characteristics of interviewees

Volunteers	Major	Year	Gender
VOL1	English	2	Female
VOL2	English	3	Female
VOL3	French	2	Male
VOL4	French	2	Female
VOL5	English	3	Female
VOL6	English	2	Male
VOL7	English	3	Female
VOL8	English	2	Female
VOL9	English	2	Male

3.2. Data collection

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to collect and analyze data regarding the role of the Youth Union in promoting sustainable development within educational institutions, specifically through the "EHN" summer volunteer program organized by students from the School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, as this approach is particularly effective for exploring respondents' attitudes and thoughts on complex and potentially sensitive topics, allowing researchers to probe further for additional information and clarification of responses (Barriball & While, 1994). The interview questions were prepared and piloted. After that, interviews were conducted, and the answers were carefully noted down in a notebook. The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent during the conversation, allowing the researcher to review them later. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes, focusing on the impact of Youth Union activities on the development of students' soft skills, social awareness, and integration ability. Additionally, the study evaluated the contribution of Youth Union activities to sustainable development within the higher education environment.

3.3. Data analysis

Qualitative data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher applied the qualitative data analysis method proposed by Flick (2018) in the current investigation. By identifying the main themes or patterns in the data, the researcher proceeded to classify. The collected data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method to clarify the prominent themes and patterns related to the impact of the Youth Union activities in the research context. First, to familiarize with the data, the researchers re-read

the data to find meaning and determine which part of the data had great value. Then, the researcher tried to organize and retrieve the data by labeling and assigning codes. Next, the researcher identified the main themes, the importance of the responses, the relationships between themes or data sets, and attempted to extrapolate explanations from the information. Finally, the data were interpreted and presented according to each research question and research content, specifically: (1) The impact of The Youth Union activities on the development of soft skills and social awareness of students; (2) The impact of The Summer Volunteer Program "EHN" in improving students' integration ability into society

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

Research Question 1: How do the Youth Union activities, especially the summer volunteer program "Em hoi nhap", influence the development of soft skills and social awareness of students of the School of Foreign Languages?

The results of the interviews indicate that Youth Union activities, particularly the "EHN" summer volunteer program, have had a significant and positive impact on the development of soft skills and social awareness among students of School of Foreign Languages. Many interviewed students (6/9 students) confirmed that their participation in these activities enhanced essential skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and time management. These skills were cultivated not only through practical engagement but also through the process of navigating diverse and complex challenges encountered in volunteer projects.

"My leadership skills have improved a lot after I was assigned to manage a small group in volunteer activities. I have learned how to listen to others' opinions and make effective decisions." (VOL3)

"I have learned that patience and the ability to listen are important skills when working with people. This is not only useful in volunteering but also in everyday life." (VOL7)

In addition, students' social awareness has also been significantly improved. Through direct participation in community activities and interactions with different target groups, students have had the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of current social issues. They are more aware of their responsibilities to the

community and the environment, thereby developing a positive attitude and willingness to contribute to society.

"Participating in the volunteer program has helped me better understand my responsibilities to the community. I learned to care about the people around me and became more aware of the social issues we are facing. Many students were interested in the experiments we conducted, because in reality they do not have the conditions to do such fun experiments." (VOL1)

Another volunteer added:

"This program has broadened my vision of what a student can do for society. I realized that everyone can contribute and make a positive change." (VOL2)

Participants also emphasized that the real-life experiences from the "EHN" activity helped them realize the importance of social cohesion and how soft skills can be applied to create positive impacts in real-life situations. This shows that the Youth Union not only plays a role in organizing extracurricular activities, but also serves as an important foundation for students' comprehensive personal and social development.

"I used to think that I could not work well under pressure, but through this activity, I realized that I can overcome many challenges if I have determination." (VOL9)

"When participating in the 'EHN' activity, I had to face many unexpected situations. This has greatly improved my ability to improvise and problem-solving skills. I feel more confident in communicating and working in groups." (VOL5)

Research Question 2: How do students evaluate the role of the volunteer program "Em hoi nhap" in improving their integration ability into society?

The interview results showed that students participating in the "EHN" volunteer activity positively evaluated the role of this program in improving their social integration. Most students emphasized that this experience not only helped them understand society better but also developed the skills necessary to integrate better into a diverse community.

"In the past, I often felt shy when participating in social activities, but thanks to 'EHN', I have gradually overcome that fear. I feel more

confident in communicating and participating in common activities.” (VOL6)

“I feel that my social integration ability has improved significantly. I am no longer shy when meeting new people and find myself more flexible in adapting to different situations.”(VOL8)

“By participating in “EHN”, I have learned how to work with many people from different backgrounds. During the campaign, our Organizing Committee communicated and provided information via Zalo, text messages, Facebook, email, and even phone calls when there were situations that needed to be handled immediately. This helped me better understand the value of diversity and the importance of mutual respect in society.”(VOL9)

These responses show that “EHN” is not only a volunteer activity but also an opportunity for students to develop their social integration skills, learn how to adapt and contribute positively to a diverse community. The program has helped students build social relationships, develop awareness of cultural diversity, and promote a spirit of integration in a diverse social environment.

Another volunteer expressed:

“This program has broadened my vision of what a student can do for society. I realized that everyone can contribute and make a positive change.”(VOL2)

Participants also emphasized that the real-life experiences from the “EHN” activity helped them realize the importance of social cohesion and how soft skills can be applied to create positive impacts in real-life situations. This shows that the Youth Union not only plays a role in organizing extracurricular activities, but also serves as an important foundation for students’ comprehensive personal and social development as well.

“I used to think that I could not work well under pressure, but through this activity, I realized that I can overcome many challenges if I have determination.”(VOL9)

“When participating in the “EHN” activity, I had to face many unexpected situations. This has greatly improved my ability to improvise and problem-solving skills. I feel more confident in communicating and working in groups.” (VOL5)

4.2. Discussion

The results of this study confirm and expand on previous research on the role of Youth Union activities in education. Specifically, previous studies such as Ta et al. (2014) and Ly (2020) have demonstrated that The Youth Union activities played an important role in developing students' soft skills and social awareness. This study adds to the existing literature that the summer volunteer activity “EHN” has a significant impact on both aspects, not only through imparting skills but also through creating practical experiences that help students develop more comprehensively. Besides, this study strongly emphasized students' ability to integrate socially, showing that The Youth Union activities can enhance awareness and positive attitudes toward participation and integration in the community.

4.2.1. The impact of The Youth Union activities on the development of soft skills and social awareness of students

From the perspective of the Theory of Sustainable Development in Education (Cebrián et al., 2020; Fredriksson et al., 2020; Winstone et al., 2022), Youth Union activities, particularly the “EHN” summer volunteer program, have established an educational environment that extends beyond the mere transmission of professional knowledge, aiming to cultivate students as responsible citizens. Firstly, the development of soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and social awareness, through these activities, proves to be invaluable not only in an academic setting but also in advancing the sustainable development of the broader community, aligning with the theory’s emphasis on comprehensive development (Kolb, 1984; Seow & Pan, 2014; Winstone et al., 2022). Students who participated in these programs reported increased confidence, improved problem-solving abilities, which strengthened soft skills (Lau et al., 2013; Ta, 2014; Nguyen, 2021; Chang et al., 2022; Tran, 2024). These experiences, in turn, prepare them to contribute meaningfully to sustainable development efforts in the future (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Kosarikov & Davydova, 2022). Secondly, this approach aligns with the theory of incorporating of sustainable development theory into educational practices, which is intended not only to equip students with knowledge and skills but also to foster the development of systems thinking and critical thinking abilities (UN, 2015; Williamson et al.,

2017; Baena-Morales et al., 2023). This approach enables students to identify complex issues and pursue innovative and sustainable solutions to global challenges (UN, 2015). In this context, the “EHN” summer volunteer program also supports the sustainable development goal of fostering a sense of social responsibility. By engaging in volunteer work, students learn to contribute positively to their communities (Nguyen, 2021; Pham, 2024), reinforcing the theory's assertion that education should produce responsible citizens capable of making meaningful contributions to society (UNESCO, 2016; UNESCO, 2017).

From David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), participation in real-life activities such as the “EHN” program offers students valuable opportunities to engage in the full cycle of learning: experiencing, reflecting, generalizing, and applying their knowledge to real-world situations. This approach enables students to go beyond theoretical learning, allowing them to develop essential skills through direct experience, thereby reinforcing and expanding their knowledge while cultivating the qualities necessary for societal success (Buckley & Lee, 2021). Responses from interviewees students indicate that they have acquired important skills by confronting and resolving real-life challenges within the community, a process that closely aligns with the stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. First and foremost, the “EHN” program engages students in volunteer work and community initiatives, offering hands-on experiences to build soft skills like communication, teamwork, and leadership. These activities expose students to real-world settings in which they must engage with others, solve problems, and manage challenges, thereby increasing their social consciousness and understanding of community needs, as well as develop compassion. (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Lau et al., 2013; Williamson et al., 2017; Buckley & Lee, 2021) Following these activities, students proceed to the observation and reflection stage, where they critically assess their experiences. This reflection enables students to evaluate what they've learned, identify the challenges they encountered, and comprehend how their actions affected others (Cortellazzo et al., 2021; Cojocaru, 2023). This reflective process is critical for internalizing lessons learned and gaining a better knowledge of societal concerns.

During the abstract conceptualization stage, students start to apply the knowledge and principles they have acquired in their academic studies to explain and make sense of the challenges and successes they encountered during the volunteer program (Chang et al., 2022). Last but not least, during the active experimentation stage, students use the insights gained from their experiences and reflections to approach new challenges. Besides, through the journey of experiential learning, students have the opportunity to reflect on societal issues and the needs of the community, particularly in this case, the needs of secondary school students (Lau et al., 2013; Williamson et al., 2017; Buckley & Lee, 2021). Through this reflection, volunteers can develop their orientation for future contributions (Ta, 2014; Chang et al., 2022).

4.2.2. The impact of the Summer Volunteer Program "Em Hoi Nhap" in improving students' integration ability into society

Through the perspective of the Sustainable Development Theory in Education, students realized that the “EHN” volunteer activity was not only an opportunity to apply the skills and knowledge they had learned, but also an important part in preparing them to become responsible global citizens. The program's focus on community engagement and social responsibility helps students develop a deeper understanding of societal structures and issues, which is crucial for their ability to integrate effectively into broader social contexts. Social integration was developed through participating in diverse activities and collaborating with community members, helping students realize the importance of maintaining sustainable values in all aspects of life (Kosarikov & Davydova, 2022). Students became more aware of the relationship between individuals and society and the value in improving their social integration abilities, thereby enhancing their ability to integrate and contribute to the community (Nguyen, 2021). The program's involvement in social integration also contributes to the theory's overarching goal of developing sustainable communities. The program helps students gain the essential skills and knowledge to integrate into society, resulting in a more socially cohesive and sustainable community (Pham, 2024). Therefore, this is consistent with the theory's notion that education should not only provide information but also train students to be active, involved citizens

who contribute to the sustainability of their communities (UNESCO, 2017).

Kolb's theory also sheds light on how students evaluate the role of the "EHN" program in enhancing their ability to integrate into society. Through the lens of Experiential Learning Theory, activities such as "EHN" helped students experience the reality of cultural and social diversity, thereby developing the skills to adapt and connect with different social groups (Cortellazzo et al., 2021). Participating in these activities allowed students to learn not only from their own experiences but also from the experiences of others (Joseph & Carolissen, 2022), enriching their understanding and critical thinking skills (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Williamson et al., 2017). Students reported that they felt more flexible, more adaptable, and more willing to engage in different communities, which is very much in line with the principles of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984).

5. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

Examining the research results through the lenses of Sustainable Development Theory and Experiential Learning Theory has highlighted the role of the Youth Union in promoting the comprehensive development of students, thereby contributing to the sustainable development of society. Through practical activities that "EHN" program does as an example, students not only develop necessary skills but also become more responsible for the community, which is important for their long-term success and the sustainable development of society.

The findings from this study have important implications for improving the Youth Union and promoting sustainable development in education. The realization that volunteers' activities such as "EHN" can develop soft skills, raise social

awareness, and promote students' ability to integrate into society suggests that these activities should not only be maintained but also need to be expanded and improved further. This is especially important in the context of modern education, where sustainable development and inclusive education are becoming the main goals. These results also show that the Youth Union can play an important role in shaping responsible citizens who are willing to contribute positively to the community. In this regard, the Youth Union can promote youth empowerment by helping young students build their abilities, confidence, and access to support, enabling them to take charge of their lives and contribute positively to society (Díaz-Iso et al., 2019).

5.2. Limitations and recommendations

While the study has yielded valuable insights, three limitations must be acknowledged. First of all, the interview sample consisted of only 09 students from the School of Foreign Languages, which may not be fully representative of the broader student population, which may affect the generalizability of the study's findings. Second, using interviews as the sole data collection method presents challenges in ensuring the accuracy and honesty of student responses, as there is potential for response bias. Furthermore, the study's focus on a single activity, the "EHN" program, may not capture the full scope of the Youth Union activities among students at Can Tho University. Future research should consider expanding the sample size and diversity, as well as incorporating multiple data collection methods, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of The Youth Union activities in university education, especially for the Goals of Education for Sustainable Development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest related to this publication.

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