

Youth Organizations' Promotion of Education for Sustainable Development Competencies: A Case Study

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Abstract:

This paper details how two popular non-formal actors at Vietnamese universities, the Youth Union and youth environmental clubs, promote engagement by student teachers in sustainability. Though their activities were found to have enhanced students' awareness of environment and sustainability, there remain two categories of constraints, internal and external, preventing students from proactive performance in sustainability. Based on an analysis of each organization's strength and weaknesses, and on students' demands, the authors suggest four steps to improve sustainability planning, including establishment of a hub of sustainability promotion, fostering sustainability leadership, conceiving a systematic action plan, and creating a communication network to promote students' active efforts towards sustainability

Keywords: youth, sustainability-linked activities, education for sustainable development

1. Background

1.1 Youth sustainability-linked activities (SLAs)

Nearly half of the world's population is under 25 (CIA World Factbook, 2014) and this age group is considered to be key stakeholders promoting environmental protection and sustainability. Many recent programs and policies have focused on young people because of their roles in long-term social change and their active performance in environmental conservation (Wray-Lake, Flanagan, & Osgood., 2010). Empowering and mobilizing youth is one of the five priority action areas of the Global Action Program (GAP), a follow-up to the DESD of UNESCO (Buckler & Creech, 2014; Leicht, Julia, & Won, 2018). Enhancement of youth sustainability literacy (Ariffin & Ng, 2020; Maus, 2019) is considered as the first step of such empowerment.

Under the umbrella of sustainability, young adults have been involved in diverse fields such as climate change and disaster risk reduction, environmental conservation, socio-economic development and cultural preservation. Popular forms of youth sustainability-linked actions include the following (Hall, 2010; Schusler, Krasny, Peters, & Decker, 2009):

- Improving the physical environment (e.g., restoring natural habitats)
- Engaging in community development towards sustainability (e.g., promoting composting, organic farms, assisting communities during disasters)
- Enhancing public awareness on sustainability themes and promote sustainably responsible behaviors (e.g., organizing community festivals and campaigns with such themes as environmental problems, food consumption, saving energy)

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- Training change agents or leaders to transform society (e.g., training workshops, camping, forums)

The development of youth forums and platforms and assistance from funders and sponsor organizations have resulted in expanding youth networks at the national, regional and global scale and the foundation of youth-led non-governmental organizations since the last decade. The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) has estimated that youth worldwide are nearly two times more networked than the global population as a whole (Lam, Blakeley, Loni, & Huang, 2018). The 1st World Youth Sustainability Summit in Berlin is a typical example. Under the theme “Youth and Sustainability in Everyday Life – Challenge, Rethink and Revive Global Ways of Living”, this event attracted more than 160 youths from over 30 countries worldwide to discuss with each other and to issue a declaration of commitment by young people to sustainable development and an appeal to decision makers (Youthinkgreen, 2013).

Young people will be inheriting the planet as the workforce transitions over the next few decades yet the state of the environment and climate will have a substantial impact on the livelihoods of youth globally (Lam et al., 2018). It is worth noting that along with influential youth groups, the emergence of young leaders like Greta Thunberg is attracting much popular attention worldwide to urgent global issues such as climate change and plastic waste.

Changing youth behavior and sustaining their commitment towards sustainability are complex efforts. Applying a narrative analysis of three typical Swedish young adults who are active in sustainability, Almers (2013, 116) identified six common themes that promote action competence for sustainability: “emotions creating a desire to change conditions; a core of values and contrasting perspectives; action permeation; feeling confident and competent with what one can contribute; trust and faith from and in adults; and outsidership and belongingness”. Working with youth is a challenging task that requires patience, intellectual capital (ideas and skills), financial capital, social capital and goods transfer (ICYE European Association, 2009). In the education for sustainable development (ESD) field, youth should be engaged throughout the whole process of projects or programs to perceive sustainability problems, transform behavior and commit themselves to sustainability.

The recent accelerating expansion of youth-led organizations (YLOs) is allowing youth to be engaged in sustainability-linked programs. YLOs transform youth participation from spontaneous groups (e.g., eco clubs) to well-structured organizations. YLOs are fully led, managed and coordinated by young people (Advocatesforyouth, n.d.), though in many cases they work under the patronage of different actors such as university educators, researchers, NGO leaders and funders. Running an YLO empowers youths to be creative in conceiving sustainability efforts, which can be regarded as a type of experiential learning. Indeed, “through participation, youth can learn civic concepts (such as decision-making structures) and skills (such as communicating and negotiating) that increase their ability to influence public affairs” (Schusler and Krasny 2008, 272). In addition, leaders of YLOs typically transfer ownership to new leaders after a certain time (often before turning 30), so that youth participation can continue. Recent publications have sought to suggest apposite characteristics of SL by analyzing training course

operation or interviewing outstanding sustainability leaders. According to Whilst, Shriberg and Macdonald (2013) key sustainability leadership skills include:

- Communications skills: the ability to communicate effectively on thorny issues to diverse stakeholders
- Systems intelligence: the capacity to work across multiple domains and analyze complex problems
- Self-assessment and self-awareness: people who can both reflect on themselves and tell their own story
- Balance of strong sense of confidence with a strong sense of humility
- Ability to be a problem-solver

The determination of key SL competencies gives worldwide educators and educational policy makers overarching directions to adjust their training to foster change agents in sustainability. Although there have been some frameworks and models as noted above to provide better understanding of the characteristics of sustainability leaders in general, there is little published research on the specific topic of youth leadership in sustainability, particularly in relation to either age range or occupation. Thus, this research was developed to understand the existing participation of student teachers in SLAs and the reflection of such activities on their sustainability competence, then to propose some solutions to enhance their engagement in such activities.

1.2 Environmental youth groups in Vietnam

In order to learn more about youth participation in sustainability and their leadership competencies, the author conducted a case study at The University of Danang – University of Science and Education (DUEd) focusing on environmental youth groups. An overview follows of the two most popular types of environmental youth groups, the Youth Union and environmental clubs.

a. Youth Union

The Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, which was founded in March 1931 with the original name of Vietnam Labour Youth Union, is an official mass organization of Vietnamese youth (Youth Union, 2007). Led by the Communist Party, the Youth Union (the informal name of Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union) is the largest social political organization of Vietnamese young people. According to the latest report of the Youth Union (YU), its members comprise around 28% of all Vietnamese youth from age 15 to 30 (Youth Union, 2015).

Like other social-political organizations in Vietnam such as the Women's Union and the Farmers' Union, the Youth Union is a multi-tiered organization with four administrative levels: national/central, provincial, district, and ward/commune. YU exists as a parallel structure in the educational system and at workplaces (Valentin, 2007; Youth Union, 2012), as shown in Fig 1. YU leaders at all levels are nominated and elected by its members.

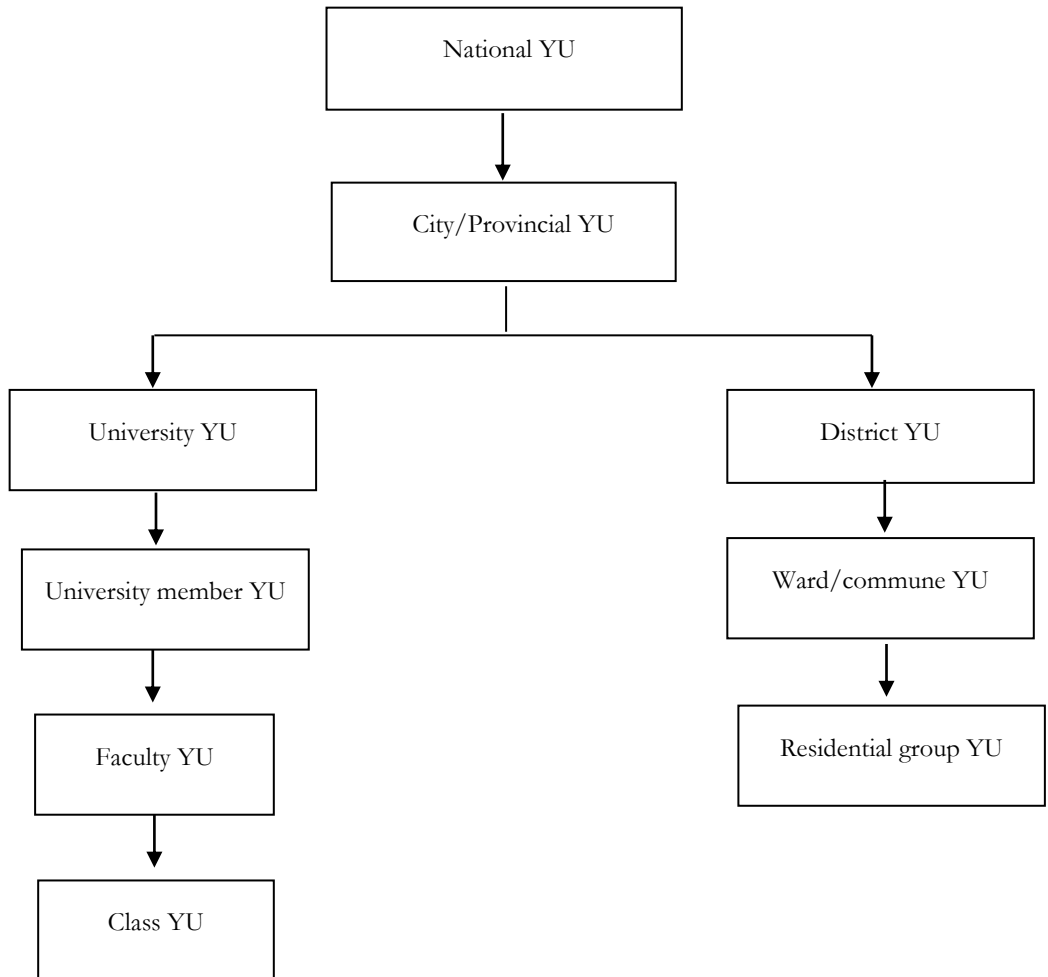


Figure 1. Administrative levels of YU

The Youth Union recruits those aged from 15 to 30 who are “progressive, striving for the Party’s ideal and goal of national independence and socialism, for the cause of rich people, strong country, just, democratic and civilized society” (Youth Union, 2012). Most university students in Vietnam are members of the YU (Valentin, 2007). As a preponderance of the nation’s active young citizens are members, YU bears a major role in promoting youth roles in national development. Thus, the YU activities focus on three tasks:

- Educate to enhance the young generation’s politics, ideology and lifestyles under the leadership of the Communist party;
- Disseminate information about governmental laws, regulations, policies and strategies to youth and;
- Empower youths to contribute in national development in all dimensions (society, economy, culture, environment)

YU promotes its members' participation by either rewarding certificates and scholarships or nominating them to become members of the Communist Party. This activity, in turn, may increase job opportunities for young graduates, particularly for government positions or in national enterprises. Under the context of globalization, some researchers have suggested that the YU should reform its current operations by transforming training content, cultivating new YU leaders, allowing more latitude for criticizing government policies and increasing YU's autonomy under the orientation of the Communist Party (Ngo, 2016).

In fact, it is gradually replacing its traditional strong focus on political issues by turning more attention to responses to global challenges. Of those new areas, environmental protection and climate change responses are important foci of YU activities nationwide (YU 2013). The final report of YU's activities in 2015 recounted a variety of youth environmental actions, including planting trees, enhancing youth and public awareness of environment and climate change, promoting youth innovation in saving energy, mainstreaming environmentally friendly offices and organizing clean-up days (Green Sunday). The broad scale of these activities implies continuity of youth participation in sustainability, particularly at higher education institutions. It is worth noting that taking part in YU environmental activities benefits students by allowing them to increase their non-academic score, part of the overall university assessment which is required for graduation.

b. Environmental/sustainability related groups

Since the enactment of the first environmental law in 1993 and the approval of Vietnam Agenda 21 by the Prime Minister in 2004, there has been a growing effort nationwide to improve public environmental awareness, particularly among young generations. That has engendered the formation of many environmental groups such as international and local NGOs, clubs and other civic groups. Thus besides environmental activities led by Youth Union, young people in Vietnam are able to join many different environmental groups, of which youth-led voluntary eco/environmental clubs are the most popular.

As with other YLOs around the world, Vietnamese youth environmental clubs faces fund-raising, leadership and long-term continuity problems. Although there is scant literature on youth participation in environment or sustainability in Vietnam a search of documents, reports and webpages reveals two models of successful environmental groups (Go Green Club, 2014; Nguyen, 2013; The Asia Foundation, 2011; The he xanh, 2016; Withnall, 2014). The first model is that of clubs managed under the sponsorship of international/domestic NGOs or large enterprises (e.g., Challengetochange, Greenhub, Toyota) or being mentored by local NGOs (Fig.2). The second type consists of environmental clubs founded by university students and supported by university staff – either YU or faculty members.

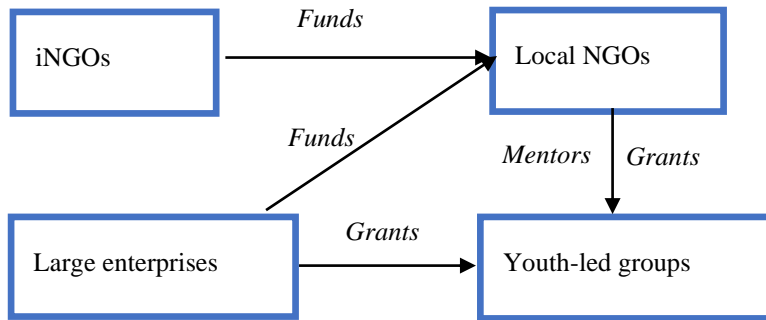


Figure 2. Model of successful youth-led environmental groups

The Asia Foundation, a nonprofit international development organization, has collaborated with two Vietnamese NGOs, Live and Learn and the Centre for Education and Development, to train approximately 500 young environmental activists across Vietnam, and they have awarded 18 grants for teams of these youths to implement sustainability-linked projects (Nguyen, 2013). In terms of large enterprises, Toyota Motors Vietnam (TMV) is one of the most active sponsors of young environmentalists. During the first three years after the establishment in 2008 of the TMV-sponsored Go Green Club (GGC) in Hanoi, TMV involved 3000 voluntary members in the three biggest cities in the country (Hanoi, Danang and Ho Chi Minh). According to TMV, each member of GGC serves as a nucleus to promote the activities of environmental protection and raise public awareness (Toyota Motors Vietnam 2016). GGC has organized several creative environmental projects that reach Vietnamese young people, such as Green Habitation, an activity that took place over a 45-day period at schools for the disabled. Consisting of various games, training workshops and art performances, this event enabled GGC members to educate the students to change their daily habits to conserve nature and mitigate climate change impacts. In order to recruit more members and share experiences with other young activists, a website was created (<http://gogreen.com.vn/>) by its members. Similar environmental and sustainable development youth groups that are well-known across the country include the Be Change Agents, 350 Vietnam and the Delta Youth Alliance.

Environmental clubs (ECs) are also extremely active at higher education institutions. Universities feature innumerable student clubs and circles among students being educated in such disciplines as technology, international relations, agriculture, economy, education and foreign languages. Enhancing community awareness of sustainability-related problems, building members' skills and fund raising are the most common activities of such groups.

The proliferation of ECs has led to the foundation of a national youth environmental network called *Thế Hệ Xanh Việt Nam* (the Vietnam Green Generation Network) in 2008. Currently, The He Xanh is the sole network of ECs nationwide under the support of the domestic NGO Live and Learn. The network aims to empower leadership of young leaders of ECs by sharing knowledge of sustainability, youth initiatives and fund-raising opportunities, and operating a year-long training program. Moreover, The He

Xanh can connect Vietnamese YLOs with others worldwide and promote participation by Vietnamese youth leaders in international youth forums for sustainability.

Vietnamese are becoming increasingly concerned about the impacts of climate change and environmental problems arising from rapid industrialization during recent decades. Active participation of youth in awareness-raising campaigns, clean-up efforts and consumption reduction promotion is a prerequisite to sustainability. Despite the existing challenges, young ECs in a developing country like Vietnam play a vital role to mainstreaming sustainability among youths.

2. Methodology

2.1 Questionnaire survey

In August and November 2016, the author conducted a questionnaire survey, utilizing both multiple choice and open-ended questions, to understand student teachers' participation in youth-led sustainability-linked activities at DUEd. Student teachers were selected as respondents because in their future careers they are expected to integrate sustainability topics in their pedagogy or create place-based sustainability educational content for their students. A total of 143 student teachers from the faculties of Geography and Biology and Environmental Science were surveyed.

2.2 Focus group discussion

After the analysis of the questionnaires, a focus group of 12 students was formed to discuss two issues: (i) Student teachers' participation in SLAs and; (ii) Solutions to promote SLAs at the university

2.3 Key personal interviews

Two leaders of the YU and two leaders of the student clubs were interviewed. The results from student questionnaire survey and focus group discussions were shared with these interviewees to clarify the collected information and comprehensively explore the organization of their SLAs. This interview also allowed the authors to explore opportunities to promote collaboration between the YU and student clubs to involve student teachers in SLAs.

2.4 Data analysis

Data from the questionnaire surveys were statistically analyzed, using SPSS, to identify: (i) the proportion of sustainability activities in student extra-curricular activities, (ii) types of activities by YU and student clubs, (iii) how the activities influence student teacher's performances in sustainability and, (iv) their demand related to sustainability activities.

Data from the qualitative methods (open ended questions and focus group discussion) were analyzed mainly to understand the strengths and weakness of YLOs in implementation of SLAs, then to propose solutions to promote student teachers' involvement in SLAs.

3. Results

3.1 YU-led sustainability activities

a. Student teachers' participation in YU-led sustainability activities

With 98% of DUEd students as members, YU is the largest and most influential organization for extracurricular activities of student teachers. According to two DUEd YU staff interviewees, environment/sustainability-related topics have become a compulsory part of YU activities since 2013 and such activities account for 10-15% of YU activities annually. The YU interviewees identified four successful sustainable development programs that have been held on a continuing basis among undergraduate students:

- Green Summer (Mua he xanh) is an annual campaign that encourages students to stay in rural communities in remote areas of Vietnam during their summer vacation. The campaign, lasting from two to four weeks, is expected to provide students with unique volunteer experiences assisting communities with their knowledge and enthusiasm. Depending on students' disciplines, they may help local people to construct or reinforce infrastructure (bridges, schools, houses), offer free health check-ups, or consult on agriculture. In the case of DUEd student teachers, they often organize on-site classes to teach children basic knowledge and enhance their awareness of the environment. The campaign has highlighted the endeavor of youths and the strong connection between HEIs and local communities.
- Tree Planting (Trong cay) was first carried out by Vietnam's founding president Ho Chi Minh. The campaign aims to involve students in not only planting trees but also tending and conserving the trees on campus and surrounding areas.
- Green Sunday (Chu nhat xanh) is the most frequent and popular clean-up campaign conducted by YU. The campaign calls for youth participation to remove and dispose of drawings, banners, and fliers on roads, pavements and public places, to collect trash and to enhance public awareness of environmental protection.
- Protect Hometown Rivers (Bao ve dong song que huong) was implemented due to the dramatic rise in water pollution across Vietnam. The program aims to raise awareness of youths, especially among college students, in order to keep the water bodies near their living places clean. The DUEd YU leader explained that under this program, students frequently collect trash from rivers and riverbanks or urban lakes. As a notable example of their activities, some DUEd students applied a wetland restoration approach to purify water at an urban lake in Danang City.

YU is able to mobilize large numbers of students to participate in special events. For Environmental Day, for instance, approximately 500 students join a bicycle tour to call upon people to conserve the environment.

The investigation of 143 student teachers indicates that among the activities mentioned above, participation in litter campaigns for Green Sunday is the most common and frequent activity organized by DUEd YU. Indeed, 93% of the respondents have participated in such litter campaigns, although 88% of the students claimed that their participation was involuntary. Students in a focus group stated that most of the clean-up activities organized by YU were quite repetitive and superficial. However, when asked

about Green Summer campaign, 54% of the interviewed students revealed that they had not been able to take part in Green Summer campaigns yet they really wished that they could join.

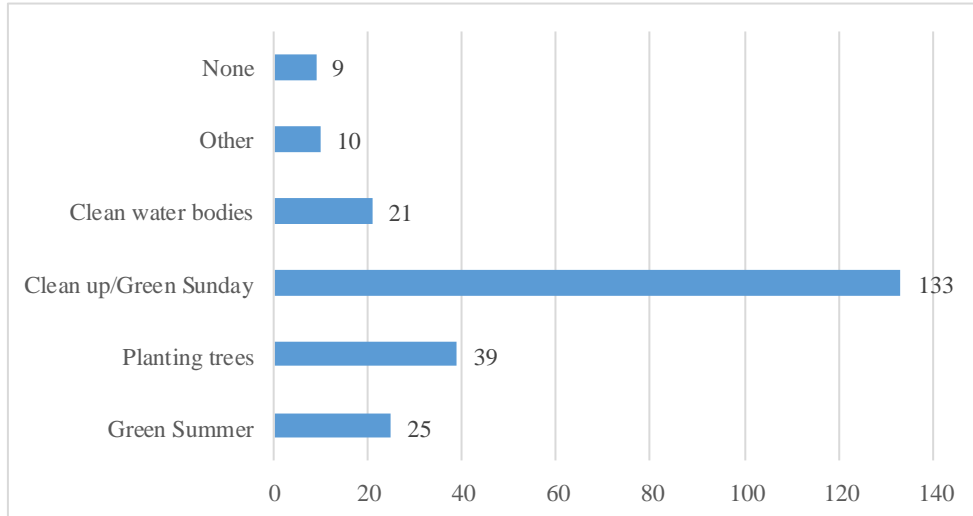


Figure 3. Student teachers' participation in DUEd YU's sustainability activities ($n = 143$)

The abovementioned activities are conducted by DUEd's university-wide YU organization. In addition YU units are able to generate and implement their own activities at each faculty and class level. Notably, 60-70% of participants in environmental activities are from faculties with environment-related teacher training programs including Bachelor of Biology, Chemistry and Geography Education. At those faculties, YU collaborates with student clubs to organize small-scale environmental activities such as recycling fashion shows, flea markets and Earth Hour ceremonies. Nevertheless, the clean-up campaigns remain the most predominant and frequent.

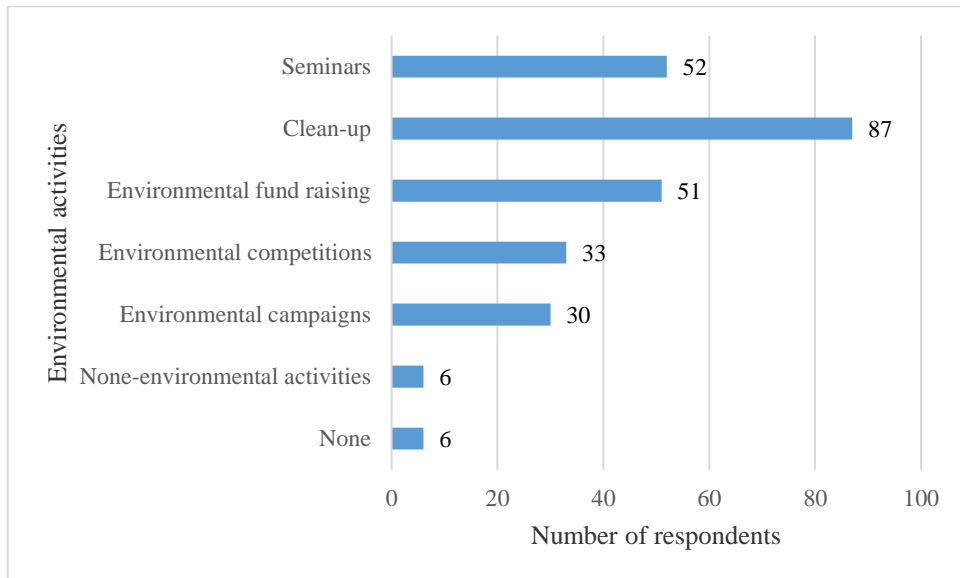


Figure 4. Student teachers' participation in YU's sustainability activities at their faculty (n=143)

b. Reflections of student teachers on YU-led sustainability activities

The questionnaire indicated that by participating in YU activities, students gained a range of knowledge and skills (Table 1). It is worth noting that most of the knowledge and skills that students gained were from Green Summer campaigns, although it is organized only once a year. According to one female student:

I have participated in both the cleanup campaigns and Green Summer. I personally think that Green Summer is great opportunity for us to go and stay with local people in remote areas. Many of us were born in urban areas and we do not know how difficult the lives of rural residents are. At the beginning of the campaign, I had thought that we were going to help such local residents. However, I recognized that we gained innumerable practical and indigenous knowledge from the local community beyond academic knowledge that we had learned at university. I want to enrich my knowledge and link with such indigenous knowledge to protect local natural conditions and help people to get income in accordance with environmental conservation (female student, 21).

Results from open-ended questions indicated that students gained abundant knowledge and skills that motivated them towards sustainability (shown in Table 1)

Table 1. Outcomes of participation in YU-led sustainability activities

Outcomes	Number of codes from responses
Knowledge	212
Practical knowledge	102
Environmental knowledge	54
General knowledge	45
None	11
Skills	203
Communication	44
Group work	74
Personal skills	85
Motivation	134
Enhance consciousness of sustainability/environment	83
Want to protect environment	42
None	9

Results from the survey and FGs showed that although YU has organized some sustainability-linked activities (SLAs) these activities have not completely met the demand of students yet (see Fig. 5). In the focus group, students claimed that the advantage of YU-led sustainability is building students' skills, particularly personal skills that allow them to feel confident in communication and organizing extra-curricular activities which may be useful for their future teaching. Conversely, students stated that such activities did not effectively improve their understanding or change their behavior towards sustainability because of the superficiality and lack of creativity of the activities as well as the lack of updated information and knowledge. Students did not feel inspired and motivated to act actively in sustainability, hence only 6% of respondents indicated that YU activities completely satisfied them.

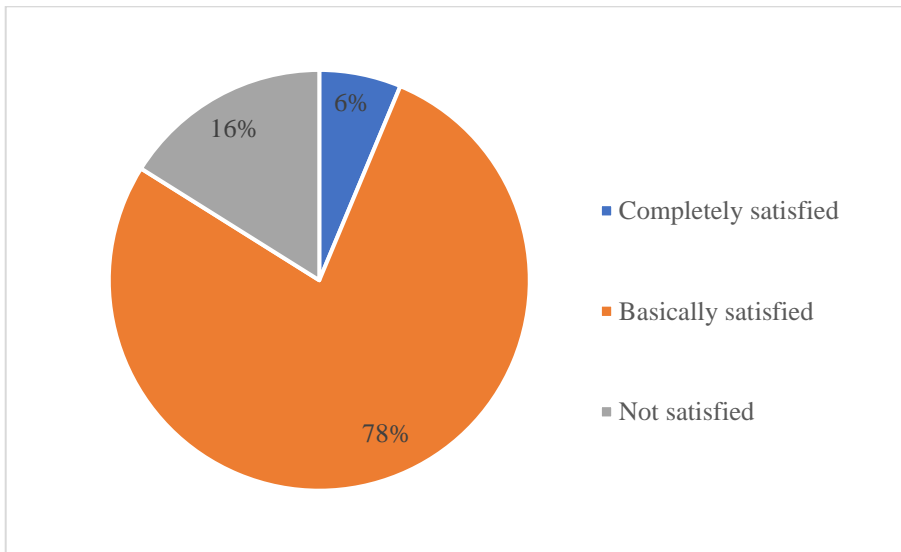


Figure 5. Students' satisfaction with YU-led sustainability activities

3.2 Student-led environmental groups

a. Student participation in environmental groups

During the period of this research, from October 2013 until December 2016, the authors were informed of the activities of six student-led environmental groups by interviewees: Go Green Danang, Love Nature in Danang, Danang River Watch (DRW), ENV Volunteer, Green Arrow and Geography Environment Club (GEC). The groups were established by different agents, including the private sector (Go Green Danang is a branch of Go Green Vietnam, founded by Toyota Motors Vietnam), young wildlife conservationists (Love Nature in Danang was founded by young wildlife conservationists working in the Son Tra peninsula), an NGO (ENV Volunteer), a group of college students with sponsorship by a Vietnamese NGO and with the patronage of university lecturers (DRW), and students with the assistance of faculty members (GEC and Green Arrow).

Of the groups, GEC accounted for the largest number of members among the interviewees. Go Green and Green Arrow have disbanded, while DRW and Love Nature in Danang were transformed to become local NGOs. GEC is a typical student-led club since it was founded and run by students. The club was originally a group of students at the Faculty of Geography who wanted to support each other in learning about the environment and geography. In 2012, with the advice of lecturers from the faculty of Geography, GEC was founded to diversify student activities involving the environment and geography. According to the current club leader, popular activities sponsored by GEC include litter campaigns, sharing information about job opportunities and scholarships, charity drives, and enhancing environmental awareness of students and communities. These activities aim to improve club members' soft skills and environmental knowledge. Recently GEC has collaborated with the university YU on large events such as the Environmental Day Campaign and the Earth Hour Ceremony,

which require much preparation and expenditure. GEC organizes meetings once or twice a month as well as picnics to improve skills and strengthen members’ relationships. Of 143 surveyed students, 40 students had participated in SLAs organized by eco clubs. Their participation in eco clubs is presented in Figure 6.

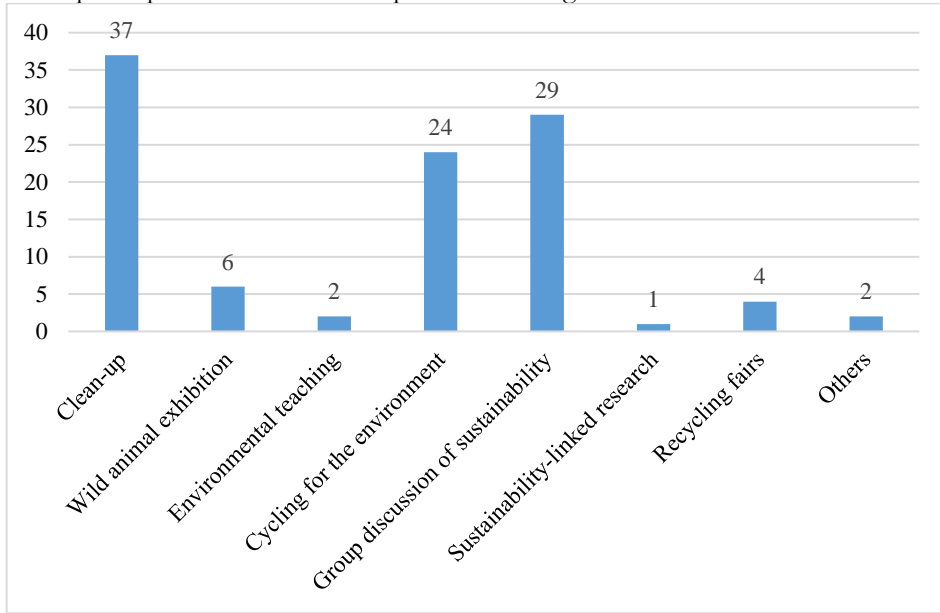


Figure 6. Student teachers' participation in eco clubs' activities (n=143)

Although the percentage of students participating was highest for litter campaigns with 92.5%, the activities run by eco clubs are more diverse than those of YU. In the focus group, students explained the differences between litter campaigns run by YU and the clubs as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences between YU and clubs in clean-up activities

Difference	YU	Clubs
Number of participants	Many (more than 100)	Few (less than 30)
Places	Determined by YU leaders (DUEd, pavements)	Determined by club members (beaches, park, public areas)
Reasons for participating	Compulsory extra-curricular activities (YU staff will check attendance)	Want to protect environment
Preparation and implementation	YU leaders	Club members
Evaluation	None	After activity

There are two common reasons why litter campaigns are the most frequency activity, as explained by students in the FG: first, because this is a low-cost activity, secondly, it is quite easy to prepare and arrange. In the case of YU activities, no attempt is made

afterwards to assess the efficiency of activities but in case of eco clubs, the members usually get together and evaluate the efficiency of activities, then discuss how to improve future activities.

b. Reflections of student participants in environmental groups

The survey results related to outcomes of student participation in environmental activities are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Outcomes of student participation in environmental group activities (n=40/143)

Outcomes	Number of answers
Knowledge	
Improve knowledge of environment and sustainability	45
Learn about local environmental problems	16
Skills	
Improve skills of teaching about environment and sustainability	4
Improve communication skills	48
Improve skills of group work	38
Improve skills to organize extra-curricular activities	21
Improve skills of financial management	9
Build leadership skills	3
Motivation	
Change behavior towards sustainability	26
Orient future career	16
Feel more responsible for sustainable development	14
Want to inspire others to protect environment	14

The outcomes of participation in eco groups appear to be more concrete than in YU. Students mentioned well-regarded competencies such as communication skills, group work and updating sustainability knowledge as well as sustainability-linked skills such as leadership, environmental teaching skills and inspiration for environmental protection. Yet the number of such answers remains limited, mainly from the active students who are leaders of a club. Notably, of 40 such students, there were only 16 students who joined club activities regularly. One student noted:

Currently, we have 40 members but usually in the first semester, GEC members may reach more than 100. Many student members are getting busy with university schedules in the second semester, particularly members who will graduate in the second semester. In order to sustain club ownership, we will select several enthusiastic members who really care about environmental problems and are willing to prioritize club activities.

Enthusiasm or willingness is the core factor because that allows them to persevere when trouble occurs while operating the clubs (e.g. conflicts among members or financial stress). We train new leaders by sharing our experiences and YU leaders collaborate with us to inculcate leadership skills. (GEC leader, 21).

4. Discussion

4.1 Constraints of efficient youth-led sustainability activities at DUEd

Both YU and Eco clubs have important roles to play in engaging students in sustainability activities. Their strengths and weakness are described in Table 4.

Table 4. Strengths and weakness of YU and Eco clubs in SLAs

	Youth Union	Eco clubs
Strength	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-organized - Stable funds for implementation - Influentiality - Good leaders with leadership competencies - Large membership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creativeness - Autonomy - Flexibility - Sustainability-oriented members - Self/individual motivation
Weakness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inflexibility (plan and activities must be approved or followed by central leaders) - Politically oriented activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of budget - High turn-over of leaders

Youth participation in sustainability as presented in the case study of DUEd shares many common elements with examples worldwide in both the types of activities implemented (Hall, 2010; Schusler et al., 2009) and the challenges faced (Advocatesforyouth, n.d.; Almers, 2013). Overall, there are two categories of constraints hampering the expansion of sustainability-related activities at DUEd that emerged from interviews with two YU leaders, two environmental club leaders and the student FG. First is the “internal” constraint of student apathy. In the FG, students argued that only about 10% to 20% of DUEd student teachers actually cared about environmental or sustainability issues. Most of those students are studying at faculties closely related to sustainability themes. On the contrary, many students merely care about benefits of their participation. This fact has bearing on the inability of most students to take strong actions to stop their friends from littering or perform environmental friendly acts because they feel they are “strangers” or even “self-important”. Explained one student:

Enthusiasm is the crucial factor that enables each individual to regularly participate in environmental activities. I have learned that “If you really want to do something, you'll find a way. If you don't, you'll find an excuse”. Many students complain that they are busy with their homework or part time job so they cannot join our environmental activities. Yet, they still have time to surf the Internet and check Facebook (male, 20).

The second category is “external” constraints which includes: (i) the lack of interesting and creative activities of YU, (ii) the lack of opportunities for student teachers to be fully engaged in SLAs, (iii) the lack of information related to sustainability funds, programs and training courses, (iv) the lack of conditions/facilities and inspiration that promote their environmental performance (e.g. poor solid waste management system at

university), (v) the lack of appropriate recognition and value from university YU, (vi) the lack of sustainability leadership in implementation of sustainability, and (vii) the lack of financial capital to support eco ideas/programs. Some of these requirements have been described by researchers as typical factors that promote proactive behavior for sustainability (Almers, 2013).

Moreover, there remains a huge gap in student teachers' demands for sustainability activities and youth-led SLAs at DUEd. There were three areas needing improvement most, according to surveyed students and students in the FG: 1. Sustainability teaching competencies (81), 2. Latest knowledge of global issues (71), and 3. Skills to work with communities (71). In fact, the most popular activities are not related to their future teaching job. Clean-up, environmental campaigns and cycling may be helpful to enhance their communication skills generally yet most SLAs were not designed to develop their specific skills for future teaching. As explained by Advocatesfor youth organization (2016), future job prospects are an important factor that increases their interest and sustainable engagement in sustainability.

4.2 Solutions to advance student teachers' participation in youth-led sustainability activities

Students claimed that they preferred the model of eco clubs which engaged them in the whole process of an environmental activity rather than the YU. They noted that eco club leaders pay attention to improving their members' knowledge and skills to not only enable them to conduct the club activities but also to strengthen membership. Interviews with two club leaders suggest that their individual characteristics conform to the core internal factors mentioned in research related to pro-environmental behaviors or sustainability leadership (Almers, 2013; Brown, 2011; Visser & Courtice, 2011). Such characteristics include environment/sustainability knowledge, self-awareness, visionary, creativity, responsibility and communicativeness. They noted that since YU is a mass official organization that compulsorily involves student teachers in environmental activities its impact can be limited. Student participation is expected for students to secure certificates and maintain high extra-curricular scores. Obviously, rewards or returns are also essential to maintain youth commitment in sustainability (Advocatesfor youth, n.d.). However it should also be noted that the YU leaders are elected by students because they are enthusiastic, have experience in working with young students, are able to communicate across disciplines and some YU leaders are young lecturers who have a good reputation in both university and society.

The above analysis suggests that the collaboration between YU and student clubs will boost the effectiveness of sustainability activities. YU should encourage more autonomy in lower YU units (faculty and class) and provide sponsorships to student clubs. This would allow more students to become involved in environmental activities on their own initiative. In order to institutionalize and advance sustainability in student extra-curricular activities, YUs can consider the following steps:

1. Establish a hub of sustainability promotion: as a leading organization, DUEd YU is able to map student sustainability activities, then identify and recruit potential change agents in sustainability. Only a few university YU leaders would be required to manage such a hub.

2. Build sustainability leadership: the first trainees could be students who fit the profile mentioned above. YU leaders could train these students in soft skills (i.e. communication, listening, presentation, etc.) and ESD experts (i.e. faculty lecturers, NGO leaders, etc.) can train and inspire them in sustainability.

3. Construct a systematic action plan: currently, there is no any clear action plan for student sustainability activities, excepting DUEd YU Green Summer and Green Sunday. Most activities are spontaneous and overlap, which may reduce the number of participants. At the beginning of the academic year, the hub can call for students' initiatives in sustainability from individuals, clubs, classes or faculties. Subsequently, core members of the hub can select the most appropriate initiatives, then construct a yearly action plan based on student proposals, human resources and financial situation¹. Notably, the action plan will be also updated by faculties and university management committees and can be adjusted if required.

4. Create a communication network: a communication network (i.e. a part of the university website or Facebook page) should be created to disseminate the action plan to the student population so that students can register to participate in activities that they feel interested in. Information on student sustainability implementation should be published through this network. Obviously, such a network will not only facilitate, recognize and reward students' engagement in sustainability but it will also enable them to share knowledge and experience of sustainability.

This systematic approach will promote students' active performance by allowing them to apply their autonomy and creativity and mitigate feelings of isolation. Students will be able to experience the whole process of creating a sustainability program, including generating ideas, modifying ideas, preparing, implementing and evaluating. Through this process, students will become problem solvers so that they can learn about challenges and how to overcome them. In this process, YU leaders will play roles as mentors or advisers to help students modify their ideas under the umbrella of university sustainability themes, as facilitators to connect students to outside stakeholders (i.e. communities, schools, NGOs), and as evaluators to recognize and award students. Therefore, they do not need to devote much time and human resources to generate and implement activities and force students to participate like before.

Conclusion

The Youth Union, a political organization of Vietnamese youth, often conducts activities with sustainability themes as a part of its regular activities. In Vietnamese teacher education institutions as in other HEIs, the Youth Union and student-led eco groups provide student teachers with several opportunities to be involved in sustainability activities. Such youth-led organizations are the most frequent non-formal educators at DUEd to enhance student teachers' consciousness of environment and sustainability.

¹ YU members pay membership fees annually. YU at faculty and university will utilize such money to run student extra-curricular activities

YU with experienced and well-respected leaders can reach a large number of students to mainstream sustainability, but their approaches require more autonomy and creativity. Meanwhile, by engaging students in planning and carrying out sustainability programs, eco clubs significantly enhance students' engagement with sustainability. Based on the analysis of each organization's strength and weakness, and students' demands the author suggested four steps to improve sustainability planning, including establishment of a hub of sustainability promotion, fostering sustainability leadership, conceiving a systematic action plan, and creating a communication network to promote students' active efforts towards sustainability.

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