

# Undergraduate Students' Self-Assessment of Social–Emotional Learning and Competency-Based Instruction in Vietnamese Higher Education

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## Abstract

Social–emotional learning (SEL) has become increasingly relevant in higher education as universities worldwide seek to cultivate adaptable, ethical, and socially responsible graduates. Yet empirical evidence on SEL-related competencies among Vietnamese undergraduates remains limited, particularly regarding their ability to connect SEL with competency-based instructional approaches. This study addresses this gap by examining the self-assessed SEL and competency-based instructional competencies of 388 students recruited through random sampling from four universities in Ho Chi Minh City. An eight-item SEL competency scale, originally developed by Huynh and colleagues, was adapted to assess students perceived abilities across conceptual, procedural, and application-oriented domains. Responses were rated on a 0–4 Likert-type scale. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20, employing frequency and percentage distributions, with the instrument demonstrating excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .945$ ). Results showed that most students rated themselves at moderate to fair levels across all competencies, while proficient performance remained consistently low. Conceptual understanding was stronger than procedural or applied competencies, and the lowest levels of confidence appeared in items requiring integration between SEL and competency-based instruction or demonstration of SEL in instructional practice. These findings suggest that undergraduate students possess foundational awareness of SEL but lack opportunities for deeper experiential engagement and structured pedagogical development. The study highlights the need for intentional curricular design, increased practice-based learning experiences, and university-level initiatives that embed SEL more explicitly within instructional processes. Implications for educational policy, curriculum innovation, and future research are discussed to support the advancement of SEL within Vietnamese higher education.

**Keywords:** *social–emotional learning; competency-based instruction; higher education; undergraduate students; Vietnam.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Social–emotional learning (SEL) has become an important focus in contemporary educational discourse, particularly as higher education systems worldwide confront increasing demands for adaptability, interpersonal competence, ethical reasoning, and global citizenship. Foundational frameworks developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020, 2021) emphasize that SEL encompasses a set of multidimensional competencies—ranging from emotional awareness to responsible decision-making—that enable individuals to navigate complex learning and working environments. Although SEL has historically been studied within primary and secondary school settings, scholarship has increasingly highlighted the need to integrate SEL into university-

level teaching and learning, where students face heightened academic pressures, diverse social contexts, and rapidly changing professional expectations (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2020; Srinivasan, 2019).

In Vietnam, research related to SEL remains limited in scope and has focused primarily on school-aged learners or pre-service teachers. Existing studies tend to examine conceptual understanding of SEL or its classroom application within K–12 settings (Huynh *et al.*, 2022), leaving a substantial gap in the literature concerning SEL competencies among undergraduate students. At the same time, ongoing national reforms emphasize competency-based education, experiential learning, and the development of holistic learner capacities. These reforms align with international perspectives arguing that SEL is essential for cultivating

ethical professionalism (Campbell, 2014), experiential engagement (Kolb, 2014), global competence (Reimers, 2009), and integrity within learning communities (Mathrani *et al.*, 2021). Yet little is known about how Vietnamese university students perceive their own SEL-related competencies, particularly in relation to competency-based instruction—a pedagogical approach increasingly emphasized in higher education.

This gap is especially notable given that university learners must navigate collaborative coursework, group-based problem solving, and environments requiring emotional self-regulation, empathy, inclusive communication, and responsible decision-making. International scholarship suggests that conceptual exposure alone is insufficient for meaningful SEL development; learners must also engage in structured, reflective, and experiential practices to build applied competencies (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Jagers *et al.*, 2019; McCall *et al.*, 2023). Without empirical data describing the current state of SEL competencies among Vietnamese undergraduates, universities face challenges in designing evidence-based curricula, targeted interventions, or institutional support systems to strengthen SEL capacities.

In response to this research gap, the proposed study aims to examine undergraduate students' self-assessed competencies in social-emotional learning and competency-based instruction across multiple universities in Ho Chi Minh City. Using an adapted measurement scale derived from Huynh *et al.*, (2022) and informed by international SEL frameworks, the study seeks to assess students' perceived abilities in conceptual understanding, procedural reasoning, and applied SEL-related instructional competencies. By identifying areas of strength and areas requiring further development, the study intends to provide foundational evidence to guide future curriculum design, instructional innovation, and institutional planning for SEL integration within Vietnamese higher education.

## METHODS

### Participants

The present study used a random sampling strategy to recruit undergraduate students from multiple higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, during October 2025. A total of 388 students participated. The sample included students from four universities: Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH), Saigon International University (SIU), the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-VNUHCM), and Saigon University (SGU). These institutions represent a mixture of public and private universities within the city's higher education system.

Regarding academic background, participants represented several disciplinary clusters. The largest group consisted of students majoring in Psychology and Educational Psychology. Additional clusters included Foreign Languages (e.g., English Studies, Korean Studies), Communication and Media (e.g., Public Relations, Multimedia Communication, Film and Television Technology), Business and Economics (e.g., Business Administration, Marketing, International Finance, E-commerce, Commerce), Tourism and Hospitality (e.g., Tourism Management, Travel Services Management), and smaller specialized fields such as Veterinary Medicine. This distribution reflects the diversity of academic programs available across participating institutions.

Of the total sample, 288 identified as female (74.2%) and 100 as male (25.8%). Participants represented all academic years: 37.6% were freshmen, 13.4% sophomores, 28.6% juniors, and 20.4% seniors. Consistent with contemporary instructional practices in Vietnamese higher education, most students (94.3%) reported that they had taken at least one course during the most recent academic year that required group work or a group-based project, whereas 5.7% indicated that they had not, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Characteristics of participants (N = 388)**

Variable	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	288	74.2%
Male	100	25.8%
<b>Academic Year</b>		
Freshman	146	37.6%
Sophomore	52	13.4%
Junior	111	28.6%
Senior	79	20.4%
<b>During the most recent academic year, did you enroll in any course that required participation in group work or a group-based project?</b>		
No	22	5.7%
Yes	366	94.3%

### Measurements

In the present study, we adopted the measurement scale developed by Huynh Van Son, Giang Thien Vu, Do Tat Thien, Nguyen Chung Hai, and Nguyen Tran Minh Hai (2022). The scale was originally constructed based on a theoretical framework describing the competencies required to apply the Social–Emotional Learning (SEL) model in teaching, and it includes items designed to assess learners’ understanding of SEL concepts and their ability to integrate these principles into instructional practice. For the purposes of the current research, the instrument was reused to evaluate undergraduate students’ self-perceived competencies across the same domains. Responses were rated on a Likert-type scale from 0 (Completely Unable to Perform) to 4 (Proficient/Fully Competent Performance). In the present study, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha of .945, supporting its reliability for the current sample.

### Data Analysis

All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 20.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). The dataset was examined for missing values, and all 388 responses were retained for analysis (listwise  $N = 388$ ). Descriptive analyses were conducted to

summarize students’ self-assessed competencies, using frequency counts and percentage distributions across the five performance levels of the 0–4 scale. To support the reliability of the overall instrument, Cronbach’s alpha for the eight-item scale was calculated as part of the analysis plan. For interpretative clarity, the following score ranges were applied: 0.00–0.80 = Not Achieved, 0.81–1.60 = Average, 1.61–2.40 = Fair, 2.41–3.20 = Good, and 3.21–4.00 = Very Good.

## RESULTS

Table 2 presents the distribution of undergraduate students’ self-assessment across eight competency indicators related to social–emotional learning (SEL) and competency-based instruction. Overall, the patterns observed in the frequency and percentage distributions reveal that the majority of participants positioned themselves at the mid-range of the performance continuum, with the largest concentrations appearing in the *Moderate Level of Performance* (2) and *Fair Level of Performance* (3) categories. This trend was consistent across all eight items, suggesting that most students perceived their competencies as developing rather than either insufficient or fully proficient.

**Table 2: Undergraduate students’ self-assessment of competencies in social emotional learning and competency-based instruction (N = 388)**

Variable	Completely Unable to Perform (0)	Low Level of Performance (1)	Moderate Level of Performance (2)	Fair Level of Performance (3)	Proficient / Fully Competent Performance (4)
Explain the concept of social–emotional competence.	15 (3.9%)	52 (13.4%)	158 (40.7%)	133 (34.3%)	30 (7.7%)
Explain the concept of the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) model.	31 (8.0%)	100 (25.8%)	154 (39.7%)	87 (22.4%)	16 (4.1%)
Articulate the educational principles underlying the SEL model.	39 (10.1%)	97 (25.0%)	147 (37.9%)	84 (21.6%)	21 (5.4%)
Explain the concept of competency-based instruction aimed at developing learners’ capacities.	21 (5.4%)	65 (16.8%)	141 (36.3%)	129 (33.2%)	32 (8.2%)
Describe the nature and procedural framework of competency-based instruction for learner development.	22 (5.7%)	76 (19.6%)	139 (35.8%)	122 (31.4%)	29 (7.5%)
Explain the concept of competency-based instruction within the SEL model.	39 (10.1%)	82 (21.1%)	161 (41.5%)	84 (21.6%)	22 (5.7%)
Describe the nature and procedural framework of competency-based instruction as implemented through the SEL model.	37 (9.5%)	86 (22.2%)	157 (40.5%)	88 (22.7%)	20 (5.2%)
Demonstrate ways to apply the SEL model in instructional practice.	41 (10.6%)	90 (23.2%)	142 (36.6%)	92 (23.7%)	23 (5.9%)

Regarding foundational conceptual understanding, 40.7% of participants reported a moderate ability to explain the concept of social–

emotional competence, while an additional 34.3% rated themselves at the fair level. Only 7.7% considered themselves proficient in this domain, whereas 17.3% fell

within the not achieved or low performance categories. This distribution indicates that although conceptual awareness of social-emotional competence is relatively widespread, high-level mastery remains limited among undergraduates.

A similar pattern emerged in students' understanding of the SEL model itself. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64.5%) placed themselves at the moderate or fair performance levels, while only 4.1% claimed proficient understanding. Notably, this item displayed one of the higher proportions of students identifying at the lowest performance levels (8.0% completely unable; 25.8% low performance), suggesting that the SEL model remains conceptually unfamiliar or insufficiently emphasized across the participating institutions and academic majors.

Students' ability to articulate the educational principles underlying SEL followed the same general trend. A combined 37.9% rated themselves as moderate and 21.6% as fair, while 10.1% reported being completely unable to perform this task. This relatively elevated proportion in the lowest category may reflect the abstract nature of SEL principles or the limited formal exposure learners have to SEL-based pedagogical frameworks within standard curricula.

With respect to competency-based instruction, students reported somewhat stronger levels of confidence. For the item assessing understanding of competency-based instruction aimed at developing learners' capacities, 69.5% placed themselves at moderate or fair levels, and 8.2% identified as proficient—the highest proportion of proficient responses observed across all items. Parallel distributions appeared in the item addressing the procedural framework of competency-based instruction: 35.8% moderate, 31.4% fair, and 7.5% proficient. These results suggest that students may be more familiar with competency-based approaches than with SEL-specific constructs, possibly because competency-based instruction is increasingly integrated into university teaching practices in Vietnam.

When SEL and competency-based instruction were combined conceptually—specifically, explaining competency-based instruction within the SEL model and describing its procedural implementation—the proportion of students rating themselves at the lower performance levels increased. For the first integrated item, 10.1% reported complete inability, and 21.1% indicated low performance, while only 5.7% identified as proficient. Likewise, the second integrated item showed 9.5% completely unable and 22.2% low performance, with only 5.2% at the proficient level. These findings imply that although students may understand SEL and competency-based instruction independently, they experience greater difficulty

conceptualizing how the two frameworks intersect in practice.

Finally, the item assessing the ability to demonstrate ways of applying the SEL model in instructional practice produced one of the highest concentrations of students in the moderate (36.6%) and fair (23.7%) categories. Nonetheless, 33.8% of the sample clustered within the lowest two performance levels (10.6% completely unable; 23.2% low performance), indicating that the transition from conceptual understanding to applied pedagogical skill remains a significant challenge for many undergraduates. Only 5.9% rated themselves as proficient in applying SEL strategies, suggesting substantial room for development in practice-oriented competencies.

Across all eight items, the general pattern reveals a student population with emerging but not yet fully developed competencies in SEL and competency-based instruction. The consistently small percentage of students rating themselves at the proficient level highlights the need for more structured, explicit, and practice-oriented SEL instruction within university curricula. Meanwhile, the concentration of responses around the moderate and fair categories suggests that learners possess a foundational awareness of the concepts but require further scaffolding to achieve higher levels of mastery. Taken together, these findings provide a detailed portrait of how undergraduates from diverse disciplines and institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam perceive their developing competencies within the SEL and competency-based instructional frameworks.

## DISCUSSION

Research on social-emotional learning (SEL) in Vietnam has grown in recent years, yet much of it has focused primarily on school-based contexts or pre-service teachers (e.g., Huynh Van Son *et al.*, 2022). Studies exploring SEL competencies among university students across diverse disciplines remain scarce, even though higher education has become an important setting for developing socio-emotional competencies required for workplace readiness and global citizenship. At the same time, the integration of SEL with competency-based instruction—two frameworks increasingly emphasized in Vietnam's educational reform—has not been systematically examined at the undergraduate level. Existing literature often discusses SEL conceptually (CASEL, 2020, 2021; Srinivasan, 2019), or addresses teacher professionalism and ethical practice (Campbell, 2014; Gimbert *et al.*, 2023), but empirical insights into how undergraduate students perceive their SEL-related abilities are still limited. The present study addresses these gaps by assessing self-perceived SEL and competency-based instructional competencies among 388 undergraduates from multiple universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.



Across all eight competencies, most students rated themselves at the *Moderate* or *Fair* levels of performance. High-level mastery (*Proficient/Fully Competent*) was consistently low across items, while *Completely Unable* and *Low* performance categories were more frequent for items requiring integration between SEL and competency-based instruction or the application of SEL in practice.

Students expressed stronger confidence in conceptual tasks, such as explaining social-emotional competence or describing competency-based instruction, and weaker confidence in tasks requiring procedural understanding of SEL-based instruction or demonstration of SEL in teaching practice. These results suggest that although undergraduate students possess a foundational conceptual awareness, their applied competencies remain underdeveloped.

The findings mirror conclusions from previous Vietnamese SEL research showing that learners often have fragmented or surface-level understanding of SEL unless supported by structured instructional design (Huynh Van Son *et al.*, 2022). This pattern is consistent with broader international literature, which describes SEL competencies as requiring explicit modeling, guided practice, and experiential learning opportunities (Kolb, 2014; Srinivasan, 2019).

Conceptual understanding was relatively stronger in this sample, which aligns with CASEL's (2020, 2021) assertion that SEL terminology and frameworks can be introduced relatively easily, while applied skill development requires systemic support. The limited capacity to integrate SEL with competency-based instruction supports observations made by Darling-Hammond *et al.*, (2020) regarding the challenges universities face in embedding holistic pedagogical approaches across disciplines.

The difficulty students experienced in operationalizing SEL strategies echoes concerns raised by Jones and Bouffard (2012) and Jagers *et al.* (2019), who highlight structural and contextual barriers limiting implementation, even when conceptual knowledge exists. Similarly, the low proficiency levels observed may reflect constraints in student-teacher interaction quality, as Williford and Wolcott (2015) argue that relational environments are crucial for SEL development.

From a broader educational perspective, SEL competencies support ethical reasoning (Campbell, 2014), global competence (Reimers, 2009), academic integrity (Mathrani *et al.*, 2021), and leadership responsiveness (Ruiz, 2023). The emerging—but incomplete—competency profiles in this study therefore signal a need for stronger integration of SEL within university curricula to support student development holistically.

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, the study relied on self-report data, which may not fully reflect actual competencies due to biases or limited self-awareness. Second, the cross-sectional design captured only a snapshot of student competencies, without assessing changes over time. Third, the sample, while diverse across institutions and majors, was restricted to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam limiting national generalizability. Fourth, the instrument assessed only eight SEL-related competencies; additional SEL domains identified by CASEL (2020, 2021) were not included. Finally, the study measured perceived abilities rather than performance demonstrated through authentic tasks or observation.

Future research should employ multimethod approaches—such as behavioral assessments, classroom observations, or teacher ratings—to triangulate self-reported competencies. Longitudinal studies would help track developmental trajectories across academic years. Experimental designs could examine the impact of SEL-infused instructional strategies or experiential learning modules (Kolb, 2014). Broader sampling from universities nationwide, or comparative studies across regions, would strengthen generalizability. Researchers may also explore how SEL competencies relate to academic integrity (Mathrani *et al.*, 2021), global and intercultural competencies (Reimers, 2009), and equity-oriented educational practices (McCall *et al.*, 2023; Jagers *et al.*, 2019). Future work should investigate institutional factors—such as leadership, curriculum design, and educator SEL competence—that support or hinder SEL development in higher education (Gimbert *et al.*, 2023; Ruiz, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

This study provides examinations of SEL-related competencies among undergraduate students in Vietnamese higher education. The findings reveal a pattern of moderate conceptual understanding alongside limited application-oriented competencies, aligning with both Vietnamese and international literature on the challenges of embedding SEL in higher education environments. These results highlight the need for more intentional, structured, and experiential approaches to SEL development within university curricula. By identifying specific areas of strength and weakness, this study contributes valuable evidence to inform future educational policy, curriculum design, and pedagogical innovation aimed at fostering holistic and socially responsible graduates in Vietnam.

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