
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Stability in Vietnamese undergraduate students' self-perceived social-emotional learning competencies across gender and academic year

Sy Van Pham

HUTECH University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Corresponding Author: Sy Van Pham, **E-mail:** pv.sy@hutech.edu.vn

| ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has been increasingly recognized as a critical component of competency-based education in higher education; however, empirical evidence from Vietnamese universities remains limited. This study examined undergraduate students' self-assessed competencies in social-emotional learning and competency-based instruction, with particular attention to differences across gender and academic year. A cross-sectional survey design was employed with a sample of 388 undergraduate students from multiple universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Data were collected using an adapted SEL self-assessment scale measuring competencies across conceptual, procedural, and applied domains. Descriptive statistics, independent-samples *t* tests, and one-way ANOVA were used for data analysis. The results indicated that gender was not significantly associated with students' self-assessed SEL competencies, $t(386) = 0.17, p = .86$, with a negligible effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.02$). Similarly, no statistically significant differences were found across academic years, $F(3, 384) = 1.66, p = .18$. Although second-year students reported slightly lower mean scores ($M = 1.79, SD = 0.97$) compared to other cohorts, these differences did not reach statistical significance. Overall, students reported moderate levels of perceived SEL competence ($M = 2.02, SD = 0.86$). The findings suggest that Vietnamese undergraduates possess foundational awareness of SEL concepts, yet opportunities to develop applied and integrative competencies remain limited. The absence of demographic differences underscores the importance of instructional design and learning experiences, rather than demographic characteristics, in supporting SEL development within competency-based higher education.

| KEYWORDS

Social-emotional learning; competency-based instruction; undergraduate students; self-assessment; Vietnamese higher education

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 11 December 2025

PUBLISHED: 15 December 2025

DOI: 10.32996/jpbs.2025.5.3.2

1. Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a central concern in contemporary educational discourse, particularly as higher education institutions confront growing demands for adaptability, interpersonal competence, ethical reasoning, and global citizenship. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020, 2021), SEL comprises a multidimensional set of competencies—including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making—that enables learners to function effectively in complex academic, social, and professional environments. While early SEL research predominantly focused on primary and secondary education, a growing body of scholarship now emphasizes the relevance of SEL within university contexts, where students encounter heightened academic pressure, diverse peer interactions, and increasingly fluid career trajectories (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Srinivasan, 2019).

In higher education, SEL is closely aligned with competency-based instruction, which prioritizes demonstrable abilities, reflective practice, and the integration of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This alignment reflects broader international calls for universities to cultivate not only disciplinary expertise but also ethical professionalism (Campbell, 2014), experiential engagement

(Kolb, 2014), global competence (Reimers, 2009), and integrity within learning communities (Mathrani et al., 2021). Importantly, contemporary perspectives suggest that SEL competencies are not inherently tied to fixed demographic characteristics such as gender, but rather develop through pedagogical exposure, learning design, and meaningful practice opportunities within institutional contexts.

Within Vietnam, empirical research on SEL remains limited and unevenly distributed. Existing studies have primarily examined SEL among school-aged learners or pre-service teachers, often emphasizing conceptual understanding or classroom-level applications in K–12 settings (Huynh et al., 2022). As noted by Pham (2025), empirical evidence on SEL-related competencies among Vietnamese undergraduates remains sparse, particularly regarding their capacity to connect SEL principles with competency-based instructional practices. Consequently, little is known about how university students perceive their own SEL competencies, nor how these perceptions relate to instructional approaches increasingly promoted by national higher education reforms.

This gap is particularly consequential given that undergraduate students are routinely required to engage in collaborative learning, group-based problem solving, emotional self-regulation, inclusive communication, and responsible decision-making. International research consistently indicates that conceptual exposure to SEL alone is insufficient for sustained competency development; instead, students require structured, experiential, and reflective learning opportunities to translate SEL concepts into practice (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Jagers et al., 2019; McCall et al., 2023). Where such opportunities are limited or inconsistently embedded across curricula, students' self-perceived SEL competencies may remain relatively stable across demographic groups and stages of study.

Recent findings from Vietnamese higher education contexts further underscore this concern. The absence of meaningful differences in self-assessed SEL competencies across gender and academic year suggests that students' perceptions of their preparedness are not strongly shaped by demographic characteristics or academic seniority. Rather, these patterns may reflect relatively uniform—or insufficiently differentiated—exposure to SEL-related content and competency-based instructional practices throughout undergraduate programs. As Pham (2025) observes, Vietnamese undergraduates often demonstrate foundational awareness of SEL concepts, yet report lower confidence in applied and integrative competencies, particularly those requiring the demonstration of SEL within instructional or experiential settings.

In response to these gaps, the present study examines undergraduate students' self-assessed competencies in social-emotional learning and competency-based instruction across multiple universities in Ho Chi Minh City. Drawing on an adapted measurement scale developed by Huynh et al. (2022) and informed by international SEL frameworks, the study assesses students' perceived competencies across conceptual, procedural, and application-oriented domains. By focusing on self-assessment patterns rather than demographic distinctions alone, this study aims to provide empirical evidence to inform curriculum design, instructional innovation, and institutional strategies for embedding SEL more explicitly and effectively within Vietnamese higher education.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The present study employed a random sampling approach to recruit undergraduate students from multiple higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in October 2025, yielding a total sample of 388 participants. Students were drawn 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)—representing both public and private sectors of the city's higher education system. Participants' academic backgrounds encompassed a wide range of disciplinary clusters, with the largest proportion majoring in Psychology and Educational Psychology, followed by Foreign Languages, Communication and Media, Business and Economics, Tourism and Hospitality, and a small number from specialized fields such as Veterinary Medicine, thereby reflecting the diversity of programs offered across the participating institutions. The sample comprised 288 female students (74.2%) and 100 male students (25.8%), with representation across all academic years: 37.6% freshmen, 13.4% sophomores, 28.6% juniors, and 20.4% seniors (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants (N = 388)

Variable	Frequency	Percent	
Gender			
	Female	288	74.2%
	Male	100	25.8%
Academic Year			
	Freshman	146	37.6%
	Sophomore	52	13.4%
	Junior	111	28.6%
	Senior	79	20.4%

2.2 Measurements

In this study, we employed the measurement instrument developed by Huynh Van Son, Giang Thien Vu, Do Tat Thien, Nguyen Chung Hai, and Nguyen Tran Minh Hai (2022), which was originally grounded in a theoretical framework outlining the competencies necessary for implementing the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) model in educational contexts. The scale comprises items assessing both conceptual understanding of SEL and the capacity to apply SEL principles within teaching practice. For the purposes of the present research, the instrument was adapted for use with undergraduate students to measure their self-assessed competencies across the same domains. Participants responded using a Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (completely unable to perform) to 4 (proficient or fully competent performance). In the current sample, the scale exhibited excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .945, indicating strong reliability.

2.3 Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics, Version 20.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). The dataset was screened for missing values, and all 388 responses were retained for analysis (listwise N = 388). Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize students’ self-assessed competencies in social-emotional learning and competency-based instruction (SEL_mean). An independent-samples t test was performed to examine differences in SEL_mean by gender, with gender coded as 0 (female) and 1 (male). To investigate differences across academic years, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, comparing students in Years 1 through 4. Assumptions of homogeneity of variances were assessed using Levene’s test. Given the unequal group sizes, Welch’s ANOVA was additionally employed as a robustness check. Effect size estimates were calculated where appropriate. All statistical tests were two-tailed, with the level of significance set at $\alpha = .05$.

3. Results

As shown in Table 2, an independent-samples t test was conducted to examine gender differences in undergraduate students’ self-assessed competencies in social-emotional learning and competency-based instruction.

Table 2. Gender Differences in Self-Assessment of Competencies in Social-Emotional Learning and Competency-Based Instruction (SEL_mean)

Gender	N	M	SD	t	df	p	Cohen’s d
Female (0)	288	2.03	0.84	0.17	386	.86	0.02
Male (1)	100	2.01	0.91				

Note. SEL_mean = self-assessment of competencies in social-emotional learning and competency-based instruction.

Results indicated that female students (M = 2.03, SD = 0.84) and male students (M = 2.01, SD = 0.91) reported nearly identical levels of perceived SEL-related competencies. The difference between groups was not statistically significant, $t(386) = 0.17, p = .86$. The associated effect size was negligible (Cohen’s $d = 0.02$), suggesting a trivial practical difference between genders.

As shown in Table 3, A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in undergraduate students’ self-assessed competencies in social-emotional learning and competency-based instruction across academic years (Year 1 to Year 4).

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA Results for Self-Assessment of Competencies in Social–Emotional Learning and Competency-Based Instruction (SEL_mean) by Academic Year

Academic Year	N	M	SD	F(3, 384)	p
Year 1	146	2.09	0.81		
Year 2	52	1.79	0.97		
Year 3	111	2.02	0.88	1.66	.18
Year 4	79	2.06	0.81		
Total / ANOVA	388	2.02	0.86		

Note. *SEL_mean* = self-assessment of competencies in social–emotional learning and competency-based instruction.

Descriptive statistics indicated modest variation in mean SEL competency scores across academic years, with Year 1 students reporting the highest mean level of perceived competence ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 0.81$) and Year 2 students reporting the lowest ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.97$). Year 3 ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.88$) and Year 4 students ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 0.81$) reported comparable levels of self-assessed competence. Levene's test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met, $F(3, 384) = 1.82$, $p = .14$. The ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences in SEL competency self-assessments among students from different academic years, $F(3, 384) = 1.66$, $p = .18$. Given the unequal group sizes and as an additional robustness check, Welch's ANOVA was also conducted and similarly yielded a nonsignificant result, $F(3, 161.97) = 1.37$, $p = .26$.

4. Discussion

The present study examined undergraduate students' self-assessed competencies in social–emotional learning (SEL) and competency-based instruction within Vietnamese higher education. Overall, the findings contribute empirical evidence to a literature that remains limited in scope, particularly at the university level in Vietnam. Two main results warrant discussion: the absence of meaningful gender differences and the lack of significant variation across academic years. Together, these findings offer important insights into how SEL-related competencies are currently experienced and perceived by undergraduate students.

The first key finding indicates that gender was not significantly associated with students' self-assessed competencies in SEL and competency-based instruction. Both male and female students reported comparable levels of perceived preparedness across conceptual, procedural, and applied domains. This result aligns with contemporary perspectives suggesting that SEL competencies are not inherently gendered, especially within higher education environments where students typically receive similar curricular exposure and instructional experiences (CASEL, 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

From a methodological standpoint, the extremely small effect size observed further supports the conclusion that gender does not constitute a substantive explanatory factor in understanding variability in SEL self-assessments within this sample. This finding is consistent with international research emphasizing that differences in SEL outcomes are more strongly linked to contextual and pedagogical factors—such as instructional design, learning opportunities, and experiential engagement—than to demographic characteristics alone (Jagers et al., 2019; McCall et al., 2023).

In the Vietnamese context, this result also reflects broader patterns in higher education, where curricular structures and teaching approaches tend to be standardized across student groups. As noted by Pham (2025), undergraduate students often encounter SEL-related concepts implicitly rather than through differentiated or targeted pedagogical strategies. Consequently, gender-based differences in self-perceived SEL competence may be minimized when learning experiences are relatively uniform and lack explicit SEL-focused interventions.

The second major finding shows that academic year was not a significant factor influencing students' self-assessed SEL and competency-based instructional competencies. Although minor fluctuations in mean scores were observed—most notably the slightly lower average reported by Year 2 students—these differences did not reach statistical significance. This pattern suggests a relative stability in students' perceptions of their SEL competencies across stages of undergraduate study.

Substantively, this finding raises important questions about the extent to which SEL development is intentionally scaffolded across academic years. In theory, competency-based education and experiential learning models would predict progressive growth in applied competencies as students advance through their programs (Kolb, 2014). However, the absence of such progression in self-assessments may indicate that exposure to SEL concepts and practices is either relatively consistent across years or insufficiently differentiated by curricular level.

An alternative interpretation is that students' self-perceptions of SEL competence are shaped more strongly by individual experiences—such as group projects, internships, or practicum opportunities—than by academic seniority alone. This interpretation aligns with international evidence suggesting that meaningful SEL development depends on structured, reflective, and practice-oriented learning experiences rather than passive or conceptual instruction (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Srinivasan, 2019). In Vietnamese higher education, where experiential and competency-based approaches are still unevenly implemented, such opportunities may not systematically increase as students' progress through their degree programs.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Vietnamese undergraduates possess a relatively stable and moderate level of SEL awareness but may lack sustained opportunities to deepen and apply these competencies in instructional contexts. Pham (2025) similarly reported that while students demonstrate foundational conceptual understanding of SEL, their confidence is lowest in areas requiring integration of SEL with competency-based instruction or the demonstration of SEL through practice. The current results reinforce this interpretation by showing that neither gender nor academic year meaningfully differentiates students' self-perceived competencies.

These findings have several implications for curriculum design and institutional planning. First, they underscore the need for more intentional and explicit integration of SEL within university curricula, particularly through competency-based and experiential learning approaches. Second, rather than targeting SEL interventions based on demographic characteristics or year of study, universities may benefit from focusing on pedagogical quality, instructional coherence, and opportunities for reflective practice across all undergraduate levels. Finally, institutional initiatives that embed SEL across courses and programs—rather than treating it as an implicit or peripheral outcome—may be essential for fostering deeper and more transferable competencies.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The reliance on self-assessment data may not fully capture students' actual SEL competencies or their ability to apply these skills in authentic contexts. Future research could incorporate mixed-methods designs, including behavioral measures, performance-based assessments, or qualitative interviews, to triangulate self-reported findings. Additionally, expanding the sample beyond universities in Ho Chi Minh City would enhance the generalizability of results across Vietnamese higher education.

Future studies should also examine alternative predictors of SEL competency development, such as exposure to SEL-oriented coursework, participation in experiential learning, teaching methodologies, or institutional support structures. By shifting the focus from demographic variables to instructional and contextual factors, researchers can generate more actionable insights to support effective SEL integration in higher education.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated undergraduate students' self-assessed competencies in social–emotional learning (SEL) and competency-based instruction in Vietnamese higher education. The findings revealed no meaningful differences in SEL self-perceptions across gender or academic year, suggesting a relatively uniform experience of SEL-related competencies among undergraduate students. The absence of variation by year of study further indicates that SEL development may not be systematically scaffolded throughout undergraduate curricula. Importantly, although these variables did not yield statistically significant effects, the results are reported in the interest of scientific transparency and cumulative knowledge building. Overall, the findings suggest that while students possess foundational awareness of SEL concepts, opportunities to develop applied and integrative competencies remain limited. These results underscore the importance of intentional instructional design and experiential learning approaches in embedding SEL within competency-based higher education.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Campbell, E. (2014). *Teaching ethically as a moral condition of professionalism*. In L. Nucci, D. Narvaez, & T. Krettenauer (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (pp. 117–134). Routledge.
- [2] CASEL. (2020). *What is SEL?* Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>
- [3] CASEL. (2021). *CASEL's SEL framework: What are the core competence areas and where are they promoted?* Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.
- [4] Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 24*(2), 97–140.
- [5] Huynh Van Son, Giang Thien Vu, Do Tat Thien, Nguyen Chung Hai, & Nguyen Tran Minh Hai. (2022). Nhận thức về năng lực vận dụng mô hình giáo dục cảm xúc–xã hội (SEL) vào dạy học của sinh viên sư phạm Việt Nam [The perception of competence to apply the social–emotional learning model into teaching of Vietnamese pedagogical students]. *Vietnam Science Education Journal, 18*(1), 8–14.
- [6] Jagers, R. J., Rivas-Drake, D., & Williams, B. (2019). Transformative social and emotional learning (SEL): Toward SEL in service of educational equity and excellence. *Educational Psychologist, 54*(3), 162–184.
- [7] Jones, S. M., & Bouffard, S. M. (2012). Social and emotional learning in schools: From programs to strategies. *Social Policy Report, 26*(4), 1–33.
- [8] Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT Press.

-
- [9] Mathrani, A., Han, B., Mathrani, S., Jha, M., & Scogings, C. (2021). Interpreting academic integrity transgressions among learning communities. *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 17, Article 1.
- [10] McCall, C. S., Romero, M. E., Yang, W., & Weigand, T. (2023). A call for equity-focused social-emotional learning. *School Psychology Review*, 52(5), 586–607.
- [11] Pham, S. V. (2025). Undergraduate students' self-assessment of social-emotional learning and competency-based instruction in Vietnamese higher education. *Journal of Advances in Education and Philosophy*, 9(12), 579–584. <https://doi.org/10.36348/jaep.2025.v09i12.002>
- [12] Reimers, F. (2009). Educating for global competency. In J. Cohen & M. Malin (Eds.), *International perspectives on the goals of universal basic and secondary education* (pp. 197–216). Routledge.
- [13] Srinivasan, M. (2019). *SEL Every Day: Integrating social and emotional learning with instruction in secondary classrooms*. W. W. Norton & Company.