

# Social-Emotional Competence of Students in Ho Chi Minh City University of Education

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the level and structural characteristics of social-emotional competence (SEC) among students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education within the framework of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted with 382 undergraduate students using the Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis. The results indicate that students demonstrate a relatively high level of overall SEC ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). However, the distribution across components is uneven. Interpersonal competencies, particularly relationship skills and self-awareness, are more developed, while self-management and social awareness are comparatively weaker. All five components show positive and statistically significant correlations ( $p < .01$ ), supporting the integrated structure of SEC. Despite the generally high level of competence, the findings reveal a discrepancy between socio-emotional awareness and effective behavioral regulation. Importantly, this study identifies a critical structural imbalance between socio-emotional awareness and behavioral regulation, which represents its key contribution to the literature on social-emotional competence in higher education. This suggests that students' perceived competence does not fully translate into consistent real-life application. The study highlights the need for higher education institutions to adopt structured, experiential and practice-based approaches to foster balanced development across SEC components, particularly in enhancing emotional regulation, adaptability and psychological well-being.

**Keywords:** Social-emotional competence (SEC), Higher education students, CASEL framework.

## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary higher education, student development is increasingly understood as extending beyond academic achievement to include psychological and social competencies. Among these, social-emotional competence (SEC) has been widely recognized as a critical factor influencing students' well-being, academic engagement and long-term adaptability (Durlak et al., 2011; OECD, 2019). Grounded in the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework, SEC encompasses five interrelated domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020).

A growing body of research has demonstrated that SEC plays a vital role in students' academic success and mental health. Students with higher levels of SEC are more capable of regulating emotions, building positive relationships and maintaining engagement in learning activities (Taylor et al., 2017). Conversely, limited SEC has been associated with stress, behavioral challenges and reduced academic persistence (Eisenberg et al., 2010). These issues are particularly relevant in higher education, where students face increased autonomy, academic pressure and complex social interactions.

In the Vietnamese higher education context, students are increasingly exposed to academic pressure, social expectations and transitional challenges related to career development. However, formal social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are not yet systematically integrated into university curricula. As a result, students often develop socio-emotional awareness through informal experiences rather than structured training. This situation

raises an important question regarding whether such awareness is effectively translated into consistent behavioral competence in real-life contexts.

Despite its importance, research on SEC in higher education remains limited in non-Western contexts such as Vietnam. Existing studies have largely focused on general measurement rather than examining the internal distribution of competence components or identifying developmental imbalances. Moreover, empirical evidence specific to Vietnamese higher education is still insufficient to inform targeted interventions.

Notably, prior studies suggest that students often exhibit relatively strong socio-emotional awareness but encounter difficulties in translating this awareness into effective behavioral regulation (Denham et al., 2012). This imbalance indicates that SEC may not develop uniformly across its components and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of its structural characteristics.

In response to these gaps, the present study aims to (1) examine the overall level of SEC among students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education and (2) analyze the distribution and interrelationships among its core components. By providing empirical insights into both the level and structure of SEC, this study contributes to the growing body of SEL research and offers practical implications for enhancing student development in the Vietnamese higher education context.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

This study employed a quantitative approach using a cross-sectional survey design to examine the level of SEC and the distribution of its core components among university students. This design enables the systematic analysis of patterns and relationships within a specific population at a given point in time.

### Participants

The participants were undergraduate students from Ho Chi Minh City University of Education. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed and 382 valid responses were retained for analysis after data screening. Participants were selected using convenience sampling, which allowed for efficient access to students across different academic years and majors.

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants (N = 382)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	143	37.4
	Female	239	62.6
<b>Year of study</b>	Year 1	75	19.6
	Year 2	125	32.7
	Year 3	131	34.3
	Year 4	51	13.4
<b>Academic major</b>	Natural sciences	96	25.1
	Social sciences	198	51.8
	Specialized programs	41	10.7

	Foreign languages	47	12.3
<b>Academic performance</b>	Excellent	108	28.3
	Good	188	49.2
	Fair	79	20.7
	Average	7	1.8
<b>Training performance</b>	Excellent	143	37.4
	Good	148	38.7
	Fair	81	21.2
	Average	10	2.6

As presented in Table 1, the sample included 62.6% female and 37.4% male students. Participants were distributed across academic years, with 32.7% in Year 2 and 34.3% in Year 3. In terms of academic majors, 51.8% of students were from social sciences. Regarding academic performance, 49.2% were classified as good and 28.3% as excellent. Training performance showed a similar distribution, with 38.7% rated as good and 37.4% as excellent.

Participation in the study was voluntary and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection process.

### **Instrument**

The study utilized the Social-Emotional Competence Questionnaire (SECQ) developed by Zhou and Ee (2012), based on the CASEL framework. The instrument consists of 25 items measuring five dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

Responses were measured on a six-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree).

### **Data collection procedure**

Data were collected between January and February 2026 during the academic period. The survey was administered in an online format using a structured questionnaire. Participants completed the survey voluntarily and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection process.

### **Data analysis**

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 22.0. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to assess the level of SEC. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among the components. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The results indicated high internal consistency, with alpha values for the subscales ranging from 0.906 to 0.930

## **RESULTS**

### **Overall level of social-emotional competence**

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the overall level of SEC among students. The distribution of competence levels is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Distribution of social-emotional competence levels (N = 382).**

Level	Score range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very low	1.00–1.83	6	1.6
Low	1.84–2.67	10	2.6
Moderately low	2.68–3.51	31	8.1
Moderately high	3.52–4.35	89	23.3
High	4.36–5.19	162	42.4
Very high	5.20–6.00	84	22.0

Note.  $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ .

The findings indicate that students demonstrated a high level of SEC ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). The majority of participants were classified in the high (42.4%) and very high (22.0%) categories. Overall, approximately 88% of students scored at or above the moderately high level, reflecting a generally strong profile of SEC.

A smaller proportion of students fell into the lower categories, including moderately low (8.1%), low (2.6%) and very low (1.6%). This suggests that although most students possess adequate competencies, a minority may still experience difficulties in emotional regulation and social adaptation. The standard deviation ( $SD = 0.95$ ) indicates moderate variability across the sample.

### Social-emotional competence across five dimensions

The descriptive statistics for the five dimensions of SEC are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Means and standard deviations of the five dimensions of SEC**

Dimension	M	SD	Level
Self-awareness	4.68	1.05	High
Self-management	4.32	1.09	Moderately high
Social awareness	4.29	1.13	Moderately high
Relationship skills	4.73	1.03	High
Responsible decision-making	4.61	1.04	High

Among the five dimensions, relationship skills obtained the highest mean score ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), followed by self-awareness ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) and responsible decision-making ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ), all at a high level.

In contrast, self-management ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and social awareness ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) were rated at a moderately high level. Social awareness showed the greatest variability ( $SD = 1.13$ ), indicating substantial differences among students in their ability to understand others' perspectives and social contexts.

Overall, the results suggest that students performed better in interpersonal competencies than in intrapersonal regulation and social perception.

### Correlations among the five dimensions

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the five dimensions. The results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4. Pearson correlation matrix of social-emotional competence dimensions.**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-awareness	—				
2. Self-management	.79**	—			
3. Social awareness	.71**	.73**	—		
4. Relationship skills	.77**	.72**	.64**	—	
5. Responsible decision-making	.78**	.72**	.75**	.79**	—

Note. N = 382.  $p < .01$  (2-tailed). \*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level.

All correlations were positive and statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ), indicating that the five dimensions are closely interrelated. Correlation coefficients ranged from .64 to .79, representing moderate to strong associations ( $r \geq .50$ ).

The strongest relationships were observed between relationship skills and responsible decision-making ( $r = .79$ ) and between self-awareness and self-management ( $r = .79$ ). The lowest, though still meaningful, correlation was found between social awareness and relationship skills ( $r = .64$ ). These findings support the interconnected structure of SEC.

## DISCUSSION

### Overall level of social-emotional competence

The present study found that students demonstrated a high level of SEC. This finding is consistent with the framework proposed by CASEL, which conceptualizes SEC as a set of interrelated skills developed through continuous interaction between individual and environmental factors (CASEL, 2020).

This result is in line with previous research indicating that students in higher education settings tend to report moderate to high levels of SEC due to exposure to collaborative learning, social engagement and reflective academic practices (Durlak et al., 2011; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The relatively high proportion of students at the upper levels in the current study may be explained by the specific context of teacher education, where communication, interpersonal interaction and self-reflection are emphasized as core components of professional training.

However, a small proportion of students exhibited lower levels of competence. This finding is noteworthy, as prior studies have shown that limited SEC may be associated with difficulties in academic adjustment, stress management and psychological well-being (Durlak et al., 2011). Therefore, while the overall results are positive, they also highlight the need for targeted support for students who may be at risk.

### Differences among dimensions

The findings revealed that relationship skills, self-awareness and responsible decision-making were the strongest dimensions, whereas self-management and social awareness were comparatively weaker.

This pattern is partially consistent with the CASEL framework, which emphasizes the integration of interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies (CASEL, 2020). The strong performance in relationship skills may be attributed to the social nature of university learning environments, particularly in teacher education programs that require frequent collaboration, group work and communication. Similar findings have been reported in previous studies, where interpersonal competencies tend to develop more readily through social interaction (Zins et al., 2004).

In contrast, the relatively lower scores in self-management and social awareness suggest that these competencies may require more intentional development. Emotional regulation and perspective-taking are complex processes that often depend on metacognitive skills and guided practice (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Additionally, the higher variability observed in social awareness may reflect differences in students' exposure to diverse social and cultural contexts, which influence their ability to understand others' perspectives.

These findings suggest that SEC does not develop uniformly across dimensions. Instead, certain competencies, particularly those related to internal regulation and social cognition, may require more structured support within educational programs.

### **Relationships among dimensions**

The correlation analysis confirmed that all five dimensions were positively and significantly related, supporting the integrated structure of SEC.

Self-awareness demonstrated consistently strong associations with all other dimensions, highlighting its foundational role. This finding is consistent with theoretical perspectives suggesting that the ability to recognize one's own emotions is a prerequisite for effective self-regulation and social functioning (Brackett et al., 2011). In this sense, self-awareness may act as a central mechanism that facilitates the development of other social-emotional competencies.

The strong relationship between relationship skills and responsible decision-making suggests that students who are more effective in interpersonal interactions may also be more likely to consider social norms and ethical consequences when making decisions. This aligns with previous research indicating that social competence and moral reasoning are closely linked (Denham, 2006).

Overall, the pattern of correlations supports the view that SEC functions as a dynamic and interconnected system. Improvements in one domain may contribute to the development of others, although causal relationships cannot be established based on the current data.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have several implications for educational practice. First, although students generally demonstrated high levels of SEC, the lower performance in self-management and social awareness suggests the need for targeted interventions in these areas.

Educational programs should adopt a comprehensive approach to social-emotional learning, consistent with the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2020), ensuring balanced development across all competencies. In particular, integrating structured activities such as emotional regulation training, reflective exercises and perspective-taking tasks may help strengthen these relatively weaker dimensions.

Second, the central role of self-awareness highlighted in this study suggests that interventions focusing on self-reflection and emotional understanding may have broader benefits across multiple domains of SEC. This is supported by prior research demonstrating that foundational competencies can generate positive spillover effects (Durlak et al., 2011).

Finally, future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to further examine the development of SEC over time and to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions in higher education contexts.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among variables. Second, the use of self-report measures may introduce response bias, as participants' responses may reflect subjective perceptions rather than actual behavior. Third, the sample was drawn from a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts.

Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to better examine the development of SEC over time and to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the level and structure of social-emotional competence among students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education. The findings indicate that students generally exhibit high levels of social-emotional competence, with most participants falling within the moderately high to very high range. Among the five dimensions, relationship skills, self-awareness and responsible decision-making were the strongest, whereas self-management and social awareness were relatively weaker. Correlation analyses further indicated significant positive associations among all dimensions, supporting its conceptualization as an integrated construct, with self-awareness functioning as a central component.

These findings suggest that although students demonstrate overall strong social-emotional functioning, the uneven development across dimensions indicates the need for more balanced competency development. It is recommended that higher education institutions systematically integrate social-emotional learning into formal curricula, particularly within teacher education programs where interpersonal and reflective competencies are essential. Structured learning activities such as guided reflection, collaborative tasks and experiential learning should be incorporated to strengthen both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

Furthermore, targeted interventions should prioritize self-management and social awareness, focusing on emotional regulation, stress management and perspective-taking. These competencies require sustained practice and guided facilitation rather than incidental learning. In addition, fostering supportive and interactive learning environments can enhance opportunities for communication, collaboration and self-reflection, thereby reinforcing social-emotional development.

Overall, this study provides empirical evidence from a Vietnamese higher education context and underscores the importance of fostering balanced social-emotional competencies as a foundation for students' academic, personal and professional development. This finding suggests that the high level of reported competence may partly reflect students' subjective self-perceptions rather than fully developed behavioral capabilities in real-life situations.

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