



## FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT THROUGH EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN VIETNAM

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### Abstract:

In this day and age, extracurricular activities play an important role in the full development of university students by enhancing their soft skills, which are basically for their occupations and social calendar. In the face of significant benefits, numerous students face obstacles in meeting the demands of the job market due to a lack of soft skills. More than 83% of students are unable to accomplish job requirements due to skills deficiency, according to statistics from the Vietnam Institute of Educational Research. This paper reports the findings from an investigation into students' perceptions of the necessity and development of soft skills through extracurricular activities, particularly focusing on Youth Union activities by conducting a questionnaire survey of foreign language students. The findings show that foreign language students are fully aware of the essential soft skills. The findings also point out why they choose to participate in extracurricular activities to develop these skills.

**Keywords:** soft skills development, foreign language students, extracurricular activities, Youth Union

### 1. Introduction

Studies have identified the significant role of soft skills in today's workplace, leading to career success (Tripathy, 2020; Becic *et al.*, 2024; Kaushik & Sinsinwar, 2024). Along with hard skills, soft skills are considered required evaluation criteria for candidates and employees. One of the most practical ways for soft skills development among students is by participating in extracurricular activities. In the Vietnamese context, scholars have offered plenty of extracurricular activities for students. However, demotivating factors,

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such as a lack of relevance, engagement, or ineffective time management, can lead to students' disengagement in these activities. These highlight the need to study students' choices and preferences in developing soft skills through extracurricular activities. Moreover, while numerous studies have investigated soft skills development through extracurricular activities, few have specifically focused on foreign language students or explored their perceptions of which activities are most beneficial. One major constraint for identifying soft skills is that no specific list of soft skills is universally agreed upon for career success (Green-Weir, 2020), complicating research in this area.

Accordingly, this study aims to address the following two research questions:

- 1) What are the essential soft skills for foreign language students after graduating and entering the job market?
- 2) What are the reasons that lead to their choices of participation in extracurricular activities to develop soft skills?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Role of Extracurricular Activities in Developing Soft Skills

Extracurricular activities have long been recognized as crucial in developing soft skills among university students. These activities not only complement academic learning but also foster essential skills such as communication, teamwork, time management, and problem-solving, all of which are valuable in professional environments. According to Shcheglova (2019), studies conducted in international universities since the 1990s have yielded mixed results regarding the impact of extracurricular activities on learning outcomes. While some research highlights positive effects on student skills and academic performance, others report neutral or negative outcomes (Kuh *et al.*, 2000; Pascarella *et al.*, 2010;). This variation suggests that while extracurricular activities are widely studied, their effects can depend on various factors such as institutional context and student engagement.

In countries where soft skills are highly emphasized, such as the U.S., a study by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford University found that 85% of career success is attributed to well-developed soft skills, with only 15% stemming from technical knowledge (Chua *et al.*, 2017). This underscores the importance of soft skills in professional life and highlights the critical role that universities must play in fostering these competencies. Similarly, Ivanova and Logvinova (2017) point out that extracurricular activities in Russian universities bring many positive outcomes, reinforcing the global recognition of their value.

Moreover, Chua *et al.* (2017) found that participation in student union activities enhances critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. This research in the Philippines emphasizes that soft skills are interconnected; developing one skill can promote growth in others. To maximize the effectiveness of these activities, however, universities and clubs must offer structured programs and clear guidance to engage students and ensure that they acquire the necessary skills for their future careers.

## **2.2 The Current Situation of Soft Skills Among Foreign Language Students**

In today's educational landscape in Can Tho City, developing soft skills has become increasingly essential, especially for students majoring in foreign languages. Soft skills not only support academic achievement but also serve as key competencies for success in the labor market. Numerous studies have demonstrated that soft skills, such as communication and adaptability, play a pivotal role in helping students navigate diverse and complex professional environments (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Phuong, 2022).

Research conducted in developed countries such as the U.S., Australia, Canada, and the U.K. has identified ten essential soft skills for students, as outlined by Viet (2009). These include learning and self-study skills, creative thinking, planning and organizing, communication, problem-solving, and teamwork (Nhat, 2021). For foreign language students in Can Tho, these skills are vital for academic success and career advancement, particularly in international work settings. Despite this, many students still fail to recognize the importance of developing soft skills, which can hinder their ability to adapt to the demands of the labor market (Hau, 2021).

## **2.3 Participation in Extracurricular Activities to Develop Soft Skills: Challenges and Opportunities**

Foreign language students today face various challenges in cultivating soft skills such as communication, leadership, time management, and teamwork. One of the most effective ways to develop these competencies is through participation in extracurricular activities. However, the reality shows that student engagement in these activities is limited, often due to factors such as academic pressure, time constraints, and a lack of motivation.

A study by Stanford University (2016) reveals that heavy academic workloads and high expectations can cause significant stress, leaving students with little time for extracurricular participation. This, in turn, reduces their opportunities to develop soft skills, which are critical for personal and professional growth. Munir and Zaheer (2021) further note that time limitations, especially for students balancing both studies and part-time work, discourage participation in extracurricular activities, particularly in distance learning environments where flexibility is required.

For foreign language students in Can Tho City, similar barriers exist. The demands of mastering a foreign language, combined with academic pressures, result in lower participation rates in extracurricular activities. Although there are several clubs and programs available, the number of clubs specifically tailored for foreign language students remains limited. This lack of specialized platforms diminishes students' opportunities to engage in skill-building activities, pushing them to rely mainly on faculty union or student association events.

## **3. Material and Methods**

This study employs a survey questionnaire to investigate the role of extracurricular activities in developing soft skills among foreign language students. The study

participants comprised 180 foreign language major students enrolled in the School of Foreign Languages at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. The questionnaire was designed based on both previous research by Tran Vo Thien An conducted in 2023 in various schools, departments, and institutes at a university in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam as well as insights into the local educational context. Following the collection of survey data, the research combines various research methods, including synthesis analysis and statistical analysis, to examine the data collected.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Soft Skills Chosen by Foreign Language Students as Essential After Graduating and Entering the Job Market

When examining the soft skills that foreign language students consider essential for graduation and entering the job market, "Communication skills" emerged as the most selected, with 177 students choosing it, accounting for 98.3%. This underscores the importance of effective communication in the job market. Next in line is "Teamwork skills", which were highly valued by 168 students (93.3%), reflecting the need for collaboration and working together to achieve common goals. Following that is "Problem-solving skills", chosen by 156 students (86.7%), and "Time management skills", selected by 157 students (87.2%). Both of these skills are crucial for efficiently managing and organizing tasks. "Presentation skills" were also highly regarded, with 153 students (85%) emphasizing the necessity of conveying ideas clearly and persuasively.

Although fewer students chose "Leadership skills" (119 students, accounting for 66.1%) or "Negotiation skills" (114 students, accounting for 63.3%), these are still important skills that some students recognize as needing development for their careers. Other skills, such as "Critical thinking skills" (81.7%), "Adaptability skills" (73.3%), and "Planning and organizing skills" (77.2%), also received considerable attention from students, highlighting the importance of being prepared to face changes and being flexible in the workplace.

**Table 1:** Soft skills chosen by foreign language students as essential after graduating and entering the job market

| Soft skills                        | Participants and percentage responses |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Communication skills            | 177 (98.3%)                           |
| 2. Teamwork skills                 | 168 (93.3%)                           |
| 3. Problem-solving skills          | 156 (86.7%)                           |
| 4. Leadership skills               | 119 (66.1%)                           |
| 5. Critical thinking skills        | 147 (81.7%)                           |
| 6. Adaptability skills             | 132 (73.3%)                           |
| 7. Time management skills          | 157 (87.2%)                           |
| 8. Negotiation skills              | 114 (63.3%)                           |
| 9. Presentation skills             | 153 (85%)                             |
| 10. Planning and organizing skills | 139 (77.2%)                           |

## 4.2 The Reasons Lead to Their Choice to Participate in Extracurricular Activities to Develop Soft Skills

There are various reasons leading to students' choices to engage in extracurricular activities, and due to a wide range of personalities, interests, and hobbies, these activities are not chosen impulsively among students. Thus, the survey result reveals 4 main causes that affect their options in participation in those activities.

**Table 2:** The reasons foreign language students choose to participate in extracurricular activities may include

| Reasons  | Participants and percentage responses |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. The difficulty level of the activities is suitable for my abilities | 93 (51.7%)                            |
| 2. The selected activities align with my future goals                  | 96 (53.3%)                            |
| 3. The selected activities meet my needs for learning and research     | 94 (52.2%)                            |
| 4. The selected activities are within my budget                        | 46 (25.6%)                            |
| 5. I enjoy participating with my friends                               | 126 (70%)                             |
| 6. I enjoy participating alone   | 12 (6.7%)                             |
| 7. I enjoy participating in small group activities                     | 38 (21.1%)                            |
| 8. I was advised by seniors/friends to choose this activity            | 32 (17.8%)                            |
| 9. I was advised by academic advisors to choose this activity          | 12 (6.7%)                             |
| 10. I learned about the activity through the university's website      | 48 (26.7%)                            |
| 11. I learned about the activity through groups or Facebook pages      | 71 (39.4%)                            |

Based on the statistical data collected, the main reason students participate in extracurricular activities is "I enjoy participating with my friends" with 70% of the participants choosing this option. This indicates that a sense of community and connection with friends plays a significant role in students' participation decisions.

Following this, 53.3% of students selected activities that align with their future goals, highlighting the importance of choosing activities that can support their future career development. Also, the reason that "The selected activities meet my needs for learning and research" also has a high percentage at 52.2%, showing that students seek opportunities for learning and research through extracurricular activities. Additionally, 51.7% of students consider "The difficulty level of the activities is suitable for my abilities" as an important factor, indicating their interest in participating in activities that match their skill levels.

Another reason, "I learn about the activities through groups or Facebook pages," was chosen by 39.4% of students, reflecting the trend of using social media to find information about activities. Next, "I learn about the activities through the university's website" accounted for 26.7%, showing that some students still rely on the university's official channels for information. Regarding financial considerations, "The selected activities are within my budget" received 25.6% of the votes. A smaller portion (21.1%) of students prefer participating in "small group activities," indicating a preference among some students for a less crowded working environment.

The reason "I was advised by seniors/friends to choose this activity" was selected by 17.8% of students, while "I was advised by academic advisors to choose this activity" and "I enjoy participating alone" both had low percentages, at 6.7%. This suggests that teacher advice or solo participation is not a determining factor for most students.

## 5. Recommendations

Based on the research findings, we propose recommendations for enhancing soft skills development and improving participation in extracurricular activities among foreign language students:

- 1) Encouraging students to prioritize the development of communication skills is crucial because almost all participants selected communication skills (98.3%) as essential for entering the job market.
- 2) Promoting the development of teamwork and problem-solving skills is key since 93.3% and 86.7% of participants identified them. These skills are important for collaboration and critical thinking tasks in their future careers.
- 3) Tailoring extracurricular activities to align with students' interests, career goals, and skill levels is necessary to ensure that these opportunities effectively meet both their academic and personal development needs.
- 4) Leveraging social networks and university channels to inform students about extracurricular opportunities is essential for cultivating engagement and ensuring students have access to accessible and familiar resources.
- 5) Addressing participation barriers such as time constraints, budget limitations, and group dynamics, is important for creating more inclusive and appealing extracurricular activities that cater to a broader range of student preferences.

## 6. Conclusion

This study addressed students' views on crucial soft skills for their future careers while exploring their choices of extracurricular activities to develop these skills. In terms of soft skills, the results show that most foreign language students recognize the significance of soft skills on future career development. Specifically, communication, teamwork, time management, problem-solving, and presentation skills are highly valued among these students as closely aligned with their majors and future direction, which require employees to master the skills. However, other skills, such as leadership and negotiation skills, were ranked lower. Then, more focus should be placed on developing these soft skills to ensure a well-rounded development. Regarding their reasons for participating in extracurricular activities, students are significantly influenced by social connections, as a majority of students enjoy participation with friends. Additionally, students consider alignment with their learning and future career path as a main factor in their decision to engage in extracurricular activities at school. Based on the results in general, it is evident that foreign language students have a proactive approach toward enhancing their soft

skills, aside from academic achievement, emphasizing their positive attitudes, sense of responsibility, and understanding of career prerequisites and qualifications. In conclusion, foreign language students show a high level of awareness toward the necessity of soft skills and recognize that joining extracurricular activities supports their personal growth.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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