

The Learning Journey of Sustainable Young Leaders: How Experiential and Cultural Learning Shapes Future Sustainability Champions

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Abstract

The urgency of global sustainability challenges necessitates the development of leaders equipped with the competencies to drive transformative change. This study examines how experiential and cultural learning influence sustainability awareness and leadership development among students participating in an international blended learning program. Using a qualitative research design, the study explores how hands-on sustainability projects, intercultural engagement, and reflective learning shape students' ability to critically assess and address sustainability challenges.

Grounded in Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), and Intercultural Competence Theory (Deardorff, 2006), this research investigates how direct experiences, structured reflection, and cross-cultural exposure contribute to sustainability-oriented leadership development. ELT highlights learning through concrete experiences and reflection, TLT explains how transformative shifts in thinking occur through critical reflection, and Intercultural Competence Theory emphasizes the role of cross-cultural understanding in effective leadership and decisionmaking.

Data collection includes pre- and post-program interviews, participant observations, and reflective journals from twenty student participants engaged in the program. The data is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key learning transformations. Findings reveal that experiential and cultural learning enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, intercultural adaptability, and leadership skills, enabling students to bridge theoretical knowledge with real-world sustainability applications. Exposure to diverse cultural perspectives fosters cross-cultural competence, ethical leadership, and a stronger commitment to sustainability action.

This study contributes to the discourse on sustainability education, transformative pedagogy, and global leadership. The findings offer insights for educators, policymakers, and organizations on designing more effective experiential learning models that prepare future sustainability leaders.

Keywords: experiential learning, transformative learning, intercultural competence, cultural immersion, sustainability education, leadership development