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The impact of perceived university social responsibility on lecturers' education for sustainable development implementation behavior in Vietnam

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Abstract: Higher education institutions increasingly declare commitments to university social responsibility (USR), yet these commitments do not consistently translate into the classroom practices required for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This study examines the mechanism through which lecturers' perceived USR influences their ESD implementation behavior, and the conditions under which this influence is strengthened. Grounded in the Whole Institution Approach, Signaling Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, the study proposes a serial mediation model in which university reputation and organizational commitment transmit the effect of perceived USR on ESD implementation behavior. It further examines whether lecturers' attitudes towards sustainable development moderate the relationship between organizational commitment and ESD implementation behavior. Primary data were collected from 354 lecturers at public and private universities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, using a stratified sampling method, and were analyzed with partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The measurement model satisfied the criteria for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. The structural results indicate that perceived USR has a positive and significant effect on ESD implementation behavior ($\beta = 0.137$). Perceived USR positively affects university reputation ($\beta = 0.375$), which in turn increases organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.331$), and organizational commitment positively affects ESD implementation behavior ($\beta = 0.208$). The serial indirect effect through university reputation and organizational commitment is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.026$), supporting the proposed mediation mechanism. Sustainable development attitude significantly and positively moderates the effect of organizational commitment on ESD implementation behavior ($\beta = 0.105$), and it also exerts a strong direct effect ($\beta = 0.430$). These findings clarify how institutional commitments to sustainability are converted into individual teaching behavior, and they indicate that cultivating lecturers' sustainability attitudes is a necessary condition for advancing sustainable development in higher education. The study offers implications for university leaders and education policymakers seeking to embed sustainability within institutional governance.

Keywords: university social responsibility, education for sustainable development, implementation behavior, organizational commitment, sustainable development attitude

Introduction

The gap between strategic commitments to university social responsibility (USR) and the actual implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a key challenge in the governance of higher education (Le & Nguyen, 2023). While USR is seen as a comprehensive strategic management system including teaching, research, operations and community service (Vallaeys, 2014; Ali et al., 2021), the actual integration of these strategic orientations in the classroom practice is still limited. In this context, lecturers are the key agents to translate macro-level policies into micro-level pedagogical behaviors. However, the realization of ESD implementation behavior is dependent on volitional effort and professional work, which are heavily affected by the institutional environment and internal psychological motivations (Holst et al., 2025).

Although many studies have been conducted on the concepts of USR and ESD, the literature review reveals many empirical gaps. Previous studies have primarily focused on measuring the effects of USR on brand image, service quality, student satisfaction (Vázquez et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2020; Vuong et al., 2024). For human resources, the assessment is mainly at the level of general engagement or job satisfaction (Pham, 2022; Phan et al., 2023), without quantitative analysis of the impact of perceived USR on specific professional behaviors, such as ESD implementation behavior. In addition, the mediating mechanism of the process of "how" perceived USR leads to behavior is also underexplored, especially the roles of organizational factors (university reputation) and individual psychological factors (organizational commitment, personal attitudes) (Daramola, 2024).

To fill these gaps, this study is conducted to empirically examine the mechanism through which perceived USR affects the ESD implementation behavior of university lecturers in Vietnam. The research develops a multidimensional analytical framework by assessing the serial mediating roles of university reputation and organizational commitment. At the same time, the study explores the moderating role of sustainable development attitudes to clarify the boundary conditions that determine the extent of this translation process. The findings of this study not only contribute to the theoretical framework of higher education governance but also offer practical implications to help educational institutions optimize their capacity for executing sustainable development initiatives.

The structure of this paper is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, Section 2 presents the theoretical foundation and hypothesis development. Section 3 discusses the research methodology. Section 4 reports the results of the data analysis using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Section 5 discusses the findings, and Section 6 presents the conclusions and managerial implications.

Theoretical foundation and hypothesis development

Fundamental theories

The Whole Institution Approach (WIA) is an important framework for assessing sustainable development in educational contexts (Holst, 2024). The WIA argues that ESD requires integrated, synchronised implementation across the whole organizational system, including governance, operations and organizational culture. The implementation of the WIA creates a normative institutional environment that shapes the professional conduct of individuals.

Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) is used to describe the process by which organizations transmit signals of unobservable attributes to reduce information asymmetry. USR adoption by higher education is a signal that conveys genuine information about the organization's capabilities and ethics (Connelly et al., 2011). Such signals enhance lecturers' perceptions of the institution's reputation.

The theoretical background to explain the psychological attachment between individuals and organizations is Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to the theory, when universities send signals of prestige, lecturers feel pride and a higher level of identification with the organization, which subsequently enhances their overall organizational commitment.

Social Exchange Theory was introduced by Blau (1964) and is applied to explain the drivers of behaviors. Based on the norm of reciprocity, lecturers who perceive positive values from their organization develop a sense of obligation to reciprocate through voluntary extra-role professional behaviors.

Hypothesis development

Perceived USR and ESD implementation behavior

Perceived USR refers to an individual's evaluation of the university's management strategy for its impacts on four dimensions: educational, research, organizational, and social (Vallaeys, 2014). The WIA model argues that when an

organization systematically implements USR, it creates a normative institutional environment that is a strong predictor of an individual's ESD implementation behavior (Holst, 2024).

Conversely, the absence of macro-level governance commitments results in a scenario in which sustainable development policies are not inherently translated into the micro-level professional conduct of lecturers (Le & Nguyen, 2023). An organization's explicit demonstration of social responsibility supplies the necessary resources and guidance for lecturers to voluntarily integrate sustainability into their pedagogical activities. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Perceived USR positively affects lecturers' ESD implementation behavior.

The mediating mechanism of university reputation and organizational commitment

Signaling Theory identifies social responsibility practices as an important factor in the improvement of a university's reputation and image (Phan et al., 2023; Plungpongpan et al., 2016). USR programs send clear signals that lead lecturers to form positive assessments of the organization's reputation.

H2a: Perceived USR positively affects university reputation.

The mechanism is explained by Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) which describes the process by which reputation becomes attachment. Empirical studies demonstrate that organizational reputation and sustainable values foster employee loyalty and commitment (Pham, 2022).

H2b: University reputation positively affects lecturers' organizational commitment.

Grounded in Social Exchange Theory, organizational commitment acts as a motivational mediator driving implementation behavior. Integrating ESD content into lectures requires voluntary effort. Ganji et al. (2025) provided empirical evidence that organizational policies can trigger ESD behavior only when they succeed in nurturing an individual's commitment to the organization.

H2c: Organizational commitment positively affects lecturers' ESD implementation behavior.

Synthesising Signaling Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Social Exchange Theory provides a comprehensive framework for this serial mechanism. USR practices function as positive signals that enhance university reputation (Connelly et al., 2011; Phan et al., 2023). In turn, this elevated reputation fosters lecturers' identification and organizational commitment (Pham, 2022). Ultimately, governed by the norm of reciprocity, this commitment intrinsically motivates lecturers to voluntarily engage in extra-role pedagogical behaviors, specifically ESD implementation (Ganji et al., 2025). Therefore, university reputation and organizational commitment form a serial mediating mechanism linking perceived USR to actual ESD implementation behavior.

H2d: University reputation and organizational commitment serially mediate the relationship between perceived USR and lecturers' ESD implementation behavior.

The moderating role of sustainable development attitude

Although organizational commitment promotes general extra-role behaviors, this factor is not sufficient to promote highly specific behaviors such as ESD. Daramola (2024) found that personal attitude towards sustainability is an important factor in translating organizational motivation into the behavior of integrating ESD in teaching practice.

It is therefore expected that when a lecturer has a high commitment to the organization and a positive attitude towards sustainable development, these two factors would produce a synergistic interaction effect that significantly promotes ESD implementation behavior. On the other hand, a lack of supportive attitude towards sustainable values may attenuate the positive effect of organizational commitment on ESD implementation behavior. Therefore, personal attitudes dictate the magnitude of this relationship:

H3: Sustainable development attitude positively moderates the relationship between organizational commitment and ESD implementation behavior.

Research methodology

Sampling design and data collection

This study collected primary data from a target population comprising lecturers currently employed at higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh City. To ensure representativeness and accurately reflect the governance characteristics of

the educational system, a stratified sampling method based on ownership type was applied, in conjunction with convenience and snowball sampling techniques.

The survey sample was allocated into two principal groups: private universities, including Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH), and Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF); and public universities, encompassing the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH), Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HCMUT, a member of Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City), and Saigon University, among others.

The first round of data collection provided a greater number of responses than expected. However, a rigorous data cleaning process was performed, discarding incomplete questionnaires, straight-lining responses and outliers, which resulted in a final sample of 354 valid observations for analysis. In accordance with the criteria proposed by Hair et al. (2019), for a complex structural model, a sample size of 354 observations substantially exceeds the minimum requirement, thereby ensuring a high level of statistical power for the PLS-SEM analyses.

Measurement of variables

All constructs in the research model were measured using scales with established reliability and validity from international studies. A rigorous back-translation process was conducted by experts to ensure semantic equivalence when adapting these scales to the Vietnamese higher education context. The observed variables were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

Table 1. Summary of the measurement scales in the model

Construct	Code	Number of items	Sources
Perceived USR	USR	4	Vázquez et al. (2016), Latif (2018)
University reputation	REP	4	Carmeli et al. (2006)
Organizational commitment	OCO	4	Allen & Meyer (1991)
Sustainable development attitude	ATT	4	Biasutti & Frate (2017), Daramola (2024)
ESD implementation behavior	ESD	6	Holst (2024), Çam-Tosun & Söğüt (2024)

Source: Compiled by the authors

Data analysis method

This study employed PLS-SEM using SmartPLS software version 3.2.9 to process and analyze the data. The analytical procedure was conducted in three stages:

Measurement model assessment: The study established a data processing strategy to secure the reliability and convergent validity of the model. Observed variables with outer loadings below the ideal threshold of 0.708 were evaluated and eliminated only if their removal increased the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) above the recommended threshold values (Hair et al., 2019). To meet this threshold, the CR must exceed 0.70, and the AVE must be 0.50 or higher. The discriminant validity was tested using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio (HTMT < 0.85).

Structural model assessment: The path coefficients were statistically tested with a bootstrapping procedure of 5,000 resamples. The explanatory power of the model was evaluated using the coefficient of determination (R^2). Furthermore, potential multicollinearity issues were strictly controlled using the variance inflation factor (VIF < 3.3).

Results

Descriptive statistics

Survey data were collected from 354 lecturers currently employed at public and private universities in Ho Chi Minh City. The demographic characteristics of the sample are relatively evenly distributed across gender, age, academic qualification and rank (Master's degree, Doctorate, Associate Professor/Professor), teaching experience, and disciplinary fields (Economics and Management, Engineering and Technology, Social Sciences), ensuring representativeness for the target population. The dataset contains no missing values and was subsequently coded for analysis using SmartPLS software.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the research sample

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	176	49.7
	Female	178	50.3
Age	Under 30 years old	106	29.9
	30 to 40 years old	78	22.0
	41 to 50 years old	81	22.9
	Over 50 years old	89	25.1
Academic qualification/rank	Master's degree	114	32.2
	Doctorate degree	103	29.1
	Associate Professor/Professor	137	38.7
Teaching experience	Under 5 years	128	36.2
	5 to 10 years	109	30.8
	Over 10 years	117	33.1
Disciplinary field	Economics and Management	122	34.5
	Social Sciences	122	34.5
	Engineering and Technology	110	31.1
University type	Public	171	48.3
	Private	183	51.7

Source: Authors' analysis of survey data

Measurement model assessment

The measurement model was assessed by evaluating internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. In the measurement model assessment, the observed variables ESD1 and ESD2 had outer loadings of 0.586 and 0.625, which are slightly below the ideal threshold of 0.708. However, according to Hair et al. (2019), indicators with outer loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 should be retained if their removal does not lead to an increase in CR and AVE above the suggested threshold values. Since the CR (0.878) and AVE (0.548) of the ESD construct already satisfy the recommended criteria, these variables were retained to preserve content validity.

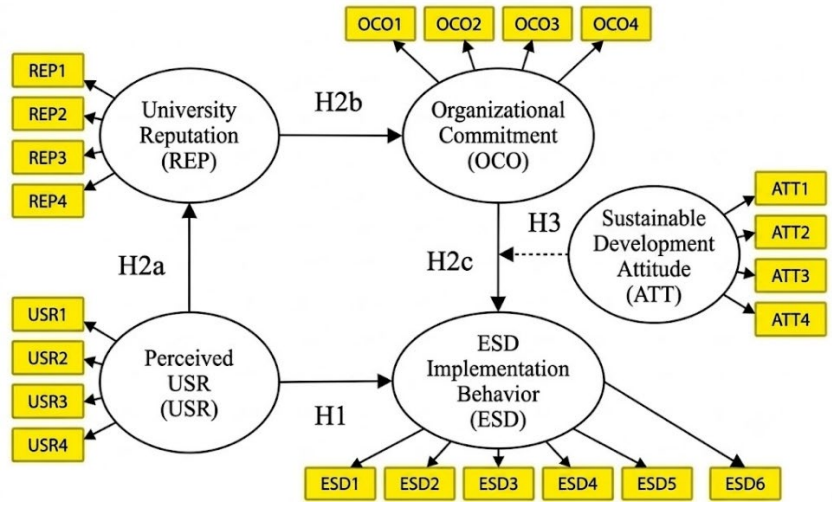

Figure 1. PLS-SEM structural model analysis results

Source: Authors' analysis using SmartPLS

The final measurement model assessment results are presented in Table 3. All observed variables exhibited outer loadings ranging from 0.586 to 0.952. All latent constructs achieved Cronbach's Alpha and CR values > 0.8, confirming an excellent level of internal consistency reliability. The AVE for all constructs was > 0.5, ranging from 0.548 to 0.901, fulfilling the requirements for convergent validity.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity assessment of the measurement scales

Latent construct	Code	Number of items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Perceived USR	USR	4	0.944 – 0.952	0.963	0.973	0.901
University reputation	REP	4	0.938 – 0.945	0.958	0.970	0.888
Organizational commitment	OCO	4	0.936 – 0.941	0.955	0.967	0.880
Sustainable development attitude	ATT	4	0.943 – 0.950	0.961	0.972	0.896
ESD implementation behavior	ESD	6	0.586 – 0.846	0.838	0.878	0.548

Source: Authors' analysis using SmartPLS

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations. As presented in Table 4, all HTMT values range from 0.117 to 0.593, which are strictly well below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). This indicates that all latent constructs in the model are conceptually distinct.

Table 3. Discriminant validity (HTMT ratio)

	ATT	ESD	OCO	REP	USR
ATT	-				
ESD	0.593	-			
OCO	0.288	0.423	-		
REP	0.265	0.362	0.346	-	
USR	0.466	0.384	0.117	0.390	-

Source: Authors' analysis using SmartPLS

Structural model assessment

Prior to hypothesis testing, potential multicollinearity was controlled. The analysis results indicated that the inner variance inflation factor (Inner VIF) values ranged from 1.000 to 1.345, which are significantly lower than the recommended threshold of 3.3 (Hair et al., 2019), affirming that multicollinearity did not distort the structural results.

The explanatory power of the model was evaluated through the coefficient of determination (R^2). The independent variables explained 35.8% of the variance in ESD implementation behavior, 11.0% of the variance in organizational commitment, and 14.1% of the variance in university reputation.

To test the research hypotheses, a bootstrapping technique with 5,000 resamples was applied to determine the statistical significance of the path coefficients.

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Table 4. Hypothesis testing results

Hypothesis	Path	β	STDEV	T-value	P-value	Conclusion
H1	USR → ESD	0.137	0.053	2.593	0.010	Supported
H2a	USR → REP	0.375	0.044	8.566	< 0.001	Supported
H2b	REP → OCO	0.331	0.047	6.988	< 0.001	Supported
H2c	OCO → ESD	0.208	0.061	3.413	0.001	Supported
H2d	USR → REP → OCO → ESD	0.026	0.009	2.744	0.006	Supported
H3	ATT * OCO → ESD	0.105	0.051	2.075	0.038	Supported
Main effect	ATT → ESD	0.430	0.049	8.786	< 0.001	Significant

Source: Authors' analysis using SmartPLS

As presented in Table 5, the structural model assessment confirms the statistical significance of all proposed hypotheses. Regarding the direct effects, perceived USR positively impacts ESD implementation behavior ($\beta = 0.137$, $t = 2.593$, $p = 0.010$), supporting H1. Furthermore, perceived USR significantly enhances university reputation ($\beta = 0.375$, $t = 8.566$, $p < 0.001$), which in turn positively affects organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.331$, $t = 6.988$, $p < 0.001$). Organizational commitment subsequently exerts a significant positive effect on ESD implementation behavior ($\beta = 0.208$, $t = 3.413$, $p = 0.001$). Consequently, hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H2c are fully supported.

To evaluate the serial mediation mechanism (H2d), the specific indirect effect of the entire causal chain was examined. The analysis reveals a statistically significant indirect effect of perceived USR on ESD implementation behavior through the sequential mediators of university reputation and organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.026$, $t = 2.744$, $p = 0.006$), providing empirical support for H2d.

Regarding the moderating analysis, the interaction term between sustainable development attitude and organizational commitment (ATT * OCO) has a positive and significant impact on ESD implementation behavior ($\beta = 0.105$, $t = 2.075$, $p = 0.038$). Therefore, hypothesis H3 is supported. Additionally, the main effect of sustainable development attitude on ESD implementation behavior is highly significant ($\beta = 0.430$, $t = 8.786$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

The impact of perceived USR on ESD implementation behavior

Quantitative testing results confirm that perceived USR has a positive and statistically significant impact on lecturers' ESD implementation behavior (H1 is supported). This finding provides empirical evidence that reinforces the perspectives of Holst (2024) and Leal Filho et al. (2018). Thus, the findings support the premise that the systematic implementation of USR policies contributes to a normative institutional environment, which in turn facilitates the integration of sustainable values into individual professional practices.

This finding is also consistent with the practical issue raised by Le & Nguyen (2023) in Vietnam, where macro policy commitments are not always matched with practical actions. Statistical evidence shows that sustainable development commitments affect teaching practices only if such commitments are translated into a clear perception of the organization's social responsibility in the mind of the teaching staff.

The mediating roles of university reputation and organizational commitment

The results of the study confirm a serial indirect effect between perceived USR and ESD implementation behavior through university reputation and organizational commitment (H2a, H2b, H2c, H2d are supported). Consistent with Signaling Theory and the conclusion of studies by Pham (2022) and Phan et al. (2023), the implementation of social responsibility helps the university send positive signals, thereby improving and consolidating the reputation of the organization. This reputation will then be the premise to increase the level of identification and affective commitment of lecturers to the university.

The reciprocity principle of Social Exchange Theory suggests that organizational commitment acts as a catalyst prompting lecturers to engage in voluntary extra-role behaviors, namely the behavior of ESD implementation. This finding supports the conclusion of Ganji et al. (2025) that organizational commitment is an important mediating

psychological mechanism for transforming a university's governance policies into the sustainable development behavior of its staff.

The moderating role of sustainable development attitude

A significant theoretical contribution of this study is the confirmation of the positive moderating role of sustainable development attitude on the relationship between organizational commitment and ESD implementation behavior (H3 is supported). In previous studies, Daramola (2024) has shown that personal attitudes towards the environment cannot directly predict the behavior of integrating ESD into teaching. Organizational support is a prerequisite.

The results of this study further elucidate this situation by identifying personal attitude as a boundary condition that, in particular, when coupled with a high level of organizational commitment to sustainable development values, greatly increases the intrinsic motivation to perform ESD behaviors. This finding bridges the theoretical gap regarding the interaction between organizational-level motivations and individual characteristics in shaping professional behaviors.

Contributions and challenges for sustainable development

The findings can be interpreted in direct relation to the study's objective of clarifying the contributions and challenges of sustainable development in higher education. The confirmed pathway, in which perceived USR affects ESD implementation behavior through university reputation and organizational commitment, shows how institutional sustainability commitments are translated into the teaching practices required to advance Sustainable Development Goal 4 and, in particular, Target 4.7 on equipping learners with the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). The evidence also indicates a challenge, since the institutional effect is modest ($\beta = 0.137$) relative to the effect of sustainable development attitude ($\beta = 0.430$); this suggests that institutional commitments are not translated automatically into behavior and that cultivating lecturers' sustainability attitudes is a necessary condition for embedding ESD (Le & Nguyen, 2023; Daramola, 2024).

Conclusions and managerial implications

Conclusions

This study explains how USR commitments shape the actual teaching behaviors of lecturers in Vietnam. The results demonstrate that when universities act responsibly, they enhance their reputation and build the organizational commitment needed to encourage sustainable teaching practices. However, individual attitudes also play a major role. A lecturer's positive attitude towards sustainability substantially strengthens the effect of organizational commitment on the integration of ESD into teaching. Overall, this research offers practical evidence on how institutions can successfully turn broad sustainability policies into everyday teaching actions. In relation to sustainable development, the study indicates that responsible institutional conduct advances ESD only when it is accompanied by lecturers' commitment and, above all, their positive attitudes towards sustainability; strengthening institutional responsibility and cultivating individual sustainability attitudes should therefore proceed together so that sustainability policy is realized as educational practice.

Managerial implications

Implications for university leadership: To enhance effectiveness, universities are advised to align formal written policies with practical execution, transitioning from standalone social activities to incorporating USR into core operational strategies. Leadership should focus on constructing organizational reputation and maintaining a transparent and democratic working environment to consolidate the commitment levels of the lecturers. Furthermore, to maximize the activation of ESD implementation behavior, universities need to implement professional development courses that not only address pedagogical skills but also foster the positive attitude of lecturers towards sustainable development goals.

For the Ministry of Education and Training: The shared impact mechanism for public and private universities offers a practical basis for state regulatory agencies to develop and promulgate a common quality accreditation standard on USR and ESD. The quantification of social responsibility criteria in university ranking systems will generate positive institutional pressure, encouraging universities to proactively transform their governance models.

Limitations and future research directions

The research data were collected using a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to draw firm causal inferences over time linking changes in USR policies to changes in lecturers' behaviors. Future investigations should use longitudinal data to address this limitation.

The scope of sampling is currently focused mainly on Ho Chi Minh City. The next studies will expand the scale of sampling nationwide, thereby increasing the representativeness and external validity of the model.

The entire current analysis focuses solely on the perspective of the teaching staff. The higher education ecosystem involves multidimensional interactions; therefore, future research should integrate evaluation data from students, alumni, and corporate partners to provide a more comprehensive picture of how USR is perceived and its subsequent behavioral impacts across different stakeholders.

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