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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Internationalised Master's Education for Sustainable Development: Aspirations and Access Barriers among Youth Climate Actors in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT
Internationalisation-at-Home has become an important development strategy for Vietnamese higher education sector. In this effort, internationalised Master's education expands access to global and interdisciplinary knowledge while enhancing professional competence locally without requiring overseas mobility. In practice, access to these educational programs remains challenging due to high costs, English-medium instruction requirements, urban concentration and information barriers. This study examines youth climate actors' aspirations and their perceived barriers to accessing internationalised Master's education related to sustainable development. Using a multiphase mixed-methods design, the study analyses collected data from 117 valid questionnaires, six in-depth interviews, and one focused group discussion. Findings show that participants seek globally informed, locally applicable knowledge, interdisciplinary capacity, professional legitimacy, and collective action networks for sustained climate work and policy engagement. Meanwhile, perceived barriers include limited access to program information, inflexible formats, the limited affordability of tuition fees, scholarship uncertainty, high language requirements, and limited recognition of climate-related experience in admissions. The article argues that internationalised Master's education should be evaluated not solely in terms of its scale of expansion, but also in terms of the extent to which intended learners can identify, access, and apply what they have learned meaningfullyto sustainable development practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's commitment to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the National Strategy on Climate Change to 2050 has placed the development of high-quality human resourcesat the centre of national policy (UN in Viet Nam, 2017; Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2022; 2024). This policy direction is reinforced by global frameworks such as UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development Roadmap (2020) and the UNFCCC Action for Climate Empowerment agenda (n.d.), positioning education as a mechanism for enabling learners to participate in climate action and sustainable development.

Within this transformation agenda, Internationalisation of Higher Education, defined as the process of "integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2003, p.2), has become an important policy and institutional strategy. For sustainable development and climate action, this international dimension is highly relevant as they are transnational in nature and requires learners' engagement with global knowledge, interdisciplinary problem-solving, intercultural collaboration, and comparative policy perspectives. Internationalisation-at-Home (IaH) is especially significant in this regard, since it seeks to embed these dimensions within domestic learning environments and expand global learning opportunities for students unable to participate in cross-border mobility. This is particularly relevant in

Vietnam, where overseas study remains inaccessible for many, and aligns with the idea of "internationalisation for all", emphasising that internationalisation should "enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff" and contribute meaningfully to society (de Wit & Hunter, 2015).

In Vietnam, recent policy directions, including Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW, frame IaH as a critical strategy within a broader "breakthrough" reform agenda to improve education quality and develop high-quality human resources (Communist Party of Vietnam [CPV], 2025). However, the promise of IaH, referred to as "internationalised education" in this study, does not automatically translate into an accessible learning journey. High tuition fees, English-medium instruction (EMI) requirements, urban concentration, and uneven information systems can turn these pathways into de facto elite routes (Pang, 2022; Tran, 2014; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019; Vu & Nguyen, 2018).

This tension is especially significant for Vietnamese youth climate actors, defined in this study as young people aged 20-35 engaged in sustained climate or environmental action across educational, community, professional, or institutional settings. By participatingin climate initiatives, they represent a potential workforce for sustainable development. However, previous reports indicate that they often face capacity constraints, limited technical support, and restricted access to formal learning opportunities that could enhance their impact (UNDP, 2021; 2022; UNESCAP, 2023). Their experiences thus offer a useful empirical entry point for examining whether internationalised Master's education in Vietnam aligns with the aspirations and access conditions of learners already engaged in sustainability practice.

Against this background, this study addresses two questions: (1) What aspirations drive youth climate actors in Vietnam to pursue internationalised Master's education related to sustainable development? (2) What perceived barriers prevent them from accessing such programs? The findings are expected to inform contemporary education policy and practice by clarifying how such programs can better support Vietnam's human resource development for sustainable development, with implications for more responsive design and delivery.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Internationalisation-at-Home for high-quality human resource development in Vietnam

In Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW, Vietnam's Politburoacknowledges that higher and vocational education remains "fragmented and underdeveloped, not yet meeting the requirements for high-quality human resource training and scientific research" (CPV, 2025). In response, it introduces a 2026-2035 national target program to modernise education and training, prioritising higher education as a strategic sector for developing a skilled workforce. Within this reform agenda, IaH is advanced through international standards, accreditation, elite university development, recruitment of foreign lecturers, joint and transnational programs, and the strengthening of foreign-language capacity. Collectively, these measures position IaH as both a pedagogical approach and a policy tool for institutional upgrading, international alignment, and sustainable-development capacity building.

This policy direction builds on an already expanding internationalisation landscape, with 408 international programs established in the Vietnamese higher education system by 2021 (Luong et al., 2026). Within this context, this study defines "internationalised Master's education related to sustainable development" as programs that meet three criteria: (1) domestically delivered through purposeful IaH elements; (2) operating at the Master's level; and (3) either explicitly focused on or embedding sustainable development specialisations within broader disciplinary fields. Specifically, these programs involve formal cross-border partnerships, including program mobility arrangements (e.g., joint ordouble degrees) and provider mobility models (e.g., international branch campuses and co-founded universities), while intentionally integrating internationalised curricula, EMI, virtual exchange, and other international components to support global learning outcomes (Knight, 2017).

2.2. Youth climate actors and postgraduate education for sustainable development

The term "youth climate actors" is used as an inclusive functional category capturing the overlapping roles young people occupy in climate engagement and higher education. This reflects Knight's (2008) observation that higher education actors often occupy multiple roles, with identities as learners, researchers, or practitioners being "not mutually exclusive". It is also consistent with UNICEF's (2020) framing of climate governance as a process enabling "social actors" to participate in decision-making and climate action. Thus, compared with terms such as "activists" or "practitioners", "actors" avoids homogenising youthand more accurately reflects the diversity and agency of participants in this study across professional, political, and academic boundaries. The age range reflects both

Vietnamese and regional youth frameworks while aligning with the stage at which Master's education becomes a realistic decision involving financial constraints and career considerations (ASEAN Secretariat, 2017; National Assembly of Vietnam, 2020; UN DESA, 2013).

Constituting approximately 23% of the national population, Vietnamese youth are widely recognised as a formidable force for positive change in addressing the climate crisis (UNDP, 2021). In the two Special Reports on Youth for Climate Action in Viet Nam, UNDP acknowledges youth participation in climate action across school communities, youth-led networks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), social enterprises, and policy-oriented platforms, but also documents critical capacity gaps that undermine their confidence and effectiveness (2021; 2022). The 2021 report highlights gaps in scientific knowledge, project management, public speaking, and writing skills needed to "put theoretical knowledge into practice in designing and managing climate projects", while the 2022 report notes limited access to "a methodical research environment" and advanced technical support required to develop initiatives beyond the ideation stage (UNDP, 2021; 2022). Furthermore, many actors operate "independently, without a coordinated network", limiting their policy literacy and institutional recognition, resulting in their voices failing to "reach lawmakers" (UNDP, 2022).

The aforementioned gaps are partly rooted in limitations of the general education system, where such skills are "not frequently taught in the classroom", leaving Vietnamese youth with limited access to formal skill-building opportunities (UNDP, 2021). While many actors rely on ad-hoc initiatives to fill this gap, existing programs are often "not specifically aimed at youth in the climate change field" and fail to "satisfy many of their needs" (UNDP, 2021). Short funding cycles, often "only 3-6 months", further limit sustained, practice-based learning and implementation of complex climate initiatives (UNDP, 2022).

These constraints position Master's education as a key site for capacity development, offering sustained learning, research training, professional legitimacy, and access to expert communities. Internationalised sustainable development programs may be particularly attractive for their exposure to global debates, comparative policy approaches, intercultural collaboration, and international networks addressing interconnected climate and development challenges. However, these programs may remain difficult to access if unaffordable, urban-centred, English-intensive, or poorly communicated. This underscores the importance of examining youth climate actors' aspirations and perceived barriers to assess whether such programs can support Vietnam's sustainable development workforce agenda.

2.3. Aspirations and perceived access barriers in program choice

Building on the discussion of IaH expansion and youth climate capacity needs, this study adopts a sociological approach to university choice as shaped by the dynamic interaction between aspirations and structural constraints (DesJardins et al., 2019). Drawing on Bok's (2010) interpretation of "the capacity to aspire", aspirations are understood not simply as static individual preferences but as socially shaped orientations toward future educational trajectories. For youth climate actors, these aspirations encompass preferred program designs alongside internal capacity building, professional advancement, and broader climate influence motivations. In contrast, perceived access barriers refer to the conditions that make such programs difficult to identify, apply for, afford, or attend. These include structural "hard barriers" (e.g., tuition costs and institutional requirements) and "soft barriers" (e.g., informational gaps, navigational challenges, and reduced motivation to participate) (Bok, 2010; Mseleku, 2022).

Existing literature identifies several barriers relevant to the Vietnamese context. The first is affordability. Tran (2014) notes that while overseas study can be "hundred times more expensive" than local options, domestic joint programs charge significantly higher fees than standard public tuition to generate institutional revenue. A related barrier is English proficiency requirements, where despite the introduction of the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP), many universities continue to prioritise or, in several cases, only accept international standard tests like IELTS or TOEFL (Tuoi Tre News, 2025; VietnamNet, 2025).

Tri and Moskovsky (2019) further argue that the dominance of EMI acts as a gatekeeping mechanism, privileging students with high linguistic capital and reinforcing a two-tier system that excludes many capable students from low-income and marginalised backgrounds.

Alongside these constraints, Ryu (2024) argues that there are IaH models, such as public collaborative Transnational Education (TNE), that may partially mitigate the exclusionary dynamics identified by Tri and Moskovsky (2019) by offering notably lower tuition rates, more flexible language requirements, and internal

proficiency tests or foundation-year programs to support students' post-admission development. However, Ryu (2024) also notes that their long-term sustainability remains constrained by challenges in financing beyond initial subsidies, faculty recruitment, and the linguistic demands of bilingual curricula.

Secondly, for youth climate actors whose experience may come from non-formal settings, admission processes based mainly on formal credentials and standardised language certificates may not fully capture their practical capacity or motivation. This reflects broader debates on Recognition of Prior Learning, where experiential knowledge is often insufficiently recognised in formal higher education systems (Cooper et al., 2017).

A third barrier relates to location and information. Internationalised programs are often concentrated in major cities, imposing additional financial and mobility burdens on rural youth, who are often among the most climate-vulnerable yet least resourced groups (Pang, 2022). Moreover, Vu and Nguyen (2018) identify information access as one of the critical "non-monetary reasons" that explain the "poor participation of low-income individuals in higher education", while Pang (2022) adds that unstable internet access and limited digital resources can hinder students' navigation of complex academic and application platforms.

Overall, the literature suggests that internationalised Master's education operates within a broader chain linking national human resource development agendas, institutional internationalisation strategies, learner aspirations, and access conditions. While policy and institutional reforms seek to expand internationalised learning opportunities, their contribution to sustainable development depends on learners' perceptions of relevance, accessibility, and value for climate action. Aspirations and perceived access barriers mediate this relationship, but how these dimensions intersect in practice remains underexplored.

2.4. Research gap and need for the study

First, existing literature on IaH and internationalised higher education in Vietnam primarily focuses on policy reform, institutional expansion, and access constraints, with comparatively limited attention to learner decision-making (Luong et al., 2026; Pang, 2022; Ryu, 2024; Tran, 2014; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019; Vu & Nguyen, 2018). Second, research on youth climate action identifies capacity gaps (UNDP, 2021; 2022) but does not examine how postgraduate education may address these needs. Third, studies on pre-enrolment barriers emphasise affordability, language requirements, location, admissions procedures, and access to information (Pang, 2022; Tran, 2014; Tri & Moskovsky, 2019; Tuoi Tre News, 2025; VietnamNet, 2025; Vu & Nguyen, 2018), but rarely address internationalised Master's education for sustainable development. As a result, empirical evidence remains limited on how youth climate actors perceive the value of such programs and what shapes their ability to pursue them. This study addresses this gap by examining their aspirations and perceived access barriers, linking national policy ambitions for high-quality human-resource development to the design and delivery of internationalised Master's education.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research design

This original empirical article draws on a multiphase mixed-methods design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), comprising (i) exploratory qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs)/focus-group discussions (FGDs) to contextualise literature-derived indicators and inform survey design; (ii) a descriptive online survey to identify dominant patterns; and (iii) follow-up KIIs combined with open-ended survey responses to deepen interpretation.

3.2. Sampling strategy and participation summary

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via youth climate networks (managed by international development agencies, local NGOs, youth-led social enterprises/independent projects), university communities, and social media. Eligible participants were: (i) aged 20-35, (ii) actively involved in climate- or environment-related initiatives, and (iii) interested in, currently enrolled in, or recently graduated from overseas or internationalised Master's education related to sustainable development delivered in Vietnam.

Table 1. Summary of data sources and participants

Data collection phase	Total	Interested	Enrolled/ Graduated

			Vietnam	Abroad	Both
1. 2 qualitative phases	**7**	3	1	2	1
2. Quantitative phase	**117**	85	18	13	1

As summarised in Table 1, the study obtained 117 valid survey responses (from 135 submissions) and included seven qualitative participants across two phases (one FGD and six KIIs). Participants represented students, NGO and development practitioners, private sector employees, and youth project and network leaders and members. Follow-up KIIs included initial qualitative participants and survey respondents who expressed interest. Given the exploratory nature of the study and its emphasis on contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation, a small purposive qualitative sample and descriptive analysis were deemed appropriate.

3.3. Data collection methods and instruments

Qualitative data were collected through 60-90-minute virtual KIIs/FGDs. The structured online survey included demographic and background items, five-point Likert-scale measures of aspirations toward internationalised Master's education for sustainable development, study location preferences, and multiple-response items on perceived access barriers. Information on climate engagement (duration, type, roles, and future aspirations) were also collected to capture variation in participants' backgrounds. Both qualitative and survey data were collected in Vietnamese to ensure contextual relevance and accessibility.

3.4. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages. Qualitative KIIs/FGDs were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed in Vietnamese, and analysed thematically through iterative familiarisation, coding, theme development, and cross-participant comparison (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A hybrid coding approach combining deductive codes derived from the research questions and literature with inductive codes emerging from the data was used to ensure analytical consistency while remaining responsive to participants' perspectives. Themes were refined through repeated comparison across transcripts and survey responses.

Integration occurred through triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings to strengthen interpretation of participants' aspirations and perceived barriers. Selected quotations were translated into English for reporting purposes while preserving intended meanings.

Ethical principles included voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymisation, and the use of pseudonyms such as Participant 1, Participant 2. Since the study asked participants to discuss educational and institutional barriers, identifying information was removed from quotations and descriptive details.

Limitations include the study's perception-based scope, non-probability sampling, and potential digital access bias in online data collection. However, the mixed-methods design enhances robustness through triangulation of data sources and analytical approaches.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Aspirations for internationalised Master's education related to sustainable development

4.1.1. Aspirations for Master's education related to sustainable development

Survey results indicate that young climate actors pursue Master's education related to sustainable development primarily as a strategic pathway for interdisciplinary, contextually relevant learning and professionalisation of their climate engagement.

Table 2. Aspirations for Master's education related to sustainable development

(N = 117, 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)

Rank	Aspiration/motivation item	Mean	SD

1	Gain global sustainability theories to the specific ecological and political realities of Vietnam.	4.22	0.97
2	Understand interdisciplinary links between climate science, economics, and social policy.	4.13	0.96
3	Gain access to new opportunities in the sustainability sector.	4.09	1.03
4	Scale climate action by translating volunteer projects into sustainable, professional organizational models.	4.07	1.06
5	Expand networks of local and international peers, experts, and mentors for collective actions.	3.95	1.14
6	Learn technical skills to design and manage complex projects, including problem-solving, fundraising, and impact monitoring.	3.91	1.06
7	Gain consolidated scientific principles of climate change rather than just general awareness.	3.87	1.01
8	Meet the "must-have" criteria required for high-quality employment recruitment and higher salary ranges.	3.81	1.19
9	Increase self-confidence to take on pioneering leadership roles in climate initiatives.	3.78	1.10
10	Increase capacity to influence decisions or policies through participating in national/international climate governance.	3.77	1.05
11	Increase credibility and voice in climate discussions and dialogue.	3.76	1.16
12	Learn methodical research skills.	3.74	1.08
13	Navigate technical negotiation and policy literacy required for high-level forums.	3.74	1.04
14	Gain mental resilience to handle climate burnout to sustain actions.	3.38	1.10

As shown in Table 2, the two highest-rated items suggest that internationalisation is valued not for its foreign prestige alone, but for its potential to provide global knowledge applicable to Vietnam's interdisciplinary sustainability challenges. These nuances critique internationalised curricula in Vietnam, which highlight risks of passive knowledge transfer and an emphasis on abstract theory over local needs and priorities (Bradley, 2017; Tran, 2014). Rather than rejecting global knowledge, participants emphasised its value when translated into Vietnam's ecological, political, and community contexts.

Qualitative data reinforce this interpretation. Participants viewed Master's education as a means of linking climate engagement with systematic knowledge, particularly policy literacy, project-related skills, and interdisciplinary analysis. One participant noted that the program should help them "connect existing technical knowledge with project management thinking and public policy", underscoring the importance of applied and context-relevant learning.

A second concern of aspirations relates to professionalisation, particularly access to new opportunities in the field and the scaling of volunteer projects into sustainable organisational models. These priorities suggest that participants view Master's education as a pathway to sustaining and structuring engagement in the climate sector rather than simply obtaining a credential. Formal qualifications for career advancement also remained relevant despite the lower rank. As Participant 1 (aged 29, development agency employee) explained:

"*As I became more involved in development work, I realised that while skills are important, specialised knowledge is essential, educational level also affects career progression and salary range. In my organisation, some positions require having a Master's degree for recruitment eligibility*."

This perspectiveresonates with earlier discussion of Master's education as a potential, more sustained response to limitations in ad-hoc training opportunities that often fall short of addressing the needs of young climate actors (UNDP, 2021). However, the present study adds that it is valued for career sustainability and institutional legitimacy.

Compared to knowledge and professional goals, motivations related to policy and governance influence are less prioritised. This may reflect persistent structural constraints in Asia and the Pacific, including Vietnam, where youth remain "largely marginalised in the policy and decision-making processes that impact their futures" (UNESCAP, 2023). the sharing of Participant 1 suggests that policy engagement is seen as a longer-term goal requiring prior development of expertise, credibility, and confidence:

"*One deeper reason I want to pursue further study is that I don't want to be part of a group of young people whose voices are dismissed… Studying at the Master's level is not just about the degree itself, but about gaining the knowledge that allows me to feel confident when participating in policy discussions*."

Open-ended responses further show a strong interest in fields such as public policy, governance, and environmental law, often linked to internationally recognised Master's of Public Policy/Administration degrees, reinforcing the argument above.

Meanwhile, although "mental resilience" received the lowest mean score, it remains above the neutral midpoint, indicating non-negligible concern. Participant2 (24, education officer at a local NGO) described this as a need for long-term tools "to continue climate work without exhaustion". Other qualitative responses also point to emerging interests in climate anxiety, creative sustainability, and socio-cultural transformation. These findings suggest that participants are beginning to recognise the psychological and cultural dimensions of climate action, highlighting an underrepresented area in current Master's education.

4.1.2. Aspirations for internationalised Master's education

The findings show that under ideal conditions, studying abroad remains the dominant preference (61.5%, Figure 1). However, under realistic conditions, preferences shift toward internationalised programs in Vietnam, with studying abroad declining to 44.4%, while 36.8% favour domestic options with international elements (Figure 2).

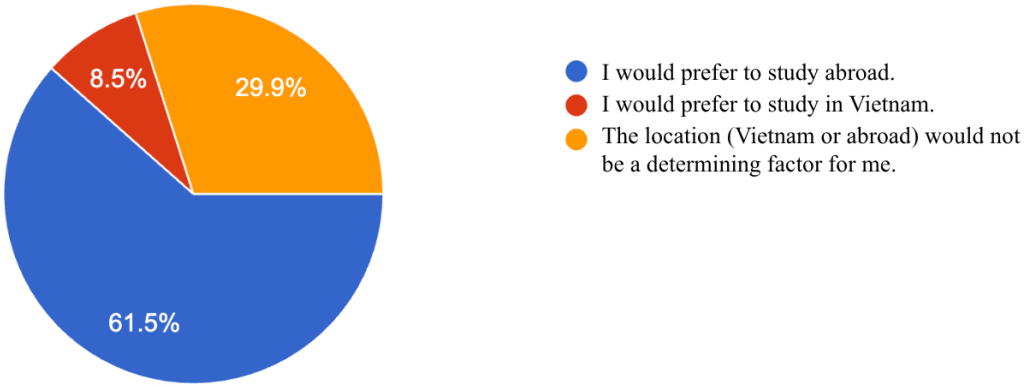

Figure 1. Ideal preferences for Master's study location in the absence of constraints (N = 117)

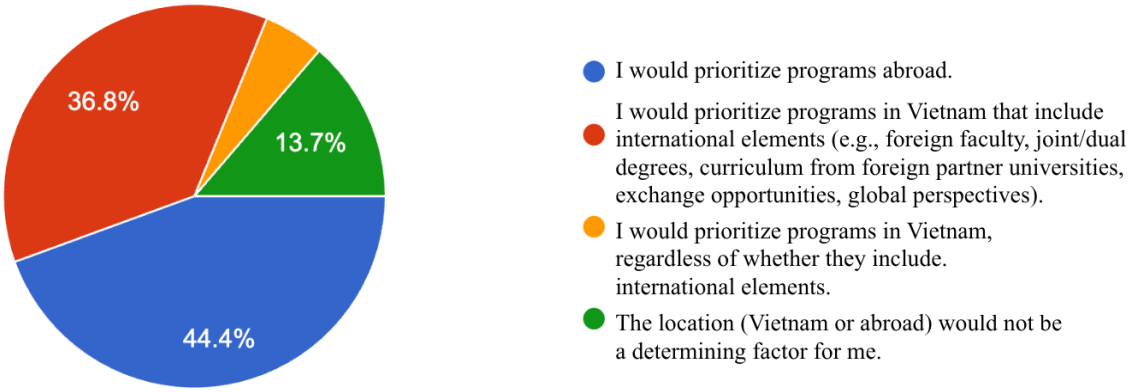

Figure 2. Realistic preferences for Master's pathways under existing constraints (N = 117)

Qualitative responses suggest that study-location choices reflect a negotiation between global-learning aspirations and practical constraints. Preferences for studying abroad were partly driven by perceptions that domestic sustainability curricula remain limited in interdisciplinarity, practical orientation, and research depth. As Participant 3 (aged 28, research lab assistant) explained:

"*Current programs [in Vietnam] lack practical lessons and in-depth research experience in the field of sustainable development. Compared to developed countries, which have a long history of interest in and investment in sustainable development, programs in Vietnam have not yet achieved a comparable level of depth and comprehensiveness. Furthermore, important content such as Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) and the "just transition" model has not been fully and systematically integrated into the training programs*."

Concerns also remain regarding program quality: "*It is currently unclear whether the programs in Vietnam will be effective or applicable after completion*".

However, the decline in preference for studying abroad under realistic conditions appears shaped by financial, professional, and personal constraints. Many participants highlighted the difficulty of securing funding or leaving ongoing work, family, or community commitments to study abroad: "*The biggest obstacle is finances… even though I really want to*", "*Because I can't yet quit my current job and leave my family to go abroad*", "*I chose to stay in Vietnam to maintain my presence and ensure stable operations for my startup*".

Beyond these constraints, participants viewed internationalised education as a way to balance global exposure with local feasibility, emphasising the value of studying domestically while accessing international knowledge: "*I want to study domestically to easily understand the country's context, but still want to learn and apply from advanced countries*". Others highlighted that exposure to local realities enables more grounded research and helps bridge theory and practice, as "local attachment and empathy are key to effective implementation".

Overall, RQ1 findings qualify mobility-centred understandings of internationalisation. While cross-border mobility remains associated with prestige and educational quality (Knight, 2003), youth climate actors often recalibrated these aspirations under financial, linguistic, and professional constraints, shifting toward internationalised programs delivered domestically. The findings support IaH scholarship by showing that learners value internationalisation not only as physical mobility, but also as access to global knowledge, interdisciplinary learning, diverse networks, and comparative perspectives that can be meaningfully adapted to local sustainability contexts. As one respondent explained: "*What I care most about is what I will learn and who I will interact with, because every place has its strengths and weaknesses*." In this sense, earlier concerns regarding the local relevance of internationalised curricula (Bradley, 2017; Tran, 2014) may require further qualification. Extending discussions on the limitations of short-term capacity-building initiatives (UNDP, 2021; 2022), participants viewed internationalised Master's education as a more sustained pathway for professional development and long-term climate engagement.

4.2. Perceived barriers to accessing internationalised Master's education

While financial costs and uncertainty surrounding scholarships emerged as the most prominent concerns, perceptions of access were also shaped by limited program information, inflexible study formats, language requirements, relocation demands, and admissions criteria.

Table 3. Main perceived access barriers (N = 117; up to three selections)

Rank	Barrier	Frequency	Percentage
1	Affording tuition fees	64	54.7%
2	Accessing scholarships or financial support	58	49.6%
3	Balancing study with work/climate activities	46	39.3%
4	Accessing necessary, reliable program information	43	36.8%
5	Finding a suitable study format	40	34.2%
6	Relocating to another city	15	12.8%

7	Meeting language requirements	14	12.0%
8	Meeting GPA requirements	9	7.7%

First, Table 3 reveals financial barriers as the dominant concern, particularly regarding tuition affordability and access to funding support. This finding confirms Tran's (2014) argument that domestic internationalised programs may remain financially demanding despite being cheaper than overseas study. Qualitative survey responses further suggest that "*International master's programs in Vietnam typically require tuition fees that are quite high compared to the average income of the population*", with Participant 4 (23 years old, national youth network coordinator) noting in the FGD that pursuing such programs often requires "years of saving" or "total dependence on a full scholarship". Several respondents also pointed to limitations in scholarship systems, particularly the emphasis on academic metrics over practical experience:

"*Abroad, there are many scholarship programs for individuals with community project achievements and leadership, instead of just focusing on GPA... In Vietnam, scholarships lean more toward GPA and research, which is not my strong point. So, I don't think I'm competitive for a domestic Master's scholarship.*"

Additionally, the present study adds a learner-side perspective by showing that affordability extends beyond tuition to include application fees, language preparatory courses and testing fees, relocation, and financial uncertainty associated with deposit payments required before scholarship decisions are announced. Some participants also raised concerns about the growing use of paid mentorship services in scholarship applications, as those with greater financial resources are better positioned to access guidance and improve their chances.

Second, participants highlighted tensions between postgraduate study and ongoing professional or climate commitments, alongside concerns about the flexibility of existing study formats. This reflects the reality that many climate-engaged learners are already embedded in professional roles, community initiatives, or entrepreneurial projects. As Participant 2 noted in the FGD, there is a persistent concern about how to "maintain both" when programs require full-time, inflexible participation. For some participants, full-time study may require suspending paid work or reducing the climate activities that originally motivated further study. Thus, access depends not only on admission but also on whether delivery modes enable learners to sustain ongoing engagement.

Third, information barriers emerged as another major theme, particularly regarding limited awareness and difficulty navigating available programs. Illustrated in Figure 3, most respondents were aware of only a few internationalised Master's programmes related to sustainable development in Vietnam, while a considerable proportion were unaware of any.

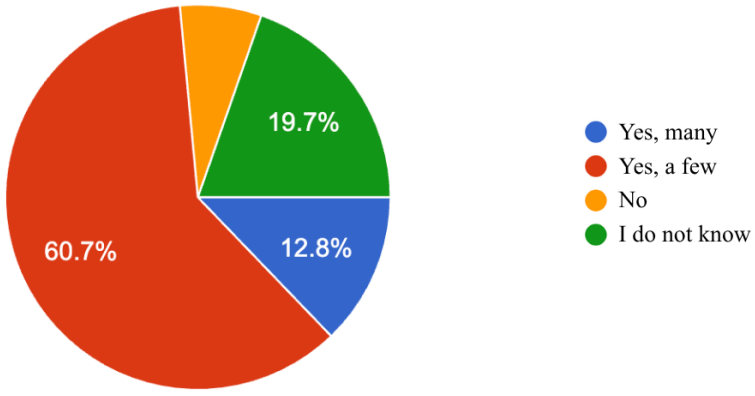

Figure 3. Awareness of the availability of internationalised Master's programs related to sustainable development within Vietnam (N = 117)

Qualitative responses suggest that this barrier extends beyond a simple lack of information. Participants described uncertainty surrounding course content, international exposure opportunities, career prospects, admission requirements, and scholarships, "making it difficult for students to evaluate and make decisions". This finding is important for policy and practice because weak communication may reinforce perceptions that internationalised education is elite and financially inaccessible, particularly when public institutions fail to communicate scholarship

opportunities or accessible pathways clearly. As one participant observed: "*Most of these programs are offered at private institutions where the tuition fees are quite high. Moreover, public schools communicate very poorly about scholarship funds, opportunities, and accessibility for students*". Participant5 (35 years old, entrepreneur), who was enrolled in a public collaborative TNE that Ryu (2024) mentions, similarly noted:

"*It seems the school hasn't done a very good job with its communication. I honestly didn't know what school it was until told about it, although the program and support are excellent. This is unfair as it doesn't reach as many people*."

This finding extends Vu and Nguyen's (2018) argument on information access by showing that communication gaps shape not only participation in higher education generally, but also perceptions of accessibility within the internationalised education landscape specifically.

Finally, although GPA and language requirements appeared less significant overall, qualitative responses suggest that they remain consequential for participants from rural, low-income, or marginalised backgrounds, where barriers are often cumulative and interconnected. Participant6 (30 years old, graduate student) reflected:

"*GPA is often used as the first filter, sometimes eliminating candidates before other factors like work experience, motivation, or research orientation are considered. This unintentionally creates a disadvantage for those whose personal circumstances required them to work early, or those who only truly found their academic direction after graduation*."

Participant7 (26 years old), from a northern mountainous border region, similarly described internationalised Master's education as a distant possibility due to the financial, linguistic, and social expectations surrounding postgraduate study:

"*Born and raised in the northern border mountainous region, pursuing a master's degree was quite a distant dream for my family and everyone around me. Reaching even a bachelor's degree was already a great achievement, let alone an international master's degree. For most people, it was unthinkable due to financial constraints, the difficulty of learning English, and many other factors*."

Overall, consistent with previous studies, the findings show that tuition costs (Tran, 2014) and EMI requirements (Tri & Moskovsky, 2019) remain major barriers to access. In addition, the findings highlight the importance of "soft barriers" (Bok, 2010; Mseleku, 2022), including fragmented institutional communication, unequal access to information networks, and uncertainty in navigating admissions systems. Unlike much of the existing literature, this study also finds that active climate engagement itself can become a barrier, as full-time program structures and limited recognition of non-formal experience create tensions with ongoing professional and social commitments. For this learner group, the central issue is not simply whether programs exist, but whether whether access to these programmes and the learning journey they entail are understandable, affordable, flexible, and compatible with ongoing professional and climate commitments.

4.3. Integrated discussion and implications for policy and practice

Taken together, the findings shift the policy focus from program expansion to program design. Although youth climate actors' aspirations align with Vietnam's sustainable-development workforce goals, their perceived barriers suggest that IaH should be assessed not only by availability, but also by learner accessibility and usability.

First, institutions need to improve program visibility and navigability. Some participants associated internationalised education mainly with high cost, despite the existence of more affordable options and funding support. Universities should therefore communicate tuition, scholarships, language requirements, curriculum content, and career relevance more transparently through centralised portals, outreach, and targeted communication for underrepresented learners. This is not merely an administrative issue, but one that shapes whether internationalised education is perceived as realistically accessible and attainable.

Second, program delivery should better reflect the realities of learners already engaged in professional or community-based work. This aligns with UNESCO's Flexible Learning Pathways framework, which promotes learning arrangements less constrained by time, place, and pace, particularly for non-traditional learners and working adults (Martin & Furiv, 2024; Wang, 2025). In practice, this may include expanding part-time, modular, hybrid, evening, weekend, or work-integrated formats. Vietnamese institutions have already experimented with block teaching, weekend delivery, and partial online instruction, while international models include asynchronous online learning models that allow students to study flexibly and extended-enrolment arrangements that enable working

learners to complete degrees over three years while spreading tuition costs across the standard two-year duration. Importantly, scaling such approaches could support the broader "triple policy objectives of improving access, quality, and equity" in higher education (Martin & Furiv, 2024).

Third, admissions and scholarship processes should consider recognising practice-based experience alongside academic and language credentials. For applicants whose climate expertise has been developed through field engagement, selection systems relying mainly on GPA and standardised English certificates may not fully capture their potential. More holistic approaches, including motivation statements, leadership records/portfolios, evidence of project impact, and interviews could better align admissions with the applied nature of sustainable development work. Scholarship schemes shall similarly broaden definitions of merit beyond conventional academic indicators alone.

Fourth, programs should embed global learning in ways that are meaningfully adapted to local contexts. One practical approach is more participatory curriculum governance. As Luong (2026) shows in Vietnam's IaH context, top-down curricular and quality assurance structures shaped by international partnerships often position local academics as implementers while constraining international faculty's pedagogical autonomy, limiting both groups' role in knowledge co-creation. More participatory arrangements, such as shared curriculum design, joint assessment decisions, and collaborative course sequencing, can strengthen academic ownership and support the contextualisation of global sustainability knowledge within Vietnam's ecological and socio-political realities.

Finally, these governance and program design reforms require a sustainable financing base. Resolution No. 71-NQ/TW sets an important direction by committing to allocate at least 3% of the total state budget to the higher education sector (CPV, 2025). This is crucial if IaH is to avoid excessive dependence on tuition revenue. Without stronger public investment, internationalised programs may remain financially inaccessible or increasingly shift costs onto learners (Parajuli et al., 2020; Tran et al., 2023). However, with adequate support, Vietnam can use IaH, scholarships, language support, and flexible delivery to better align global learning with national sustainable development priorities.

5. CONCLUSION

This article examined youth climate actors' aspirations for, and perceived barriers to, internationalised Master's education related to sustainable development in Vietnam. The findings show that participants viewed such education as a pathway to gain globally informed yet locally applicable interdisciplinary knowledge, strengthen professional legitimacy, access networks, sustain long-term climate engagement, and participate more confidently in climate policy discussions. These aspirations align closely with Vietnam's policy agenda for developing high-quality human resources for climate commitment and sustainable development. At the same time, access was perceived to be constrained by limited information, financial costs, scholarship uncertainty, inflexible study formats, language requirements, and admissions criteria that may not fully recognise practice-based expertise.

Conceptually, the article contributes to IaH scholarship by examininginternationalised Master's education by showing that learners value internationalisation not only as physical mobility, but also as access to global knowledge, interdisciplinary learning, and diverse networks that can be meaningfully applied within local sustainability contexts. Rather than understanding internationalised Master's education in particular, and IaH more broadly, mainly through institutional expansion, the findings suggest examining these processes from the learner perspective, including whether intended learners can identify, afford, access, and meaningfully apply such programs in sustainable development practice.

To better support climate and socially engaged learners, internationalised Master's education requires clearer communication, more flexible learning, more responsive admissions practices and contextualised curriculum, and sustained public investment. Future research could examine whether similar patterns emerge among other learner groups, compare policies and practices of different institutional models, and track learners longitudinally from initial interest through enrolment and completion to understand how such opportunities are experienced and applied in climate and sustainable-development engagement over time.

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