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VOLUNTEERING AT VIETNAM'S NATIONAL STUDENT SPORTS GAMES: PERCEIVED COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT AMONG SPORT MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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Abstract

Sporting events provide valuable settings for experiential learning in sport management education. Against this background, this study examines sport management students' perceived development of professional competencies through volunteering at Vietnam's 6th National Student Sports Games 2026, a national multi-sport event for university students hosted by the University of Sport Ho Chi Minh City. The study assesses students' self-reported competency development, compares perceived development across volunteer roles, and examines the associations between three experiential conditions and overall competency development. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire with five-point Likert-type items from all 200 sport management students (first- to fourth-year) who volunteered at the Games from 15 to 30 October 2026. The questionnaire was administered progressively between 16 October and 1 November 2026, after the competitions to which students were assigned had concluded. Data were analyzed in SPSS 26.0 using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, one-way ANOVA with post hoc comparisons, and multiple linear regression. Students reported high or very high levels of perceived development in venue and competition operations (M = 4.21), incident handling and on-site adaptability (M = 4.08), and interpersonal communication and teamwork (M = 4.35). Perceived development differed significantly across roles: liaison officers reported the highest mean scores in communication and incident handling, whereas competition secretariat and technical staff reported the highest mean score in venue operations. Task variety and challenge, perceived support from the faculty and organizing committee, and reflective learning were each positively associated with overall competency development and jointly accounted for 58.4% of its variance (adjusted R^2). Given the cross-sectional, self-report design, these findings indicate associations rather than causal effects. They nevertheless offer practical insights for designing event-based work-integrated learning in Vietnamese sport management programs, particularly through structured role rotation and daily debriefing.

Keywords: *experiential learning; professional competencies; sport event volunteering; sport management education; work-integrated learning*

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INTRODUCTION

Sport management programs are expected to prepare graduates who can connect academic knowledge with the operational demands of the sport industry. This expectation is reflected in accreditation standards: the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation identifies experiential learning as an essential component of the undergraduate curriculum (Sauder et al., 2023). A study of competence-oriented sport management education in Germany also found that students' self-assessed proficiency fell short of the importance industry experts assigned to the same competencies (Wohlfart et al., 2022), while a recent umbrella review proposed a harmonized competency framework for the field (Guidotti et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that developing professional competencies requires learning opportunities that extend beyond the classroom.

The theoretical rationale for such opportunities is well established. Experiential Learning Theory conceptualizes learning as a process in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). In this process, concrete experience becomes a source of learning when students reflect on it, develop abstract concepts, and test those concepts in subsequent situations. Work-integrated learning (WIL) applies this logic in higher education by placing students in authentic work settings, often through partnerships with industry. In sport degree programs, Agnew et al. (2017) proposed extending an existing WIL model to include both partnership and debriefing components, emphasizing the role of post-placement debriefing in consolidating learning gained through practice.

Within sport management, learning outcomes have been examined in relation to internships (McClean et al., 2020; Sauder & Mudrick, 2018), applied coursework (DeLuca & Fornatora, 2020), and service-learning (Bush et al., 2016). By comparison, volunteering at large-scale sporting events has received less empirical attention, despite its growing use as an experiential learning opportunity in sport management programs. Pate and Shonk (2015) found that students volunteering at the Super Bowl reported substantial learning through both hands-

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on work and informal reflective conversations with faculty and peers while travelling to and from the event. Similarly, Miller et al. (2022) reported that undergraduate sport management students working at an international sports event developed communication skills and cultural awareness and gained a clearer understanding of how classroom content applies in practice. In a survey of 54 students, Sauder et al. (2023) also found high levels of perceived personal and career-related learning following a short-term, high-profile sporting event; students with more substantial responsibilities reported greater personal learning. Evidence from Asia is also emerging. Suroto et al. (2020) described a collaboration between an Indonesian university and the organizing committee of the 2018 Asian Games to create learning opportunities for event management students, while Lu (2021) documented an industry–university collaboration in Taiwan that used practical experiential learning in the sport industry to enhance student employability.

These studies offer useful insights into what students may gain from event-based experiences. However, much of the available evidence comes from North American events or relies on qualitative and small-sample designs. Less is known about whether students' perceived gains differ according to their assigned volunteer roles. In addition, few studies have examined within a single model the experiential conditions that may be associated with these gains: the variety and challenge of assigned tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), support from the host institution (Eisenberger et al., 1986), and opportunities for structured reflection (Kolb, 1984). Empirical evidence from Southeast Asia is also limited. For example, Alviana et al. (2021) examined the implementation of the volunteer program and the constraints faced by volunteers at the 2019 ASEAN School Games, rather than volunteers' learning outcomes.

In Vietnam, the National Student Sports Games (Đại hội Thể thao Sinh viên toàn quốc) is a nationwide multi-sport competition for students in higher education institutions, organized by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The sixth edition was held in October 2026 and hosted by the University of Sport Ho

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Chi Minh City, a public university specializing in sport and physical education. The Games brought together 73 delegations from higher education institutions across Vietnam to compete in a range of sports (Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam [MOET], 2026). As a large-scale event with an intensive competition schedule, the Games placed considerable operational demands on the host institution. To support event operations, the Faculty of Sport Management deployed 200 student volunteers from 15 to 30 October 2026 in frontline roles, including team liaison, competition secretariat and field-of-play technical support, protocol and hospitality, logistics, and media and information services.

Building on previous research into event-based experiential learning (Pate & Shonk, 2015; Sauder et al., 2023), this study examines sport management students' perceived professional competency development through volunteering at a national university sports event in Vietnam. It addresses three research questions.

RQ1: To what extent do students perceive that they have developed competencies in venue and competition operations, incident handling and on-site adaptability, and interpersonal communication and teamwork through volunteering at the Games?

RQ2: Does perceived competency development differ across assigned volunteer roles?

RQ3: To what extent are task variety and challenge, perceived support from the faculty and organizing committee, and reflective learning associated with overall perceived competency development?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide empirical evidence to inform the integration of event volunteering into the WIL component of sport management programs.

METHOD

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Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design. The constructs included in the study were informed by literature on Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986), and competency frameworks in sport management (Guidotti et al., 2023).

Participants

The participants were all 200 full-time undergraduate students in the Faculty of Sport Management at the University of Sport Ho Chi Minh City who volunteered at the Games. As the study covered the entire population of student volunteers from the faculty, no sampling procedure was used. Participants belonged to four cohorts, identified by the university's enrollment codes. K49 refers to students admitted in 2026. The cohort distribution was as follows: K49 (first-year students, n = 65), K48 (second-year students, n = 56), K47 (third-year students, n = 45), and K46 (fourth-year students, n = 34).

Instrument

The questionnaire comprised two parts. Part A collected demographic and assignment-related information, including cohort, gender, assigned role, and previous event experience. Part B contained 20 items measuring seven constructs: task variety and challenge (three items), perceived support from the faculty and organizing committee (three items), reflective learning (three items), venue and competition operations (three items), incident handling and on-site adaptability (three items), interpersonal communication and teamwork (three items), and career self-efficacy (two items). For the competency items, students indicated the extent to which they believed the volunteer experience had helped them develop each capability. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). Using an interval width of 0.80, mean scores were interpreted as follows: very low

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(1.00–1.80), low (1.81–2.60), moderate (2.61–3.40), high (3.41–4.20), and very high (4.21–5.00).

Procedure

The questionnaire was administered both in person and online via Google Forms. Data were collected progressively between 16 October and 1 November 2026: students completed the questionnaire after the competitions to which they were assigned had concluded, with the final responses collected at the closing of the Games. Collecting data shortly after each competition was intended to reduce recall bias. All 200 questionnaires were returned and deemed valid, yielding a 100% response rate. Students were informed of the purpose of the study, participated voluntarily, and their responses were anonymized.

Data Analysis

The data were coded, screened, and analyzed using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were first calculated. Internal consistency was then assessed using Cronbach's alpha; values of 0.70 or higher and corrected item–total correlations of 0.30 or higher were considered acceptable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), followed by least significant difference (LSD) post hoc comparisons, was used to compare competency scores across the five role groups. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Finally, multiple linear regression was used to examine the associations between the three experiential conditions and overall competency development. Multicollinearity was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF; Hair et al., 2019) and residual independence was assessed using the Durbin–Watson statistic (Field, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic and role-assignment characteristics of the 200 student volunteers.

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Table 1. Profile of participants (N = 200)

Characteristic	Category	*n*	%
Cohort	K49 (first year)	65	32.5
	K48 (second year)	56	28.0
	K47 (third year)	45	22.5
	K46 (fourth year)	34	17.0
Gender	Male	108	54.0
	Female	92	46.0
Assigned role	Team liaison officer (LO)	60	30.0
	Competition secretariat / field-of-play technical support / referee assistant	55	27.5
	Protocol / hospitality / victory ceremonies	40	20.0
	Logistics / medical support / transport coordination	25	12.5
	Media / information desk	20	10.0
Prior event experience	First large sporting event	88	44.0
	One or two previous events	76	38.0
	More than two previous events	36	18.0

Because the survey covered all student volunteers from the faculty, the data describe the composition of this volunteer group rather than a probability sample of sport management students more broadly. First- and second-year students accounted for 60.5% of participants, and 44.0% were volunteering at a large sporting event for the first time. This indicates that the Games provided an early field-based experience for many students. Third- and fourth-year students, in turn, may have brought more prior experience to their assigned tasks. The gender distribution was relatively balanced (54.0% male and 46.0% female). By role, team liaison officers formed the largest group (30.0%), followed by students assigned to the competition secretariat and technical support (27.5%).

Reliability of the Measurement Scales

Before the main analyses, the internal consistency of the seven scales was examined. As shown in Table 2, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.798 to

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0.865, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The minimum corrected item–total correlations ranged from 0.589 to 0.694, also exceeding the criterion of 0.30. These results indicate that all seven scales demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 2. Reliability of the measurement scales (N = 200)

Construct	Code	Items	Cronbach's α	Min. item-total *r*
Task variety and challenge	NV	3	0.814	0.612
Perceived support from the faculty and organizing committee	HT	3	0.842	0.648
Reflective learning	PT	3	0.798	0.589
Venue and competition operations	CM1	3	0.865	0.694
Incident handling and on-site adaptability	CM2	3	0.831	0.651
Interpersonal communication and teamwork	CM3	3	0.856	0.677
Career self-efficacy	TT	2	0.812	0.684

Note. Min. item–total r = the lowest corrected item–total correlation within each scale. Career self-efficacy was included in the questionnaire but was not analyzed in the present study.

Perceived Development of Professional Competencies (RQ1)

Table 3 reports the means and standard deviations for the three competency dimensions and their respective items following the 16-day event deployment.

Table 3. Students' self-assessed competency development (N = 200)

Competency dimension and item	Code	*M*	*SD*	Level
Venue and competition operations	*CM1*	*4.21*	*0.58*	*Very high*
Controlling the field of play, arranging circulation routes, and managing facilities	CM1.1	4.26	0.62	Very high
Processing match records and checking athlete accreditation and documents	CM1.2	4.14	0.68	High
Managing timetables and coordinating the actual progress of matches	CM1.3	4.23	0.61	Very high
Incident handling and on-site adaptability	*CM2*	*4.08*	*0.64*	*High*
Remaining calm and maintaining professional conduct when incidents occur	CM2.1	4.11	0.65	High
Distinguishing situations that can be handled independently from those that must be reported	CM2.2	4.02	0.71	High
Coping with time pressure and complaints from delegations	CM2.3	4.12	0.66	High

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Competency dimension and item	Code	*M*	*SD*	Level
Interpersonal communication and teamwork	*CM3*	*4.35*	*0.52*	*Very high*
Intercultural communication and conduct with the 73 delegations	CM3.1	4.38	0.55	Very high
Coordinating smoothly with other functional teams	CM3.2	4.41	0.54	Very high
Negotiating, explaining regulations, and conveying announcements from the organizing committee	CM3.3	4.26	0.63	Very high
Overall professional competency	*CM_TOTAL*	*4.21*	*0.51*	*Very high*

Students reported a very high level of overall competency development (M = 4.21, SD = 0.51). Of the three dimensions, interpersonal communication and teamwork received the highest mean rating (M = 4.35, SD = 0.52). The item concerning coordination with other functional teams (CM3.2) received the highest rating overall (M = 4.41). This finding may reflect the interdependent nature of multi-sport event operations, which require volunteers to coordinate continuously with teammates, other functional teams, and participating delegations. The prominence of communication is consistent with previous research on event-based learning. Sauder et al. (2023), for example, identified interpersonal communication as one of the most highly rated areas of personal learning, while Miller et al. (2022) found that communication was a key soft skill developed by students working at an international sports event.

Venue and competition operations were also rated very highly (M = 4.21, SD = 0.58). By arranging venues, checking athlete documents, and monitoring competition schedules, students may have had opportunities to apply the operational standards covered in their sport event organization course (Nguyen, 2018) under real-world conditions. This interpretation is consistent with the theory–practice connection reported by Miller et al. (2022). Incident handling and on-site adaptability received the lowest rating of the three dimensions, although the mean remained high (M = 4.08, SD = 0.64). This area may have been particularly demanding because students had to respond to schedule conflicts, complaints from

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coaching staff, and athlete injuries, often under time pressure. By contrast, Sauder et al. (2023), found that adaptability to change was among the highest-rated areas of learning among volunteers at a high-profile event in the United States. Differences in measurement instruments, rating scales, and event contexts prevent direct comparison. Nevertheless, this contrast suggests that opportunities to exercise independent judgment may vary across events and volunteer roles. Because competency was assessed retrospectively through self-reports, the scores should be interpreted as perceived development rather than objective evidence of skill gains.

Differences in Competency Development across Volunteer Roles (RQ2)

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether perceived competency development differed across the five volunteer role groups. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Differences in competency development across volunteer roles (ANOVA)

Competency dimension	Role group	*M*	*F*(4, 195)	*p*
Venue and competition operations (CM1)	Liaison officers	4.06	7.824	< .001
	Secretariat/technical	4.48		
	Protocol/hospitality	4.12		
	Logistics/medical	4.18		
	Media/information	3.98		
Incident handling and on-site adaptability (CM2)	Liaison officers	4.24	3.112	.016
	Secretariat/technical	4.18		
	Protocol/hospitality	3.92		
	Logistics/medical	4.04		
	Media/information	3.85		
Interpersonal communication and teamwork (CM3)	Liaison officers	4.56	6.415	< .001
	Secretariat/technical	4.22		
	Protocol/hospitality	4.42		

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Competency dimension	Role group	*M*	*F*(4, 195)	*p*
	Logistics/medical	4.16		
	Media/information	4.31		

Note. Group sizes were as follows: liaison officers, n = 60; secretariat/technical staff, n = 55; protocol/hospitality, n = 40; logistics/medical support, n = 25; and media/information, n = 20. Pairwise LSD comparisons are available from the authors upon request.

The results showed statistically significant differences across volunteer roles for all three competency dimensions. Students assigned to the competition secretariat and technical support group reported the highest level of development in venue and competition operations ($M = 4.48$; $F(4, 195) = 7.824$, $p < .001$). This may be because their duties required close attention to competition regulations, match records, and equipment standards. Team liaison officers, by contrast, reported the highest mean scores in interpersonal communication and teamwork ($M = 4.56$; $F(4, 195) = 6.415$, $p < .001$) and incident handling and on-site adaptability ($M = 4.24$; $F(4, 195) = 3.112$, $p = .016$). As frontline contacts for participating delegations, liaison officers received and addressed teams' requests and complaints throughout the event. Their responsibilities may therefore have exposed them more frequently to communication and problem-solving demands.

These role-based differences broadly accord with the finding of Sauder et al. (2023) that volunteers with more substantial responsibilities reported greater personal learning than those with less demanding duties. They are also consistent with evidence from sport management internships that students' satisfaction with their assigned duties was associated with perceived learning (Sauder & Mudrick, 2018). The pattern further suggests that different roles may be associated with distinct competency profiles. In other words, an assignment may shape not only how much students perceive they learn but also what they learn. Students who remain in a single role throughout an event may therefore have fewer opportunities to develop competencies outside that role's main responsibilities. These comparisons should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously: the LSD procedure does not adjust for multiple comparisons, and the role groups were unequal in size.

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Experiential Conditions Associated with Competency Development (RQ3)

Multiple linear regression was used to examine the associations of task variety and challenge (X1), perceived support from the faculty and organizing committee (X2), and reflective learning (X3) with overall competency development (Y). The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Regression of overall competency development on experiential conditions

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	VIF
Constant	0.812	0.214		3.794	< .001	
Task variety and challenge (X1)	0.285	0.046	0.334	6.195	< .001	1.285
Perceived support from the faculty and organizing committee (X2)	0.241	0.048	0.278	5.021	< .001	1.341
Reflective learning (X3)	0.298	0.051	0.321	5.843	< .001	1.312

Note. $R^2 = .590$; adjusted $R^2 = .584$; $F(3, 196) = 94.043$, $p < .001$; Durbin-Watson = 1.912.

The regression model explained a substantial proportion of the variance in overall competency development ($R^2 = .590$, adjusted $R^2 = .584$; $F(3, 196) = 94.043$, $p < .001$). The three experiential conditions therefore accounted for 58.4% of the adjusted variance in the outcome. All VIF values were below 1.5, suggesting that multicollinearity was not a concern (Hair et al., 2019). The Durbin–Watson statistic was 1.912, indicating no apparent concern about residual autocorrelation (Field, 2018). The standardized regression equation was as follows:

Overall competency development = 0.334 × Task variety and challenge + 0.278 × Perceived support + 0.321 × Reflective learning

All three experiential conditions were positively and significantly associated with overall competency development. Task variety and challenge had the largest standardized coefficient (β = 0.334, p < .001), followed by reflective learning (β = 0.321, p < .001) and perceived support (β = 0.278, p < .001). However, the differences between these coefficients were modest, and the study did not test whether they differed significantly from one another.

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The positive association between task variety and challenge and overall competency development is consistent with the job characteristics model, which proposes that work involving a variety of skills is more likely to be experienced as meaningful and to foster internal work motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The association with reflective learning also accords with a central proposition of Experiential Learning Theory: concrete experience is more likely to be transformed into learning when followed by reflection (Kolb, 1984). This finding is consistent with the observation of Pate and Shonk (2015) that student volunteers discussed the day's work with faculty and peers during the evening drive back to their hotel. It also echoes Sauder et al. (2023) finding that informal conversations with faculty members involved in the event received higher learning ratings than formal orientations and training sessions. (Agnew et al., 2017) likewise emphasized the importance of incorporating debriefing into WIL models in sport.

The positive association between perceived support and overall competency development is consistent with the concept of perceived organizational support (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and with the finding of McClean et al. (2020) that internship-related stimulus events, including supervisor support, were positively associated with students' career intentions. The importance of support becomes clearer when the potential drawbacks of experiential learning are considered. Previous research suggests that experiential learning does not invariably produce positive outcomes. For example, Cunningham et al. (2005) reported lower anticipated career satisfaction and occupational commitment among students who had completed an internship than among those who had not. Sport internships have also been criticized for involving exploitative working conditions (Hawzen et al., 2018), while students in an experiential event management course encountered challenges in sustaining their engagement (Cohen & Nite, 2019). In the volunteer literature, Sheptak and Menaker (2016) associated volunteer frustration with inadequate communication from the organization. Similarly, Alviana et al. (2021) found that insufficient volunteer preparation and management constrained the

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implementation of the volunteer program at the 2019 ASEAN School Games. Taken together, these studies suggest that institutional support may help determine whether event volunteering functions as a meaningful learning experience or merely provides an additional source of labor.

This study has several limitations. First, all variables were measured through retrospective self-reports at a single point in time. The findings therefore reflect perceived development and associations rather than causal effects. A pretest–posttest design with a comparison group would provide stronger evidence of change. Second, measuring both the predictors and outcomes using a single questionnaire may have inflated the observed associations through common method variance. Third, the data were drawn from one event and one faculty, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other institutions and event types. Fourth, the post hoc comparisons did not adjust for multiple testing. Future research could combine student self-assessments with supervisor evaluations and follow students over time to determine whether perceived gains persist beyond the event.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the perceived professional competency development of 200 sport management students who volunteered at Vietnam's 6th National Student Sports Games 2026. Three main findings emerged. First, students reported high or very high levels of development in venue and competition operations, incident handling and on-site adaptability, and interpersonal communication and teamwork. Communication and teamwork received the highest ratings. Second, perceived competency development differed across assigned roles: competition secretariat and technical staff reported the highest level of development in venue operations, whereas team liaison officers reported the highest mean scores in interpersonal communication and teamwork and in incident handling and on-site adaptability. Third, task variety and challenge, perceived support from the faculty

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and organizing committee, and reflective learning were each positively associated with overall competency development and jointly accounted for 58.4% of its adjusted variance. Task variety and challenge had the largest standardized coefficient, followed closely by reflective learning, although the differences among the three coefficients were modest. Given the cross-sectional, self-report design, these findings describe students' perceptions and associations rather than causal effects.

These findings point to three practical recommendations. First, university leaders and the Faculty of Sport Management could consider recognizing structured participation in large-scale sporting events, from university-level to national-level competitions, as a professional practice module or as part of an existing practicum. Such participation should be assessed against program learning outcomes using an operational competency checklist. Second, organizers could introduce structured role rotation for student volunteers at future events. For example, liaison officers could assist the competition secretariat for one or two sessions, allowing students to gain experience in different parts of the event service-delivery process and reducing the risk of an overly narrow competency profile. Third, a 15–20-minute debriefing session led by a supervising lecturer could be held at the end of each competition day as a required part of the program. These sessions would give students an opportunity to relate operational challenges and mistakes to course content and may help strengthen their confidence and problem-solving skills.

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