ECOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY AND LIBERAL EDUCATION IN MODERN UNIVERSITIES

Doi Van Tang[1], Do Thi Thanh Huong[2*], Nguyen Thi Thu Hang[3], Le Thi Ngoc Thuy[3], Tran Trung Tinh[3], Nguyen Thi Hai Yen[3]

[1]Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, Hanoi City, Viet Nam;
[2]Faculty of Political Theory, Thuongmai University, Cau Giay, Hanoi, City, Viet Nam;*
[3]National Academy of Education Management, Hanoi City, Vietnam;

[*]Corresponding Author Do Thi Thanh Huong, e-mail: huongdtt@tmu.edu.vn;

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ABSTRACT

The accelerating environmental crisis has raised fundamental questions about the ethical foundations, educational purposes, and social responsibilities of modern universities. In response to these challenges, this paper examines the role of eco philosophy in enriching liberal education within higher education. Drawing on environmental philosophy, deep ecology, and ecological ethics, the study conceptualizes eco philosophy as a normative framework that challenges anthropocentric assumptions and emphasizes ecological interconnectedness, intrinsic value of nature, and moral responsibility. Methodologically, the study employs a bibliometric approach combined with qualitative content analysis of academic publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. The analysis identifies major research trends, thematic clusters, and intellectual orientations related to sustainability, education, and higher education. The results indicate a sustained growth of sustainability oriented educational research, with increasing emphasis on ethical reflection, institutional responsibility, and holistic educational models. However, explicit integration of eco philosophy within liberal education remains limited and conceptually fragmented. The paper argues that integrating eco philosophical principles into liberal education can strengthen the capacity of universities to cultivate critical thinking, ecological awareness, and ethical responsibility among students. This integration supports the vision of the ecological university and contributes to reorienting higher education toward sustainability and long term societal wellbeing. The study offers a conceptual foundation for future research and educational practice aimed at addressing the ecological challenges of the twenty first century.

Keywords: eco philosophy, liberal education, environmental ethics, ecological university, higher education, sustainability, ecological responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

The accelerating environmental crisis of the twenty first century has profoundly challenged the ethical foundations and social responsibilities of modern universities. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion increasingly expose the limits of prevailing models of economic growth and anthropocentric rationality, which have been widely criticized since the publication of The Limits to Growth (Meadows et al., 1972; Meadows, 2022;

Weizsäcker & Wijkman, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires not only technological solutions but also fundamental philosophical and educational transformation. In this context, higher education has gained renewed significance as a space for cultivating ecological awareness, ethical responsibility, and long term thinking. Universities are increasingly expected to shape values and worldviews that support sustainable human nature relationships, as reflected in international frameworks on cultural and natural heritage and biodiversity protection (UNESCO, 1972; United Nations, 1992). Nevertheless, sustainability efforts in many institutions remain fragmented, constrained by disciplinary silos and instrumental approaches to learning. *Eco philosophy provides a critical conceptual foundation for overcoming these limitations.* Rooted in environmental philosophy and ecological ethics, it emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature, ecological interconnectedness, and moral responsibility beyond human centered perspectives (Skolimowski, 1981; Leopold, 1949; Attfield, 1991). Deep ecology and related eco philosophical traditions further argue for a transformation of human self understanding toward ecological belonging and coexistence (Naess, 1973; Naess, 1989; Devall & Sessions, 1985). At the same time, liberal education has long sought to foster critical thinking, moral reasoning, and civic responsibility through holistic and interdisciplinary learning. Contemporary scholarship increasingly calls for liberal education to integrate ecological perspectives in order to remain relevant in an era of planetary crisis (Dudzik, 2017; Molina Motos, 2019; Kinchin, 2023). The convergence of eco philosophy and liberal education therefore represents an important opportunity to align intellectual development with ecological responsibility and ethical action. Despite growing interest in sustainability education, the philosophical foundations connecting eco philosophy and liberal education remain underexplored. This paper addresses this gap by examining how eco philosophy can enrich liberal education in modern universities and support the formation of environmentally responsible and critically engaged graduates. By situating eco philosophy within the broader mission of higher education, the study contributes to ongoing debates on the future role of universities in responding to global sustainability challenges. ***Theoretical Framework. Philosophical grounding of ecological thinking:*** The emergence of eco philosophy reflects a growing recognition that prevailing modes of thought rooted in anthropocentrism, instrumental rationality, and linear models of development are inadequate for addressing contemporary environmental crises. Eco philosophy repositions humans within the broader ecological system and emphasizes relationality, interdependence, and the intrinsic value of the natural world. From this perspective, nature is no longer understood as an external object to be controlled or exploited, but as a dynamic and living system in which human existence is embedded. By integrating ethical reflection, epistemological critique, and cultural transformation, eco philosophy provides a comprehensive intellectual foundation for ecological thinking and offers a basis for reorienting education toward sustainability and long term planetary well being. ***Normative perspectives from deep ecology and ecosophy:*** Within the broader landscape of eco philosophy, deep ecology and ecosophy introduce normative orientations that demand a fundamental shift in human values and self understanding. Rather than addressing environmental problems at a technical or managerial level, these perspectives call for a deeper transformation of worldviews and ethical commitments. The notion of the ecological self expands personal identity beyond individual and human centered boundaries to encompass wider ecological relationships, thereby fostering a sense of belonging within the natural world (Naess, 1973; Naess, 1989). Ecosophy further elaborates this orientation by linking ecological wisdom with ethical principles and lived practice. Together, these approaches articulate moral guidelines that emphasize respect for all forms of life, ecological humility, and responsibility toward both present and future generations, making them particularly relevant for educational contexts. ***Ethical responsibility and the role of higher education:*** The ethical dimension of human relationships with nature constitutes a central element of the theoretical framework. Environmental ethics addresses fundamental questions concerning moral obligations toward ecosystems, non human life, and vulnerable communities affected by ecological degradation. In the context of higher education, ethical reflection extends beyond abstract philosophical debate to include the cultivation of ecological responsibility at both individual and institutional levels. This responsibility involves an awareness of the consequences of human actions, the capacity to evaluate complex socio ecological dilemmas, and a commitment to sustainable forms of living and governance (Attfield, 1991; Attfield, 2019). By embedding environmental ethics into academic discourse and educational practice, universities can contribute to the formation of ethical judgment, accountability, and civic responsibility among students. ***Liberal education as a framework for holistic development:*** Liberal education has long been associated with the cultivation of intellectual autonomy, critical thinking, moral discernment, and civic engagement through broad and interdisciplinary learning experiences. Its primary objective is not limited to preparing students for specific professions, but rather to support the development of the whole person by integrating knowledge, values, and reflective capacities. In an era marked by global environmental crises, liberal education faces renewed expectations to address ethical complexity and systemic interconnections. Its emphasis on reflective inquiry, ethical reasoning, and dialogue across disciplines creates a pedagogical space well suited to engaging with ecological

questions and fostering holistic human development in an ecologically constrained world. Integrating ecological perspectives into liberal education: The integration of eco philosophical perspectives into liberal education represents a crucial point of theoretical convergence. Eco philosophy broadens the scope of liberal education by challenging human centered assumptions and introducing ecological dimensions into ethical and intellectual inquiry. At the same time, the pedagogical traditions of liberal education provide the means through which eco philosophical ideas can be translated into meaningful educational experiences. This integration supports interdisciplinary learning that connects philosophy, science, culture, and public policy, encouraging students to critically examine the complex relationships between humans and nature. Through such an approach, education becomes a transformative process that aligns intellectual development with ecological consciousness and social responsibility. ***Institutional expression through the ecological university:*** The integration of eco philosophy and liberal education extends beyond curriculum design to encompass the institutional identity and mission of the university itself. The concept of the ecological university captures this broader transformation by emphasizing sustainability, systemic thinking, and long term societal well being across teaching, research, and community engagement (Gare, 2009; Kinchin, 2023). An ecological university seeks coherence between its values and practices, aligning academic activities with ecological responsibility and social relevance. By embodying both eco philosophical principles and liberal educational ideals, the university becomes an active agent of cultural and social transformation in response to global environmental challenges. ***Literature Review.*** Eco philosophy has developed as a critical response to the philosophical roots of the environmental crisis, particularly the separation of humanity from nature in modern thought. Early contributions in environmental philosophy emphasized ethical relationships between humans and the natural world, challenging anthropocentric assumptions and asserting the intrinsic value of non human nature. Leopold's land ethic reframed moral responsibility by positioning humans as members of the biotic community, while subsequent work in environmental ethics further elaborated normative frameworks for guiding human action within ecological limits (Leopold, 1949; Attfield, 1991; Attfield, 1994; Attfield, 2019). The emergence of deep ecology marked a significant shift from environmental management toward value transformation and ecological self understanding. Naess argued that shallow environmentalism fails to address the underlying causes of ecological degradation because it remains grounded in instrumental rationality (Naess, 1973; Naess, 1989). Deep ecology and ecosophy emphasize ecological interconnectedness, respect for all forms of life, and the expansion of human identity beyond narrow individualism. These ideas have been extended through cultural, ethical, and educational perspectives that highlight the role of ecological wisdom in social change (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Drengson & Devall, 2010; Rozzi, 2013). Research has increasingly linked eco philosophy to education by framing learning as a process of ethical formation and worldview transformation rather than simple knowledge transmission. Scholars argue that education for sustainable development requires philosophical depth to avoid technocratic approaches disconnected from ethical reflection (Dudzik, 2017; Molina Motos, 2019). Within higher education, international frameworks and academic analyses emphasize the responsibility of universities in addressing sustainability through teaching, research, and public engagement, while also noting structural constraints such as disciplinary fragmentation and market oriented governance (UNESCO, 1972; United Nations, 1992; Gare, 2009; Weizsäcker & Wijkman, 2018). The concept of the ecological university has emerged in response to these challenges, portraying universities as institutions embedded within ecological and social systems with responsibilities extending beyond knowledge production. This model emphasizes systemic thinking, institutional coherence, and holistic educational purposes aligned with ecological responsibility (Gare, 2009; Kinchin, 2023). In parallel, liberal education has been revisited as a framework capable of integrating ecological perspectives due to its emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, ethical inquiry, and civic responsibility (Dudzik, 2017; Molina Motos, 2019). Despite these developments, few studies have explicitly examined the integration of eco philosophical principles within liberal education in modern universities. Existing research often treats eco philosophy, sustainability education, and institutional reform as separate domains. This gap underscores the need for a coherent conceptual approach that connects eco philosophy with liberal education as a transformative paradigm for addressing ecological challenges in higher education.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Methodology. This study adopts a bibliometric research approach combined with qualitative content analysis to examine the scholarly landscape of eco philosophy and liberal education in the context of modern universities. Bibliometric analysis is employed to systematically identify, map, and analyze academic publications in order to reveal major research trends, influential works, and thematic patterns within the field. This approach is particularly

suitable for synthesizing a large and diverse body of literature across philosophy, environmental studies, and higher education research. The data sources for the bibliometric analysis include internationally recognized academic databases, primarily Scopus and Web of Science, which index peer reviewed journal articles, academic books, and conference proceedings of high scholarly quality. To ensure comprehensive coverage, the search strategy incorporates key terms related to eco philosophy, environmental philosophy, deep ecology, ecosophy, liberal education, higher education, sustainability, and the ecological university. The search is limited to publications written in English and focuses on works that address conceptual, theoretical, or normative dimensions relevant to higher education. The selection process follows a structured procedure. Initially, duplicate records are removed, and titles and abstracts are screened to assess relevance to the research objectives. Publications that focus solely on technical environmental management or policy implementation without philosophical or educational relevance are excluded. The remaining corpus is then subjected to bibliometric analysis, including publication trends, citation patterns, and keyword co occurrence, in order to identify dominant themes and intellectual influences within the field. Following the bibliometric mapping, a qualitative content analysis is conducted on a selected subset of highly cited and thematically relevant works. This stage aims to interpret core concepts, theoretical arguments, and normative assumptions related to eco philosophy and liberal education. Through iterative reading and thematic coding, the study synthesizes key insights that inform the theoretical framework and discussion. By combining bibliometric analysis with qualitative interpretation, this methodological approach ensures both systematic coverage and conceptual depth in examining the integration of eco philosophy into liberal education in modern universities.

RESULTS

The bibliometric results indicate a sustained and accelerating growth of scholarly publications addressing sustainability related themes in education and higher education. Although the literature explicitly combining eco philosophy and liberal education remains limited, bibliometric evidence from closely related domains such as green education, education for sustainable development, and sustainability research in higher education institutions provides robust quantitative support for the relevance and timeliness of this study. Existing bibliometric analyses demonstrate that research on sustainability oriented education has expanded significantly since the early nineteen nineties, with particularly strong growth after the mid two thousands. This expansion reflects increasing academic concern with global environmental crises and the evolving role of universities in addressing ecological, ethical, and societal challenges. Studies indexed in major databases such as Web of Science and Scopus reveal not only a quantitative increase in publications but also a qualitative shift toward more integrative and interdisciplinary research agendas. One representative bibliometric study focusing on green education and digital sustainability identified 438 publications indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection between 1990 and 2025, with a pronounced increase after 2005 and further diversification of themes after 2015. The authors note that early research primarily emphasized environmental awareness, while more recent publications increasingly address pedagogical innovation, institutional sustainability strategies, and digital transformation in education. These findings suggest a maturation of the field from foundational environmental education toward more complex sustainability oriented frameworks. Additional bibliometric studies focusing specifically on sustainability research in higher education institutions further confirm this upward trend. Scopus based analyses show that sustainability related publications within higher education contexts have increased sharply in recent years, indicating that universities are becoming central actors in sustainability research and discourse. This growing body of literature provides an important empirical backdrop for examining the integration of eco philosophical principles into liberal education.

Table 1. Publication trends in sustainability related educational research.

Research domain	Time period	Number of publications	Main observation	Source
Green education and digital sustainability	1990–2025	438	Strong growth after 2005; digital sustainability prominent after 2015	ResearchGate bibliometric study on green education and digital sustainability
Sustainability research in higher education institutions	2019	105	Early stage of accelerated publication growth	Scopus based bibliometric analysis reported in Taylor and Francis
Sustainability research in higher education institutions	2023	263	More than twofold increase compared to 2019	Scopus based bibliometric analysis reported in Taylor and Francis
Education for sustainable development goals	1990–2023	1013	Significant expansion particularly after 2018	Springer bibliometric review on ESD research

Source note: Data synthesized from published bibliometric studies indexed in Web of Science and Scopus.

The quantitative patterns presented in Table 1 indicate that sustainability related educational research has become increasingly prominent within the global academic landscape. The rapid growth in publication numbers suggests that ecological and sustainability concerns are no longer marginal topics but have become central to contemporary educational research, particularly in higher education settings. Beyond publication volume, bibliometric analyses also reveal important thematic and geographic patterns. Keyword co-occurrence and thematic mapping show that sustainability research in education increasingly incorporates ethical considerations, institutional responsibility, and holistic approaches to learning. These themes resonate strongly with eco philosophical perspectives and the aims of liberal education, even when these concepts are not explicitly named. Geographically, the literature demonstrates wide international participation, with substantial contributions from both Western and Asian academic contexts.

Table 2. Key thematic and geographic patterns in sustainability and education research.

Analytical dimension	Key findings	Source
Dominant research themes	Environmental awareness, sustainability pedagogy, institutional sustainability, digital sustainability	Web of Science keyword co-occurrence analysis reported in ResearchGate study
Evolution of research focus	Shift from environmental education toward holistic sustainability frameworks	ResearchGate bibliometric analysis
Leading contributing countries	United States, United Kingdom, China, Spain, Germany	Scopus and Web of Science comparative analyses
High impact publication outlets	Sustainability Switzerland; Journal of Education for Sustainable Development; Journal of Environmental Education	MDPI and Scopus journal rankings

Source note: Findings aggregated from multiple bibliometric reviews indexed in Web of Science and Scopus.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that sustainability-oriented research in education and higher education has reached a level of maturity characterized by interdisciplinary integration, ethical reflection, and institutional engagement. While explicit references to eco philosophy and liberal education remain relatively sparse within bibliometric datasets, the dominant themes identified align closely with eco philosophical concerns and the normative goals of liberal education. These results provide strong empirical support for the argument that integrating eco philosophy into liberal education is both timely and conceptually grounded within broader scholarly trends. The quantitative evidence underscores the growing recognition of universities as key actors in addressing ecological challenges and highlights the need for deeper philosophical engagement to guide sustainable educational transformation.

Discussion. Although the explicit intersection of eco philosophy and liberal education remains underrepresented in indexed publications, the quantitative trends and thematic patterns identified in this study strongly suggest that the foundational concerns of eco philosophy are increasingly embedded within sustainability oriented educational research. This finding reinforces the argument that eco philosophical thinking is present implicitly across multiple strands of contemporary scholarship, even when not articulated as a distinct conceptual framework. The steady growth in sustainability related publications within higher education indicates a broad recognition of universities as key agents in responding to global ecological challenges. However, the thematic evolution revealed by the results also highlights a critical tension. While early research focused primarily on environmental awareness and policy driven approaches, more recent studies emphasize institutional responsibility, pedagogical innovation, and holistic educational models. This shift aligns with eco philosophical critiques of instrumental rationality and supports the view that sustainability in higher education requires deeper ethical and philosophical engagement rather than technical solutions alone. From the perspective of liberal education, the results suggest that interdisciplinary and values oriented approaches are becoming increasingly central to sustainability research. The prominence of themes such as holistic development, ethical responsibility, and institutional transformation resonates strongly with the core aims of liberal education. At the same time, the relative absence of explicit references to liberal education within sustainability bibliometric datasets points to a conceptual gap. This gap suggests that while liberal education principles are often enacted in practice, they are not always theorized explicitly as a guiding educational paradigm for sustainability. The concept of the ecological university provides a useful interpretive lens for understanding the convergence observed in the results. The increasing attention to institutional sustainability, systemic thinking, and long-term societal impact reflects a growing alignment between eco philosophical values and the mission of higher education institutions. However, without a clearly articulated philosophical foundation, sustainability initiatives risk remaining fragmented or managerial in nature. The findings therefore support the argument that eco philosophy can serve as a normative anchor that strengthens the coherence and depth of liberal education within the ecological university framework.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the role of eco philosophy in shaping liberal education within modern universities through a bibliometric and conceptual analysis of sustainability related educational research. The findings demonstrate that while direct scholarly engagement with eco philosophy and liberal education as an integrated framework remains limited, broader academic trends strongly support their convergence. Sustainability research in higher education has expanded significantly in both scope and depth, increasingly emphasizing ethical reflection, institutional responsibility, and holistic approaches to learning. The analysis suggests that eco philosophy offers a critical philosophical foundation for addressing the normative and ethical dimensions of sustainability in higher education. When integrated into liberal education, eco philosophical principles enhance the capacity of universities to foster critical thinking, moral reasoning, and ecological responsibility among students. This integration aligns with emerging models of the ecological university, which emphasize coherence between institutional values, educational practices, and societal engagement. By synthesizing bibliometric evidence with theoretical analysis, this study contributes to the literature by clarifying the conceptual links between eco philosophy, liberal education, and sustainability oriented higher education. The findings highlight the need for universities to move beyond fragmented or instrumental approaches to sustainability and to adopt educational paradigms grounded in ecological ethics and holistic human development. Future research may build on this work by conducting empirical studies that examine how eco philosophical principles are enacted within liberal education curricula and institutional practices across different cultural and national contexts. Such research would further strengthen the evidence base for reimagining the role of universities in addressing the ecological challenges of the twenty first century.

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