

PEOPLE

Sustainability Through Cultural Synergy

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An international student sharing her sustainability insights. Participating international students were also invited to reflect on their personal experiences of living in different countries. (Photo courtesy of NTU D-School.)

“Which night market was the first in Taiwan to go plastic-free?” As the trivia question appears on the screen, the room comes alive—whispers, quick Google searches, exchanged glances. In this lightning round of eco-questions, participants compete for the crown of plastic-reduction awareness.

The correct answer? Ningxia Night Market. Cheers erupt. Groans follow. Then comes the next question.

This wasn’t your average quiz night. It was the culminating exchange event of the “Reducing Plastic in Night Markets” project—a collaboration between international interns from the Taipei City Government’s Department for Youth (TPYD) and National Taiwan University’s D-School. Their mission? Target one of Taiwan’s most iconic, yet environmentally challenging spaces: the local night market.



Akane (third from left), an international student from Japan, engaging with team members on the idea of sustainable practices. (Photo courtesy of NTU D-School)

From Stinky Tofu to Sustainable Policy

The six-member team, including students from NTU, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei First Girls' High School, and international exchange students, didn't just make observations—they acted. They shot videos, drafted policy proposals, and engaged vendors and market-goers alike in discussions about waste and sustainability.

Emily, an NTU student and project member, explained her team's motivation: "We all love night markets. But one of our teammates from Europe asked about something we'd taken for granted—'Why so much single-use plastic?'" That seemingly small question opened the team members' eyes and sparked a big shift; they started to reimagine how the local street food scene could embrace more sustainable practices.

Global Perspectives, Local Action

Vaiiti, an exchange student from the University of Bordeaux, was stunned by Taiwan's coffee culture. "In France, there are legal restrictions on single-use plastics. But here, every coffee order meant a disposable cup, lid, and sleeve." She proposed a solution modelled after the practice at French university campuses: initiate a reusable cup program to students.

For Akane, an exchange student from Waseda University in Japan, the experience was about connecting. "People here were always willing to help you!" she said, eyes sparkling. Despite the occasional inconvenience of testing eco-containers, most Taiwanese vendors were cooperative—even enthusiastic—about participating and offering feedback.

Innovation Through Cultural Synergy

During the past month, the team visited night markets around Taiwan, gathering field data and developing tailored policy proposals for each market. Emily observed an interesting pattern in collaboration styles: Asian students excelled at structuring and standardizing processes, while international members brought adaptive thinking and cultural innovation. The result? A cross-cultural synergy that expanded everyone's view of what forms sustainable practices could take.

"As to sustainability, every country faces similar challenges. That's exactly why global collaboration adds value," Emily noted.

A Platform for Change

Elly Hsu, Program Manager at D-School, emphasized that the project embodies the school's mission: Embrace Social Responsibility, Learn for Action. "We're committed to shaping a new generation of sustainability leaders through interdisciplinary, action-oriented education," she said.



By invitation, participants posted their thoughts on reducing plastic in night markets using sticky notes. (Photo courtesy of NTU D-School)



Guide addressing students on a tour of NTU D-School's Makerspace. Afterwards, D-School students introduced and demonstrated the tools and equipment onsite. (Photo courtesy of NTU D-School)

In the month ahead, the team will continue gathering knowledge and insights and finalizing policy recommendations to present to the Taipei City Government. Their goal: to give voice to the international youth who call Taipei home—at least for now—and to leave behind a greener, smarter city.

This is more than an internship. It's a movement led by young global citizens, determined to turn everyday spaces—like Taiwan's bustling night markets—into testbeds for growing a greener, more sustainable world.