



THAI BUDDHIST UNIVERSITY MEET THE CRITERIA OF HEALTHY UNIVERSITIES UNDER THE AUN-HPN FRAMEWORK

Phra Suthirattanabundit Suthit Oboun¹, Saichol Panyachit^{2*}, Phoobade Wanitchanon²

¹Faculty of Social Sciences, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, Thailand

²Faculty of Social Sciences, Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand

*Corresponding author E-mail: Saicholpa@g.swu.ac.th

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Thailand has recognized the importance of promoting health through institutional engagement, particularly by leveraging the collaborative capacity of higher education institutions under the ASEAN University Network-Health Promotion Network (AUN-HPN). This research article identified its primary objective as developing mechanisms and a management system for a Buddhist-oriented health-promoting organization within MCU. However, integrating AUN-HPN practices with religious contexts involved several key conditions that served both as limitations and protective factors—for example, the care of monks' physical health and avoiding smoking and drinking alcohol, which aligned with the principles of the Dhamma-Vinaya.

Methodology: The study employed an implementation research design. It integrated the holistic framework of the "Three Spheres of Well-being" *sīla* (Moral Discipline), *samādhi* (Meditation), and *paññā* (Wisdom). These represented moral and ethical conduct in daily life, mental strength, adaptability, and knowledge application to foster health through Buddhist principles. This framework was used to guide practical health initiatives. A total of 36 stakeholders participated as members of the university's Health Promotion Committee to co-develop strategies. All 36 stakeholders were university policy-level actors who participated in focus group discussions, after-action reviews, and lessons learned based on their practical involvement in health promotion activities.

Main Results: Driving the university toward becoming a Healthy University under the AUN-HPN framework through the Threefold Way required strong mental health, firm moral integrity, and a continuous readiness to adapt and learn. These dimensions were interconnected with physical health, mental health, social health, and spiritual/intellectual well-being. The findings revealed three key components: 1) The development of *sīla*-based well-being (Ethical Conduct), which focused on creating enabling environments through systemic structures and policy-driven networks within the AUN-HPN framework; 2) The advancement of *samādhi*-based well-being (Mental Concentration), which emphasized mental health, social connection, and work-life balance—aligned with the spiritual capital inherent in Buddhist practices, and 3) The promotion of *paññā*-based well-being (Wisdom), highlighted the internal development and external dissemination of health knowledge through the lens of socially engaged Buddhism.



Involvement to Buddhadhamma: This research involved Buddhadhamma through the application of Applied Buddhism to promote the development of Healthy Buddhist Universities. The research findings reflected the Three Domains of Holistic Well-being, which were linked to Buddhist principles and contributed to the management and transformation toward a health-promoting Buddhist university. This holistic approach encompassed *sīla* (Moral Discipline), *samādhi* (Meditation), and *paññā* (Wisdom), served as an important model for other health-oriented organizations to adopt in their development efforts. Therefore, integrating Buddhism with the AUN-HPN framework was feasible and capable of transcending the contextual limitations of the religious contexts. It can be concretely applied at both policy and practice levels. Moreover, the Threefold Way helps to support the achievement of key indicators within the AUN-HPN framework-such as promoting strong mental health and establishing a smoke-free and alcohol-free university.

Conclusions: The study concluded that integrating Buddhist principles into health promotion strengthened institutional strategies and fostered holistic well-being in university settings. Although implementing health-promoting university initiatives under the AUN-HPN framework was guided by structured operational models and evaluation indicators, in practice, successful health promotion at the university level required a profound understanding of social and cultural context. The AUN-HPN framework served as a valuable compass, enabling institutions to adapt and apply its components according to their unique settings. Nevertheless, Buddhist universities in Thailand were diverse and regionally dispersed. Future research should have involved lesson drawing and comparative analysis to highlight the contextual differences in implementation. Such an approach would have contributed to the sustainability of development efforts and facilitated more tangible progress toward achieving the health and education-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: Healthy University, Monastic Education, Health Promotion Policy, AUN-HPN, Thailand

Introduction

Thailand was one of the countries that placed importance on health promotion by encouraging universities to integrate the ASEAN University Network-Health Promotion Network (AUN-HPN) framework into their institutional policies. However, there were still limitations regarding the specific contexts of each university, particularly Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), which provided education for Buddhist monks and operated within its own unique religious and cultural context. This article applied the "Three Spheres of Well-being" (*Sīla*, *Samādhi*, and *Paññā*) as an intuitive yet powerful framework for practical application in promoting health within a university context that carried distinct religious characteristics.

The Health Promoting University (HPU) concept has been adopted as a strategy for health development, utilizing higher education institutions as foundational platforms for fostering holistic well-being. This perspective on the relationship between higher education institutions and health promotion reflects the capacity to integrate health education with health promotion, thereby enabling students and staff to extend the cultivation of a culture of health consciousness into their daily lives.



Transforming universities into environments conducive to health promotion has become a key objective that all universities recognize and are actively working towards. This should not be limited to temporary health promotion activities but should instead support long-term and sustainable health promotion. The establishment of a Health Promoting University (HPU) requires participation at all levels, a shared goal-setting process, and equitable access to health-promoting initiatives, ultimately creating an organizational culture that values the health and well-being of all its members (Suárez-Reyes & Van den Broucke, 2016); (Tsouros, 1998).

Nowadays, member countries are enhancing the development of Health-Promoting Universities through an academic network mechanism under the ASEAN University Network-Health Promotion Network (AUN-HPN). The Healthy University Rating System (HURS) is used as a tool to evaluate and monitor progress toward becoming a Health-Promoting University. The HURS is grounded in the Healthy University Framework (HUF), which is structured around three main pillars: Systems and Infrastructure (SI), Zero-Tolerance Areas (ZT), and Health Promotion Areas (HP) (ASEAN University Network-Health Promotion Network, 2023; 2024).

Wattanapisit et al. (2022) performed a health survey among university students in ASEAN countries, and the findings reflect the operational mechanisms of the ASEAN University Network-Health Promotion Network (AUN-HPN). The study classified ASEAN university students into five groups: High sugary beverage consumption, poor mental well-being, healthy, alcohol drinkers, and smokers. The majority of students were categorized in the high sugary beverage consumption group. This group consumed high amounts of sugary beverages daily but does not exhibit other health risks, as they do not smoke, do not drink alcohol, and had strong mental well-being.

The health of university students in ASEAN varies according to different university sociocultural contexts. In Thailand, the majority of higher education institutions participating in AUN-HPN consist primarily of lay students and staff. This has enabled those implementing the AUN-HPN to take a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. However, Thailand has unique higher education institutions with distinct characteristics, particularly Buddhist universities where both laypeople and ordained monks' study and work together. These universities, such as Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU), operate within sociocultural contexts that differ greatly from those of traditional universities due to the presence of religious structural mechanisms in governance. These universities integrate Buddhist education with secular learning, emphasizing a balance between academic studies and mental and spiritual cultivation. Furthermore, teaching styles must be modified to conform to the monastic code of discipline (Schedneck, 2019). Additionally, living a healthy lifestyle is also influenced by various social determinants of health (SDH), particularly those influenced by religious conditions (Jeamjitvibool et al., 2022); (Panyachit, 2025).

The collection of health data on monastic students in Thailand remains relatively limited. However, Yiengprugsawan et al. (2010) conducted a study that gathered health-related data on Buddhist monastic students and discovered that those aged between 20 and 39 years commonly suffered from conditions such as goiter and liver disease, which were attributed to monastic-specific dietary behaviors. In terms of personal well-being, monastic students reported higher scores



compared to other student groups in domains such religion or spirituality, feeling safe, overall life satisfaction, relationships with neighbors, sense of community, and personal relationships. Additionally, monastic students demonstrated higher levels of spiritual capital than other student groups. This resulted from their ability to apply Buddhist principles and systematic thinking processes to problem-solving, their engagement in mental discipline and spiritual practices, and their belief in the law of karma.

When considering populations of the same age as monastic students, many studies have highlighted the importance of health-related lifestyles in relation to Health Literacy (HL), which is a crucial factor in promoting positive health behaviors. High levels of HL lead to more informed daily dietary choices, greater capacity for self-care, and better mental well-being. Furthermore, the influence of digital technology on health outcomes cannot be overlooked. Digital tools such as health applications and online Buddhist teachings are increasingly being used to access health services. Digital literacy also serves as essential knowledge for protecting individuals from exposure to unhealthy media content. Moreover, health education initiatives aimed at promoting health literacy should take into account the appropriateness and relevance of people's lifestyles. If health promotion policies are designed based on an overly rigid "one-size-fits-all" approach, certain populations may be marginalized (Intarakamhang & Macaskill, 2018); (Sbaiti et al., 2025); (Thianthai & Tamdee, 2024).

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU) is a higher education institution that values the well-being of its academic community members. Recognizing the differing health characteristics between monastic students and laypeople, the university acknowledges the importance of addressing this issue. In response to the ongoing physical and mental health challenges faced particularly by monastic students, MCU has expressed its intention to join the AUN-HPN as a strategic move to address these concerns.

Objectives

This research article identifies its primary objective as developing mechanisms and a management system for a Buddhist-oriented health-promoting organization within MCU. This initiative seeks to establish strategic health promotion practices grounded in the operational framework of the AUN-HPN, thereby contributing to the sustainable and concrete implementation of health promotion efforts within the university.

Methodology

The advancement of MCU as a Health-Promoting University is guided by the ASEAN framework. This study employs an Implementation Research (IR) approach, which prioritizes practical application and goes beyond conventional policy analysis by focusing on real-world implementation and outcomes. This research approach places strong emphasis on outcomes that arise from the actual implementation process. Accordingly, the presentation of findings primarily focuses on results derived from real-world implementation (Hjern, 1982); (Nilsen et al., 2013).

This implementation aims to produce outcomes that lead to systemic and organizational-level changes in health. To address ethical concerns regarding human participants, particularly those arising from activities under the IR approach, we have strictly adhered to all established ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. The study was officially approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (Certification Number 84/2568). We have rigorously followed all procedures in accordance with accepted ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Stakeholder Engagement

Implementation Research (IR) stresses the involvement of stakeholders at every stage of the research process. To initiate this, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University established a Steering Committee for the ASEAN Health-Promoting University to oversee the implementation phase. The committee comprises 36 members, including university administrators, representatives from various academic units, and external experts from academia, non-governmental organizations, and civil society. Its primary responsibility is to support and promote health promotion activities in alignment with the AUN-HPN framework. Stakeholders who participated in the study were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals with direct roles or authority in implementing health promotion within the Buddhist university context.

The Implementation Process

A Logic Model guides the implementation process by structuring procedures and strategies in accordance with the framework proposed by Smith et al. (2020). This model serves as a tool to direct the implementation process and to facilitate a comprehensive and integrated understanding of its various components. In alignment with the context of a Thai Buddhist university promoting health, Figure 1 illustrates the implementation process employed in this study, which is also consistent with the AUN-HPN framework. To ensure alignment with Buddhist principles, this study adopts the "Three Domains of Holistic Well-being" framework, developed to guide the social structuring of Buddhist organizations committed to health promotion (Suwanprateep et al., 2023). The framework emphasizes the cultivation of *sīla* (Moral Discipline), *samādhi* (Meditation), and *paññā* (Wisdom), which together form a stable and holistic foundation for well-being.

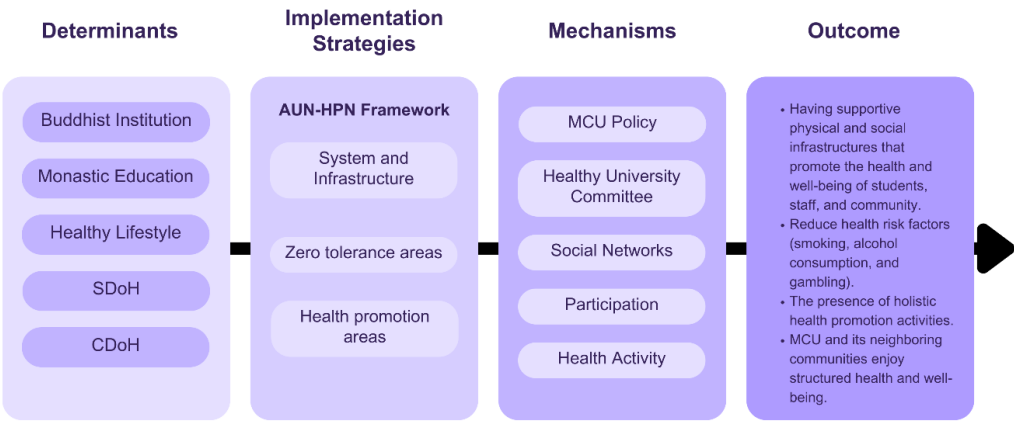


Figure 1 The Implementation Process



Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data collection for this study was conducted through documentary analysis, focusing on official meeting reports from the Steering Committee on ASEAN Health-Promoting Universities, as mandated by Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. These records provided detailed documentation of the university's implementation efforts and progress. The primary tools used in the implementation process were specifically designed to evaluate the practical application of the AUN-HPN framework in real-world settings. Through content analysis of the Steering Committee's meeting reports, the study examined the difficulties and obstacles encountered during the implementation process. This analytical approach enabled the identification of important issues and recurrent themes within the documentation. The data were systematically categorized and organized, with research findings presented to highlight implementation outcomes, an essential focus of Implementation Research (IR).

Results and Discussion

The AUN-HPN Framework in the Development of the Moral Discipline Domain

The development of the moral discipline domain, which is one of the three pillars of holistic living, plays a crucial role in the cultivation of overall well-being. The domain emphasizes the importance of positive interactions between monks and university staff within a supportive physical and social environment. To promote high-quality living at MCU, suitable social systems and structures must be established. These should be implemented as follows:

1. Establishing a foundation for well-being through the implementation of policy-oriented mechanisms

Health-promoting university initiatives have been integrated into the university's strategic plan, supported by a formal declaration of intent and health promotion policies. A steering committee has been established to guide comprehensive implementation. In addition, policy networks have been developed by utilizing MCU's campuses as key mechanisms to broaden the scope of implementation across nearly all areas under MCU's jurisdiction. The focus is on advancing activities within the AUN-HPN framework, aiming to transform Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University—including its campuses, Buddhist colleges, and classrooms—into health-promoting environments for university staff, in alignment with the indicators set forth for Health-Promoting Universities. The creation of an operational network that combines the internal and external facets of well-being is an intriguing example from Khon Kaen Province. Internally, the focus is on the welfare of monastic students and university staff on campus. Externally, efforts involve working together with the community to promote health, with a special emphasis on issues pertaining to the elderly. These initiatives align with MCU's mission of "Moral and Intellectual Cultivation" and correspond with the AUN-HPN operational framework, particularly in the domain of systems and infrastructure.



2. A Healthy University through Robust Digital Infrastructure

The implementation includes a digital health platform, ArogyaSati Health Diary, designed to promote behaviors among Buddhist monks. The platform provides personalized health recommendations, including guidance on nutrition, physical activity, and behavior modification, tailored to individual needs. It supports behavior change by employing strategies that promote positive motivation and encourage participation in group-based activities. The platform also integrates creative health media that combines Buddhist principles with scientific health knowledge. Additionally, it serves as a health risk alert system by notifying monk users of potential severe health risks and recommending appropriate screenings or consultations with health professionals. The platform also features health coaching programs, such as those for weight loss, blood sugar reduction, and increasing physical activity.

The AUN-HPN Framework in the Development of the Meditation Domain

The development of the meditation domain significantly contributes to advancing the implementation of the AUN-HPN framework, particularly in the areas of mental well-being, social interaction, and work-life balance. The meditation domain focuses on fostering mental quality and cultivating a positive mindset. An example of such implementation can be seen at MCU Chiang Rai Buddhist College, which has announced policies and demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting health within the framework of becoming a university that supports holistic well-being. Activities developed to support the establishment of a comprehensive meditation domain focus on the integration of Buddhist art with mental well-being development. Buddhist art plays a significant role in guiding and regulating the mind in accordance with Buddhist principles, embedding moral reflections and teachings within its artistic expressions. These efforts also foster opportunities for individuals to cultivate mental stability through engagement with the Buddhist art found in temples.

In terms of social interaction and work-life balance, this is reflected in the provision of designated spaces within the university where monk students and staff can relax after study or work. The university places strong emphasis on stress management, recognizing it as a critical aspect affecting both monk students and personnel. Buddhist monks inherently possess a form of cultural and spiritual capital through Buddhist teachings that support work-life balance, particularly through the practice of Vipassana meditation, which fosters mental tranquility and helps alleviate stress arising from work and study responsibilities. At the same time, Buddhism emphasizes the principle of the Middle Path, which advocates for balance in all aspects of life, including work and study. The concept of maintaining balance in whatever one is engaged in allows for self-awareness, which has become a strength of MCU in achieving its outcome-oriented goal of becoming a Healthy University within the AUN-HPN framework. At the same time, social interaction extends beyond the campus through engagement with surrounding communities, fostering socially oriented activities and the dissemination of health-related knowledge. Examples include home visits to bedridden patients and providing health education to the elderly-initiatives rooted in the Buddhist principle of Sangahavatthu (Acts of Social Integration) and aligned with the Buddhist social welfare action plan, aiming to position Buddhism as a force for social good.



The AUN-HPN Framework in the Development of the Intellectual Domain

The AUN-HPN framework emphasizes the importance of a sharp intellect and a comprehensive understanding of established health data, both of which support the achievement of goals related to zero-tolerance policies and health promotion across nearly all domains. The implementation, therefore, focuses on cultivating health literacy among MCU monk students and personnel by drawing upon the long-standing strengths of Buddhist spiritual capital, which are deeply embedded in its teachings and practices. Various health promotion activities have been carried out, including anti-smoking campaigns within the university; Health screenings for students, faculty, and staff at the Buddhist College; Health education training sessions; and The promotion of physical activity through institutional sports events. Additionally, health knowledge has been developed and integrated with Buddhist principles to enhance holistic understanding among students and staff.

The AUN-HPN Framework in the Specific Context of MCU

In the context of MCU, certain aspects of the AUN-HPN framework are regulated through the Dhamma-Vinaya (Buddhist Monastic Code) and social institutions such as the Sangha Supreme Council, which plays a key role in enabling Buddhist universities with monastic members to effectively meet the framework's indicators. Road safety infractions, such as the failure to wear helmets, are specifically addressed in the context of Thai Buddhist monks. The Sangha Supreme Council of Thailand issued Resolution No. 11/2564, which prohibits monks from operating automobiles or motorcycles, even though the Vinaya (Monastic Code) does not specifically forbid it. However, allowing monks to drive may result in possible Vinaya violations because doing so could lead to commercial, civil, or criminal offenses under the Land Traffic Act B.E. 2522 (1979).

Furthermore, the restrictions on monks' physical mobility imposed by the monastic code of discipline make it particularly challenging to meet the indicator related to health promotion in the curriculum and co-curriculum. General Education (GenEd) courses that support health promotion fall under the university's undergraduate curriculum standards. However, there are no courses at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU) that are exclusively focused on health promotion. Moreover, physical health promotion is not emphasized within the overall curriculum. Instead, the university places a strong emphasis on the application of Buddhist knowledge, especially its benefits for mental health and wisdom cultivation. Courses such as Psychology of Life and Death and Buddhist Psychology exemplify this approach.

Discussion

Modern Thai society places great importance on health promotion, which is encouraged through the use of multi-level policy tools. Through the ASEAN University Network-Health Promotion Network (AUN-HPN), universities across Thailand are increasingly emphasizing health promotion. However, challenges remain in effectively applying this framework in certain contexts. Differences in institutional settings, particularly between universities offering health sciences programs and those that do not, contribute to these challenges (Yeravdekar et al., 2024). This paper, on the other hand, primarily emphasizes application of the AUN-HPN framework in Thai Buddhist universities, notably MCU.



It addresses both the adjustments required to align the framework with the unique context of the university and the direct implementation of the framework's standards.

The findings of this study encompass various aspects, analyzed through the framework of the Three Domains of Life for holistic health management (Suwanprateep et al., 2023). The moral discipline domain (*Sīla*) aims to establish a healthy environment through systemic policies and structures supported by cooperative networks. In the meditation domain, the focus is on developing health promotion initiatives that emphasize mental well-being, social interaction, and work-life balance, all of which align closely with existing Buddhist capital. In the intellectual domain, the emphasis lies on developing appropriate health knowledge and extending its impact beyond the university, guided by Buddhism's goal of benefitting society.

The implementation of the AUN-HPN framework has significantly contributed to the development of MCU as a Buddhist university that promotes health, guided by the principles of system and infrastructure, zero-tolerance areas, and health promotion areas (ASEAN University Network-Health Promotion Network, 2023; 2024). Additionally, it is essential to consider the differences in health culture and well-being practices within the university. A culture and set of values that prioritize good health will contribute to the university's success in becoming a strong, health-promoting Buddhist institution. Using the university as a social institution to promote health is in line with the Ottawa Charter, which emphasizes a systematic approach to strengthening health and creating an environment conducive to health promotion. This also involves recognizing the participation of stakeholders within the university, including students, professors, technicians, and administrative staff, in the planning process (Suárez-Reyes & Van den Broucke, 2016).

The ultimate goal of becoming a model health-promoting Buddhist university in ASEAN through the implementation of the AUN-HPN framework faces several challenges. These include ensuring the sustainability of activities, which should not be temporary but integrated into collaborative efforts beyond the health sector; Maintaining operational standards within the framework; and Establishing a flexible system and infrastructure that can adapt to social and cultural changes (Dooris & Doherty, 2010).

Originality and Body of Knowledge

In Figure 2 shows research findings that reflect the Three Domains of Holistic Well-being, which are linked to Buddhist principles and contribute to the management and transformation toward a health-promoting Buddhist university. This holistic approach encompasses *sīla* (Moral Discipline), *samādhi* (Meditation), and *paññā* (Wisdom), serving as an important model for other health-oriented organizations to adopt in their development efforts. However, the advancement of a health-promoting university within Buddhist monastic universities requires the support of additional environmental mechanisms. For example, the Digital Monk Health Tools (ArogyaSati) play a role in recording and monitoring the health behaviors of monks in the university. At the same time, monastic universities



hold a unique advantage in their practical application of Buddhist principles, which have been concretely implemented across various dimensions-physical, mental, social, and intellectual.

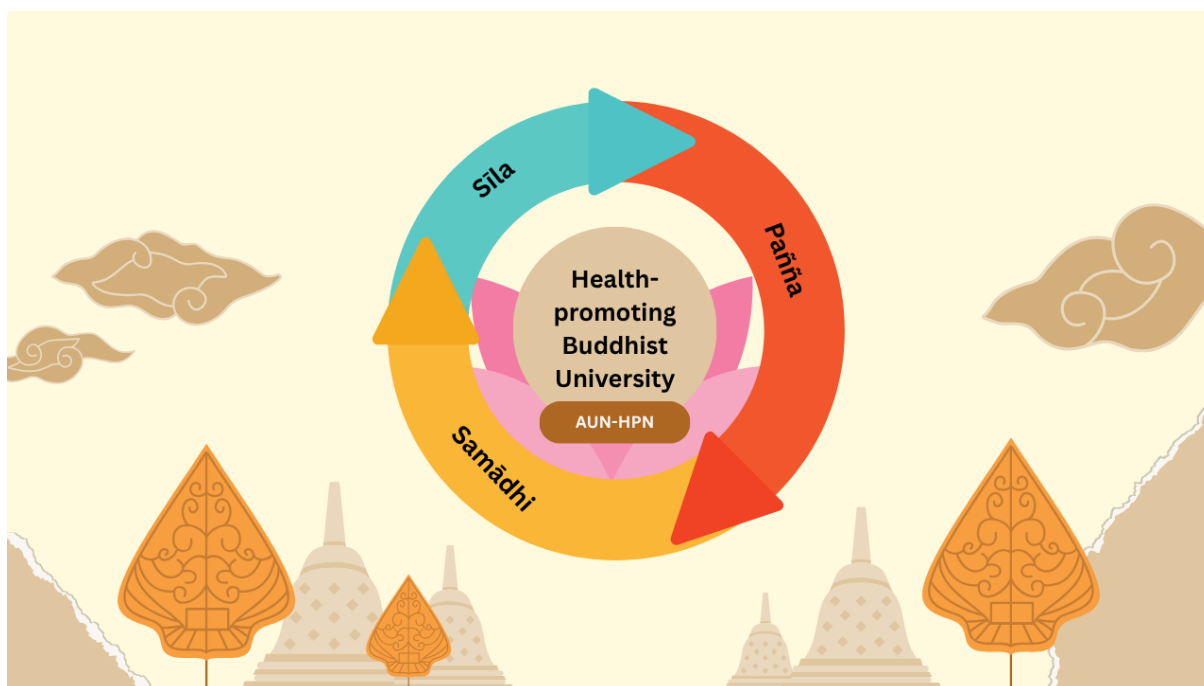


Figure 2 Three Domains of Holistic Well-being in Health-Promoting Buddhist University

Conclusions and Recommendations

A major difference in this work is the use of the AUN-HPN framework as a strategic tool for fostering health inside Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU). Unlike past attempts, which seldom put this framework into practice, this study employs an Implementation Research (IR) methodology that emphasizes outcomes derived from process-based execution and real-world application. This distinction helps practitioners and policymakers better understand how to modify the AUN-HPN framework, especially in universities with a long history of religious affiliation and culturally distinct teaching and learning environments. A notable observation from the practical application of the AUN-HPN framework is that, while the framework is structurally robust, it also demonstrates considerable flexibility when adapted to the specific context of a Buddhist university. Furthermore, some elements of the successful implementation were impacted by external or community-based contributions rather than resulting solely from direct institutional actions. Rather, it is the social structure of Buddhist institutions that causes this; It provides a framework for members to follow to fit social norms. This includes formal rules-such as the ban on driving cars and motorcycles issued by the Supreme Sangha Council, which serves as an official social control system-as well as religious precepts that forbid drinking, smoking, and gambling. Should this initiative develop into further research, the next step would be to suggest a return to using social science and Buddhist studies tools as a conceptual framework. It is essential to collect comprehensive health-related data on monk students and personnel across Buddhist universities



in Thailand to establish an accurate health profile. This would make it easier to identify the social determinants of health that influence the health-related lifestyle choices of monk students and university staff. In terms of advancing studies in Buddhist Studies, we recommend the development of a doctrinal framework that aligns with the AUN-HPN framework. This would enable a concrete integration and linkage between the health promotion approaches of Buddhism and those of the AUN-HPN. Future research should involve lesson-drawing and comparative analysis to highlight the contextual differences in implementation. Such an approach would contribute to the sustainability of development efforts and facilitate more tangible progress toward achieving the health and education-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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