



Teaching Vietnamese Studies through an Interdisciplinary Lens: Opportunities and Challenges in Contemporary Higher Education

Bui Khac Du ^{1*}, Chung Le Khang ²

¹ Bachelor of Education in Vietnamese Language and Literature, Vietnam

² Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

* Corresponding Author: **Bui Khac Du**

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Abstract

In the context of higher education's ongoing transition toward integrative learning and interdisciplinary competence development, Vietnamese Studies has emerged as a promising field for the application of interdisciplinary teaching approaches. This paper aims to examine the enabling conditions, opportunities, and institutional barriers in the implementation of interdisciplinary pedagogies in Vietnamese Studies programs across Vietnam. Drawing on document analysis of curriculum frameworks and semi-structured interviews with ten faculty members from three major universities, the study highlights that interdisciplinary teaching enhances students' knowledge integration, practical relevance, and systems thinking. However, the adoption of this approach remains constrained by rigid program structures, insufficient interdisciplinary teaching capacity, and administrative-academic policies that hinder curricular innovation. The paper proposes several solutions, including the professional development of multi-disciplinary teaching staff, the redesign of curriculum content around thematic integration, and the creation of more flexible academic policies to support interdisciplinary program models within the Vietnamese higher education context.

Keywords: Vietnamese Studies, Higher Education, Interdisciplinary Teaching, Interdisciplinary Curriculum, Educational Reform

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and the rapid evolution of interdisciplinary knowledge, the study and teaching of national cultures—particularly within Southeast Asia—are increasingly approached through integrated and multidimensional lenses. Vietnamese Studies, as a comprehensive field focusing on Vietnam's history, culture, society, and people, plays a crucial role in bridging local knowledge with global academic discourses. The field not only contributes to shaping national identity and cultural representation in international exchanges but also provides a foundational knowledge base for various applied sectors, including tourism, media, education, cultural diplomacy, and sustainable development.

Despite this potential, in practice, Vietnamese Studies programs in Vietnam are often delivered as a “composite field,” consisting of discrete disciplinary modules such as linguistics, literature, history, sociology, and cultural studies. This fragmented structure can lead to disconnected curricula, limited epistemological cohesion, and underutilization of the field's potential to cultivate integrative thinking and complex problem-solving skills—skills that are increasingly central in 21st-century higher education. Modern education is shifting from linear knowledge transmission to the development of students' ability to connect, synthesize, and innovate across disciplinary boundaries.

Within this pedagogical transformation, Vietnamese Studies must be reconceptualized as a field with inherent interdisciplinary characteristics—capable of addressing social, cultural, economic, and political issues in a holistic manner rather than through isolated disciplinary frameworks. As such, teaching Vietnamese Studies through an interdisciplinary approach is not merely a pedagogical choice, but a strategic necessity for enhancing educational quality, real-world relevance, and graduate employability. However, implementing this shift is far from straightforward. Higher education institutions in Vietnam still face structural constraints, including outdated curricular models, rigid administrative systems, and insufficient faculty capacity for interdisciplinary instruction. Although many academic leaders and faculty members recognize the value of interdisciplinary teaching, it remains limited in actual practice.

This paper, therefore, seeks to explore three core research questions: (1) What is the current potential of implementing an interdisciplinary approach in teaching Vietnamese Studies? (2) What are the key challenges that hinder the application of this model in the present context? (3) What enabling conditions and viable strategies are necessary to promote interdisciplinary teaching in Vietnamese Studies programs at the undergraduate level?

Answering these questions is not only significant for advancing the theoretical understanding of interdisciplinary education in Vietnam but also contributes practically to enhancing the implementation of Vietnamese Studies curricula in the era of digital transformation and global integration.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. The Concept of Interdisciplinarity in Education

Over the past few decades, interdisciplinarity has emerged as a defining trend in global higher education. According to Klein (1990)^[12], interdisciplinarity refers to “the integration of knowledge, methods, and approaches from two or more disciplines to address complex problems that cannot be fully understood through a single disciplinary lens.” This approach is especially relevant in the face of increasingly systemic and multifaceted socio-cultural and environmental challenges.

Jacobs (1989)^[11] argues that interdisciplinary teaching is more than simply combining content from various fields; rather, it constitutes a pedagogical strategy aimed at developing critical thinking, systems thinking, and practical problem-solving skills. In higher education, interdisciplinary instruction fosters collaboration across academic domains, enabling learners to construct integrated, flexible, and creative forms of knowledge.

2.2. Vietnamese Studies as an Inherently Interdisciplinary Field

Vietnamese Studies, by its very nature, is an interdisciplinary field from its inception. Unlike traditional disciplines such as history, literature, or linguistics, Vietnamese Studies encompasses a wide array of domains including culture, society, economy, geography, politics, and the environment. Its overarching aim is to provide a holistic understanding of the Vietnamese people, their history, and their developmental trajectories.

As emphasized by the Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences (2014), the field represents a “multi-

dimensional mosaic” of national identity, incorporating both traditional and modern, local and global elements. Similarly, Hồ and Trần (2022) stress that Vietnamese Studies cannot be dissociated from interdisciplinary foundations: “Without the integration of anthropology, geopolitics, ethnology, and religious studies, it is difficult to capture the full complexity of Vietnam’s cultural and social landscape.”

Nonetheless, Vietnamese Studies is still largely taught as a collection of single-disciplinary courses within specialized faculties or departments. As a result, its curriculum often lacks genuine integration in terms of methodology, content, and learning outcomes.

2.3. Review of Research on Interdisciplinary Teaching in the Social Sciences

Globally, numerous studies have demonstrated the pedagogical value of interdisciplinary teaching within the social sciences and humanities. Interdisciplinary education has gained significant traction at major universities in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and across Europe. Programs such as American Studies, Southeast Asian Studies, and Cultural Studies exemplify this approach—combining perspectives from literature, history, sociology, anthropology, environmental studies, and political science (Hayami, 2006; Rowe, 2000)^[6, 16].

In Asia, interdisciplinary frameworks have been successfully adopted in Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University (Japan) and in the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies program, which is organized around thematic modules addressing issues such as sustainable development, cultural heritage, migration, and urbanization. These programs have been shown to cultivate multidimensional analysis and integrative thinking among students (Liu, 2020)^[13].

In Vietnam, while some recent works have addressed integrated pedagogical approaches in higher education (Nguyễn, 2024; Hoàng *et al.*, 2024), most remain theoretical or based on isolated case studies. Specific to Vietnamese Studies, existing literature tends to focus on descriptive overviews of curricula, with limited empirical research on how interdisciplinary teaching is actually implemented—particularly from the perspective of instructors who are directly engaged in teaching and curriculum development.

2.4. Identifying Research Gaps

This review highlights a notable research gap: while interdisciplinary education is well-theorized internationally, and Vietnamese Studies itself is inherently interdisciplinary, empirical research on its implementation in Vietnam remains limited. Specifically, little has been done to examine the lived teaching experiences of faculty engaged in interdisciplinary instruction within Vietnamese Studies programs. Furthermore, in-depth analysis of curriculum integration across institutions is lacking. Addressing this gap is the central motivation and foundation of the present study.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore in depth the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing an interdisciplinary teaching approach in Vietnamese Studies within the current higher education context. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to the study’s aim of capturing the lived experiences, perceptions, and evaluations of university lecturers—those directly

involved in teaching and curriculum development. As Creswell and Poth (2016)^[5] argue, qualitative inquiry allows researchers to understand reality from the insider's perspective, helping to uncover complex, subjective, and context-bound processes.

3.1. Semi-structured Interviews

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a widely used technique in educational research that enables the gathering of open-ended and in-depth responses from participants (Vaivio, 2012)^[18]. Ten lecturers currently teaching in Vietnamese Studies programs at three major universities participated in the study: Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, University of Labour and Social Affairs, and University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) having at least five years of experience teaching in Vietnamese Studies; and (2) having contributed to the design or revision of the program curriculum. The interview questions focused on three key areas: (1) Perceptions and experiences of interdisciplinary teaching in Vietnamese Studies; (2) Opportunities and challenges in implementing interdisciplinary approaches; (3) Suggestions for improving the current training programs.

All interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom (for remote participants), with participants' informed consent for audio recording. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The research strictly adhered to ethical guidelines in social science research, ensuring anonymity, data confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage of participation (Israel & Hay, 2006)^[10].

3.2. Curriculum Document Analysis

In parallel with the interviews, the study conducted document analysis of secondary data, including curriculum frameworks, course syllabi, intended learning outcomes, and the structure of core and elective courses from the three participating universities. The document analysis aimed to: Identify the extent of knowledge integration across domains (e.g., culture, history, linguistics, tourism, economy, environment); Detect indicators of interdisciplinary teaching and assessment methods; Compare curriculum structures with lecturers' perceptions of integrated teaching.

Content analysis was used as the analytical method to code and categorize information from these documents (Bowen, 2009)^[1], forming thematic clusters aligned with the research objectives.

4. Research Findings

Based on an analysis of data obtained through semi-structured interviews with ten lecturers from Vietnamese Studies programs at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, University of Labour and Social Affairs, and University of Social Sciences and Humanities (VNU-HCM), complemented by a review of relevant curricular documents, two main thematic categories were identified: (1) opportunities, and (2) challenges in implementing interdisciplinary teaching in Vietnamese Studies (Trung *et al.*, 2025)^[17].

4.1. Opportunities Associated with Interdisciplinary Approaches in Vietnamese Studies

The application of interdisciplinary pedagogy in Vietnamese Studies has opened up significant potential for pedagogical and curricular innovation. According to the interview data, three main opportunities were consistently recognized by participants: expanding the scope of knowledge and integrative thinking; enhancing adaptability to real-world professional contexts; and fostering internationalization in teaching and learning.

4.1.1. Expanding Knowledge Horizons and Developing Integrative Thinking

A major advantage of interdisciplinary teaching lies in its capacity to provide learners with a comprehensive and interconnected understanding of complex cultural realities. Rather than viewing culture as a static or isolated construct, students are encouraged to engage with its dynamic intersections with history, politics, communication, the environment, and the economy—elements that shape contemporary Vietnam.

As one lecturer from Ho Chi Minh City University of Education explained: *"I teach Vietnamese Culture, but I can't stop at rituals and customs. Nowadays, students need to understand how culture manifests in media, on social networks, in policy debates, and even in urban spaces."* (Lecturer 1, personal communication, February 2025)

Another faculty member from the University of Labour and Social Affairs emphasized the importance of integrated course design:

"I once designed a module combining tourism development and environmental conservation. The outcome was that students realized these areas are inseparable. They became more inquisitive and engaged in deeper discussion." (Lecturer 5, personal communication, February 2025)

This aligns with Jacobs' (1989)^[11] theoretical perspective that interdisciplinary education allows learners to "view the world as a whole" rather than as fragmented pieces of knowledge.

4.1.2. Meeting Market Demands and Advancing Internationalization

Beyond cognitive benefits, interdisciplinary teaching is perceived as essential for meeting the demands of today's labor market, which favors graduates with flexible mindsets, adaptive skills, and the ability to work across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. Many interviewees reported that employers in the fields of culture, education, diplomacy, and tourism are increasingly seeking candidates with a hybrid skillset in culture, language, economics, and project management.

"Vietnamese Studies students who focus only on traditional culture will struggle in the job market. They need to know how to combine cultural analysis with communication, event planning, or tourism development." (Lecturer 2, personal communication, February 2025)

International classes further underscore the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach. A lecturer from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities observed:

"International students are not just curious about Vietnamese traditional culture; they also ask about the role of culture in industrialization, or regional disparities in socio-economic development. Without interdisciplinary knowledge, it's hard to provide meaningful answers." (Lecturer 3, personal communication, February 2025)

These practical insights reinforce the argument that interdisciplinary teaching in Vietnamese Studies is not simply an innovative pedagogical option, but a strategic imperative for improving educational relevance and aligning with global academic trends.

4.2. Challenges in Implementing Interdisciplinary Teaching in Vietnamese Studies

Despite the aforementioned opportunities, the transition toward interdisciplinary teaching in Vietnamese Studies still faces several systemic barriers. Analysis of the data revealed four key challenges: rigid curriculum structures, limited faculty capacity, lack of interdisciplinary teaching materials and assessment tools, and institutional-policy constraints.

4.2.1. Curriculum Structures Rooted in Disciplinary Silos

One of the most fundamental obstacles lies in the current organization of Vietnamese Studies curricula. At all three surveyed institutions, programs remain structured along disciplinary lines, with courses segmented into fields such as Vietnamese Culture, Vietnamese Linguistics, National History, and General Sociology. While some thematic overlaps exist, most curricula lack integrative frameworks or project-based interdisciplinary modules.

As one lecturer from the University of Labour and Social Affairs noted:

"We are still teaching based on an old program structure, with courses divided by traditional disciplines like literature, linguistics, and history. There's no formal plan for integrating content across subjects." (Lecturer 2, personal communication, February 2025)

This situation reflects what Klein (1990) ^[12] describes as "knowledge fragmentation," a persistent limitation in mono-disciplinary models of higher education.

4.2.2. Limited Interdisciplinary Competence among Faculty

Effective interdisciplinary instruction requires not only familiarity with multiple domains, but also the ability to synthesize diverse theoretical frameworks and pedagogical approaches. However, most Vietnamese Studies lecturers in Vietnam have been trained in single disciplines such as literature, history, linguistics, or Asian studies, which makes interdisciplinary course design and delivery particularly challenging.

A senior faculty member from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities shared:

"We all come from highly specialized backgrounds, so many colleagues find it difficult to implement interdisciplinary teaching. Not everyone feels confident tackling topics like public policy or cultural economics." (Lecturer 6, personal communication, February 2025)

In addition to technical limitations, some faculty members expressed hesitation or discomfort when asked to teach content outside their disciplinary expertise.

4.2.3. Lack of Interdisciplinary Teaching Materials and Assessment Tools

A major constraint identified in the interviews was the shortage of interdisciplinary teaching resources. Existing textbooks and syllabi remain largely discipline-specific, with few integrated case studies or real-world learning scenarios. Furthermore, assessment systems have yet to be adapted to

evaluate interdisciplinary competencies.

As a junior lecturer at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education explained:

"We want to develop interdisciplinary course outlines, but we don't know where to start. There are no models, no integrated teaching materials, and our assessment system hasn't caught up." (Lecturer 9, personal communication, February 2025)

The absence of appropriate assessment tools not only hinders classroom implementation but also limits the ability to provide constructive feedback and improve curriculum design.

4.2.4. Administrative and Policy Barriers

Finally, significant challenges stem from academic governance and institutional policies. Interdisciplinary teaching often requires collaboration across departments, co-teaching arrangements, and shared responsibility for course design. However, current regulations regarding teaching loads, course ownership, and academic credit allocation remain rigid and fragmented.

A department head at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities commented:

"Creating an interdisciplinary course requires coordination across departments. But in practice, the policies on teaching hours and course management are too rigid, which makes collaboration difficult." (Lecturer 4, personal communication, February 2025)

This scenario creates what could be called an "administrative paradox"—where interdisciplinary teaching is encouraged in principle but hindered in practice by structural and bureaucratic constraints.

5. Discussion

The research findings reveal both promising developments and persistent limitations in the implementation of interdisciplinary teaching in Vietnamese Studies at Vietnamese universities. When placed within the context of international practice and contemporary higher education reforms, these findings highlight the urgent need for structural transformation in academic governance, operational frameworks, and curriculum design.

5.1. Comparative Reflections: International Interdisciplinary Models

Globally, interdisciplinary models have been effectively implemented in various fields of area studies. In Japan, the Southeast Asian Studies programs at Kyoto University and the University of Tokyo are structured around the integration of knowledge from anthropology, history, political science, environmental studies, and international development. This design enables learners to engage deeply with complex regional themes (Hayami, 2006) ^[6].

Similarly, American Studies in the United States has long been considered a model of interdisciplinary education. Students are trained to examine culture through lenses such as history, literature, gender studies, ethnic studies, and critical theory. As Rowe (2000) ^[16] succinctly puts it, *"American Studies is not a discipline but a perspective—a way of reading culture across boundaries, institutions, and ideologies."*

By contrast, Vietnamese Studies in Vietnam has primarily evolved as an administrative amalgamation of traditional disciplines such as literature, history, and linguistics. This

model lacks a coherent methodological foundation and integrated curricular structure. As a result, interdisciplinary approaches in Vietnamese Studies remain superficial and have yet to yield significant academic or applied outcomes.

5.2. The Role of Academic Policy and University Governance

One of the key barriers lies in the absence of supportive academic policies and governance mechanisms. Brint (2005) argues that for interdisciplinary teaching to be truly effective, universities must restructure organizational systems, promote cross-departmental collaboration, and recognize faculty contributions to integrated curriculum development. Yet, as the present study shows, Vietnamese institutions still operate under mono-disciplinary regulations in teaching assignments, course ownership, and performance evaluations.

This institutional inertia fosters reluctance to change and diminishes the motivation for interdisciplinary collaboration, even among faculty who acknowledge its pedagogical benefits. In the context of university autonomy reforms, the lack of proactive policy frameworks to support interdisciplinary education risks leaving Vietnamese institutions behind global academic trends.

5.3. Reframing the “Disciplinary Boundaries” in Vietnam’s Higher Education Reform

Promoting interdisciplinary Vietnamese Studies is not merely a matter of pedagogical innovation; it entails a deeper structural redefinition of the “disciplinary” concept within Vietnam’s higher education system. Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW (2013) on fundamental and comprehensive education reform emphasizes a shift from knowledge transmission to competency development—requiring training programs to integrate knowledge from multiple domains and overcome traditional academic fragmentation. The revised Law on Higher Education (2018) further allows universities to design open, interdisciplinary, and flexible programs. However, institutionalizing this autonomy remains constrained by legacy issues, including rigid major classifications, enrollment quotas, and funding formulas still tied to single-discipline models.

Thus, Vietnamese Studies must be re-conceptualized not as a “composite field” but as an intrinsically integrative discipline, serving as a bridge between the humanities, social sciences, and development studies. Transforming Vietnamese Studies from an administratively aggregated program into a truly interdisciplinary academic field requires systemic reforms in curriculum philosophy, academic management, and faculty development.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

This study affirms that adopting an interdisciplinary approach in the teaching of Vietnamese Studies is an inevitable trend amid ongoing reforms in higher education and the growing demands of international integration. Interdisciplinary pedagogy enhances learners’ capacity for systems thinking and complex problem-solving, while also equipping them with professional competencies applicable to diverse fields such as communication, tourism, cultural research, and community development (Jacobs, 1989; Klein, 1990)^[11, 12]. However, the implementation of interdisciplinary Vietnamese Studies in Vietnam still faces numerous

challenges, including rigid mono-disciplinary curricula, a lack of integrative teaching materials, insufficient faculty capacity, and administrative or policy constraints (Brint, 2005; Nguyen, 2024). These barriers highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive reform strategy—one that aligns curricular design with institutional governance and faculty development.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on theoretical insights and empirical findings, this study proposes four key policy and practice-oriented recommendations:

- (1) Update curricula following interdisciplinary logic: Academic institutions should transition from subject-based structures to theme-based program designs that integrate knowledge across disciplines. The “central thematic modules” model—successfully implemented at institutions like Harvard, the University of Tokyo, and Yale-NUS—offers a tested framework for interdisciplinary education (Hayami, 2006)^[6].
- (2) Train and develop multi-skilled faculty: Lecturers should be provided with professional development opportunities in interdisciplinary pedagogy, including cross-disciplinary workshops and collaborative research initiatives. Team-teaching models should be encouraged, with flexible teaching-hour allocations and equitable recognition of faculty contributions (Brint, 2005; Hoang & Tran, 2022).
- (3) Build integrated teaching resources and open-access repositories: Investing in interdisciplinary teaching materials—such as integrated textbooks, case studies, and digital learning modules—is essential. Vietnamese Studies centers should collaborate to establish shared open educational resource (OER) platforms tailored to interdisciplinary teaching and learning.
- (4) Promote project-based and case-based teaching strategies: Project-based learning (PBL) and case-based learning (CBL) are effective strategies to develop students’ critical, collaborative, and creative capacities. Projects may address concrete societal themes such as heritage preservation, ecotourism development, regional cultural diversity, or digital transformation in the cultural sector (Nguyen, 2024).

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