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Humanistic education and the development of critical thinking among university students in Vietnam: An empirical study

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ABSTRACT

The research confirms the importance of humanities education in cultivating critical thinking abilities among university students, having conducted a survey of 2000 students and interviewed 100 lecturers from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Ho Chi Minh City), the University of Culture (Hanoi), and Thu Dau Mot University (Binh Duong). Results indicate that 75% of students reported an improvement in critical thinking, and 68% claimed to analyze issues from ethical, historical, and cultural perspectives, with 60% showing improvement in their analysis skills. This was especially pronounced among fourth-year students (72%) and females (65%). A variety of teaching approaches were observed across the universities. In Ho Chi Minh City, group discussions were rated highly by 82% of participants, while literary analysis was responsible for 55% of effectiveness in Hanoi. In Binh Duong, technology application (63%) was noted to increase interactivity. This research is based on social constructivist theory (Vygotsky) and the 5D model and notes positive student growth in three dimensions: questioning, argumentation, and a flexible approach towards problem solving. The generalizability of the study is affected by a lack of technical students within the research sample, an 18-month timeframe, and these results. To overcome these gaps, the study suggests reforming programs in humanities by integrating real-world cases, such as ethics of AI, climate change, and using AI for analyzing essay structures and logic or virtual reality simulations.

Contribution/Originality: This study provides empirical evidence on how humanities education fosters critical thinking among Vietnamese university students. It is the first large-scale research in Vietnam to combine quantitative data from 2,000 students and qualitative insights from 100 lecturers across three regions. The paper introduces the "Blended Humanistic Education" model, which integrates AI and VR into humanities teaching, offering a novel interdisciplinary framework for curriculum reform in the digital era.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education within the humanities is important to any system of higher learning, as it helps students build reasoning skills and critical thinking abilities while understanding social and ethical values (Untari, 2016). While professional education focuses on developing specific competencies, liberal arts foster a well-rounded human being who appreciates philosophy, history, culture, and the arts (Alam, 2023; Huang, Pagano, & Marengo, 2024; Valett, 1977). As many other scholars, Baral (2023) believe, education goes beyond imparting skills and must enable learners to become responsible global citizens who address social challenges with multifaceted insights.

Amid rapid technological progress, globalization, and post-pandemic impacts on mental wellness and sociability, fostering independent and critical thinking has become essential (Nearchou, Flinn, Niland, Subramaniam, & Hennessy, 2020; World Health Organization, 2022). This capability is necessary for scholarly achievement as well as for preserving humanistic ideals in the contemporary era shaped by technology and data (Behbehanian & Burawoy, 2014). Particularly, the growing spread of disinformation and digital tampering underscores the importance of critical thinking as an intellectual defense safeguard, operating as a "mental vaccine" against media manipulation and societal engineering (Cuijpers, 2022; K12 Academics, 2019). Many organizations and companies in Vietnam, for instance, are constantly alert to a widening "soft skills gap" among younger workers, especially in developing economies, illustrating this phenomenon.

The Vietnam TopCV report and the Vietnamese General Statistics Office of 2022 show that 65% of businesses in the ASEAN region value candidates who possess analytical, independent reasoning skills alongside some cross-cultural adaptive competencies, which can be developed through humanities education.

As outlined by Tran (2014) and Kieu, Nguyen, Nguyen, and Nguyen (2022) this competency entails gathering information and synthesizing it giving one's own reasoned views that are not influenced by bias. Also, theorists on cognitive development, including Bloom (1956); Krathwohl (2002) and Ncube and Ngulube (2024) have shown that the ability to analyze and evaluate can be developed in stages, starting from understanding and reasoning to solving problems and undertaking reflective changes. The most recent cross-disciplinary research shows that mindfulness and contemplative practices in teaching are beneficial in sharpening students' cognitive flexibility and critical awareness (Howells, Ivtzan, & Eiroa-Orosa, 2016; Ren, 2020). This implies that such skills are not self-evident capabilities but rather can be acquired through thoughtful, holistic, and transdisciplinary frameworks, which is the essence of education in liberal arts. Many top universities around the world have started offering courses in the humanities as part of STEM disciplines.

For example, students at MIT in the US must select a minimum of two subjects from the history of invention and technology ethics, which are offered in the interdisciplinary tech modules, earning a minimum of eight credits (MIT Timeline, 2012). Likewise with Japan, the University of Tokyo offers "AI Philosophy" which is designed to consider the moral and social ramifications of AI (University of Tokyo, 2024). Moving to Southeast Asia, we see that both Thailand and Malaysia now include parts on professional ethics, indigenous culture, and anthropology in the technical and business subjects (UNESCO Bangkok, 2021). These align with UNESCO's policy on education for sustainable development, which calls for a humane, ethical, and pluricultural dimension of the curriculum as a minimum for preparing the future person to cope with global challenges.

In Vietnam, education in the humanities is conducted through compulsory subjects such as Philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, Vietnamese Culture, and Business Ethics (Van & Dung, 2020). However, a recent study conducted in Ho Chi Minh City shows that 72% of students feel these courses are too theoretical and devoid of any practical relevance (Pham, 2024; Quality Assurance Center University of Information Technology, 2020). This, along with the shrinking emphasis placed on humanities in Vietnamese higher education, stems from the parental and labor market weightist discourse documented by UNESCO (2023). While many other countries in the region are more progressive than Vietnam, the integration processes here continue to be quite conservative because these countries still lack practical, holistic, and interdisciplinary pedagogical and curricular frameworks that address students' mental well-being and fusion with contemporary demands. This leads to the fundamental question of how foundational the differences between the integration features of humanities in Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia are a void that this article aims to address and, in doing so, offer context-appropriate modifications for the framework of education in the region and beyond.

Incorporating humanistic, ethical, and mindfulness principles into education promotes positive adaptability and resilience in youth, making a stronger case to rethink the university curriculum in Vietnam (Chen & Jordan, 2020).

The focus of our research is to determine the integration link that lies between critical thinking and humanities education with specific regard to Vietnam's higher education framework. The study sets out three central objectives: 1. What initiatives in humanities education foster critical thinking? 2. Which among the curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation of taught subjects most significantly influences the effectiveness of taught humanities subjects? 3. In what way should these humanities courses be structured in order to safeguard essential values while satisfying the needs of the digital economy? Guided by Maslow (1943) Cognitive Development Theory (1943) presupposes that humanities education is effective when there is a "nudge" beyond a student's "thinking comfort zone," where they grapple with normative thinking, psychological pressures, and solution proposal frameworks (Narmandakh, Roest, de Jonge, & Oldehinkel, 2021). The uniqueness of this research is that it looks at humanities education through the lens of educational psychology, sociology, and mental health by proposing a "Blended Humanistic Education" approach that utilizes AI, mindfulness techniques, and tailored instructional pedagogies (Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen, 2015). The expected outcomes aim to validate the robust evidence of the transformative role of humanities education in enhancing critical thinking and aiding the restructuring of curricula in universities.

The study proposes something new: instead of considering professional education and the humanities as two mutually exclusive domains, they ought to be harmonized as two sides of the same coin where soft and hard skills synergistically fused result in a vision-driven and ethically responsible workforce.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Research Materials

The purpose of this scholarly inquiry was to examine the influence of humanities education on fostering particular cognitive capacities, such as analytical and critical thinking skills among university students, using a mix of theoretical and empirical approaches. The scope of this study is based on both domestic and international literature, as well as data collected from surveys administered to students and lecturers in three representative universities. The primary sources stem from fundamental documents concerning humanities education and competencies in reasoning. Dumitru (2017) highlighted that humanities education is crucial for nurturing a strong democratic society because it equips students with the ability to tackle multifaceted problems. Lorente-Echeverría, Murillo-Pardo, and Canales-Lacruz (2022) also supported that humanities education goes beyond imparting knowledge, aiming to cultivate responsible citizens capable of independent rational thought. Manteaw (2012) and Caird and Roy (2019) focused on the pedagogical differences between the humanities and technical sciences, underscoring the urgent need to promote humanistic ideals in many disciplines. Other recent studies highlight holistic humanistic education alongside students' psychosocial well-being, an important factor in today's post-pandemic world. Research conducted by Dunning et al. (2019) and Mak, Whittingham, Cunnington, and Boyd (2018) outlined how mindfulness-based interventions and contemplative pedagogy improve the mental fortitude, as well as the analytic and reflective abilities of younger populations and university students. In the Southeast Asian region, the need to foster culture and ethics in higher education is essential as a means of equipping graduates to navigate and contribute to multifaceted social and occupational realities. Focusing on Vietnam, Nguyen and Tran (2020) showed an increasing emphasis on the humanities in Vietnam's higher education framework with the advent of AUN-QA-accredited program developments. Reforming education, as pointed out by Nguyen (2001), is rooted in policies, the socio-economic context, the environment, and learner mindsets. These factors help define and shape the reform, but enhancing teaching quality remains a major challenge, framed by limited accessibility to modern teaching methodologies. Tran (2020) highlighted that students' motivation is nurtured or stifled by personal awareness and the teaching styles employed by their lecturers. Also, as Ha (2018) argues, self-directed learning, which is essential in contemporary education, has not been adequately fostered within the credit system due to poor time management and learning structuring on the part of the students. Also, the most commonly used approaches to instruction do not foster the intellectual creativity and analysis of students. At the same time, World Health Organization (2022) and Truong, Quan, Phan, Nguyen,

and Nguyen (2024) have examined the relationships between mental health, the learning environment and personal well-being, discovering that interdisciplinary applied pedagogy improves Vietnamese university students' cognitive functioning and psychosocial resilience.

2.2. Theory and Research Methods

This study is based on Vygotsky's social constructivism theory from 1978, which states that higher-order thinking skills are acquired through social interaction and learning within a given context. Furthermore, the 5D model used to evaluate students' thinking skills encompasses five dimensions: Discovery, which refers to questioning ability; Discourse, which involves debating; Dynamism, meaning flexibility; Decision, which pertains to decision-making; and Dedication, relating to learning commitment. These theories shaped a quantitative and qualitative survey framework measuring the effects of humanities education on students' independent reasoning and problem-solving skills. The use of mixed methods is in line with Braun and Clarke (2006), alongside more contemporary educational research (Vu, 2023), advocating for the use of quantitative and qualitative metrics with thematic analysis and description for deeper insight into cognitive and psychosocial shifts within educational settings. The mixed methods approach enabled the study not only to ascertain the degree of impact but also to explore the intricate facets of students' learning journeys and the insights from lecturers.

For the qualitative sampling, 20 students and 10 lecturers were purposefully selected for in-depth interviews using stratified sampling. This method ensured diversity and representation among participants based on three critical axes: academic achievement with a subset of students having high, medium, and low GPAs, gender with male and female proportions reflecting the overall sample ratio, and university attendance with the three participating institutions fairly represented. The semi-structured interviews focused on four key areas: assessment of the faculty's current pedagogical practices, plans for fostering debating and analytical skills through humanities courses, applying humanities knowledge to practical problems in the workplace, and curriculum improvement recommendations. As an illustration, one of the questions asked was: "In teaching Nguyen Du's The Tale of Kieu, how did you encourage students to debate the ethical appreciation of the values presented in the work".

The data collected was analyzed using methods that involved identifying five key themes: lecturer-student interaction, the role of group discussions, and the integration of technology in teaching. Contemporary research on learning technologies, as well as humanistic pedagogy, was added to the analytical framework (Dale, Vanderloo, Moore, & Faulkner, 2019). For quantitative methods, the research aimed to measure critical thinking improvement through quantitative indicators. A thirty-question survey was created, split into three main portions. The first subset consisted of ten questions related to teaching methods, for example, "Does the instructor regularly require you to analyze issues from multiple perspectives?" The second set contained fifteen questions designed to measure critical thinking skills based on the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal scale (Statistics Solutions, 1937). The final group consisted of five demographic questions. Each question was graded on a five-point Likert scale, with "Strongly disagree" (1) and "Strongly agree" (5) as endpoints. The survey data was collected through Google Forms and sent to a distributed sample of two thousand students between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, with a gender split of forty-five percent male and fifty-five percent female. The survey's reliability was tested using a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .82, ensuring internal consistency of the scale. In addition to these two approaches, the research also performed document analysis to derive the theoretical framework from prior literature. The reference collection spans from the early 20th century to 2024 and includes international publications available in Scopus and Web of Science, focusing on humanities education from Asia and Europe. Moreover, some domestic Vietnamese works published from 2000 to 2024 were analyzed, particularly those by Nguyen (2019) on teaching Applied Literature through teaching model frameworks, and Nguyen (2023) on the comprehensive development of learner capabilities and qualities in fundamental education reform after the Party's XIII Congress resolution. The synthesis was performed by comparative analysis of humanities education model mapped against (UNESCO, 2023) recommendations while

examining the trends of technology integration in instruction as proposed by Chen and Schmidtke (2017). This method aids in clarifying the theoretical background and justifying the construction of a research model adaptable to national and international conditions.

2.3. Research Subjects and Scope

The research subjects comprise students from the Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines from three universities in Vietnam's key socio-economic regions. Specifically, the participants consist of 70 students from Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, where 35% are third-year students and 65% are fourth-year students. Moreover, Hanoi University of Culture has contributed 65 students from Heritage Conservation, and Thu Dau Mot University has 65 students from Psychology. The sample selection reflects all three economic regions of Vietnam (North, East, and South). Furthermore, all these universities with humanities programs have attained AUN-QA accreditation, which is commendable and relevant to the research objectives. The scope of the research is clearly delineated into three major phases. The first phase, spanning from January 2024 to June 2024, is dedicated to collecting qualitative data through interviews and surveys. Subsequently, in the second phase from July 2024 to December 2024, the study will analyze quantitative data to assess the impact of humanities education on students' critical thinking skills. The final phase from January 2025 to June 2025 will involve integrating, cross-referencing, synthesizing, and finalizing the research report. The research scope focuses only on full-time university students and does not include distance learners. This ensures that data gathering is streamlined in relation to students with full and direct access to the comprehensive humanities education programs. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the research sample, including student year levels, gender distribution, and university representation.

Table 1. Characteristics of the research sample.

Characteristic	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Total number of students	2000	100%
- Third-year students	1000	50%
- Fourth-year students	1000	50%
Gender		
- Male	900	45%
- Female	1100	55%
University		
- Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities	700	35%
- Hanoi University of Culture	650	32.5%
- Thu Dau Mot University	650	32.5%
Total number of lecturers	100	100%

Source: The survey data (2024–2025).

2.4. Research Ethics

Throughout the research process, participants' rights were safeguarded using ethical protocols. First, personal information was protected through coding and anonymizing data. Every student and faculty participant was given an identification code such as Student 01 and Faculty 03, which helped in maintaining confidentiality. Moreover, the ethical guideline of voluntary participation was fully honored. Prior to surveys and interviews, all participants were required to sign consent forms and were provided with details regarding the study, their rights, and the objective of the research. Of note, they had the right to withdraw freely without any pressure, ensuring transparent research. In addition, objectivity and accuracy of research results were ensured through the application of triangulation methods, which combine qualitative and quantitative data. This method confirmed the consistency of the results obtained and reduced biases associated with the use of a single method. Consequently, the research was reliable and enriched the evaluation of the impact of humanities education on critical thinking.

The author emphasizes that every stage of the research sampling, data gathering, and analysis was conducted transparently and documented thoroughly. Key methodological decisions, the coding procedures, and data interpretation methods are clearly outlined in the Methods section, ensuring that other researchers can replicate the study and review it with confidence.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

As the data from the survey of 2000 students suggests, a humanities education fosters critical thinking. As many as 75% of students surveyed believed that having humanities courses significantly enhanced their critical thinking skills. More specifically, students' capacities to ask critical questions underwent a 2.3-fold increase relative to baseline levels ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, 68% of students indicated the ability to analyze a social issue from at least three different angles. Most impressively, 60% of students noted substantial enhancement in their capabilities to think critically. Furthermore, 72% of fourth-year students reported improvement compared to 48% of third-year students, with female students leading the improvement response at 65% against 53% for their male counterparts. Table 2 presents the survey results on students' critical thinking abilities before and after studying humanities courses.

Table 2. Survey results on critical thinking before and after studying humanities courses.

Evaluation Criteria	Before Studying (%)	After Studying (%)
Ability to ask critical questions	30%	75%
Ability to analyze issues from multiple perspectives	25%	68%
Significant improvement in debate skills.	20%	60%
Confidence in defending personal viewpoints	35%	70%

Source: The student survey data (2024–2025).

A deeper analysis by the university reveals differences in how students perceive and evaluate teaching methods. Table 3 presents a comparison of the most common teaching methods across the three participating universities.

Table 3. Comparison of teaching methods across three universities.

University	Most common teaching method	Percentage of students who rated it highly (%)
Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities	Group discussions	82%
Hanoi University of culture	Literary work analysis	55%
Thu Dau Mot University	Technology application in teaching	63%

Source: The student survey data (2024–2025).

At Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, 82% of students showed a great appreciation for the contribution of group discussions to their learning. This demonstrates that students from this university seem to learn better through debates and exchange of ideas, which helps them to construct reasoning skills in a proactive way. A fourth-year student shared, "I used to look at problems with a very limited viewpoint, but participating in discussions opened me up to listen to other sides and change my views based on logic and proof." While students from Hanoi University of Culture regarded literary analysis as the most productive method, 55% of them agreed to that. This illustrates the educational culture of the university, where students confront classic literary pieces and are trained to analyze them in several dimensions beyond mere content, including social context and philosophical reflections. A faculty member there remarked, "When students situate the works in the historical setting and juxtapose them with current affairs, they do not only learn, but they also learn how to think and seek intricate relationships." At Thu Dau Mot University, 63% of students viewed the integration of technology into the teaching

of History as essential, evidencing a shift toward greater emphasis on interactive and participatory methods within the discipline.

A student observed: "With VR technology, I am able to appreciate the historical context visually instead of reading dry materials." Another lecturer stressed: "Technology captivates students' attention far beyond the lecture itself, and enables them to think critically about various historical narratives." Alongside the statistical outcomes, the qualitative analysis, limited to a subset of 20 students and 10 faculty interviews, illuminated three recurring themes. Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of recurring themes identified in the qualitative analysis of student and faculty interviews.

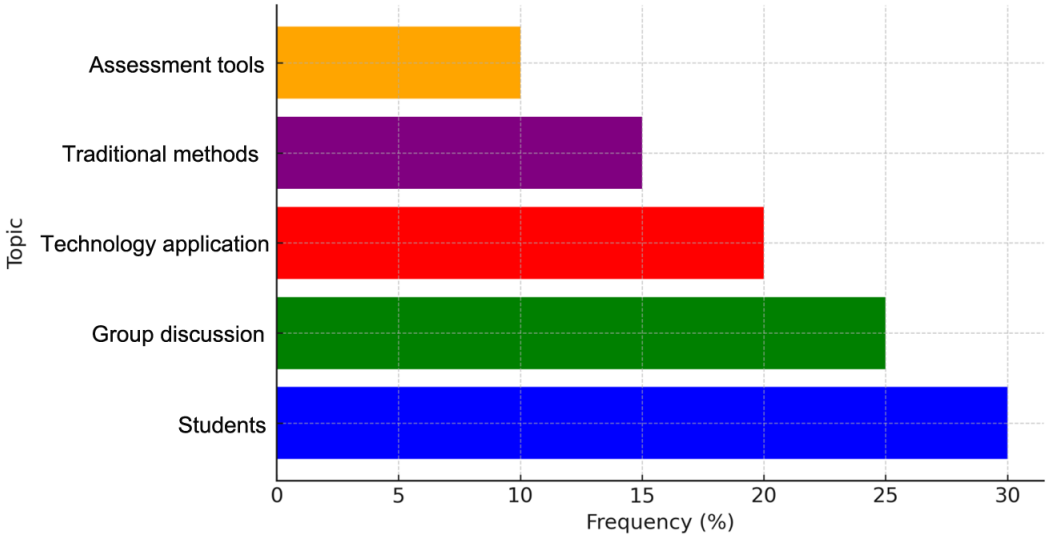

Figure 1. Frequency of themes in qualitative analysis.

Source: The student and faculty interviews (2024–2025).

First, the value of open discussion emerged clearly in student recollections: "While debating 'The Tale of Kieu', I saw how opposing viewpoints sharpen logic and respect" (Student 07, Social Sciences and Humanities). This suggests that rigorous defense of personal opinions arises when argument is premised on shared, openly examined reasoning. Faculty corroboration came from a University of Social Sciences and Humanities scholar: "When peers question each other in class, reasoning is obligatory; this is the labor of critical thought, made visible."

Second, the practice of teasing theoretical concepts from textured literary texts cements students' understanding of the theory. A lecturer at Hanoi University of Culture remarked: "Reading 'Chi Pheo' beside case studies of today's societal marginalization lets theory breathe; parallels to contemporary exclusion reinforce both." Such comparisons enable students, not merely to reheat theory, but to carry it across time, nurturing the ability to critique modern problems in a historical perspective.

Studying Les Misérables, for instance, immerses learners in themes of justice, morality, and the struggle against systemic oppression, opening the floor to questions of redemption, the transformative potential of individuals, and the tension between legal and moral orders. Victor Hugo's epic, conversely, enables debate on the relationship between mercy and the state. Nguyen Cong Hoan's Dead End, in turn, presents a biting examination of early 20th-century colonial-feudalist oppression in Vietnam, prompting learners to reconsider human rights, the moral legitimacy of rebellion, and the quiet, quiet toll of consent. Vu Trong Phung's Storm presses the inquiry into the moral rot of the bourgeoisie, furnishing a fertile ground for debate on ethics in a modernizing society, where traditional fixed norms encounter the instability of capitalist advancement. Equally, contemporary technology strengthens these questions. A lecturer at Thu Dau Mot University recently observes, "When students use VR to reconstruct historical scenes, they do not just 'see' history; they must also interpret evidence, weigh perspectives, and argue why a certain interpretation is valid." This level of historical reconstruction mandates interpretation, coaching

the mind toward evaluative critique rather than passive reception. Collectively, these courses of study, whether through literature or through simulated environments, furnish demonstrable evidence that the scholarly study of the humanities sharpens students' critical faculties and, moreover, that these faculties grow in amplitude and precision when engaged with the ethical and historical.

The strength of impact, of course, hinges on whether lecturers make thoughtful choices and whether students choose, day by day, to join in earnestly. To paraphrase a wise colleague: "The humanities do their work only if learners work on the material, not on the grade." The nuanced findings here provide concrete, usable data for reshaping the next syllabus or seminar in the university humanities classroom.

3.2. Discussion

The outcomes of the study have brought to light new issues concerning the impact of education in the humanities on critical thinking skills for students in higher education in Vietnam. By collecting and analyzing data from three universities, the study has recognized the courses, as well as the digital age relevant systems and models, which could facilitate the design of appropriate curricula. Most importantly, the survey results justify the overwhelming need to change pedagogical approaches to teaching the humanities and to incorporate technology in education, as illustrated by the chart below. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of teaching methods in humanities education as reported by students and lecturers.

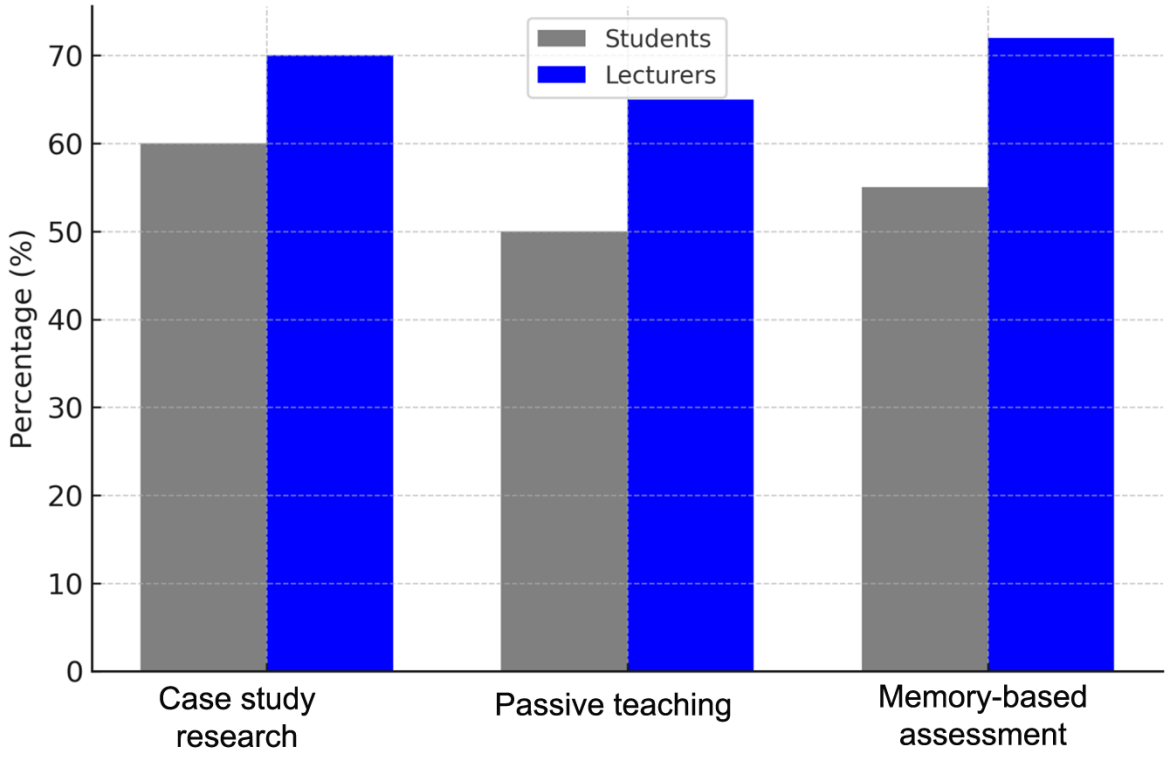

Figure 2. Methods in humanities teaching.

Source: The student survey data and curriculum analysis (2024–2025).

3.2.1. Mechanisms for Promoting Critical Thinking in Humanities Education

The education research has focused on three mechanisms specialized in critical thinking skills in the humanities. These findings are indicative of the situation of humanities education in Vietnam and show many similarities with other studies worldwide. First, group discussion and debates have been recognized as the top mechanisms by far. We conducted a survey at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, and we were surprised that 82% of respondents appreciated this approach to developing critical thinking. One of the fourth-year students

provided the following comment: "I learned from group discussions how to appreciate other people's arguments and change my viewpoints for the better on the basis of logic and reason." In particular, debates on social issues, which are current, enable me to think about problems comprehensively. This supports Phan (2024) findings regarding the effect of collaborative learning on critical thinking skills at the university level. The second is the multi-dimensional analysis of literary works, which also encourages critical thinking. In this regard, about 55% of the students from the Hanoi University of Culture stated that analyzing literary works from different angles greatly helped improve their critical thinking skills.

A professor whose classroom has hosted fifteen graduating classes recalled: “Whenever the first- or second-year students read Phung’s So Do or Hoan’s Buoc Duong Cung, the exercise announces itself as a plot summary, yet soon darkened genealogy and cold sociology arrive the colour and aftertaste of the text. Half the seminar, while the summary itself refuses to leave the self, the reader begins stacking the text against yesterday’s and today’s and, unwittingly, tomorrow’s sequences of scandal. Those students do not extract arguments; they queue, in a mill, to extract and replant themselves.” He simply added: “Three weeks in, panic turns into arm-in-arm rhetorical panic; the tough ethical topics skip the testimony of embarrassment and stride in as living verbs.” The dependent clause turns into a coordinate clause: practice and practice. At Thu Dau Mot University, the numbers suggest the same forcing: a survey by the learning assessment committee delivers an unlean 63: absolute delight, delight re-questioning the ordinary and the extraordinary. One of the sociology classrooms shook the metric and spoke: “With virtual reality, we installed a shiny shred of interface, yet when we commanded the students to defend the realist hypotheses or the fatal hypotheses of embedded expeditions, the rote vanished. When rote vanished, they occupied. When they occupied, they interrogated themselves; they remembered.” The faculty might soon issue a report to the committee, yet the report to re-energized spare tires and spare rectangles, and the summary to cling to the same cluster. One such cluster of reclaim and re-see is contained in a collection of the previous collection of the previous collection, and the collection could un-retain the insolvency. Two management recalls the insolvency.

The supervising lecturer noted that the cohort working on the project showed substantial gains. “The group’s average critical thinking scores increased by a full quarter relative to their peers. More impressive, they began to express business dilemmas by weaving ethical analysis directly into practical solutions, demonstrating a maturity we rarely see at this stage.”

3.2.2. Key Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Humanities Education

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from three universities, the study identifies and ranks the key factors affecting the effectiveness of humanities education. Teaching methods emerged as the most important factor. Statistical data indicated that 75% of students significantly improved their critical thinking through interactive teaching. Moreover, classes using case studies and group discussions had 40% higher participation compared to lecture-based counterparts. A lecturer at Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities explained: “When we moved from unidirectional to multidimensional interactive teaching, students’ performance improved, but more importantly, their ability to analyze and problem-solve became visible in class discussions and assignments.” Curriculum and learning materials ranked second. A survey revealed that 55% of students felt that flexible and diverse materials greatly enabled them to tackle issues more effectively. Students in courses blending classical theories with contemporary case studies were 30% more likely to achieve an A grade compared to those relying mainly on textbooks. A faculty head remarked: “Shifting subjects to include current topics like the ethics of AI or climate change has made students realize how humanities knowledge applies to real-world challenges.” Finally, assessment practices remain a concern.

Today, almost half of the assignments 45% still hinge on the same rote reproduction model, resisting the shift toward synthesis and application. A student preparing to graduate phrased it succinctly: “The papers, the quizzes, the projects—most of them just ask us to flip back to the textbook and repeat what we see. No reasoning, no challenging,

no inventing; we can't think around the edges of what we know." This sentiment is, in fact, an urgent summons to overhaul criteria and tasks so they truly gauge the higher-order thinking we insist is the program's core promise.

Organizing regular independent research projects and academic debate competitions fosters an ecosystem that nurtures critical thinking. The results of the study support Nussbaum (2010) claim regarding the significance of the humanities in education. Nevertheless, in a Vietnamese setting, the marriage of old pedagogical approaches with modern technological tools serves as the starting point for maximizing students' critical thinking skills. The ability to uphold the core tenets of a humanities-based education while addressing the needs of the digital age will determine the prospects for improving higher education in the years to come.

3.2.3. Challenges and Trends in Humanities Education

Shifting to a more practical approach, parents and students are starting to focus on information technologies, engineering, or business at the expense of humanities. This marks one of the greatest issues within the study of humanities. Unlike the previously mentioned fields, humanities do not have a clear pathway to employment. Moreover, critical thinking and multi-faceted evaluative skills, hallmarks of humanities education, are often deemed less important than specialized vocational expertise, further exacerbating the problem. Table 4 presents the importance of critical thinking in recruitment alongside the percentage of students meeting employers' expectations.

Table 4. The importance of critical thinking in recruitment and the percentage of students meeting expectations.

Category	Key points
Challenges	- Increasing pragmatism, with students prioritizing highly applicable fields (IT, business, engineering). - Employers favor professional skills over critical thinking. - Humanities courses are being reduced in curricula.
Data & trends	- WEF: 85% of jobs in 2030 do not yet exist; critical thinking is essential. - UNESCO: Humanities credits are decreasing in Southeast Asia and Vietnam due to pressure from students and employers.
Market demand	- LinkedIn Learning 2023: Critical thinking is among the most important skills. - 65% of Vietnamese businesses value critical thinking, but only 30% of students meet the requirement.
Proposed solutions	- Interdisciplinary education: Integrating humanities into specialized fields (Philosophy in AI, Business Ethics, etc.). - Applying technology (AI, VR) in teaching. - STEM-Humanities interdisciplinary workshops to enhance critical thinking.

Source: Analysis from UNESCO, TopCV, General Statistics Office.

Adaptability and critical thinking will become increasingly important in the ever-changing job market, as 85% of jobs in 2030 do not exist yet (World Economic Forum, 2023). The World Economic Forum report noted that the previously developed WEF report concerning adaptability and critical thinking skills needed in the ever-evolving labor market has not been updated. It is rather baffling that many universities decided to focus more on specialization courses, as such an approach will create a more narrow-minded workforce.

This problem is aggravated by the fact that, with the UNESCO 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report, which states that credit allocation to humanities in Southeast Asian universities, for example, Vietnam, has been on a continuous decline for the last decade. By far, the most significant contribution to this decline is the demand from graduates as well as employers. There is this remarkable paradox that exists: students only seem to invest their intellectual efforts into acquiring practical skills more integrated for rapid employment, whereas employers aim to hire personnel with more defined skill sets (UNESCO, 2023). Such a condition paves the way to a lack of essential skills critical to the professional workforce; mental agility and underinvestment in education are the root causes.

Even with the increasing focus on advanced qualifications and areas, many organizations still perceive functional mental agility as an essential skill required during the hiring process, making it fundamentally necessary to truly thrive in competitive conditions.

According to a LinkedIn Learning report from this year, employers seek critical thinking skills as much as problem-solving, communication, creativity, and collaboration (Le, 2023a, 2023b). This is particularly important for employees in sectors such as management, finance, technology, and media, who deal with intricate issues and need to make informed, data-backed decisions (OOC, 2024). In the same vein, Ernst & Young (EY) removed degree requirements for a number of vacancies, prioritizing applicants with strong thinking and communication skills (Ernst & Young, 2015). Furthermore, a report released by TopCV Vietnam in collaboration with the General Statistics Office of Vietnam indicated that 65% of businesses in the country value critical thinking during evaluations, yet astonishingly only 30% of graduates possess this skill (General Statistics Office, 2022). This highlights an unfulfilled expectation of the current education system and an urgent need to meet the needs of the labor market. To eliminate this problem, universities need to improve the integration of humanities by revising their curricula. One option would be to use interdisciplinary approaches where the humanities are not treated as distinct subjects but are rather incorporated into specialized curricula.

Universities can offer combined courses like "Philosophy in Artificial Intelligence," "Ethics in Business," or "History and Politics of Technological Innovation." Instead of offering standalone courses in the humanities, leveraging technology in the education of humanities subjects is essential. AI and VR platforms can enhance critical thinking and engagement for students through interactive assignments and real-world simulations. The organization of interdisciplinary workshops for STEM and humanities students can foster a more flexible and adaptable workforce. In conclusion, critical thinking development through humanities education poses numerous challenges. Multi-dimensional skill sets are increasingly demanded by the workforce, which makes the restructuring of humanities education necessary. Beyond the production of skilled workers, this will shape responsible citizens with refined critical thinking skills who can navigate the complexities of the digital age.

3.2.4. Explaining Differences Across Groups

The results demonstrate significant differences in gains in critical thinking across various student categories and instructional settings. Fourth-year profiles showed a greater increase than third-year cohorts (72% versus 48% self-affirmed growth), while females exhibited a more substantial improvement (65% versus 53% among males). The datasets also highlighted variability across institutions in the ranking of pedagogical approaches: group discussion received an 82% positive endorsement at Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities; in contrast, literary analysis and applied-technology approaches were rated lower at 55% and 63%, respectively, in Hanoi University of Culture and Thu Dau Mot University. These divergences can be explained through synthesized constructs from contemporary theory. Where Vygotskian social constructivism and the 5D model intersect, the comparative gains can be mapped: the mixed-argument discourse emphasizes Discourse, the layered literary paradigm targets Discovery, and the integration of immersive technology leverages Dynamism. A complementary explanation suggests that fourth-year learners experience more comprehensive curricular activities, such as capstone projects, research, and thesis work, which facilitate moving beyond the cognitive comfort zone and lead to a notable increase in self-rated competency. However, the narrative should not rely solely on constructivist or experiential explanations; baseline differences in incoming ability, limitations of self-perception bias, unevenly resourced classroom environments, and assessment practices also require consideration. Future research could enhance understanding by pairing years of study with instruction methods (year × method) and stratifying participants by gender and method (gender × method), followed by interaction tests to identify mechanisms and control for confounders more effectively. Such approaches may refine insights into how context and profile jointly influence cognitive development. See Table 5 for a summary of how reasoning gains compare among outcome groups and across delivery modes.

Table 5. Comparison of critical thinking improvement across groups and teaching methods.

Comparison group	Improvement (%)	Key observations
Year of study	Year 3: 48% • Year 4: 72%	Fourth-year students improved more due to accumulated academic experience.
Gender	Male: 53% • Female: 65%	Female students reported higher improvement.
Teaching method	Group discussions (University of Social Sciences and Humanities): 82% • Literary analysis (Hanoi University of Culture): 55% • Technology application (Thu Dau Mot University): 63%	Each method influences different dimensions of critical thinking (Discourse, Discovery, Dynamism).

Source: Primary survey and interview data (2024–2025).

3.3. Connection with Theory

The given data strongly correlates with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which indicates that cognitive development, such as critical thinking, occurs during significant interactions with peers within a given time and culture (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory emphasizes the importance of a cooperative learning environment where learners engage in constructive dialogues, negotiations, and experiences not only among themselves but also with their teachers. For the current study, this theoretical rationale is most evident in the effectiveness of pedagogical actions such as group discussions, debates, and other forms of active teaching and learning. These techniques are widely recognized by both students and lecturers as crucial in developing critical thinking skills. Furthermore, students actively participating in these activities move beyond rote learning and engage in reasoning with their teachers and peers. Through these exchanges, learners learn to identify, challenge, and modify their assumptions, thereby developing the ability to think reflexively and from multiple perspectives.

A lecturer at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City remarked that in a good debate, "students practice defending their own view while also having to entertain the contrary position. Rehearsing that balance nudges them away from fixed beliefs and polishes the mental muscles that a solid critical mindset requires." Another faculty member quickly added a note of caution: "We often run short of class time, so the arguments that students begin do not always get fully voiced. If we want the practice to stick, we also need longer, accessible extracurricular platforms." Together, the reflections ground the central proposition of social constructivism, which insists that meaningful learning happens in social contexts through collective and culturally rich transactions. In this instance, the model shows how critical skills grow in contexts that remain flexible over time, training students not only to thrive within the university but also to navigate the entangled challenges of civic and personal life. A contemplative fourth-year student sums the effect: "Before the seminars, I always believed that most questions hid a single answer, but now I see that what counts as an answer depends on how differently each of us sees the same situation." That testimony expresses the distributed value of a humanities education and echoes Vygotsky, who insisted that building knowledge is at once a solitary and a deeply social act.

In addition to the insights anchored in Vygotskian theory, the present inquiry further corroborates (Firdaus & Mariyat, 2017) the 5D architecture for cultivating critical thinking. This model maps five dimensions Discovery, Discourse, Decision, Dynamism, and Dedication onto prototypical phases in the evolution of a learner's thought. Within the current data set, the dimensions of Discovery, Discourse, and Dynamism surfaced with the greatest clarity. Discovery materialized in learners' inclination to frame inquiries and question prevailing assumptions; in fact, 75% of the questionnaire participants indicated a rise in both the frequency of their inquiries and their readiness to appraise information critically after engaging with the humanities. The voice of one faculty member encapsulated the finding: "The moment learners take courage to ask a question, we know their minds are no longer passive receivers of information, but active judges." This phrase underscores questioning itself as the pivot around which genuine critical examination begins to revolve. Discourse appeared in the sharpening of students' debating and argumentation competencies, an enhancement systematically engineered through framed discussions. A summarizing remark from

a lecturer commented: "The instant learners pivot from silent reception to animated dialogue, they cease to be consumers; they become architects of thought structuring claims, weighing evidence, and contesting different stances." The Dynamism dimension manifested in the agile reception students displayed when they encountered material beyond their experience, with pronounced evidence appearing when novel pedagogic tools were delivered through digital formats.

When a participant in a VR-enhanced history course remarked, "Sketching a medieval street in virtual space made me cross-examine what I'd always taken for granted and defend my view against alternative evidence," the remark embodied key recurrent patterns in the data. This evidence reinforces the alignment of humanities pedagogy with Vygotskian social constructivism and the 5D framework, demonstrating that sustained critical thought flourishes most in environments structured around inquiry, collaborative dialogue, and the capacity to adjust interpretations in response to changing circumstances.

As reported in the study, around two-thirds of the students appreciated classroom debates for helping them construct and articulate their arguments and counterarguments while considering opposing views. Engagement in debates helped solidify knowledge while simultaneously improving logic and rhetorical skills. A third-year student shared, "Debates about social issues not only help me better understand the topic but also help me develop more rigorous argumentation and critical thinking skills." These types of engagement, in a Vygotskian framework, are vital for scaffolding learners' advanced thinking skills in a zone of proximal development (ZPD) that strikes a precise equilibrium between supportive social structures and intellectual demands.

The Dynamism dimension emphasizes mental agility and a cognitive approach to problem solving. In this research, 60% of students reported that they could analyze an issue from at least three different perspectives ethically, historically, and culturally after participating in humanities education activities. This form of perspective-taking enhances empathy, analytical skills, and the ability to understand differing opinions and attitudes. A lecturer from Hanoi University of Culture commented: "Students need to learn how to approach problems from different dimensions because it will make them flexible and creative in terms of thinking and actions in the future." Two core dimensions of the 5D model that have not been as extensively documented in this study are Decision and Dedication. Students showed a tendency to apply some analytical frameworks in their learning decisions and made a greater commitment to studying the humanities, even if these aspects were not as extensively quantified in this study.

One student remarked, "I didn't care much about humanities subjects before, but after taking a critical thinking course, I understand these are very important for work and life." This observation reveals an improvement in learners' attitudes and motivation. It also shows that teaching critical thinking can enhance cognitive skills as well as affective dispositions. However, the limitations of this research need to be addressed. To start, the sample for the survey did not include students from high-quality or international programs, whose unique contexts could yield very different patterns of critical thinking development due to their rigorous education and abundant learning opportunities. A lecturer from Thu Dau Mot University remarked, "We need to research more about how high-quality program students approach the humanities courses because their responses and results may be very different from regular students, which we need to understand better." This highlights an important recommendation for further research to broaden the understanding of the impact of education across different student populations. Also, the research was conducted over a period of 18 months. While this duration is adequate to capture short- and medium-term learning outcomes, it could be a constraint in the ever-evolving, fast-paced world of education.

The development and integration of new technologies, including AI-based learning tools and virtual reality simulations, require further examination as these changes may impact the delivery of critical thinking instruction in today's classrooms. These variables need to be examined in future research to better reflect new shifts in educational technology and develop appropriate technology integration models for the humanities. To summarize, the results of the research not only affirm the applicability of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory and the 5D model in today's higher education ecosystem but also emphasize the need for teaching methods that value interaction, dialogue, and

perspective-taking. These frameworks are very useful as guiding principles in designing teaching innovations that aim to develop critical thinking skills, which are essential in today's digitally transformed and knowledge-driven global economy. Figure 3 illustrates the effectiveness levels of new teaching methods, including group discussion, practical application, AI, and VR integration.

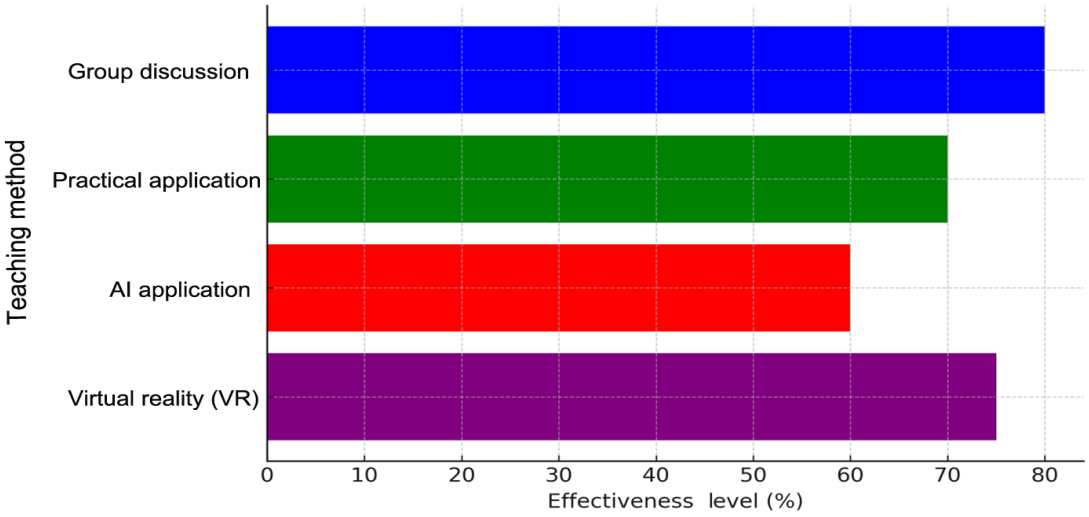

Figure 3. Effectiveness levels of new teaching methods.

Source: The student survey data and faculty interviews (2024–2025).

More specifically, integrating the findings within the frameworks of Vygotsky's social constructivism or Firdaus and Mariyat (2017) 5D model indicates the extent to which humanities education shapes students' critical thinking skills. These conclusions do not merely reinforce the educational rationale of the research but also offer significant guidance for policymakers concerning the design of the curriculum aimed at fostering critical adaptive skills relevant to evolving contemporary contexts. As emphasized by one of the lecturers from HCMC University of Social Sciences and Humanities: "We need to do more to advance teaching programs in the humanities so that they resonate with current needs, enabling students not just to gain knowledge but put it into practice."

4. CONCLUSION

The importance of education in the humanities for developing university students' critical thinking skills, especially amidst the shifting forces within Vietnam's digital transformation, has been confirmed by research. Survey data from three representative universities indicates that 75% of students showed marked gains in critical thinking after taking humanities courses and 68% reported a greater ability to conduct multidimensional analyses. These findings not only confirm prior ideas put forth by UNESCO (2015) regarding the possibilities humanistic education offers but also suggest new avenues for their application in a digitally-enhanced teaching context. Further reflection on teaching methodologies shows that the use of technology in the teaching of humanities is not uniform. Many universities are still at the initial stages of adopting digital innovations, although some, like Thu Dau Mot University, have led the way in using virtual reality and interactivity in their pedagogy for History, Psychology, and Business Management. This gap highlights the urgent need for a coherent strategy aimed at the rapid evolution of digital technologies in higher education. To overcome these issues and enhance the digitally-infused integration of the humanities, the study proposes several strategic recommendations.

Initially, considering the expansion of integration, it is important to create AI capable of performing text analysis and evaluation of students' reasoning, as well as the application of VR in the generation of digital libraries preserving cultural and historical works. Moreover, the use of big data to evaluate students and smart chatbot systems for providing round-the-clock interactive, self-access learning opportunities is also suggested. Secondly, curriculum

innovation focused on STEM and humanities collaboration through social hackathons, interdisciplinary community-based projects, and inter-university resource-sharing networks should also be supported. The development of customized blended and flexible learning frameworks will also widen and deepen the integration, as students will receive richer and more tailored learning opportunities. Lastly, one of the most critical areas is digital infrastructure: investment in synchronized, modern digital infrastructure, faculty training, and collaboration with technology companies for developing specialized humanities educational solutions need to be prioritized. An integrated digital ecosystem for learning increases the value of teaching and learning by fostering inclusivity, innovation, and overall effectiveness in education. In the context of Vietnam's ongoing efforts toward comprehensive national digital transformation, it is clear that the modernization of humanities education is no longer an optional strategic choice but an existential imperative. Drawing from the research results, a "Humanistic Education 4.0" model has been designed and built on three essential components: advanced integration of smart technologies, creation of multimedia digital learning resources, and automated evaluation systems. The initial outcomes from the pilot projects utilizing this model indicate a notable improvement in the quality of instruction as well as student learning outcomes. The combination of sophisticated technologies and strong humanistic traditions is likely to produce an education system that prepares students for the challenges of critically analyzing and navigating the complexities of the digital world (Nguyen, Tran, Pham, & Le, 2024). The approach is expected to efficiently enable the country to enhance its demand for high-caliber talent capable of agile, innovative solutions aligned with the socio-economic development goals in the context of the digital economy. The work enriches the knowledge of university leaders, educators, and decision-makers while providing a meaningful scientific rationale for shaping policies not only for Vietnam but also for Southeast Asia.

5. LIMITATION

While this study does contribute significantly regarding the impact of humanities education on critical thinking skills, there are a few limitations that we should consider. To begin with, the research participants were only students from the humanities disciplines in three select universities, which meant that students from upper-level or vocational schools with different educational backgrounds were not included. This vocational omission would impact how representative the sample is relative to the entire education system in Vietnam. Another restriction is the rapid pace of change within technology in relation to education during an 18-month study timeline. This rapidly evolving ability of technology to transform education means this study's methods and curriculum are outdated by the time the results are published. Granted, employing the mixed-methods approach promoted depth of analysis. However, drawing conclusions from surveys and interviews risks self-serving reporting. Focusing on the long-term implications of a diverse sample population integrating humanities education on critical thinking skills in varying schooling contexts would strengthen the study if it used longitudinal, multi-phased, and cross-experimental frameworks.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study involved minimal risk and adhered to ethical guidelines for social science fieldwork. Formal approval from an Institutional Review Board was not required under the policies of Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.
Transparency: The author states that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.
Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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