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## Exploring the Integration of the Happy School Model in Vietnamese Higher Education: Insights and Implications from the Perspectives of Tertiary EFL Teachers

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study explored the possibility of implementing the happy school model (HSM) in the context of Vietnamese higher education, with a focus on the socio-cultural perspectives of nine tertiary English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers at different career stages. Through semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and theoretical underpinning by constructivist paradigm and humanistic education theory, the study illuminated multifaceted insights. Key themes emerged, including aligning the HSM with holistic student development, recognizing challenges and potential benefits, balancing traditional Confucian values, and adapting the model to Vietnam's unique socio-cultural and economic landscape. The findings provide valuable guidance for educational innovation in Vietnam, highlighting complexities of aligning a new educational paradigm with existing practices and cultural norms. While the study's focus on a specific cultural context and limited participant pool presents certain limitations, the insights offer rich contributions to the broader global dialogue on education and human development. Future research directions and practical implications are also discussed, making this study a valuable resource for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in the intersection of universal educational principles and specific cultural contexts like Vietnam.

**Keywords:** *Happy school model, higher education, perspectives, tertiary EFL teachers, Vietnam.*

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### Introduction

Vietnam, a rapidly developing country with a rich cultural heritage, has made significant strides in the field of education. The education system has always been at the forefront of societal transformation, serving as a reflection of the nation's cultural, historical, and socioeconomic dynamics (Thao & Mai, 2022). Recently, Vietnam's higher education has undergone several reforms and policy changes aimed at modernizing its institutions, improving the quality of education, and ensuring that its graduates are equipped to meet the demands of a globalizing economy. The government, recognizing the importance of higher education in national development, has introduced policies to increase university autonomy, promote research, and enhance international collaboration. However, these reforms have also brought about challenges, such as ensuring equity in access to higher education, maintaining the quality amidst rapid expansion, and reconciling traditional educational values with contemporary global standards (N. Nguyen & Tran, 2018).

Within this landscape, the concept of the "happy school model" (HSM) has emerged as an intriguing prospect for potential application in higher education. The HSM emphasizes creating a positive, joyful, and nurturing environment for students, aiming to enhance both academic achievements and personal growth (Bahramian et al., 2021; Döş, 2023). It contrasts with more traditional educational models that may place greater emphasis on academic rigor and discipline (Shreeve, 2008). Although there is a growing body of literature on the HSM's global applications, there is a clear gap in understanding its potential fit within the Vietnamese higher education system. Many studies have primarily focused on

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the outcomes of HSM in western and other Asian contexts (e.g., Bahramian et al., 2021), but a comprehensive exploration of its implications in Vietnam is scant.

Considering Vietnam's unique socio-cultural landscape, the integration of the HSM in higher education might bring forth new dynamics and challenges. The interplay between the collectivist culture, Confucian values, and contemporary global educational trends provides an exciting field of exploration (Truong et al., 2017). Analyzing the perspectives of those who are directly involved in the teaching process is vital for a nuanced understanding of this concept. Specifically, English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers, as intercultural mediators, may offer valuable insights into the compatibility, potential benefits, and challenges of implementing the HSM in the context of Vietnamese higher education.

This study aims to bridge this gap by focusing on the perspectives of Vietnamese EFL teachers, a group uniquely positioned to evaluate the blend of global educational ideas with local cultural traits. By addressing this literature gap, the research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive global understanding of the HSM while highlighting the specificities of the Vietnamese context. Their insights can contribute to shaping the future direction of education in Vietnam, potentially making it more student-centered, holistic, and fulfilling. The primary motivation behind this study is to explore an innovative educational approach that might align with the global movement towards more empathetic and humane education, while still resonating with the unique socio-cultural fabric of Vietnam. The research could also provide a framework for policymakers, educators, and institutions in Vietnam and other culturally similar contexts to implement the HSM effectively. Given the significance and novelty of this research avenue, the following research question guides this study: *"How do Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive the possibility of the HSM in higher education in the context of Vietnam?"*

## Literature Review

### *The Happy School Model*

The HSM represents a significant development in educational thinking that blends both ancient wisdom and contemporary insights. Originating from philosophical ideas like Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, the HSM was formalized in the late 20th century, inspired by Seligman et al.'s (2009) work on positive psychology. Before delving into the model's details, it is essential to clarify what happiness, a happy school, and the HSM entail. Happiness, in general terms, is a state of well-being and contentment. A happy school, meanwhile, is an educational institution where students, educators, and administrators feel content, motivated, and engaged. In contrast, the HSM has evolved as a response to growing concerns about students' mental health and the limitations of traditional educational systems, emphasizing creativity, collaboration, and emotional intelligence (Waters, 2011). Several countries have adapted the HSM to suit their specific socio-cultural contexts, such as Bhutan's Gross National Happiness index and Finland's focus on well-being in education (Sahlberg, 2021; Ura et al., 2012). While praised for its innovative approach, the HSM has also faced criticism for potentially oversimplifying complex educational issues or overlooking other essential outcomes (Smith, 2016; White & Kern, 2018). Recent studies continue to investigate its practical implementation, benefits, and challenges in various settings, including non-Western contexts (Rusk & Waters, 2015). A study by Waters (2011) highlights the positive impact on student engagement and achievement, while others (e.g., Thompson, 1993) note potential conflicts with traditional educational values and structures. In short, the history of the HSM reflects an ongoing dialogue about the role of happiness and well-being in education, showcasing the model's potential to transform learning environments by intertwining intellectual growth with emotional health.

### *Higher Education in Vietnam*

Vietnam's higher education system has been profoundly shaped by its history, culture, and economic development. Studies by Truong et al. (2017), Dell et al. (2018), and Fforde (2019) provide insights into the influence of Confucian values, French colonization, and socialist ideologies on the educational landscape. The relationship of the aforementioned issue with higher education can be seen in how these historical and cultural influences shape the curriculum, teaching methodologies, and administrative structures in universities and colleges. For instance, Confucian values, which emphasize respect for teachers and a structured learning environment, can still be seen in the hierarchical and formal relationships between students and teachers in many Vietnamese institutions. Likewise, the remnants of French colonization manifest in the adoption of certain pedagogical styles and the inclusion of French as a secondary language in some courses. Socialist ideologies, on the other hand, have contributed to a strong emphasis on equity and access in higher education, sometimes at the expense of quality and innovation. Current trends in Vietnamese higher education include increasing privatization, internationalization, and efforts towards quality assurance (C. H. Nguyen & Shah, 2019). Challenges such as resource constraints, curriculum rigidity, and quality inconsistency are explored in previous works (Duong et al., 2019; N. Nguyen & Tran, 2018; Thanh, 2010).

### *Perspectives of Vietnamese EFL Teachers*

EFL teachers in Vietnam play a crucial role as intercultural mediators and facilitators of global competencies. Research by Vo et al. (2017) explores their experiences, methodologies, and attitudes towards innovative pedagogical approaches. The relationship of this issue with teachers becomes evident to understand that EFL teachers are not just imparting

language skills but also navigating the complex terrains of cultural expectations, societal norms, and global dynamics. They often find themselves at the intersection of maintaining cultural identity while also promoting global perspectives. Their challenges often go beyond just pedagogical considerations to managing these dual roles efficiently. Sociocultural factors significantly influence Vietnamese EFL teachers' pedagogical choices and perceptions (Nhat et al., 2018). Previous studies have delved into how traditional cultural values, governmental policies, and global educational trends intersect in shaping teaching practices (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Thao & Mai, 2022; Trung & Van, 2020).

The existing literature sets the stage for an investigation into the possibility of implementing the HSM in the context of Vietnamese higher education from the perspectives of EFL teachers. While each of the above areas has been studied separately, there is a lack of research that synthesizes these domains to explore the specific subject of this study. Thus, the current research aims to fill this gap by combining insights from the HSM, the socio-cultural dynamics of Vietnamese higher education, and the unique viewpoint of Vietnamese EFL teachers.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

A qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deep, contextual understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). By engaging with the subjective realities of Vietnamese EFL teachers, the study aims to uncover the complexities, meanings, and nuances of their attitudes towards the HSM.

Two main theoretical frameworks underpin this study. First, the constructivist paradigm serves as the primary theoretical lens for this research, emphasizing the socially constructed nature of reality. By acknowledging that individuals create meaning through their interactions with their social and cultural environment, this paradigm provides a nuanced approach to understanding teachers' perceptions (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). Besides, the study also draws upon humanistic education theory, which underscores the significance of personal growth, creativity, self-actualization, and emotional well-being in the learning process (Maslow, 1979). This theoretical framework aligns with the core principles of the HSM and provides a foundational basis for exploring its potential applicability in Vietnamese higher education. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain a deep, contextual understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions. By engaging with the subjective realities of Vietnamese EFL teachers, the study aims to uncover the complexities, meanings, and nuances of their attitudes towards the HSM.

### *Participants*

The participants of this study consisted of 9 tertiary EFL teachers in Vietnam, specifically selected to represent different stages of their teaching careers. The participants were divided into three distinct groups: novices, mid-career teachers, and near end-career teachers, with three teachers in each category. This stratification allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how perceptions of the HSM may differ across various career stages. Below is a detailed description of the participants, including ethical considerations that were maintained throughout the study.

All participants were ensured anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained, and pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants. In addition to these measures, careful attention was given to the potential power imbalances that can emerge in research settings. To mitigate this, open-ended questions were used to empower participants to share their views freely without feeling coerced or led in a specific direction. Active listening was prioritized during interviews, ensuring that participants felt valued and heard. Any questions or concerns raised by participants were addressed promptly and transparently. Regarding data protection, all collected data, including interview recordings and transcriptions, were stored in encrypted digital files, which were accessible only to the research team. Hard copies of any materials were kept in a secure, locked location. Throughout the research process, strict adherence to data protection regulations and best practices was maintained to ensure the utmost security and confidentiality of participant information. The information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants

Pseudonyms	Brief descriptions
Teacher A (Ms. Nguyen)	Aged 26, Ms. Nguyen has been teaching EFL at a public university for two years. She holds a Master's degree in TESOL and is enthusiastic about incorporating innovative teaching methods. Ms. Nguyen expressed curiosity about the HSM but had limited experience implementing it.
Teacher B (Mr. Tran)	Mr. Tran, 28, teaches at a private college and has three years of experience. With a background in English Literature and a keen interest in student well-being, he has attempted to create a positive classroom environment and was eager to explore the HSM further.
Teacher C (Ms. Pham)	Teaching at a public university, Ms. Pham, 27, has two years of experience and holds an M.Ed in English Education. She emphasizes interactive teaching but was relatively unfamiliar with the HSM, showing keen interest in learning more.
Teacher D (Mr. Le)	Aged 40, Mr. Le has 15 years of teaching experience at a prominent public university. Holding a Ph.D. in Linguistics, he has gradually adopted more student-centered approaches but had reservations about the feasibility of the HSM in his context.
Teacher E (Ms. Vu)	Ms. Vu, 38, teaches at a private university with 13 years of experience. With a Master's in English Language Teaching, she actively engages students through various methods and expressed openness to the HSM, though with some concerns about practical implementation.
Teacher F (Mr. Hoang)	Mr. Hoang, 42, has been teaching at a public college for 17 years. Specializing in Business English, he is a strong advocate of traditional teaching methods but was intrigued by the potential benefits of the HSM.
Teacher G (Ms. Dao)	Aged 60, Ms. Dao has an impressive 35-year career at various public universities. Though initially resistant to pedagogical changes, she has become more receptive to new ideas, including the HSM, which she considered worth exploring.
Teacher H (Mr. Minh)	Mr. Minh, 58, with 33 years of experience in a private college, emphasizes discipline and rigor but acknowledged the importance of student well-being. He expressed cautious interest in the HSM.
Teacher I (Ms. Thanh)	Teaching at a public university for 30 years, Ms. Thanh, 57, holds a Ph.D. in English Education. She has witnessed significant changes in teaching methodologies and was open to the potential of the HSM but stressed the importance of aligning it with cultural values.

The diverse range of participants, spanning different career stages, institutions, and pedagogical perspectives, provided rich insights into the research question. Their detailed profiles facilitated a nuanced exploration of how the HSM is perceived and might be implemented within the particular context of Vietnamese higher education. This diversity underscores the complexity of the issue and adds depth and texture to the findings of the study.

#### Data Collection

The data collection process in this study was thoughtfully executed using semi-structured interviews, with the guidance of a preliminary pilot study. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted with three EFL teachers who were not part of the primary sample. This allowed for the refinement of the interview protocol by identifying potential ambiguities or areas needing further exploration. The feedback from the pilot study played a crucial role in shaping the final version of the interview guide, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives.

Based on the theoretical frameworks of the study and the insights gained from the pilot study, an interview guide was meticulously developed. It contained open-ended questions, supplemented by probing and follow-up questions, to facilitate a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the research topics. Sample questions included inquiries about the participants' overall teaching philosophy, their perceptions of the HSM in the Vietnamese context, and the challenges or barriers they foresaw in implementing this model.

The procedures for data collection were carefully planned and executed. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and were provided with detailed information about the study. After obtaining written consent, interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for the participants, with the option for in-person or video conferencing. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for a natural yet focused conversation, guided by the carefully crafted questions. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in either English or Vietnamese, depending on the participant's preference.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. If conducted in Vietnamese, the transcripts were translated into English with special attention to preserving the original meanings. The credibility of the findings was further enhanced through member checking, where participants had the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of their transcribed responses.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis for this qualitative study was conducted using thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across a data set (Braun et al., 2023). The analysis began with an immersive reading of the transcribed interviews to become familiar with the data and to gain an initial sense of the participants' experiences and perspectives. This was followed by generating initial codes that identified significant features of the data that were relevant to the research question. After the coding phase, the codes were grouped into potential themes, providing a structure that helped to organize and interpret the data. Each theme was closely examined and refined to ensure that it accurately represented the corresponding codes and the underlying meanings. The relationships between different themes were also explored, leading to the development of overarching thematic concepts that encapsulated the core insights of the study. During the entire analysis process, the theoretical frameworks of constructivism and humanistic education theory guided the interpretation, ensuring alignment with the research objectives and the context of the study. The iterative nature of thematic analysis allowed for continuous reflection and refinement throughout the data analysis process. Themes were not only developed and defined but also reviewed and revised to ascertain that they provided a coherent and nuanced picture of the data. Special attention was given to the socio-cultural context of Vietnam, and the diverse experiences of the teachers, in interpreting the themes.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, several strategies were employed. Validity, which pertains to the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings, was addressed by ensuring that the research methods and data collection tools were appropriate for the study's objectives. Measures were taken to ensure that the questions posed to participants accurately captured their perceptions and experiences. Member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to verify the interpretation of their responses, added an additional layer of credibility to the findings, further bolstering the study's validity. Reliability, on the other hand, refers to the consistency and replicability of the research results. The process of analysis was also documented in detail, maintaining an audit trail that provided transparency and allowed for the potential replication of the study. As a result, the thematic analysis conducted in this study offered a rigorous and systematic approach to understanding the complex perceptions of Vietnamese EFL teachers regarding the HSM in higher education. By employing a meticulous coding process, developing and refining themes, and taking into consideration the unique cultural context, the analysis provided rich, insightful, and contextually grounded findings that contributed to the broader discourse on education and well-being in Vietnam.

### Findings

#### *Embracing the Holistic Development of Students*

Seven out of nine participants expressed a strong inclination towards nurturing students' emotional well-being and considered it a vital component of education. This was seen as aligning well with the HSM, where the emphasis is on creating a positive, supportive learning environment. Teacher D said, *"Our role goes beyond imparting knowledge. We must care for our students' hearts and minds, make them feel safe and inspired. That is what education should truly be about."* Teacher H stated, *"I used to think discipline was everything, but over the years, I have come to understand the importance of emotional connection. Our students need more than grades; they need understanding and encouragement."* From the constructivist perspective, learning is an active, constructive process where learners build knowledge through experience and reflection. The idea expressed by the teachers aligns with this paradigm, recognizing that learning is not just about absorbing information but also about emotional growth and personal development. By acknowledging the importance of nurturing emotional well-being, the teachers are embracing a view of education that goes beyond mere content delivery. This resonates with the core principles of constructivism, where the learning process is seen as deeply interconnected with the emotional and social contexts of the learners. Humanistic education theory emphasizes the importance of the whole person, including their emotional, social, and intellectual aspects. The emphasis on nurturing emotional well-being, as expressed by the participants, reflects this humanistic perspective. By focusing on students' emotional needs, teachers are recognizing the intrinsic value of each individual and acknowledging that education should be a process of personal growth and self-actualization. This approach aligns with the goals of humanistic education, which seeks to foster a nurturing, supportive environment where students can grow not only intellectually but also emotionally and personally.

#### *Challenges and Concerns Regarding Implementation*

Six out of the nine teachers expressed concerns over potential cultural barriers that might hinder the implementation of the HSM within the Vietnamese higher education system. Teacher A shared, *"While the HSM sounds appealing, we have to consider our unique cultural context. Some of the principles might clash with traditional Vietnamese values."* Teacher F remarked, *"It is not just about introducing a new model; it is about changing mindsets. I am afraid that both educators and students might resist such a significant shift in our educational approach."* The cultural barriers identified by the participants can be understood within the constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes the importance of context in learning. While constructivism encourages active learner engagement and personalized learning experiences, this must align with the cultural values and social norms of the community. The concerns raised by the teachers reflect an understanding that implementing a new educational model requires careful consideration of the local context and

potential alignment or misalignment with existing cultural practices. From a humanistic perspective, the focus on individual growth and personal fulfillment should transcend cultural boundaries. However, the challenges identified by the participants indicate that the application of humanistic principles must be sensitive to cultural norms and values. The teachers' apprehensions about potential resistance to the HSM underscore the complexity of balancing universal humanistic ideals with the unique socio-cultural context of Vietnamese higher education.

#### *Potential Benefits and Positive Impact*

All nine teachers were optimistic about the potential of the HSM to foster creativity and critical thinking among students, aligning with the goal of developing well-rounded individuals. Teacher B articulated, *"The HSM presents immense potential to transcend the limitations of rote learning by fostering creative thinking, an aspect that tends to be overshadowed in our conventional system."* Teacher E added, *"Emphasizing happiness and well-being within the educational environment can lead to greater student engagement and motivation for critical thinking. This approach has the power to be a transformative force within our education system."* The idea of fostering creativity and critical thinking aligns strongly with the constructivist paradigm, where learners actively construct knowledge through exploration and inquiry. The participants' enthusiasm for this aspect of the HSM reflects a shared belief in the importance of encouraging students to think creatively, analyze, and reflect, rather than passively absorb information. This aligns with constructivist principles that see education as an active and dynamic process of discovery. Humanistic education theory places a strong emphasis on personal growth and self-actualization. By fostering creativity and critical thinking, the HSM is seen as promoting individual expression and intellectual exploration. The teachers' positive perceptions of this potential impact reflect an alignment with humanistic ideals, where education goes beyond mere content delivery to encourage the development of well-rounded, self-fulfilled individuals.

#### *Alignment with Professional Development Needs*

Eight of the nine teachers emphasized the importance of professional development within the HSM, expressing a desire for growth in environments that are emotionally supportive and foster collaboration. Teacher C expressed, *"The HSM is not solely focused on students; it encompasses teachers as well. What we need is an environment that nurtures our professional development and acknowledges our emotional necessities."* Teacher G added, *"Aspects such as collaboration with fellow educators, continual learning opportunities, and emotional backing are vital for us in our roles. The HSM appears to resonate with and address these essential elements."* The expressed desire for professional growth in supportive environments can be linked to the constructivist paradigm, which views learning as a continuous process of building upon existing knowledge and experiences. This extends to teachers, who seek to grow in a nurturing environment that encourages collaboration and reflection. The teachers' sentiments reflect an understanding that their development is integral to the successful implementation of the HSM. The emphasis on emotional support and personal growth aligns with humanistic principles, which recognize the value and potential of each individual. By highlighting the need for a nurturing environment for professional development, the teachers are expressing a desire for an approach that respects and fosters their human potential. This emphasis on the personal and emotional aspects of professional growth resonates with the humanistic focus on self-actualization and individual well-being.

#### *The Role of Happiness in Academic Success*

All nine teachers acknowledged the role of happiness in fostering engagement and academic success, recognizing the interconnectedness of well-being, motivation, and learning outcomes. Teacher I observed, *"Engagement and motivation in students are often fueled by feelings of happiness and support, paving the way for enhanced academic performance."* Teacher B elaborated, *"Happiness in education is not merely about feeling good; it occupies a central role in the learning process. Happy students tend to be more curious, vibrant, and open to exploring innovative ideas."* Within the constructivist paradigm, learning is deeply intertwined with the learner's emotional state and engagement level. The idea that happiness plays a key role in academic success aligns with the constructivist emphasis on the learner's active participation and intrinsic motivation. By recognizing the importance of happiness in engagement and achievement, the teachers are acknowledging the holistic nature of learning, where emotional well-being is integral to the educational experience. The acknowledgment of happiness as a vital component of education resonates with humanistic education theory, which emphasizes the importance of emotional well-being in personal growth. The teachers' insights reflect a belief in the interconnectedness of happiness, motivation, and success, aligning with the humanistic focus on nurturing the whole person. This perspective underscores the potential of the HSM to foster a learning environment that values and supports the emotional well-being of students, in line with humanistic ideals.

#### *Adaptation and Localization of the HSM*

Seven of the nine teachers stressed the importance of adapting and localizing the HSM to ensure that it fits the specific socio-cultural context of Vietnam. Teacher E declared, *"The HSM cannot be merely imported into our educational system without customization to align with our distinct culture and societal values. It is imperative that we shape it to make it truly ours."* Teacher H concurred, *"Although the underlying principles of the HSM may be universal, the practical application must*

be localized and tailored. Strategies that prove effective in other countries might not necessarily translate to success within the unique context of Vietnam.” The emphasis on adapting and localizing the HSM aligns with the constructivist understanding that learning is context-dependent. Teachers recognize the need to consider the specific cultural, social, and educational landscape of Vietnam to ensure that the principles of the HSM are effectively integrated. This reflects a constructivist approach that acknowledges the importance of context in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. Humanistic education theory emphasizes the uniqueness of individual learners, which extends to the broader cultural context. The teachers’ insights about the need to customize the model affirm the humanistic principle that education should be tailored to the specific needs, values, and characteristics of the learners and their community. This perspective reinforces the importance of cultural sensitivity in applying the HSM in Vietnam.

#### *Integration with Existing Educational Practices*

Five out of the nine teachers expressed the view that the integration of the HSM should not entirely replace existing educational practices but should instead complement and enrich them. Teacher A asserted, *“Our educational heritage is rich and valuable. The HSM should be seen as a complement to enhance it, rather than a replacement. The key lies in striking the right equilibrium.”* Teacher F emphasized, *“The integration of happiness within our educational system does not signify a departure from our commitment to academic rigor. Instead, it represents the addition of a new dimension that enriches what we already practice.”* The idea of integrating the HSM with existing practices reflects a constructivist approach that recognizes the value of building on existing knowledge and structures. By emphasizing balance and integration, the teachers are proposing a way to enrich the current educational system in Vietnam by weaving in new principles without discarding what already exists. This perspective aligns with constructivist thinking, where learning is an ongoing process of construction and integration. The humanistic perspective emphasizes personal growth and self-actualization, values that are not confined to any single educational approach. The teachers’ views about balancing the HSM with existing practices resonate with this humanistic understanding. By advocating for a harmonious integration, they are seeking to create an educational environment that nurtures the whole person without losing sight of the academic goals and cultural values that shape the Vietnamese educational system.

#### *Alignment with Societal Values and Expectations*

Six of the nine teachers discussed the need to reconcile the HSM with traditional Confucian values that play a significant role in Vietnamese education. Teacher D articulated, *“The foundation of our education system lies in Confucian principles like reverence for authority and a strong focus on examinations. For the HSM to thrive in this environment, it must be in harmony with these values.”* Teacher G reflected, *“While the idea of infusing happiness into education is attractive, we have to carefully evaluate how it aligns with our culturally ingrained emphasis on discipline, hierarchical structures, and academic accomplishment.”* The recognition of the need to align the HSM with Confucian values reflects the constructivist understanding that learning is deeply rooted in a cultural context. The teachers’ insights underscore the importance of considering how the model might be integrated with existing values and expectations within Vietnamese society. This approach recognizes the complex interplay between new educational ideas and the established cultural framework. Humanistic education, with its focus on individual growth and self-fulfillment, may initially seem at odds with Confucian values emphasizing authority and hierarchy. However, the teachers’ comments suggest that reconciliation is possible by finding common ground between the nurturing aspects of the HSM and the respect for tradition and discipline inherent in Confucian principles. This reconciliation acknowledges the multifaceted nature of human development within a specific cultural context.

#### *Economic and Resource Considerations*

Five of the nine teachers highlighted potential economic and resource-related challenges in implementing the HSM within Vietnam’s existing educational infrastructure. Teacher B expressed, *“The implementation of the HSM demands significant investments in both training and infrastructure. In our particular context, these requirements might pose a substantial obstacle”*. Teacher I added, *“It is vital to consider the practical aspects. Fully adopting this model might be beyond the resources of some institutions. How can we ensure that it is accessible to everyone?”* The practical challenges identified by the teachers can be viewed through the constructivist lens, recognizing that the educational environment must be conducive to the active, learner-centered approach promoted by the HSM. The concerns about financial and infrastructural barriers reflect an understanding that effective implementation requires not just a philosophical shift but also tangible support and investment in resources. From a humanistic perspective, the focus on making education accessible and inclusive is paramount. The teachers’ concerns about economic and resource considerations underscore the importance of ensuring that the HSM does not become an exclusive privilege but is attainable within the broader context of Vietnamese society. This aligns with the humanistic commitment to fostering growth and well-being for all individuals, regardless of economic circumstances.

The study revealed multifaceted insights into the implementation of the HSM within the Vietnamese higher education system. Through the examination of various themes, the findings illuminated the teachers’ emphasis on embracing the holistic development of students, challenges, and concerns regarding implementation, potential benefits and positive

impact, professional development needs, and recognizing the interconnectedness of happiness and academic success. Furthermore, the need to adapt and localize the model to suit Vietnam's unique socio-cultural context was underscored. Participants also voiced the need to integrate the model with existing educational practices, balance it with traditional Confucian values, and consider practical economic and resource challenges.

## Discussion

### *Embracing the Holistic Development of Students*

Prior research on education models that emphasize student well-being has found consistent support for approaches that prioritize the whole student, including their emotional, social, and intellectual development (Graham et al., 2016; Ng, 2020; Woloshyn et al., 2019). From a constructivist perspective, this emphasis aligns with the belief that knowledge is constructed through an individual's own experiences and interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). The findings of this study align with this broader trend but add the nuanced perspective of Vietnamese EFL teachers. The emphasis on holistic development reflects a global shift towards recognizing the importance of emotional intelligence (Drigas & Papoutsis, 2020; Nelson & Low, 2010) and well-being in education (Khusid et al., 2020; Rechtschaffen, 2014). Drawing from humanistic education theory, this holistic approach underscores the value of self-actualization, intrinsic motivation, and the development of the whole person (Maslow, 1979). However, in the context of Vietnam, this approach must be carefully integrated with existing values and practices. The study revealed the potential for this alignment, considering the local cultural norms. It is essential to understand that while constructivist and humanistic theories offer valuable frameworks, they need to be culturally sensitive and adaptable to fit the unique needs of diverse student populations (Gay, 2018).

### *Challenges and Concerns Regarding Implementation*

Challenges in implementing innovative educational models are not unique to Vietnam and have been documented in various contexts (Cevikbas & Argün, 2017; Nurutdinova et al., 2016). From a constructivist standpoint, these challenges may be viewed as opportunities for re-evaluation and growth, given that learning is seen as a dynamic and evolving process (Vygotsky, 1978). However, the specific concerns related to economic and resource constraints and the reconciliation with Confucian values appear to be more context-specific (Fforde, 2019; Vuong et al., 2018). The Vietnamese higher education system's unique economic and cultural landscape necessitates specific considerations. Building on the humanistic education theory, the importance of recognizing individual and cultural differences, as well as addressing the holistic needs of students, becomes paramount (Maslow, 1979). The challenges raised by participants in this study highlight the practicalities that must be addressed to implement the HSM successfully. It is vital to note, however, that while the aim is the realization of the full potential of every student, it is equally essential to appreciate and incorporate the rich traditions and values unique to the Vietnamese context (Rogers, 1985). This ensures that educational innovations are not just transplanted but also effectively integrated within the particular constraints and opportunities in Vietnam.

### *Potential Benefits and Positive Impact*

The potential benefits of the HSM, such as improved student motivation and engagement, resonate with findings from other contexts (Datu et al., 2017; Zhang, 2016). From a constructivist viewpoint, these benefits align with the idea that active participation and real-world engagement enhance the depth and breadth of knowledge acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978). However, the emphasis on aligning these benefits with traditional academic success criteria seems to be more pronounced in the Vietnamese context (Le et al., 2020; T. L. Nguyen, 2019). Drawing insights from humanistic education theory, motivation and engagement are integral components for fostering an environment where students can reach their full potential, both academically and personally (Maslow, 1979). The findings reveal an understanding among Vietnamese EFL teachers that the HSM can contribute positively to the educational environment. The connection with traditional academic goals reflects a localized interpretation, emphasizing the model's potential compatibility with existing educational priorities. This reflects the essence of humanistic theory, which asserts that education should be tailored to the unique needs and cultural contexts of the students, thereby making it more relevant and effective (Rogers, 1985). In Vietnam, the intertwining of innovative approaches like HSM with traditional academic values can be seen as a pragmatic and culturally responsive way to enhance educational outcomes.

### *Professional Development Needs*

The emphasis on professional development needs aligns with broader educational research, highlighting the importance of ongoing teacher training and support (Amiri, 2021; Drossel & Eickelmann, 2017). From a constructivist standpoint, continuous learning and adaptation are crucial for educators, as they are required to construct and reconstruct their understanding and strategies in response to the evolving needs of their students (Vygotsky, 1978). The Vietnamese context adds the dimension of how this aligns with the specific demands and opportunities of implementing the HSM. Professional development is a universal concern in education, but in the context of this study, it is tied specifically to the requirements of implementing a new and culturally responsive model (Gay, 2018; Lopez & Bursztyn, 2013). Drawing on



humanistic education theory, it is evident that for teachers to foster a nurturing and holistic environment for students, they themselves need a supportive and growth-oriented environment (Rogers, 1985). This ensures they can grow both personally and professionally, enhancing their capacity to support student well-being and achievement. The focus on professional growth within a supportive environment reflects both global trends and specific local needs. In line with the humanistic approach, recognizing and addressing the unique needs of each teacher – just as with each student – is central to the broader goal of education as a transformative and self-actualizing process (Maslow, 1979).

#### *Adapting and Localizing the Model*

Many studies emphasize the importance of tailoring educational models to suit local socio-cultural contexts (Crossley, 2010; Lee & Ciftci, 2014; Mavuru & Ramnarain, 2020). This aligns with the constructivist paradigm, which posits that learning is a socially mediated process and is shaped by one's cultural and environmental experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). However, the specific ways in which Vietnamese EFL teachers view the need to adapt the HSM adds a unique perspective, reflecting Vietnam's distinct educational environment (Vu, 2021). The need for customization and localization of the HSM within the Vietnamese context reflects a deeper understanding of the country's unique cultural, historical, and social intricacies. From the lens of humanistic education theory, such customization is paramount, as it ensures that education is not just about cognitive learning, but also about addressing the holistic development of the individual within their unique cultural and social contexts (Rogers, 1985). The study's findings underscore the importance of aligning global concepts with local traditions and practices. This reflects the essence of both constructivist and humanistic approaches, where the learner is central, and the learning process is deeply intertwined with personal, cultural, and social contexts. Such alignment ensures that the learning experience is relevant, meaningful, and resonates with the lived experiences of the learners (Rogers, 1985).

#### *Integration with Existing Practices*

The integration of new teaching methods with existing practices is a common theme in educational research (De Vera et al., 2021; Donnelly et al., 2011; Goh & Sigala, 2020). From a constructivist perspective, such integration can be seen as a necessary evolution, as teaching and learning are dynamic processes that involve building upon prior knowledge and experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). This study reinforces this idea but adds depth by exploring how Vietnamese EFL teachers see this integration specifically in terms of the HSM. The findings highlight that the integration of the HSM with existing educational practices in Vietnam is not a straightforward task. Drawing from humanistic education theory, the challenge can be attributed to the need for educators to foster a learning environment that prioritizes individual growth and self-actualization (Maslow, 1979). It requires a careful balance, acknowledging the importance of maintaining traditional methods while embracing innovative strategies that are resonant with broader educational philosophies. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the essence of humanistic theory lies in appreciating and understanding each individual's unique needs and context (Rogers, 1985). Similarly, from a constructivist standpoint, while integration and evolution in educational practices are vital, they should be grounded in the learners' prior experiences and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). This approach ensures a harmonious blending of the old and the new, making education more meaningful and relevant for students.

#### *Balancing with Traditional Confucian Values*

While the balance between innovative educational approaches and traditional values has been explored in various contexts (Chou & Chou, 2011; Lehmann et al., 2008; Lin, 2014), the specific alignment with Confucian values in the context of Vietnam has not been widely examined. From a constructivist lens, such alignment is a recognition of the idea that knowledge is built upon existing cultural and historical understandings (Vygotsky, 1978). This study fills this gap, offering insights into this complex alignment. The study revealed that while there is enthusiasm for the HSM, there is also a need to ensure that it aligns with traditional Confucian values that have a profound influence on Vietnamese education (Truong et al., 2017). Grounded in humanistic education theory, this alignment emphasizes the importance of recognizing the deep-rooted cultural and social norms of students and educators (Maslow, 1979). The principles of respect for authority, emphasis on the collective, and reverence for tradition – all hallmarks of Confucianism – intersect with humanistic ideas of holistic development, individual potential, and well-being. This balance represents a unique challenge and opportunity within the Vietnamese context. It embodies the intersection of respecting and acknowledging the deep cultural roots of Confucianism while also evolving towards more holistic and student-centered approaches, resonant with both constructivist and humanistic philosophies. In doing so, the Vietnamese educational context can harness the best of both worlds, fostering an environment that is both culturally sensitive and forward-thinking.

#### *Practical Economic and Resource Challenges*

Economic and resource considerations in educational innovation have been explored globally (Looi & Teh, 2015; Mykhailishyn et al., 2019). From a constructivist standpoint, resource constraints can impact the ability to provide an environment conducive to experiential and scaffolded learning, which are core to this paradigm (Vygotsky, 1978). However, this study provides a detailed look at how these challenges manifest in the Vietnamese context, reflecting

specific economic realities. The Vietnamese educational landscape presents unique economic challenges, such as limited resources and funding (Hoai et al., 2023; McCornac, 2012). Within the framework of humanistic education theory, the importance of providing a nurturing, individual-focused environment is emphasized (Rogers, 1985). Limited resources can pose challenges to realizing this ideal, as creating such an environment often requires specific tools, programs, and support mechanisms. The study's findings indicate that while the HSM is appealing, practical considerations must be addressed to make it viable within the specific economic context of Vietnam. Balancing the humanistic aspiration of holistic student development with the pragmatic constructivist approach of building upon existing structures and resources becomes vital. This means finding innovative ways to integrate the principles of the HSM while being mindful of and adaptive to the economic constraints present in the Vietnamese educational context.

### Conclusion

The examination of the HSM's possibility within Vietnamese higher education reflects a global interest in innovative educational paradigms that prioritize holistic student well-being. However, understanding how these concepts translate within specific socio-cultural contexts like Vietnam, with its unique blend of traditions, values, and modern influences, presents a complex challenge. Recall the conceptual framework of the study, which hinged on the constructivist paradigm and humanistic education theory, emphasizing the co-construction of knowledge and the importance of holistic well-being in education. The study employed qualitative research methods, drawing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine tertiary EFL teachers in Vietnam, representing different stages of their careers. Guided by the constructivist paradigm and humanistic education theory, the thematic analysis was conducted to explore and interpret the nuanced perspectives of the participants.

The findings revealed insights into various aspects of implementing the HSM in Vietnam, such as embracing holistic development, recognizing challenges and concerns, understanding potential benefits, and aligning with professional development needs. Participants emphasized the need to adapt the model to local practices, balance it with Confucian values, and consider economic and resource challenges. In comparing these themes, it is clear there is a tension between the inherent flexibility of the HSM and the rigidity often associated with Confucian values. Additionally, the emphasis on holistic development is in stark contrast to the traditional exam-focused education prevalent in Vietnam. Yet, potential benefits like aligning with professional development needs and the possibility of integrating global paradigms suggest areas of alignment between the traditional and the innovative. These findings directly address the research objectives, which sought to understand the feasibility and intricacies of incorporating the HSM in Vietnam's unique socio-cultural milieu. Critically assessing these findings in light of the Vietnamese context, it is evident that while the HSM brings forth modern and progressive educational paradigms, its application in Vietnam must undergo modifications. The persistent influence of traditional Vietnamese educational philosophies, rooted in Confucian thought, emphasizes respect for authority, rote learning, and exam-focused education. The potential conflict between these foundational aspects and the tenets of the HSM - emphasizing student well-being, autonomy, and holistic growth - calls for a carefully curated adaptation process.

The study highlighted the intricacies of innovation in education within a specific cultural context, revealing both opportunities and complexities. Reinforcing its scholarly contribution, this research not only delves into the realm of the HSM within the Vietnamese context but also exemplifies how global educational philosophies can be contextualized and understood through the lens of local practices and values, in alignment with the initial objectives and conceptual framework. This study also contributes to the field by providing a nuanced understanding of the HSM within the Vietnamese context, expanding on global educational trends with specific insights. It adds to the limited body of research exploring educational innovation in Vietnam, especially as it relates to holistic well-being. The alignment of the findings with constructivist and humanistic theories also provides a theoretical contribution, linking global educational philosophies with localized practices.

The study's insights offer practical guidance for educators, policymakers, and administrators in Vietnam and similar contexts. The understanding of the delicate balance required to integrate innovative educational models with existing cultural norms and practices can inform future curriculum development, teacher training, and policy initiatives. Moreover, the exploration of economic and resource considerations provides a realistic framework for implementing new educational paradigms. Finally, the study underscores the importance of context-sensitive approaches in educational research and practice, emphasizing the necessity of tailoring global concepts to fit local realities.

The exploration of the HSM in the context of Vietnamese higher education illustrates the rich and multifaceted nature of educational innovation in a globalized world. By delving into the unique perspectives of Vietnamese EFL teachers, this study has illuminated the complexities, challenges, and potentials of implementing a novel educational paradigm within a specific cultural landscape. This work calls for a deeper dive into understanding how the fabric of Vietnamese society, shaped by historical, socio-political, and cultural forces, may either facilitate or impede the assimilation of novel educational paradigms. The insights gained contribute not only to the understanding of education in Vietnam but also to the broader dialogue on how to harmonize innovation with tradition, global concepts with local realities, and theoretical principles with practical considerations. The nuanced findings of this study open doors for further research and practice, offering a valuable lens through which to view the ongoing evolution of education in Vietnam and beyond.

### Recommendations

The current study's exploration of the HSM in Vietnamese higher education prompts several avenues for further research. Future investigations could benefit from expanding the participant pool to include other stakeholders, conducting longitudinal studies to track implementation over time, and exploring the model in different socio-cultural settings within or outside Vietnam. Utilizing mixed-methods approaches might enhance the robustness of the analysis, and focused studies on specific challenges, such as economic constraints or alignment with traditional values, could provide deeper insights. Evaluating various implementation strategies, analyzing the actual impact on student outcomes, examining the interplay with other educational models, and considering policy implications could offer multifaceted perspectives on the subject. These recommendations aim to deepen understanding of the HSM, its potential and challenges within the unique Vietnamese context, and its alignment with broader educational trends. By extending the inquiry into these dimensions, further research may contribute richly to the global discourse on education, innovation, culture, and human development.

### Limitations

The present study on the possibility of the HSM in Vietnamese higher education acknowledges several limitations that must be considered. The relatively small sample size of nine tertiary EFL teachers may limit the representativeness, and the focus solely on EFL teachers might present a narrower view. The study's qualitative nature and the exclusive use of semi-structured interviews may constrain generalizability and comprehensiveness, while the specific focus on Vietnam's socio-cultural context could limit applicability to other settings. Potential researcher bias and practical constraints related to funding and access could also impact the findings, as could the lack of a longitudinal perspective and the singular focus on the HSM. These limitations, while notable, do not diminish the study's contributions but instead provide directions for future research, emphasizing the need for broader inquiry and methodological diversification.

### Ethics Statements

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

### Authorship Contribution Statement

Nguyen: Design. Le: Supervision and Analysis. Phuong: Editing. Pham: Writing. Huynh: Reviewing. Nguyen: Conceptualization.

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