



Legal Consciousness among University Students in Ho Chi Minh City: Findings and Educational Responses at Hung Vuong University of Ho Chi Minh City

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ABSTRACT

Published Online: September 25, 2026

Legal consciousness shapes how university students understand legal norms, evaluate official institutions, and act when rules affect their daily lives. This study examined legal consciousness among full-time students at Hung Vuong University of Ho Chi Minh City and identified educational responses suitable for an applied, multidisciplinary university. A descriptive case-study design combined documentary analysis, a questionnaire administered to 500 students from the 2021-2025 cohorts, and purposive interviews with selected students, lecturers, and staff. Questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive percentages across legal knowledge, legal emotions and trust, compliance motivation, reported conduct, and responses to rights violations. The findings show an uneven pattern. Students understood traffic rules better than labour, intellectual-property, and digital-law issues, while social media had become their main source of legal information. Most respondents condemned serious violence and online fraud, but many treated academic dishonesty and minor traffic violations as ordinary conduct. Compliance was also driven more often by fear of sanctions than by internalised legal obligation. When their own rights were infringed, many students preferred silence, informal intervention, or public complaints on social media to formal legal remedies. The study concludes that legal education should move beyond rule transmission. Universities should integrate practical legal problems into curricula, use experiential and digital methods, coordinate with legal institutions and families, and develop students' capacity to verify information, seek lawful remedies, and regulate their own conduct.

KEYWORDS:

civic education;
normative compliance;
digital media;
experiential learning;
self-protection

I. INTRODUCTION

Legal consciousness is the part of social consciousness through which individuals and groups perceive, evaluate, and respond to law. It includes knowledge of legal rules, emotions and beliefs concerning justice and legal institutions, and the disposition to comply with or use law in practice. Vietnamese legal theory therefore treats legal consciousness as more than familiarity with legislation: it is a relationship between legal knowledge, legal psychology, and legally relevant conduct.¹⁻³

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**Cite this Article: Ho, B. (2026). Legal Consciousness among University Students in Ho Chi Minh City: Findings and Educational Responses at Hung Vuong University of Ho Chi Minh City. International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies, 6(9), 926-930*

This relationship matters in higher education because university students are entering employment, housing, consumer, digital, and civic relationships in which legal mistakes can have immediate consequences.

Vietnamese scholarship has examined legal education for students at national, regional, and institutional levels. Prior studies have emphasised the university's responsibility to disseminate law, build civic responsibility, and connect legal knowledge with ethical formation.⁴⁻⁶ Research conducted in Quang Ngai, the Central region, the Central Highlands, Tuyen Quang, the Northwest, and Thai Nguyen has also reported recurring difficulties: limited course time, passive learning, weak links between general legal theory and everyday problems, and students' tendency to study only for assessment.^{7,9-13} Active learning, digital resources, artificial intelligence, flipped classrooms, and simulated legal practice

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have been proposed as ways to make legal education more accessible and applied.^{8,14-18}

These studies provide useful foundations but do not explain the specific pattern of legal consciousness at Hung Vuong University of Ho Chi Minh City, a private multidisciplinary institution with an applied orientation. Its students study and work in a large urban environment where traffic, part-time employment, rented accommodation, electronic commerce, online communication, and academic integrity create frequent legal questions. The same environment also exposes students to fragmented legal commentary, sensational content, and unverified claims on social media. A local assessment is therefore needed before the university can select educational interventions.

This study addresses three questions. First, what do students know about general legal principles and the areas of law most closely connected to student life? Second, what emotions, beliefs, motivations, and reported behaviours reveal the quality of their legal consciousness? Third, what institutional and educational measures can reduce the gap between knowing a rule and acting on it? The article uses legal consciousness as an integrated analytical framework and treats students as both recipients of education and active subjects capable of self-education. This approach is consistent with Vietnam's broader policy objective of strengthening a socialist rule-of-law state and public respect for law.¹⁹

II. METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive case-study design. Documentary research covered Vietnamese legal-theory texts, policy documents, and scholarship on legal education, student development, and teaching methods. Analysis and synthesis were used to organise legal consciousness into three connected dimensions: legal knowledge; emotions, trust, and compliance attitudes; and conduct in situations governed by law or university rules.

Empirical data came from a questionnaire completed by 500 full-time students enrolled in different faculties and in the 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025 cohorts. Respondents were selected by random sampling. The instrument asked students to self-assess their understanding of the state, law, the Constitution, and five practical fields of law; identify their sources of legal information; report emotional reactions and trust; state their main reason for compliance; describe the frequency of selected rule violations; and indicate how they would respond when their rights were infringed. Selected students, lecturers, and staff were also interviewed purposively to clarify patterns in the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, responses were kept confidential, and the information was used for research purposes.

Questionnaire responses were processed with descriptive statistics and reported as percentages. The analysis compared

patterns within each dimension and then examined relationships among knowledge, attitudes, and reported conduct. No inferential test was used, and the study does not claim that the results represent all Vietnamese university students. The single-institution setting and reliance on self-reported behaviour are limitations, but the data support an institution-specific diagnosis and practical recommendations.

III. RESULTS

Knowledge was broad but shallow. More than 70% of respondents reported either clear or basic understanding of the nature and role of the Vietnamese state and law, citizens' constitutional rights and duties, and the Constitution's superior legal status. Detailed understanding remained uncommon. Only 10.5% reported a clear understanding of the state apparatus, while 33.7% had merely heard of it and 10.5% reported no knowledge. Interviews supported this result: some students could not distinguish the functions of the National Assembly and the Government or those of the courts and procuracies.

Knowledge also varied sharply by legal field. Traffic law was the strongest area: 35.6% described themselves as highly knowledgeable and 55.4% as familiar with basic rules. By contrast, 55.4% knew very little or nothing about labour law even though part-time work is common among students. Intellectual-property law produced the largest deficit, with 66.2% reporting little or no knowledge of copyright, software use, or plagiarism. Cybersecurity and online conduct occupied an intermediate position: 63.0% reported high or basic knowledge, but 37.0% had limited or no understanding of the legal consequences of sharing unverified information, defamation, cyberbullying, or unauthorised image use.

Students' information sources help explain this uneven knowledge. Social media was selected by 86.5% of respondents, electronic news by 65.2%, classroom lectures by 52.8%, and university or youth-union activities by 38.4%. Only 15.6% regularly consulted legislation or official government portals. Students therefore received legal information quickly, but often through short, decontextualised accounts rather than complete rules and authoritative explanations.

Emotional reactions depended on the apparent seriousness and social familiarity of the violation. Strong majorities condemned school violence and online fraud: 68.5% expressed strong indignation toward violence against vulnerable persons, and 75.2% strongly condemned online appropriation of property. Responses were much weaker for conduct that students commonly encounter. Only 12.4% strongly condemned examination fraud or plagiarism; 36.5% treated it with indifference and 12.5% were prepared to sympathise with or protect the offender. Similarly, 45.0% regarded running a red light or travelling against traffic as ordinary. Repetition appears to have normalised these violations even when students knew the applicable rule.

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Trust was directed more toward rules and the university than toward enforcement personnel. A combined 73.0% expressed complete or substantial trust in the fairness and strictness of existing law, and 74.5% trusted the fair application of university rules. However, 38.2% were uncertain about the integrity and impartiality of public officials who enforce law, while 14.0% expressed no trust. In addition, 34.3% were uncertain or did not believe that law was the most effective means of protecting their interests.

Compliance motivation revealed incomplete internalisation. Only 34.5% said they complied because doing so was right, obligatory, and protective of the common interest. Fear of punishment was the principal motivation for 48.2%, while 12.8% followed habit or the crowd and 4.5% were willing to evade a rule when violation appeared beneficial and unlikely to be detected. The reported behaviour was consistent with this finding. At least occasional lateness, absence, or proxy attendance was reported by 61.0%; at least occasional cheating, unauthorised materials, or plagiarism by 51.0%; and at least occasional traffic violations by 62.0%. Online insults and gambling were less common but remained present.

Students also had difficulty using lawful procedures to protect themselves. When facing an unlawful rent increase or loss of a deposit, only 14.5% would make a formal legal demand or report the matter, whereas 35.4% would remain silent. For unpaid wages or exploitative part-time work, 12.0% would seek formal legal help and 40.6% would accept the loss. Public confrontation or denunciation on social media was more common than a legal remedy in disputes concerning rent, wages, and defective online purchases. Formal action rose to 38.4% for online fraud, yet a substantial group still preferred informal intervention or silence. The results show a gap between recognising law as an abstract norm and using it as a practical instrument.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings support an integrated view of legal consciousness. Knowledge alone did not reliably produce confidence, self-protection, or compliant conduct. Students knew familiar rules, especially where sanctions were visible, but they had weaker knowledge in fields that require reading contracts, preserving evidence, identifying intellectual-property obligations, or selecting a legal remedy. This pattern resembles earlier institutional studies that found legal education more effective at transmitting general information than at forming durable habits and practical capacity.^{7,9-13} The present study adds a clear urban and digital dimension: students faced everyday legal risks through part-time work, rental relationships, electronic commerce, and social media, yet these were among the areas in which they felt least prepared.

The results also distinguish external compliance from internal legal commitment. Fear of punishment can produce short-

term conformity, but it weakens when supervision disappears. The high reported incidence of minor traffic and academic violations illustrates this problem. Students often knew that conduct was prohibited but treated it as acceptable because it was common, convenient, or unlikely to attract a penalty. Legal education must therefore connect rules with fairness, responsibility, and the consequences for other people. This is consistent with research linking legal education to moral development and civic responsibility rather than to memorisation alone.³⁻⁶

Curriculum reform should begin with problems students actually encounter. General legal education should retain constitutional and institutional foundations, but each unit should require students to apply those foundations to a concrete task: reviewing a room-rental clause, documenting unpaid wages, responding to an online scam, checking whether an image may be reused, or deciding how to report harassment. Short legal scenarios can reveal the boundary between informal disagreement and a legal claim. Assessment should test reasoning, evidence, and choice of remedy rather than reproduction of definitions. Earlier proposals for active teaching in general-law courses provide a workable basis for this shift.^{8,14}

Teaching methods should combine direct explanation with repeated practice. Moot courts, simulated hearings, case discussions, visits to public trials, and legal-clinic activities allow students to experience procedure and professional roles. Digital tools can support, but should not replace, guided legal reasoning. A university may use short videos, quizzes, flipped lessons, AI-assisted hypotheticals, or motion-capture simulations to increase attention and rehearsal.¹⁵⁻¹⁸ Each activity should require students to verify the governing text through an official source. That step directly addresses the finding that social media dominates legal information while primary-source reading remains rare.

Institutional coordination is equally important. The Faculty of Law can provide academic content and consultation, while lecturers in other faculties can incorporate sector-specific duties such as consumer protection, employment standards, data responsibility, and academic integrity. The Youth Union and Student Union can organise peer communication, competitions, and forums in language that students use. Student affairs staff should maintain a clear referral route for accommodation, employment, online fraud, harassment, and disciplinary concerns. Families can reinforce lawful problem solving instead of advising silence or informal retaliation. Police, courts, procuracies, justice agencies, legal-aid centres, law firms, and employers can contribute current cases, professional speakers, supervised visits, and practical guidance. This shared structure gives students a credible alternative to unreliable online commentary.

The final objective is student legal agency. Students should learn to consult authoritative sources, compare a social-media claim with the governing instrument, preserve contracts and

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electronic records, identify the competent body, and communicate a request without defamation or violence. They should also practise self-regulation in ordinary matters: attendance, academic honesty, traffic safety, and online speech. Prior research correctly treats students as both the object and the subject of legal education.⁹ University programmes succeed when students can continue learning and regulating their conduct after the course ends.

Several limits should guide interpretation. The sample came from one university, and the questionnaire measured self-reported knowledge and conduct. Social desirability may have reduced admissions of misconduct, while self-assessed knowledge may not match performance on an objective legal test. The descriptive design cannot establish causal relationships among teaching, trust, and behaviour. Future studies should use objective scenario-based assessments, compare faculties and institutions, and test whether experiential interventions improve knowledge retention, lawful help-seeking, and internally motivated compliance over time.

V. CONCLUSION

Students at Hung Vuong University of Ho Chi Minh City possessed basic legal awareness, but their knowledge, trust, and conduct did not form a consistently internalised legal consciousness. They understood highly visible rules better than the labour, intellectual-property, and digital rules needed for self-protection. They strongly rejected serious wrongdoing but often normalised familiar academic and traffic violations. Many complied because they feared punishment and hesitated to use formal remedies when their rights were infringed.

An effective response must combine curriculum content, teaching method, institutional support, and student self-education. Practical problems should be embedded in general legal education; experiential and digital methods should require verification against authoritative sources; and the university should maintain accessible connections with families, public legal institutions, legal professionals, and employers. The measure of success is not the number of rules students can repeat, but whether they can make a lawful decision, seek an appropriate remedy, and act consistently when no immediate sanction is present.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Dr Nguyen Viet Phuong for academic guidance and the students, lecturers, and staff of Hung Vuong University of Ho Chi Minh City who supported the research.

VII. DISCLOSURE

The author reports no conflicts of interest. No funding was received for this work.

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