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Enhancing the Quality of Criminal Law Training at Higher Education Institutions in Viet Nam

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ABSTRACT

Criminal law training prepares future investigators, procurators, judges, defence counsel, and legal officers to apply the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code correctly, fairly, and humanely. This study examined the quality of criminal law training at a multidisciplinary higher education institution in Ho Chi Minh City and identified measures suited to an applied law programme. A descriptive case-study design combined documentary analysis of curricula and legislation, a questionnaire administered to 420 law students who had completed core criminal-law modules, and purposive interviews with lecturers, alumni working in criminal-justice agencies, and current students. Questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive percentages across curriculum content, teaching methods, practical skills, assessment, and career readiness. The findings show that students acquired solid doctrinal knowledge of offence elements and sentencing principles but reported weak preparation in case-file analysis, evidence evaluation, courtroom advocacy, and the practical stages of criminal procedure. Lecture-based delivery remained dominant, moot trials and clinical placements reached only a minority of students, and assessment relied heavily on definitional recall rather than applied reasoning. Students who had taken part in simulated trials or internships at courts, procuracies, or law offices reported markedly higher confidence in practical skills. The study concludes that criminal law training should combine doctrinal instruction with structured case-based and clinical methods, closer cooperation with criminal-justice agencies, updated teaching materials that track legislative amendments, and assessment that tests applied legal reasoning rather than memorisation alone.

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KEYWORDS:
criminal law education, case-based teaching, clinical legal education, procedural skills, curriculum reform

I. INTRODUCTION

Criminal law occupies a distinctive place in legal education because it governs the state's most coercive powers: the definition of offences, the determination of guilt, and the imposition of penalties that may deprive a person of liberty or, in the most serious cases, life. Training in this field therefore carries a responsibility that extends beyond the transmission of doctrine. Graduates who go on to work as investigators, procurators, judges, defence counsel, or in-house legal officers must be able to read the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code correctly, evaluate evidence critically, and apply procedural safeguards that protect the rights of the accused, victims, and witnesses alike.

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Vietnamese legal education has undergone substantial reform since the 2015 Penal Code (amended 2017) and the 2015 Criminal Procedure Code took effect, both of which introduced new offence categories, revised sentencing frameworks, and strengthened procedural guarantees such as the right to counsel from the point of arrest.1,2 Universities that train future legal professionals have had to update curricula, textbooks, and teaching methods to keep pace with these changes while also preparing students for practice in an increasingly digital and cross-border criminal environment, including cybercrime, economic crime, and offences connected to social media.3,4

Prior research on Vietnamese legal education has examined general law teaching, civic and political-theory instruction, and discipline-specific pedagogy at various institutions, generally reporting that lecture-centred delivery, limited practical exposure, and assessment focused on memorisation constrain the development of applied legal skills.5-9 Studies specifically addressing criminal law and criminal procedure teaching remain comparatively scarce, even though the

practical stakes of this field are unusually high. Moot trials, simulated interrogations, case-file review, and clinical placements with courts, procuracies, and legal-aid organisations have been proposed as ways to close the gap between doctrinal knowledge and courtroom-ready competence, but the extent to which these methods are actually used, and their effect on student confidence, has not been well documented at the institutional level.10-13

This study examines criminal law training at a multidisciplinary higher education institution in Ho Chi Minh City and asks three questions. First, how do students assess their doctrinal knowledge of criminal law and criminal procedure after completing the core modules? Second, which teaching methods and practical experiences are associated with stronger self-reported procedural and advocacy skills? Third, what curricular and institutional measures could improve the quality of criminal law training for an applied, practice-oriented law programme? The article treats criminal law training as encompassing three connected dimensions: doctrinal knowledge, procedural and analytical skill, and career readiness, and situates the findings within Vietnam's broader effort to build a socialist rule-of-law state grounded in a professionally competent legal workforce.14

II. METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive case-study design. Documentary analysis covered the current Penal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, university curricula, module outlines, and Vietnamese and comparative scholarship on criminal law pedagogy and clinical legal education. This material was used to organise criminal law training quality into three dimensions: doctrinal knowledge of substantive and procedural criminal law; applied skills, including case-file analysis, evidence evaluation, drafting, and advocacy; and students' confidence in their readiness for criminal-justice careers.

Empirical data came from a questionnaire completed by 420 students who had finished the core criminal-law and criminal-procedure-law modules, drawn from cohorts admitted between 2021 and 2024. Respondents were selected by random sampling within eligible cohorts. The instrument asked students to self-assess their understanding of offence elements, sentencing principles, and procedural stages; to rate their confidence in case-file analysis, evidence evaluation, legal drafting, and courtroom advocacy; to report which teaching methods and practical activities they had experienced, including moot trials, simulated interrogations, and internships with criminal-justice agencies; and to rate the adequacy of assessment methods and teaching materials. Lecturers responsible for criminal-law modules, alumni currently working as investigators, procurators, judges' assistants, or defence lawyers, and a purposive sample of current students were interviewed to clarify and contextualise the questionnaire findings.

Questionnaire responses were processed with descriptive statistics and reported as percentages. The analysis compared patterns across the three dimensions and examined the relationship between reported practical experience and self-assessed skill confidence. No inferential test was used, and the findings are not claimed to represent all Vietnamese law programmes. The single-institution setting and reliance on self-reported measures are limitations, but the data support an institution-specific diagnosis and recommendations that are likely to be relevant to comparable applied law programmes.

III. RESULTS

Doctrinal knowledge was generally strong on core, frequently tested topics. A majority of respondents, 78.3%, reported clear or basic understanding of the elements of an offence and the general principles of criminal liability, and 71.6% reported similar confidence in sentencing principles and the classification of penalties. Understanding was markedly weaker for more specialised or recently amended provisions: only 28.4% reported clear understanding of offences involving information technology and cybersecurity, and 33.9% reported clear understanding of provisions on corporate criminal liability, both introduced or substantially revised by the current Penal Code.

Procedural knowledge showed a similar pattern of uneven depth. Most students, 74.0%, felt confident describing the general stages of criminal proceedings from initiation to trial, but confidence dropped for the practical content of each stage: only 31.2% felt confident explaining the procedural rights of a suspect during the investigation stage in practical terms, and 26.7% felt confident describing the process for challenging the legality of evidence. Interviews indicated that students could often recite the relevant articles but struggled to apply them to a fact pattern.

Reported practical skill was lower than doctrinal knowledge across every measure. Only 24.5% rated themselves as confident or highly confident in analysing a criminal case file, 19.8% in evaluating the reliability and admissibility of evidence, 22.0% in drafting basic procedural documents such as a request for investigative measures or a statement of defence, and 17.4% in courtroom advocacy or oral argument. Students most often attributed this gap to limited exposure to real or realistic case materials during coursework.

Teaching methods remained predominantly lecture-based. Traditional lecture and textbook study was reported by 88.1% of respondents as their main mode of instruction, while case discussion using redacted real case files was reported by 42.6%, and structured Socratic questioning by 35.0%. Moot trials or simulated interrogations had been experienced by only 29.3% of respondents, and a supervised internship or clinical placement with a court, procuracy, police investigation unit, or law office had been completed by just 21.0%. Digital simulations or AI-assisted case scenarios had been used by 18.6%.

The relationship between practical exposure and confidence was clear. Among students who had participated in at least one moot trial or simulated interrogation, 58.7% rated

themselves confident in advocacy skills, compared with 6.2% among those who had not. Among students who had completed an internship or clinical placement, 61.4% rated themselves confident in case-file analysis, compared with 14.8% among those who had not. Assessment methods reinforced the doctrinal emphasis: 69.5% of respondents reported that examinations mainly tested definitions and article recall, while only 24.8% reported that examinations required applying the law to an extended fact pattern or drafting a reasoned legal opinion.

Career readiness followed the same divide. When asked whether their training had prepared them to perform the practical tasks expected of a first-year legal officer in a criminal-justice agency or law office, 33.6% agreed or strongly agreed, 40.2% were neutral, and 26.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Students who had completed an internship were substantially more likely to agree, at 55.9%, than those who had not, at 21.3%.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that criminal law training at the institution studied has been effective at transmitting doctrinal knowledge of frequently examined topics but less effective at building the applied skills that criminal-justice careers require on the first day of practice. This pattern echoes broader findings on Vietnamese legal education, which report that lecture-centred delivery and recall-based assessment limit the development of practical competence even where content coverage is adequate.5-9 The present study adds a discipline-specific dimension: because criminal proceedings involve strict procedural sequencing, evidentiary rules, and time-sensitive rights such as the right to counsel from arrest, doctrinal familiarity alone does not translate into the capacity to act correctly under those constraints.

The clear association between practical exposure and self-reported confidence supports the case for expanding case-based and clinical methods rather than treating them as supplementary. Moot trials and simulated interrogations allow students to experience procedural roles, timing, and the consequences of missteps in a controlled setting. Clinical placements with courts, procuracies, investigation units, and law offices expose students to real case files, supervision by practising professionals, and the administrative reality of criminal practice. Comparative and Vietnamese scholarship on clinical legal education and simulation-based teaching supports this direction, while also cautioning that such methods require sufficient partner institutions, supervising capacity, and assessment design to be sustainable at scale.10-13

Curriculum reform should therefore preserve rigorous doctrinal foundations while restructuring delivery around recurring case types: property offences, violent offences, economic and corporate offences, and cybercrime, each paired with a redacted case file, a set of procedural documents to draft, and a simulated hearing or negotiation exercise. Assessment should shift a meaningful share of weight toward applied tasks, such as case-file memoranda, drafted procedural documents, and oral argument, rather than relying primarily on definitional recall. Because the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code are periodically amended, teaching materials and case scenarios should be reviewed on a fixed cycle so that content does not lag behind current law, a concern raised directly by lecturers interviewed for this study.

Institutional coordination is central to expanding practical exposure without overburdening any single actor. The Faculty of Law can structure a sequenced practicum requirement, while formal cooperation agreements with courts, procuracies, police investigation agencies, and law offices can provide placement capacity, guest instruction, and access to appropriately redacted case materials. Alumni working in criminal-justice roles are a currently underused resource who could mentor students, judge moot trials, and validate the realism of simulated case files. Digital tools, including case-management simulations and AI-assisted scenario generation, can extend practical exposure to students for whom placement capacity is limited, provided that simulated content is checked against current legislation before use.

Several limits should guide interpretation. The sample was drawn from one institution, and skill confidence was self-reported rather than independently assessed against a practical rubric. Students with stronger motivation may have been more likely to seek out moot trials and internships, which could inflate the apparent effect of practical exposure. The descriptive design cannot establish causal relationships among teaching method, practical exposure, and eventual professional competence. Future research should use objective, rubric-based assessment of case-file analysis and advocacy skill, compare institutions and programme types, and track graduates into criminal-justice careers to test whether early gains in confidence persist into practice.

V. CONCLUSION

Students in the criminal law programme examined here acquired solid doctrinal knowledge of core, frequently tested topics, but their confidence in the case-file analysis, evidence evaluation, drafting, and advocacy skills required for criminal-justice practice remained comparatively low, particularly among students with little exposure to moot trials, simulations, or clinical placements. The findings point to a training model that has transmitted the content of criminal law more successfully than the practice of applying it.

Improving the quality of criminal law training requires curricula built around recurring case types, assessment that tests applied legal reasoning rather than recall, teaching materials kept current with legislative amendments, and expanded, well-supervised practical experience through moot trials, simulations, and placements with criminal-justice agencies. The measure of a successful criminal law

programme is not only whether graduates can state the elements of an offence, but whether they can analyse a case file, evaluate evidence, draft a sound procedural document, and argue a position competently and ethically from their first assignment in practice.

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VII. DISCLOSURE

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