Challenges and Pedagogical Readiness for EMI: Evidence From a Vietnamese University

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Abstract

This study investigates the challenges university lecturers face and their readiness to teach major subjects in English under English-Medium Instruction (EMI) frameworks at a public university in Vietnam. Using survey data from university lecturers, we examined six domains: student challenges, lecturer capacity, curriculum, teaching materials, assessment, and academic support through descriptive statistics and reliability analysis. We then explored correlations between lecturer characteristics such as qualifications, English proficiency, teaching experience and their perceptions across these domains. While no strong associations were found for sex or experience, higher qualifications were linked to more critical self-ratings in preparedness and assessment practices. The study also captured strong consensus on institutional recommendations, including training needs, academic exchange, and policy incentives. Findings underscore the importance of structured pedagogical support over assumptions based on seniority or EMI exposure.

Keywords: English-Medium Instruction (EMI), higher education, Vietnam, lecturer challenges

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, the global expansion of English-Medium Instruction (EMI) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has emerged as a defining feature of higher education internationalization. Universities in Europe, North America, and East Asia have increasingly adopted EMI in specialized disciplines—particularly in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), business, and international studies—not only to attract international students but also to prepare domestic graduates for participation in the global knowledge economy (Rose et al., 2023; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). In Europe, the Bologna Process has accelerated the proliferation of EMI programs as part of cross-border harmonization efforts, while in East Asia, countries such as Japan, China, and South Korea have strategically invested in EMI to enhance international rankings, research collaboration, and graduate competitiveness (Galloway et al., 2020). This worldwide movement has also gained momentum in Southeast Asia, where specialized academic courses delivered through CLIL/EMI are increasingly common as universities pursue global competitiveness and regional integration (H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017). Thailand's English for Integrated Studies (EIS) initiative integrates content learning with English acquisition in technical subjects, supported by targeted teacher training and digital resources. Similarly, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines have implemented EMI-based programs in engineering, science, and business to align curricula with global standards and facilitate student mobility (Kirkpatrick, 2014; Lei & Hu, 2022).

In Vietnam, the higher education system has historically been strongly localized, with Vietnamese being the sole language of instruction across most universities and academic programs. This monolingual approach, while effective for ensuring accessibility and cultural alignment, has over time posed limitations to the international integration of Vietnamese graduates, especially in the context of globalization and labor market competitiveness (T. A. Nguyen, 2024; H. Tran & Jin, 2021). As English has become the global lingua franca of science, technology, and business, the limited exposure of Vietnamese students to academic English has emerged as a critical barrier to their participation in international academic networks, research collaborations, and graduate employability in transnational contexts (Phan et al., 2024).

In recent decades, the Vietnamese government has made a concerted push to internationalize its higher education sector, recognizing the need to equip students with the linguistic and intercultural competencies necessary for global engagement (L. T. Tran & Nguyen, 2018). Within this broader strategy, EMI has been increasingly promoted as a core mechanism for elevating the international profile of Vietnamese universities and enhancing the global competitiveness of their graduates. EMI refers to the use of English to teach academic subjects in countries where English is not the dominant language, and its implementation in Vietnam reflects both global trends and local aspirations for modernization (Vo et al., 2022). EMI programs are often introduced through advanced, high-quality, or internationalized degree tracks that are designed to attract elite students and faculty, foster international partnerships, and align curricula with global academic standards (L. T. Tran & Nguyen, 2018).

Despite these policy-level initiatives, the transition toward EMI has encountered a range of challenges. Studies have documented that many Vietnamese institutions struggle with insufficiently prepared teaching staff, uneven student English proficiency, and a lack of supporting infrastructure for content and language integration (Phan et al., 2024). Moreover, the implementation of EMI in Vietnam often takes place without adequate training in EMI methodology, which is crucial for balancing subject-matter learning with language acquisition

(L. T. Tran & Nguyen, 2018; Vo et al., 2022). As a result, some EMI courses have been criticized for reverting to code-switching or even translation-based approaches that limit students' opportunities to develop academic English fluency.

Nevertheless, there is growing empirical evidence that EMI programs can enhance the academic mobility and employment prospects of graduates, provided they are well-resourced and supported by effective pedagogy (Dearden, 2014; TT Ha Nguyen, 2024; L. T. Tran & Nguyen, 2018). Lecturers and institutional leaders have increasingly recognized the strategic value of EMI in aligning with ASEAN regional standards, attracting international collaborations, and responding to national goals for educational reform. As such, EMI in Vietnam is not merely a linguistic shift but a broader transformation in educational philosophy, governance, and global positioning.

However, the success and sustainability of specialized EMI courses and programs in Vietnam and across Southeast Asia remain uneven. Studies have documented persistent challenges, including insufficient English proficiency among both lecturers and students, lack of CLIL-specific pedagogical training, limited access to appropriate teaching materials, and institutional constraints that hinder effective implementation (Kirkpatrick, 2014; Phan et al., 2024; Vo et al., 2022). While these issues have been noted in broader EMI literature, empirical data on how specific lecturer characteristics, such as qualifications, English proficiency, and teaching experience, relate to perceptions of EMI delivery in specialized subjects remain limited. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research capturing lecturers' own prioritized recommendations for improving EMI programs in the Vietnamese context.

These observations point to two critical evidence gaps: (1) Limited understanding of the relationships between lecturer background factors and their perceptions of EMI challenges, preparedness, and resource adequacy in specialized higher education courses; and (2) Lack of empirical data on the institutional and policy-level interventions most valued by lecturers for improving EMI quality. To address these gaps, this study focuses on lecturers in specialized courses at a Vietnamese agricultural university where instruction is delivered in English. The study aims to: (1) quantitatively assess the associations between lecturer characteristics and perceptions of EMI implementation in specialized courses; and (2) document and interpret lecturers' recommended strategies for improving EMI delivery, with a view to informing institutional policy, faculty development, and resource allocation.

Methodology

Participants

Participants are lecturers from a major public university in Vietnam. They represented diverse faculties including Biotechnology and Business Administration. The majority held a master or PhD degree, with most reporting English proficiency at B2 or C1 level.

Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was developed based on theoretical frameworks and empirical studies on EMI, as reviewed in domestic (TT Ha Nguyen, 2024; TT Hang Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024) and international literature. The instrument consists of three main parts: demographic information, perceptions of EMI implementation, and recommended institutional improvements.

The core measurement section includes 49 Likert-scale items grouped into six subscales reflecting critical dimensions of EMI delivery: (a) Student Challenges (3 items); Lecturer Preparedness (13 items); Curriculum Design (7 items); Teaching Materials (5 items); Assessment Practices (10 items); Academic Support (11 items).

Each subscale comprises multiple items measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Item content was designed to capture both pedagogical and linguistic aspects of EMI implementation, in line with recommendations from prior research on bilingual and EMI instruction in higher education contexts. The questionnaire was reviewed by subject-matter experts and piloted among lecturers involved in high-quality programs at the university. Items were refined to ensure content validity, linguistic clarity, and practical relevance to the Vietnamese higher education setting. The aim was not to validate a new measurement scale but to explore how lecturer characteristics (such as qualifications, English level, years of EMI experience) correlate with perceptions of EMI-related challenges and preparedness. The survey also included open-ended items about support needs and recommendations.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic and professional profiles of the 30 lecturers who participated in the survey. The majority were female (66.7%), and most held a Ph.D. degree (73.3%), with an additional 16.7% holding the academic rank of Associate Professor. Participants represented various faculties, with the highest proportions coming from Biotechnology (26.7%) and Accounting and Business Administration (26.7%), followed by Agronomy and Rural Economics. In terms of EMI responsibilities, 50% had taught one course, while 20% had taught more than three. English proficiency levels were relatively high, with 66.7% of participants self-reporting at C1 or C2 levels. The majority of lecturers (93.3%) had more than 10 years of teaching experience, while 83.3% had at least 5 years of experience specifically in EMI contexts, indicating a well-qualified and experienced cohort for this study.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics (N = 30)

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	9	30.0
Female	20	66.7
Qualification		
M.Sc.	3	10.0
Ph.D.	22	73.3
Assoc.Prof., Ph.D.	5	16.7
Faculty		
Biotechnology	8	26.7
Agronomy	7	23.3
Rural Economics	6	20.0
Accounting &BA	8	26.7
Environmental	1	3.3
EMI courses in charge		
1 course	15	50.0

2 courses	9	30.0
> 3 courses	6	20.0
English proficiency		
B1	2	6.7
B2	8	26.7
C1	12	40.0
C2	8	26.7
Teaching experience		
5–10 years	2	6.7
> 10 years	28	93.3
EMI experience		
1–5 years	5	16.7
5–10 years	15	50.0
> 10 years	10	33.3

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and internal consistency values for the six EMI subscales. Mean scores indicate generally positive lecturer perceptions across most dimensions, with the highest average rating observed for Assessment Practices (M = 4.20, SD = 0.66), followed closely by Lecturer Preparedness (M = 4.09, SD = 0.67) and Curriculum Design (M = 4.01, SD = 0.71). The lowest mean was recorded for Student Challenges (M = 3.47, SD = 1.00), suggesting more varied responses regarding the extent of challenges faced by students in EMI contexts. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.641 (Teaching Materials) to 0.887 (Lecturer Preparedness), indicating acceptable to high internal consistency for all subscales. According to conventional benchmarks, values above 0.60 are considered acceptable for exploratory research, and values above 0.80 reflect strong reliability. These results support the use of the six subscales as reliable measures for assessing lecturer perceptions of EMI implementation. All scales showed acceptable to high reliability, supporting internal consistency.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of EMI Subscales (N = 30)

Subscale	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Student Challenges	3	3.47	1.00	0.778
Lecturer Preparedness	13	4.09	0.67	0.887
Curriculum Design	7	4.01	0.71	0.804
Teaching Materials	5	3.95	0.67	0.641
Assessment Practices	10	4.20	0.66	0.825
Academic Support	11	3.76	0.74	0.865

Note. SD: Standard Deviation.

Correlation Between Lecturer Characteristics and EMI Subscales

To investigate how lecturer profiles relate to their perceptions of EMI challenges and readiness, Spearman's correlation analyses were conducted between six subscale scores and key background variables: English proficiency, general teaching experience, EMI experience, academic qualification, sex, faculty, and number of credits taught in English. Table 3 presents the results of Spearman's correlation analysis examining the associations between lecturer characteristics and their responses across six key EMI subscales: Student Challenges, Lecturer

Preparedness, Curriculum Design, Teaching Materials, Assessment Practices, and Academic Support. Several significant correlations emerged. Notably, faculty affiliation was positively correlated with perceptions of Student Challenges ($\rho = 0.46$, $p = 0.011$), suggesting that the perceived difficulty of working with students of varying English proficiency may differ across disciplines. Qualification level was inversely associated with Lecturer Preparedness ($\rho = –0.43$, $p = 0.017$) and Assessment Practices ($\rho = –0.52$, $p = 0.003$), indicating that lecturers with higher qualifications such as associate professors or Ph.D. holders) reported lower self-assessed readiness or flexibility in these areas. While English proficiency was not significantly associated with any of the subscales, there was a marginal negative correlation between English level and Curriculum Design ($\rho = –0.33$, $p = 0.073$) and Teaching Materials ($\rho = –0.34$, $p = 0.067$), suggesting that more proficient lecturers might be more critical of existing curricular and material structures. No other statistically significant correlations were observed for variables such as sex, teaching experience, or years of EMI teaching, although some relationships approached significance (e.g., sex with Academic Support, $\rho = 0.35$, $p = 0.057$). These findings highlight the nuanced ways in which lecturer background factors relate to their perceived challenges and instructional readiness in English-medium contexts.

Table 3a

Correlation Between Lecturer Characteristics and EMI Subscales (N = 30)

Subscale	Qualification		Sex		Faculty		Courses taught	
	ρ	p	ρ	p	ρ	p	ρ	p
Student Challenges	–0.03	0.879	–0.10	0.585	0.46	0.011	–0.25	0.181
Lecturer Preparedness	–0.43	0.017	0.01	0.953	–0.20	0.296	0.09	0.642
Curriculum Design	–0.11	0.555	0.09	0.633	–0.11	0.547	–0.10	0.606
Teaching Materials	–0.23	0.226	–0.04	0.817	–0.24	0.203	0.27	0.153
Assessment Practices	–0.52	0.003	0.00	0.993	–0.18	0.336	0.11	0.571
Academic Support	–0.05	0.804	0.35	0.057	0.10	0.590	–0.13	0.497

Table 3b

Correlation Between Lecturer Characteristics and EMI Subscales (N = 30)

Subscale	Eng Level		Teach Yrs		EMI Yrs	
	ρ	p	ρ	p	ρ	p
Student Challenges	0.04	0.830	0.12	0.533	–0.05	0.794
Lecturer Preparedness	0.00	0.990	0.20	0.284	0.01	0.954
Curriculum Design	–0.33	0.073	0.12	0.513	0.04	0.814
Teaching Materials	–0.34	0.067	–0.24	0.194	0.04	0.848
Assessment Practices	–0.20	0.296	0.02	0.903	0.01	0.959
Academic Support	0.12	0.535	0.06	0.745	–0.08	0.655

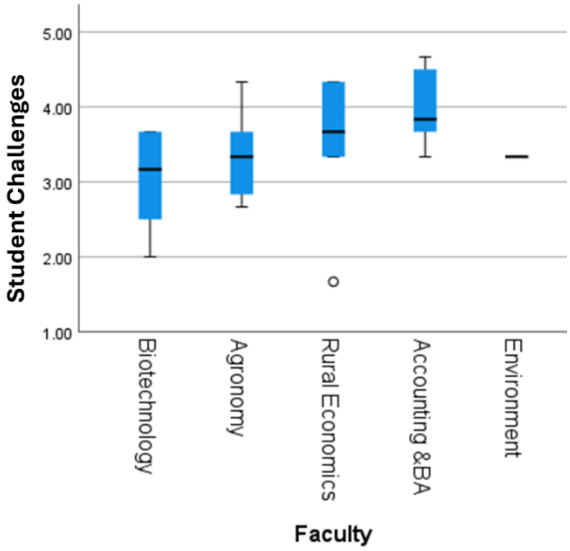
These findings imply that perceptions of EMI readiness and difficulty are not straightforwardly predicted by experience or demographic background. Higher-qualified lecturers may possess greater self-awareness or higher standards, which could explain their more critical self-ratings. Moreover, the lack of correlation with teaching volume suggests that institutional training and support, rather than experience alone, play a crucial role in shaping EMI readiness. Future studies might explore qualitative dimensions such as teaching self-efficacy, institutional climate, and exposure to international pedagogy.

Perceived Student Challenges by Faculty

To explore whether perceived student-related challenges (Subscale: Student Challenges) varied significantly across faculties, a Kruskal–Wallis H test was performed. This non-parametric method was chosen due to the small sample size and potential violation of normality assumptions. Results indicated a marginally non-significant difference in perceived student challenges across the five faculties: Biotechnology, Agronomy, Rural Economics, Accounting & Business Administration, and Environment ($H(4) = 8.248$, $p = .083$). The p-value approached the borderline of practical significance, warranting cautious interpretation. Descriptive boxplots revealed that lecturers from Accounting & Business Administration and Rural Economics reported higher perceived student challenges compared to their peers in Biotechnology and Agronomy. Lecturers from the Environment faculty showed lower variation, but with a small sample size, their results should be interpreted cautiously. While post-hoc comparisons were not conducted due to the lack of a statistically significant overall test, these findings suggest that perceptions of student readiness for EMI may differ across disciplinary contexts, possibly reflecting variations in student English proficiency, course content complexity, or faculty support culture.

Figure 1

Boxplot of Perceived Student Challenges by Faculty (N = 30)



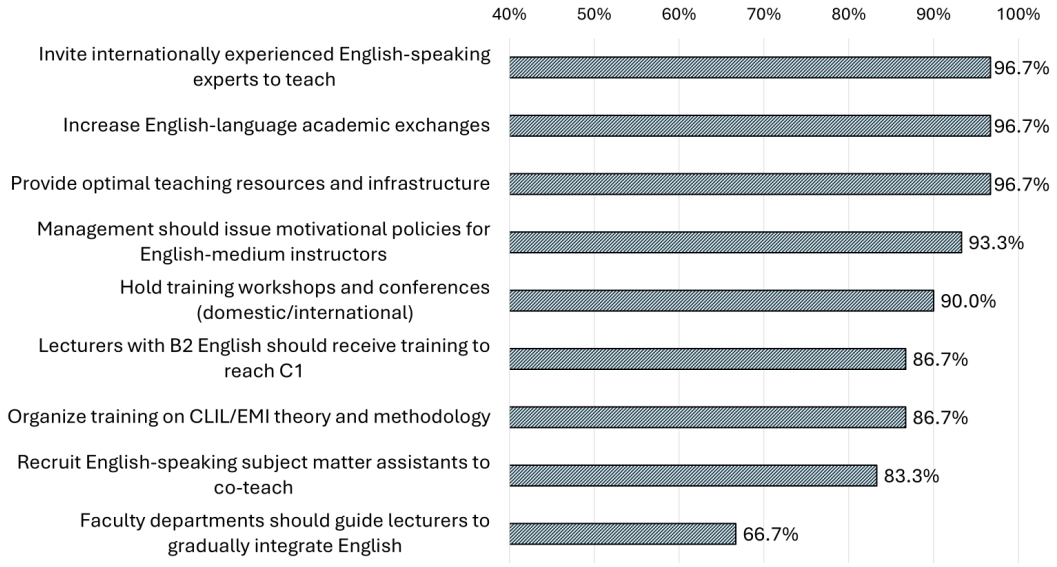
Measures for Improvement

Figure 2 summarizes lecturers' measures for enhancing the effectiveness of EMI in specialized subjects. The most strongly endorsed suggestions, each receiving support from 96.7% of respondents included: inviting internationally experienced English-speaking experts, increasing opportunities for academic exchange in English, and improving infrastructure and access to teaching materials. These priorities reflect a clear demand for both external expertise and internal resourcing to support EMI delivery. Other widely supported initiatives included policy-level motivation from institutional leadership (93.3%), participation in professional development workshops and conferences (90.0%), and language training opportunities for lecturers with B2-level proficiency to advance to C1 (86.7%). Equally, pedagogical training in EMI methodology and co-teaching with English-speaking subject matter assistants were seen as valuable by over 80% of participants. The least frequently endorsed, though still majority-

supported, recommendation was for faculty-led scaffolding of English use in instruction (66.7%). This suggests that while lecturers acknowledge the importance of gradual English integration, they may prioritize more systemic or resource-driven interventions over internal procedural shifts. These findings collectively underscore a strong appetite for strategic, well-supported, and collaborative improvements to EMI implementation at the institutional level.

Figure 2

Proportion of Lecturers Supporting Measures for EMI Teaching Improvement



Discussion

The present study examined Vietnamese lecturers' perceptions of EMI in specialized university courses, focusing on challenges, preparedness, curriculum design, teaching materials, assessment practices, and academic support. The results reveal generally positive perceptions across most subscales, high internal consistency of the measurement instrument, and specific correlations between lecturer characteristics and perceived challenges. These findings align with and extend previous research on EMI in both global and Southeast Asian contexts.

Lecturers reported the highest mean scores for Assessment Practices and Lecturer Preparedness, suggesting that despite the relatively recent introduction of EMI in Vietnamese higher education, many instructors feel confident in their ability to deliver assessments and manage classroom activities in English. This mirrors trends observed in other emerging EMI contexts, where assessment frameworks are often more easily adapted than full curriculum reform (Galloway et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2023). The lowest mean score was for Student Challenges, indicating that lecturers perceive significant variation in students' readiness to engage with content in English. This is consistent with research from other Southeast Asian countries showing that linguistic proficiency, disciplinary vocabulary, and confidence are persistent barriers for students in EMI settings (Dooey, 2010; Walkinshaw et al., 2017). Such challenges may be especially pronounced in technical fields like biotechnology and agronomy, where specialized terminology is dense and not easily acquired without strong language support.

Cronbach's alpha values for the six subscales ranged from acceptable to high, supporting the reliability of the instrument. The relatively lower reliability for Teaching Materials (0.641)

likely reflects variability in access to and quality of EMI-appropriate resources across faculties – an issue documented in studies of EMI in resource-constrained contexts, including Thailand and Vietnam, where teachers report limited support and gaps in discipline-specific materials (Galloway & Sahan, 2021) and lecturers explicitly cite resource availability as a challenge (Vu & Burns, 2014). The Kruskal–Wallis results suggest marginal differences in perceived student challenges between faculties, with lecturers in Accounting & Business Administration and Rural Economics reporting higher challenges than those in Biotechnology and Agronomy. This may be due to differing baseline English proficiency levels among students in social sciences versus STEM disciplines, as well as variations in the availability of English-language materials. Similar discipline-specific disparities have been reported in Malaysia and Thailand, where STEM students often benefit from existing English-language textbooks, while social science students may rely more on localized materials in the mother tongue (Ali, 2013; Bowen et al., 2023).

The overwhelmingly high agreement among lecturers on recommendations such as inviting internationally experienced experts, increasing academic exchanges, and providing better resources highlights the importance of systemic, top-down support for EMI. Previous studies in Vietnam (L. T. Tran & Nguyen, 2018) and the broader ASEAN region (Kirkpatrick, 2014) emphasize that sustainable EMI adoption depends on institutional commitment, faculty training, and strategic investment in language and content integration. Recommendations such as targeted training for B2-level lecturers to reach C1 proficiency and organizing workshops on EMI methodology directly address capacity-building needs. Evidence from Japan (Brown & Bradford, 2016) shows that lecturer language upgrading programs can significantly enhance both teaching confidence and student outcomes. Evidence from Indonesia highlights that EMI lecturers frequently lack formal training in resource creation and pedagogical skills, with only 42 % reporting they received such support—pointing to the potential impact that structured language and professional development programs could have on both teaching confidence and student outcomes (Endri & Sari, 2023).

Globally, EMI has grown as part of the internationalization of higher education, particularly in Europe following the Bologna Process and in East Asia through strategic national policies (Galloway & Sahan, 2021; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Southeast Asia has followed suit, with countries like Thailand implementing the English for Integrated Studies program, Malaysia expanding EMI in science and engineering, and the Philippines leveraging EMI as part of its bilingual education tradition (Kirkpatrick, 2014; Yuniar Diyanti & Madya, 2021). In Vietnam, EMI and CLIL initiatives are still evolving. While elite institutions have launched full English-medium programs in disciplines such as engineering, business, and IT, the implementation at provincial universities and in specialized fields like agriculture remains inconsistent. Barriers identified in this study, student readiness, teaching materials, and varying faculty preparedness, are echoed in previous Vietnamese studies (H. T. Nguyen et al., 2017; Vo et al., 2022). This suggests that while policy ambitions are aligned with regional trends, operational challenges persist.

Despite growing adoption, empirical data on the effectiveness of EMI in specialized courses in Vietnam remains sparse. Many studies are descriptive rather than evaluative, and there is a lack of longitudinal research tracking student learning outcomes, language gains, and career impacts. This study contributes by providing quantitative correlations between lecturer characteristics and EMI perceptions but further mixed-methods research could explore causal relationships and contextual factors. Future studies should conduct longitudinal tracking of student cohorts in EMI courses to assess both content mastery and language development; compare EMI

effectiveness across disciplines, institutional types, and geographical regions; and evaluate the impact of specific interventions, such as EMI methodology training or co-teaching with language specialists.

This study is limited by its small sample size and the focus on a single university context, which may affect generalizability. The reliance on self-reported data also means that findings reflect perceptions rather than direct measures of teaching effectiveness or student outcomes. Additionally, while the Cronbach's alpha values indicate internal consistency, further validation of the instrument across diverse EMI contexts in Vietnam is warranted. While the present findings provide insights into EMI implementation from the perspective of lecturers, it is important to recognize that the study was conducted within a single agricultural university in Vietnam. The institutional setting, disciplinary mix, and specific EMI policies may differ considerably from those of other Vietnamese universities, particularly those in urban versus rural contexts, public versus private institutions, or with differing levels of internationalization. Consequently, the patterns observed, such as the distribution of English proficiency, the nature of student challenges, and the availability of teaching materials, should be interpreted as reflective of this particular institutional context rather than representative of Vietnam's higher education sector as a whole. This contextual specificity underscores the need for broader, multi-site studies to capture a more comprehensive picture of EMI practices in Vietnam.

Conclusion

In general, the current study underscores the potential of EMI in specialized Vietnamese higher education, while highlighting persistent challenges in student readiness, resource availability, and disciplinary differences. Addressing these issues will require coordinated policy support, targeted faculty development, and sustained research engagement. The findings provide both a diagnostic snapshot of current EMI implementation and a roadmap for institutional and national stakeholders seeking to align Vietnam's higher education with global and regional standards.

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