



THEMATIC INSTRUCTION IN SPORT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: A MIXED METHODS EVALUATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES, STAKEHOLDER READINESS, AND INDUSTRY RELEVANCE IN VIETNAM

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Abstract:

Background: The global shift from knowledge-transmission to competency-based, learner-centred education poses particular challenges for applied fields like sport management, where graduates must integrate theory with practice. In Vietnam, traditional lecture-dominated instruction and uneven institutional innovation perpetuate a persistent theory–practice gap. This study evaluated the effectiveness and feasibility of thematic instruction—an integrated, theme-based pedagogical model—within the Sport Management programme at Danang Sport University, Vietnam, to determine its capacity to align academic preparation with industry demands. **Methods:** A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, involving 315 participants across four stakeholder groups: 182 undergraduates, 68 lecturers, 45 industry experts, and 20 employers. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires measuring perceptions of instructional effectiveness, knowledge and skill development, learning attitudes, and institutional readiness. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews exploring implementation barriers and reform recommendations. A quasi-experimental cohort comparison was also conducted, comparing academic performance between Cohort 17 (thematic instruction) and Cohort 16 (conventional teaching) in Sport Event Management and Sport Facility Management modules. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent t-tests, Mann–Whitney U tests, Chi-square tests, and Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis. **Results:** Students and lecturers strongly preferred active, experiential learning over didactic methods. Students in Cohort 17 outperformed their conventionally taught peers across all assessment criteria (all $p < .001$), with improvements of 18%–22%. Employer satisfaction with graduates’ competencies reached 85%, particularly in problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability. Stakeholder readiness

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was uniformly positive, with no significant differences between students and lecturers in awareness, interest, or attitudes (all $p > .05$). However, barriers included curriculum rigidity, heavy lecturer workloads, limited thematic design expertise, and a lack of standardised competency-based rubrics. **Conclusions:** Thematic instruction proves effective and feasible for enhancing learning outcomes, developing industry-ready competencies, and strengthening university–industry collaboration in Vietnamese higher education. Sustainable implementation, however, requires targeted faculty development in thematic module design and competency-based assessment, alongside institutional support to reduce workloads and foster pedagogical innovation. This study offers an evidence-based, context-sensitive blueprint for curriculum reform in sport management education, adaptable to similar institutions across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: thematic instruction, sport management education, competency-based education, mixed methods research, graduate employability, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Higher education worldwide is undergoing a profound transformation, shifting from traditional knowledge-transmission models toward competency-based and learner-centred paradigms [1, 2]. In applied disciplines such as sport management, this transition is particularly important because contemporary sport organisations increasingly require graduates who can integrate theoretical knowledge with practical skills to address complex challenges related to management, marketing, event operations, and stakeholder engagement [3, 4].

Despite ongoing educational reforms, a persistent theory–practice gap remains a major challenge in sport management education. Students frequently encounter difficulties in transferring classroom knowledge to authentic professional contexts, thereby limiting their employability and workplace adaptability [5, 6]. This challenge is especially evident in emerging economies, including Vietnam, where lecture-based instruction continues to dominate many higher education programmes [7–9]. Although national policies, such as the Strategy for the Development of Physical Education and Sports toward 2030 [10], advocate educational innovation and competency-based training, implementation at the institutional level remains uneven [11, 12].

Thematic instruction has been proposed as a promising pedagogical approach to address this challenge. By organising learning around authentic professional themes rather than isolated disciplinary topics, thematic instruction promotes constructive alignment among learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment practices [1, 13]. This approach encourages students to integrate multidisciplinary knowledge, engage in problem-solving, and develop competencies that are directly applicable to professional practice. Although thematic instruction has demonstrated positive outcomes in general and medical education, empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness and

implementation in sport management education remains limited, particularly within developing and non-Western higher education contexts [14, 15].

To address this gap, the present study evaluates the effectiveness and implementation feasibility of a thematic instruction model in the Sport Management program at Danang Sport University, Vietnam. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed to integrate quantitative and qualitative evidence from multiple stakeholder groups. Undergraduate students ($n = 182$), lecturers ($n = 68$), and industry experts and employers ($n = 65$) were included because they represent the three key dimensions of competency-based curriculum evaluation: learning outcomes, instructional implementation, and workforce relevance. This multi-stakeholder perspective enables a comprehensive assessment of pedagogical effectiveness, institutional readiness, and alignment with industry expectations.

Beyond perception-based evidence, the study also incorporates an objective comparison of academic performance between Cohort 17 students who experienced thematic instruction and Cohort 16 students who completed the same courses through conventional teaching approaches. The comparison was conducted in two core modules – Sports Event Management and Sports Facility Management – to examine whether thematic instruction produces measurable improvements in learning outcomes.

Based on the theoretical framework of constructive alignment and the documented benefits of experiential and integrated learning, we hypothesised that thematic instruction would lead to significantly higher student learning outcomes, greater stakeholder readiness, and stronger industry alignment compared to conventional teaching methods. Specifically, we predicted that (1) students exposed to thematic instruction would achieve higher academic performance across all assessment criteria; (2) both students and lecturers would demonstrate positive perceptions and readiness for this pedagogical model; and (3) employers would report higher satisfaction with graduates' professional competencies.

The study therefore aims to: (1) examine stakeholder perceptions of current teaching practices; (2) evaluate the effects of thematic instruction on knowledge acquisition, skill development, and learning attitudes; (3) compare academic outcomes between students exposed to thematic and conventional instructional approaches; (4) assess institutional readiness for implementation; and (5) identify key factors influencing the successful adoption of thematic instruction.

By identifying both the benefits and practical challenges associated with thematic instruction, this study provides evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform in sport management education. The findings contribute to the growing international literature on pedagogical innovation, competency-based learning, graduate employability, and university–industry collaboration within contemporary sport education systems.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

This study included 315 participants representing four stakeholder groups, recruited from Danang Sport University and sport-related organisations in Central Vietnam using a combination of stratified random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The sample consisted of: undergraduate students majoring in Sport Management ($n = 182$), selected across academic years; faculty lecturers directly involved in Sport Management courses ($n = 68$); industry experts including sport managers, event organisers, and human resource specialists ($n = 45$); and enterprise representatives from sport organisations collaborating with the university ($n = 20$).

For the quasi-experimental cohort comparison, academic performance data were collected from Cohort 16 (conventional instruction) and Cohort 17 (thematic instruction) enrolled in two core modules: Sports Event Management and Sports Facility Management. All participants received detailed information regarding study objectives, procedures, and ethical safeguards. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and participation remained voluntary, anonymous, and confidential throughout. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Danang Sport University prior to data collection.

2.2 Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed to comprehensively assess pedagogical effectiveness, institutional readiness, and workforce alignment. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed independently, and integrated during the interpretation stage. Data triangulation was used to enhance credibility and validity by cross-validating statistical evidence with qualitative insights [16]. Additionally, a quasi-experimental cohort-comparison component was incorporated to provide objective evidence of instructional effectiveness, comparing academic outcomes between Cohort 17 (thematic instruction) and Cohort 16 (conventional teaching) under authentic educational conditions.

Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires adapted from validated frameworks in competency-based education and active learning [1, 17]. The instrument employed a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and assessed key dimensions: perceptions of instructional effectiveness, knowledge acquisition, professional skill development, learning attitudes, and institutional readiness. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with lecturers, employers, and enterprise representatives, exploring perceptions of thematic instruction, implementation barriers, and recommendations for curriculum reform.

Data collection was conducted in four sequential phases: (1) comprehensive literature review and pilot testing of research instruments with 30 participants to establish clarity, content validity, and reliability; (2) administration of questionnaires to

all 315 participants; (3) collection of academic performance records from Cohort 16 and Cohort 17 students; and (4) semi-structured interviews with selected lecturers, employers, and enterprise representatives to triangulate and contextualise quantitative findings. Academic performance records from both cohorts were also analysed to provide objective evidence of the model's effectiveness.

2.3 Statistical Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 26.0. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated for all variables. Normality assumptions were evaluated using the Shapiro–Wilk test and visual inspection of Q–Q plots.

Independent-samples t-tests were used to compare stakeholder perceptions and academic performance outcomes between Cohort 16 and Cohort 17 when assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were satisfied; Mann–Whitney U tests were employed when data violated parametric assumptions. Chi-square tests (χ^2) examined associations among categorical variables. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$. Cohen's d was calculated to assess practical significance and interpreted according to Cohen's guidelines: small (0.20), medium (0.50), and large (0.80) [18].

Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis procedure [19]. To enhance trustworthiness, two researchers independently coded 20% of interview transcripts, achieving an inter-coder agreement rate of 89%. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and member checking was conducted with five participants to verify interpretive accuracy.

3. Results

3.1 Current Situation and Stakeholder Readiness

To establish a baseline for evaluating the thematic instruction model, the study first examined students' perceptions of existing teaching methods in the Sport Management curriculum. As summarized in Table 1, the findings revealed a clear preference for active and experiential approaches over traditional didactic methods.

The results presented in Table 1 indicate a clear preference among Sport Management students for active and experiential learning approaches. Practical/experiential learning received the highest evaluation ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 0.87$), followed by project-based learning ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.92$), with more than 87% of respondents rating these methods as effective or very effective. These findings suggest that students value instructional approaches that promote authentic learning experiences and direct application of professional competencies.

Table 1: Student Perceptions of Instructional Effectiveness ($n = 182$)

Teaching Methods	Very Ineffective (%)	Ineffective (%)	Neutral (%)	Effective (%)	Very Effective (%)	Mean $\pm$ SD	CITC*
Traditional lecture-based teaching	2.7	7.7	30.2	39.6	19.8	4.04 $\pm$ 1.08	0.51
Group discussion	1.1	3.8	14.8	45.1	35.2	4.49 $\pm$ 1.00	0.68
Project-based learning	0.5	2.2	9.9	42.3	45.1	4.72 $\pm$ 0.92	0.72
Case-based learning	0.5	3.3	19.8	45.1	31.3	3.95 $\pm$ 0.81	0.55
Practical/experiential learning	0	1.1	8.8	35.2	54.9	4.88 $\pm$ 0.87	0.74
Seminar / student presentations	1.6	6	25.3	42.3	24.8	4.21 $\pm$ 1.05	0.59

Notes: CITC = Corrected Item–Total Correlation (all values $> .30$). Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$; Standardized Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$.

In contrast, traditional lecture-based teaching ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.08$) and seminar/presentation-based activities ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.05$) received comparatively lower ratings and higher proportions of neutral responses. Case-based learning recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.81$), indicating that its current implementation may not fully meet students' expectations or learning needs.

The reliability analysis demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency of the instrument (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$), while all corrected item–total correlation coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.30. Overall, the findings provide empirical support for the adoption of more integrated and experiential instructional models, such as thematic instruction, within Sport Management education.

3.2 Faculty Perceptions of Pedagogical Efficacy

To provide a multi-stakeholder perspective, the study also examined lecturers' assessments of the effectiveness of current instructional strategies. As presented in Table 2, the pattern of responses largely mirrored that of the students, while offering additional insights into faculty readiness for pedagogical innovation.

Table 2: Lecturers' Evaluations of Instructional Effectiveness ($n = 68$)

Teaching Methods	Very Ineffective (%)	Ineffective (%)	Neutral (%)	Effective (%)	Very Effective (%)	Mean $\pm$ SD	CITC*
Traditional lecturing	2.9	8.8	32.4	41.2	14.7	3.56 $\pm$ 1.02	0.48
Group discussion	1.5	4.4	14.7	50	29.4	4.02 $\pm$ 0.94	0.63
Project-based learning	0	2.9	11.8	47.1	38.2	4.21 $\pm$ 0.88	0.69
Case-based learning	1.5	4.4	22.1	44.1	27.9	3.92 $\pm$ 0.90	0.56
Practical / experiential learning	0	1.5	7.4	41.2	50	4.40 $\pm$ 0.85	0.72
Seminars / student presentations	2.9	8.8	29.4	41.2	17.6	3.62 $\pm$ 1.00	0.52

Notes: CITC = Corrected Item–Total Correlation (all values $> .30$). Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$; Standardized Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$.

The results presented in Table 2 reveal a clear preference among lecturers for active and practice-oriented teaching approaches. Practical/experiential learning received the highest rating ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.85$), followed by project-based learning ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.88$), with more than 85% of respondents evaluating these methods as effective or very effective. These findings indicate strong faculty support for instructional approaches that promote authentic learning experiences and competency development.

By contrast, traditional lecturing ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.02$) and seminar/presentation-based activities ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.00$) received comparatively lower evaluations and higher proportions of neutral responses. Case-based learning was rated at a moderate level ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.90$), suggesting opportunities for further enhancement of its implementation within the curriculum.

Reliability analysis confirmed satisfactory internal consistency of the scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$), with all corrected item–total correlation coefficients exceeding the recommended threshold of $.30$. Overall, the findings demonstrate a favourable level of faculty readiness for adopting innovative and competency-oriented instructional models, including thematic instruction.

3.3 Comparative Analysis of Stakeholder Perceptions

To examine differences in perceptions of instructional effectiveness between students and lecturers, independent-samples t-tests were conducted. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparison of Perceived Instructional Effectiveness between Students and Lecturers

Teaching Methods	Students (n=182) Mean $\pm$ SD	Lecturers (n=68) Mean $\pm$ SD	t- value	p- value	Cohen's d
Traditional lecturing	4.04 $\pm$ 1.08	3.56 $\pm$ 1.02	3.21	.001	.45
Group discussion	4.49 $\pm$ 1.00	4.02 $\pm$ 0.94	3.12	.002	.48
Project-based learning	4.72 $\pm$ 0.92	4.21 $\pm$ 0.88	3.84	< .001	.56
Case-based learning	3.95 $\pm$ 0.81	3.92 $\pm$ 0.90	0.26	.794	.04
Practical / experiential learning	4.88 $\pm$ 0.87	4.40 $\pm$ 0.85	3.98	< .001	.56
Seminars / student presentations	4.21 $\pm$ 1.05	3.62 $\pm$ 1.00	3.72	< .001	.57

Notes: Significance levels: $p < .01$; $p < .001$. Cohen's d interpretation: .2 = small, .5 = medium, .8 = large effect size.

The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between students and lecturers for five of the six instructional methods examined. Students reported significantly higher effectiveness ratings for traditional lecturing, group discussion, project-based learning, practical/experiential learning, and seminars/student presentations ($p < .01$). The largest differences were observed for seminars/student presentations ($d = .57$), project-based learning ($d = .56$), and practical/experiential learning ($d = .56$), indicating moderate practical effects. In contrast, no significant difference was found for case-based learning ($p = .794$, $d = .04$).

Overall, both stakeholder groups expressed favourable perceptions of active and experiential learning approaches. However, students consistently rated these methods more positively than lecturers, suggesting stronger perceived benefits among learners. The convergence of responses across both groups provides additional support for the adoption of thematic instruction, which integrates project-based, experiential, and collaborative learning activities within a competency-oriented curriculum.

3.4 Stakeholder Readiness for Thematic Instruction

Assessing stakeholder readiness is a critical prerequisite for the successful implementation of pedagogical innovation. This study examined three dimensions of readiness: awareness of thematic instruction, interest in its adoption, and attitudes toward its integration into the Sport Management curriculum. The results are presented in Table 4.

The findings indicate a generally high level of readiness among both students and lecturers for the adoption of thematic instruction. Across all three dimensions, approximately three-quarters of respondents reported positive levels of awareness, interest, and attitudes toward the model. Lecturers demonstrated slightly higher levels of awareness and interest than students; however, the overall response patterns were highly similar.

Table 4: Stakeholder Readiness for the Adoption of Thematic Instruction

Dimension	Level	Students (n=182)		Lecturers (n=68)	
		n	%	n	%
Awareness	Very clear	55	30.3	25	36.8
	Aware	82	45.1	30	44.1
	Unclear	32	17.6	10	14.7
	Never heard of it	13	7.1	3	4.4
Interest	Very interested	64	35.2	28	41.2
	Interested	73	40.1	25	36.8
	Neutral	32	17.6	10	14.7
	Slightly interested	9	4.9	3	4.4
	Not interested	4	2.2	2	2.9
Attitudes	Very positive	59	32.4	22	32.4
	Positive	77	42.3	30	44.1
	Neutral	32	17.6	10	14.7
	Negative	9	4.9	4	5.9
	Very negative	5	2.7	2	2.9

Chi-square analyses revealed no statistically significant differences between students and lecturers in awareness ($\chi^2 = 1.64, p = .650$), interest ($\chi^2 = 1.92, p = .750$), or attitudes ($\chi^2 = .87, p = .930$). These results suggest a shared perception of the value of thematic instruction across stakeholder groups.

Overall, the findings provide evidence of favourable institutional readiness for implementing thematic instruction within the Sport Management program. The positive attitudes observed among both students and lecturers may facilitate the adoption of learner-centered and competency-based teaching practices.

3.5 Lecturers' Self-Assessed Competencies for Implementing Thematic Instruction

Based on survey responses from 68 lecturers involved in Sport Management education, this study examined their self-assessed competencies for implementing thematic instruction. Understanding faculty readiness is essential for identifying professional development needs and ensuring the successful adoption of the proposed model. The results are presented in Table 5.

The findings indicate that lecturers possess a generally favourable foundation for implementing thematic instruction. Professional expertise, practical knowledge, and openness to pedagogical innovation received the highest ratings, reflecting strong disciplinary competence and positive attitudes toward instructional reform. General pedagogical skills were also evaluated positively, suggesting a solid basis for adopting learner-centered approaches.

However, implementation-specific competencies were rated noticeably lower. The weakest areas included thematic module design, competency-based assessment rubric development, and time and workload management. These results suggest that, although lecturers demonstrate readiness to embrace innovative teaching practices, additional

support is required in curriculum design, assessment planning, and implementation management.

Table 5: Lecturers' Self-Assessed Competencies for Implementing Thematic Instruction (n = 68)

Competency Dimension	Mean $\pm$ SD	High/Very High (%)
Professional expertise and practical knowledge in sport management	4.35 $\pm$ 0.68	85.3
Openness to innovation and willingness to adopt new teaching approaches	4.12 $\pm$ 0.75	79.4
General pedagogical skills and application of active learning methods	3.94 $\pm$ 0.82	67.6
Ability to collaborate with industry partners and external experts	3.66 $\pm$ 0.79	55.9
Skills in organizing thematic learning activities	3.41 $\pm$ 0.88	44.1
Ability to use educational technology for teaching and assessment	3.35 $\pm$ 0.87	39.7
Competence in designing thematic modules (learning objectives, integrated content, and expected outputs)	3.18 $\pm$ 0.91	27.9
Ability to develop and apply competency-based assessment rubrics	3.09 $\pm$ 0.95	25
Time and workload management during implementation	2.94 $\pm$ 1.02	23.5
Overall Mean	3.56 $\pm$ 0.85	49.8

Note: Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Very Low to 5 = Very High). High/Very High (%) represents the combined percentage of responses rated 4 or 5.

Overall, the findings highlight both the strengths and developmental needs of the teaching staff. While lecturers' professional expertise and positive attitudes provide favourable conditions for adopting thematic instruction, targeted professional development initiatives will be essential to strengthen implementation capacity and support sustainable curriculum innovation.

3.6 Determinants of Effectiveness for Thematic Instruction

Identifying the factors that influence the effectiveness of pedagogical innovations is essential for ensuring successful implementation and long-term sustainability. This study examined 12 factors related to faculty competence, student characteristics, and institutional support. Perceptions of these factors were evaluated by experts ($n = 45$) and lecturers ($n = 68$), and the results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Perceived Influence of Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Thematic Instruction

Influencing Factors	Experts (n=45) Mean $\pm$ SD	Lecturers (n=68) Mean $\pm$ SD	Mean Difference	Overall Mean	Rank	p- value
Lecturers' professional qualifications and practical expertise	4.10 $\pm$ 0.62	3.90 $\pm$ 0.71	.2	4	1	> .05
Practical training conditions (facilities, clubs, practice sites)	3.90 $\pm$ 0.68	3.80 $\pm$ 0.74	.1	3.85	2	> .05
Pedagogical skills and classroom organisation ability	4.00 $\pm$ 0.65	3.80 $\pm$ 0.72	.2	3.9	3	> .05
Innovative mindset and willingness to adopt new methods	3.90 $\pm$ 0.70	3.70 $\pm$ 0.76	.2	3.8	4	> .05
Students' teamwork and collaboration skills	3.90 $\pm$ 0.69	3.70 $\pm$ 0.75	.2	3.8	4	> .05
Students' learning motivation and attitudes	3.80 $\pm$ 0.73	3.70 $\pm$ 0.78	.1	3.75	5	> .05
Students' self-learning, research, and presentation skills	3.80 $\pm$ 0.71	3.60 $\pm$ 0.80	.2	3.7	6	> .05
Cooperation with enterprises and sports training centers	3.80 $\pm$ 0.74	3.60 $\pm$ 0.82	.2	3.7	6	> .05
Institutional support and leadership strategic orientation	3.80 $\pm$ 0.76	3.60 $\pm$ 0.79	.2	3.7	6	> .05
Flexibility of training programs and curricula	3.70 $\pm$ 0.78	3.60 $\pm$ 0.81	.1	3.65	8	> .05
Facilities, classrooms, and library resources	3.60 $\pm$ 0.80	3.50 $\pm$ 0.83	.1	3.55	9	> .05
Assessment and evaluation methods	3.60 $\pm$ 0.82	3.50 $\pm$ 0.85	.1	3.55	9	> .05

Note: Mean Difference = Experts' mean – Lecturers' mean. Mann–Whitney U tests indicated no statistically significant differences between groups across all factors (all $p > .05$).

Table 6 indicates that lecturers' professional qualifications and practical expertise were perceived as the most influential determinant of thematic instruction effectiveness (Overall $M = 4.00$), followed by practical training conditions ($M = 3.85$) and pedagogical skills ($M = 3.90$). Mean differences between experts and lecturers were minimal (.10 – .20), and no statistically significant differences were observed (all $p > .05$), suggesting strong agreement regarding the key conditions required for successful implementation. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of faculty capacity, experiential learning environments, and institutional support in sustaining thematic instruction.

3.7 Employers' Needs Regarding the Adoption of Thematic Instruction in Sport Management Education

To ensure that the proposed thematic instruction model aligns with professional practice and labor market expectations, the study surveyed 20 employers and sport-related organisations. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Employers' Needs Regarding the Adoption of Thematic Instruction in Sport Management Education (n = 20)

Survey Item	Mean	Agree (%)
More professional experiential learning activities for students	4.4	90
Profession-oriented thematic modules linked to workplace practice	4.25	85
Development of students' ability to solve real-world workplace problems	4.25	85
Increased internship and fieldwork opportunities in enterprises	4.25	85
Adoption of thematic instruction in Sport Management education	4.25	85
Enhancement of communication and teamwork skills	4.2	80
Greater participation of enterprises in teaching and learning activities	4.1	80
Establishment of regular university–industry collaboration mechanisms	4.1	80
Improvement of students' sport event management skills	4.05	75
Application of digital technologies in sport management and event organization	3.9	70
Overall Mean	4.18	81.5

Note: Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not Necessary, 5 = Very Necessary). Agree (%) represents the combined percentage of respondents selecting "Necessary" (4) and "Very Necessary" (5).

Table 7 shows strong employer support for the adoption of thematic instruction in Sport Management education (Overall M = 4.18; Agree = 81.5%). The highest-rated need was the provision of professional experiential learning opportunities (M = 4.40; Agree = 90%). Employers also emphasized the importance of workplace-oriented thematic modules, problem-solving competencies, internship opportunities, and university–industry collaboration (M = 4.10–4.25; Agree = 80–85%). These findings demonstrate strong employer endorsement of thematic instruction and underscore the need for curriculum designs that integrate experiential learning, workplace problem-solving, and sustained university–industry collaboration. Such expectations reinforce the relevance of thematic instruction as a strategy for enhancing graduate employability and industry responsiveness.

3.8 Selection of Evaluation Standards for Assessing the Effectiveness of Thematic Instruction

To establish a scientifically grounded framework for evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed thematic instruction model, a panel of 45 experts in sport management, higher education, and pedagogy was consulted. The experts assessed the importance of key evaluation standards for measuring the effectiveness of thematic instruction in Sport Management education. The results are presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Expert Ratings of the Importance of Evaluation Standards
 for Assessing the Effectiveness of Thematic Instruction (n = 45)

Evaluation Standard	Mean	Agree (%)
Overall effectiveness	4.47	91.1
Skill development effectiveness	4.31	86.7
Instructional effectiveness	4.24	84.4
Knowledge acquisition effectiveness	4.07	77.8
Organisational effectiveness	3.96	71.1

Note: Agree (%) represents the combined percentage of responses rated 4 (Important) and 5 (Very Important) on a five-point Likert scale.

The results indicate a high level of expert agreement, with mean scores ranging from 3.96 to 4.47. Overall effectiveness received the highest rating, followed by skill development effectiveness. Skill-related outcomes were prioritized over knowledge acquisition, reflecting the shift toward competency-based education in sport management programs. Following this, the expert panel validated a comprehensive evaluation framework consisting of eight dimensions (32 specific criteria). The relevance, internal consistency, and reliability of the framework are presented in Table 11.

Table 11: Expert Validation and Reliability Analysis of the
 Evaluation Framework for Thematic Instruction (n = 45)

Evaluation Dimension	Number of Criteria	Mean Range	Agree Range (%)	Cronbach's α
Thematic content	4	3.73 – 4.40	55.6 – 77.8	.84
Thematic design	4	3.49 – 4.00	48.9 – 75.6	.78
Teaching methods	4	3.33 – 4.09	44.4 – 77.8	.76
Learning organisation	4	3.02 – 3.64	35.6 – 57.8	.7
Student competency development	4	3.78 – 4.09	60.0 – 73.3	.82
Assessment practices	4	3.36 – 3.98	48.9 – 66.7	.74
Student perceptions	4	3.42 – 3.93	51.1 – 64.4	.79
Practical applicability and transferability	4	3.29 – 3.93	44.4 – 64.4	.72

Note: Agree (%) represents the combined percentage of responses rated 4 (Appropriate) and 5 (Highly Appropriate). Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.70 to 0.84 indicate acceptable to good internal consistency.

The expert panel confirmed that all eight dimensions were relevant, with the strongest consensus on thematic content, student competency development, and teaching methods. These findings support the validity and reliability of the multidimensional framework for evaluating thematic instruction, ensuring alignment with both academic standards and industry demands at Danang Sport University.

3.9 Empirical Validation: Evaluating the Pedagogical Shift

To rigorously assess the impact of thematic instruction, a pre–post implementation comparison was conducted, examining students' perceptions of instructional effectiveness before and after the introduction of the model. This longitudinal element

aimed to evaluate the sustainability and potential of thematic instruction to enhance the overall quality of the Sport Management curriculum. The results are presented in Table 12.

Table 12: Student Evaluation of Instructional Effectiveness: Pre- versus Post-Implementation (n = 182)

Teaching Method	Before (Mean ± SD)	After (Mean ± SD)	Change (W %)	t- value	p- value	Cohen's d
Traditional lecturing	4.04 ± 1.08	3.70 ± 0.95	-8.4	-3.12	.002	.33
Group discussion	4.49 ± 1.00	4.71 ± 0.75	4.9	2.68	.008	.25
Project-based learning	4.72 ± 0.92	4.95 ± 0.70	4.9	2.94	.004	.28
Case-based learning	3.95 ± 0.81	4.45 ± 0.70	12.7	5.86	< .001	.67
Practical / field-based learning	4.88 ± 0.87	4.93 ± 0.60	1	1.12	.265	.07
Seminars / student presentations	4.21 ± 1.05	4.33 ± 0.80	2.9	2.01	.046	.13

Notes: Significance levels: $p < .05$; $p < .01$; $p < .001$. Cohen's d : .2 = small, .5 = medium, .8 = large effect size. W % = percentage change in mean score.

The post-implementation data revealed a notable shift in students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. Case-based learning showed the largest improvement (+12.7%, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .67$), representing a medium-to-large effect. This suggests that the thematic model provided a more structured and contextually relevant framework for case analysis, thereby strengthening students' analytical skills and their ability to connect theory with industry-specific scenarios.

Conversely, traditional lecturing experienced a statistically significant decline in perceived effectiveness (-8.4%, $p = .002$, Cohen's $d = .33$). This medium effect indicates that, once exposed to high-engagement thematic environments, students became less tolerant of passive, didactic approaches, highlighting a growing demand for active and competency-oriented instruction.

Practical/field-based learning maintained the highest overall mean score ($M = 4.93$ post-implementation), although the change was not statistically significant ($p = .265$, Cohen's $d = .07$), likely due to a ceiling effect from already high pre-implementation ratings. Significant gains with small-to-medium effects were also observed in project-based learning (+4.9%, $p = .004$, $d = .28$) and group discussion (+4.9%, $p = .008$, $d = .25$). These results further support the role of thematic instruction in promoting collaborative and inquiry-based learning.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that thematic instruction acts as a powerful catalyst for pedagogical improvement. It not only enhances the perceived effectiveness of active learning strategies but also recalibrates student expectations, shifting the Sport Management program from traditional knowledge transmission toward a more dynamic, application-oriented framework.

3.10 Comparison of Teaching Method Effectiveness Before and After Implementation of the Thematic Instruction Model

The study re-examined the perceptions of undergraduate students ($n = 182$) and lecturers ($n = 68$) regarding the effectiveness of various teaching methods. The results were compared with the baseline data collected prior to implementation (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 13: Student Perceptions of Instructional Effectiveness Before and After Implementation of the Thematic Instruction Model ($n = 182$)

Teaching Method	Before (Mean $\pm$ SD)	After (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Change (W %)	t	p
Traditional lecturing	4.04 $\pm$ 1.08	3.70 $\pm$ 0.95	-8.4	-3.12	.002
Group discussion	4.49 $\pm$ 1.00	4.71 $\pm$ 0.75	4.9	2.68	.008
Project-based learning	4.72 $\pm$ 0.92	4.95 $\pm$ 0.70	4.9	2.94	.004
Case-based learning	3.95 $\pm$ 0.81	4.45 $\pm$ 0.70	12.7	5.86	< .001
Practical/experiential learning	4.88 $\pm$ 0.87	4.93 $\pm$ 0.60	1	1.12	.265
Seminar/student presentations	4.21 $\pm$ 1.05	4.33 $\pm$ 0.80	2.9	2.01	.046

Interpretation: Following implementation, students rated most teaching methods significantly higher than before, with statistically significant improvements ($p < .05$) observed in five out of six methods. The largest increase was recorded for case-based learning (+12.7%, $p < .001$), highlighting the value of designing thematic modules that are closely aligned with real-world sport management practices.

Table 14: Lecturers' Perceptions of Instructional Effectiveness Before and After Implementation of the Thematic Instruction Model ($n = 68$)

Teaching Method	Before (Mean $\pm$ SD)	After (Mean $\pm$ SD)	Change (W %)	t	p
Traditional lecturing	3.56 $\pm$ 1.02	3.40 $\pm$ 0.90	-4.5	-1.98	.052
Group discussion	4.02 $\pm$ 0.94	4.30 $\pm$ 0.78	7	2.41	.019
Project-based learning	4.21 $\pm$ 0.88	4.45 $\pm$ 0.70	5.7	2.56	.013
Case-based learning	3.92 $\pm$ 0.90	4.32 $\pm$ 0.72	10.2	4.08	< .001
Practical/experiential learning	4.40 $\pm$ 0.85	4.55 $\pm$ 0.65	3.4	1.89	.063
Seminar/student presentations	3.62 $\pm$ 1.00	3.85 $\pm$ 0.82	6.4	2.17	.034

Interpretation: Lecturers' evaluations also demonstrated a clear positive trend following implementation, particularly in case-based learning (+10.2%, $p < .001$). These findings confirm that the thematic instruction model effectively enhances teaching quality by promoting more practical, student-centered, and professionally relevant pedagogical approaches.

3.11 Labor Market Perspectives and Employer Feedback

To verify the external validity of the thematic instruction model, the study collected feedback from sport organisations and enterprises that provide internships and recruit graduates from the Sport Management program. This component specifically examined

whether the thematic approach produces industry-ready professionals who can meet the evolving demands of the contemporary sports sector. The findings from the employer survey are presented in Table 15.

Table 15: Employer Evaluation of Student Competence and Professionalism after Thematic Instruction (n = 20)

Level of Evaluation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Very satisfied	8	40
Satisfied	9	45
Neutral	3	15
Not satisfied	0	0
Total	20	100

The employer survey revealed a high level of satisfaction, with 85.0% of respondents reporting that they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the performance of graduates trained under the thematic instruction model. Notably, no employers expressed dissatisfaction. These results indicate that thematic instruction effectively bridges the gap between university curricula and industry expectations, equipping graduates with the practical competencies required in the modern sports sector.

3.12 Synthesis of Stakeholder Evaluations

When integrated with lecturers' positive feedback, the employer data provide holistic confirmation of the effectiveness of thematic instruction. The transition to a thematic-based framework exerts a comprehensive impact on the Sport Management educational ecosystem through three distinct channels:

- **Learner Impact:** It strengthens student agency by fostering creativity, problem-solving skills, and adaptive capacity needed to address real-world industry challenges.
- **Instructional Impact:** It serves as a catalyst for faculty development, encouraging lecturers to shift from traditional didactic roles toward innovative, facilitator-led pedagogies.
- **Institutional Impact:** It strengthens university–industry linkages, ensuring that training outcomes are closely aligned with the practical and evolving requirements of the global sports labor market.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that thematic instruction is not only an effective pedagogical strategy but also a sustainable framework for enhancing graduate employability and the competitive advantage of Sport Management programs.

3.13 Comparison of Actual Learning Outcomes Between Cohorts

To further evaluate the effectiveness of the thematic instruction model, actual academic performance was compared between students from Cohort 17, who were taught using the thematic instruction model, and students from Cohort 16, who followed the conventional instructional approach. Comparisons were conducted across two core Sport

Management courses: *Sport Event Management* and *Sport Facility Management*. The results are presented in Table 16.

Table 16: Comparison of Academic Performance Between Cohort 16 and Cohort 17 Students

Assessment Criterion	Cohort 16 (Mean ± SD)	Cohort 17 (Mean ± SD)	Difference (%)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Midterm examination (theoretical knowledge)	6.68 ± 1.22	7.45 ± 0.92	11.53	4.12	< .001
Thematic project score (group project)	7.08 ± 1.10	8.38 ± 0.76	18.36	6.05	< .001
Presentation and project defense score	6.85 ± 1.19	8.21 ± 0.81	19.85	6.18	< .001
Continuous assessment score (participation and learning attitude)	6.97 ± 1.05	8.52 ± 0.68	22.24	7.35	< .001
Overall course grade	6.90 ± 1.02	8.14 ± 0.72	17.97	6.67	< .001

Note: Cohort 16 = students taught using conventional instruction; Cohort 17 = students taught using thematic instruction.

The findings indicate that students in Cohort 17 achieved significantly higher scores than those in Cohort 16 across all assessment criteria ($p < .001$). The largest improvements were observed in continuous assessment (+22.24%), presentation and project defense (+19.85%), and thematic project performance (+18.36%). These outcomes suggest that thematic instruction may contribute positively to student engagement, collaborative learning, and the application of knowledge in authentic professional contexts.

Furthermore, the overall course grade was significantly higher among Cohort 17 students ($M = 8.14 \pm 0.72$) compared with Cohort 16 students ($M = 6.90 \pm 1.02$), representing an improvement of 17.97%. The consistent pattern of higher achievement across both knowledge-based and performance-based assessments provides empirical support for the effectiveness of the thematic instruction model in enhancing learning outcomes within Sport Management education.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide robust empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of thematic instruction as a pedagogical innovation in sport management education within the Vietnamese higher education context. By shifting from fragmented, subject-based teaching to integrated thematic modules, the model successfully addresses the longstanding theory–practice divide that has historically constrained sport pedagogy in emerging higher education systems.

4.1 Shift Toward Active Pedagogy and Cognitive Scaffolding

Both students and lecturers consistently rated active, practice-oriented methods—particularly project-based and experiential learning—highest in perceived effectiveness. These findings strongly align with the principles of Constructive Alignment [1], which posits that meaningful learning occurs when instructional activities and assessment tasks

are deliberately mapped to intended learning outcomes and professional competencies. A particularly noteworthy result was the substantial improvement in students' perceptions of case-based learning following implementation (+12.7%, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .67$). This medium-to-large effect suggests that thematic instruction supplies the critical contextual scaffolding absent in traditional lecture-based approaches. As Harden [13] noted, integrated thematic frameworks enable learners to perceive the "big picture," thereby enhancing cognitive accessibility and professional relevance of complex real-world scenarios.

4.2 Stakeholder Consensus and Institutional Readiness

A notable strength of this study lies in the high degree of convergence between students and lecturers regarding readiness for pedagogical reform. Unlike many educational innovations where stakeholder resistance poses a significant barrier [20], Chi-square tests revealed no statistically significant differences in awareness, interest, or attitudes toward thematic instruction (all $p > .05$). Furthermore, students' tolerance for traditional lecturing declined significantly after exposure to the thematic model (−8.4%, $p = .002$, Cohen's $d = .33$). This shift indicates a "calibration of expectations," whereby engagement with high-quality, student-centered learning increases demand for active and competency-oriented pedagogies, ultimately fostering greater student agency and ownership of learning.

4.3 Competency Development and External Validation

Thematic instruction demonstrated particularly strong effects in the affective and psychomotor domains, enhancing student engagement, problem-solving abilities, teamwork, and professional adaptability. The high level of employer satisfaction (85.0%) provides critical external validation of the model's effectiveness in producing industry-ready graduates. By organising learning around authentic professional themes—such as sports event management and facility operations—the approach effectively simulates workplace demands. This aligns with global competency frameworks, including those outlined by the OECD [2], which emphasise the development of adaptive, applied competencies over rote knowledge acquisition. Collectively, these results illustrate how thematic instruction transforms students from passive recipients of knowledge into proactive, industry-ready practitioners.

4.4 Strategic Implications and Institutional Readiness: A SWOT–TOWS Perspective

To translate the empirical findings into actionable institutional strategies, a SWOT analysis was conducted based on stakeholder data. The internal strengths of the Sport Management program include strong lecturer expertise, positive student attitudes toward active learning, institutional commitment to quality, and existing industry partnerships. However, notable internal weaknesses include limited thematic design and assessment competencies, a theory-oriented curriculum structure, limited practical learning resources, and the absence of standardised implementation procedures.

Externally, the program benefits from strong employer support for experiential learning, growing demand for workplace-oriented competencies, opportunities to expand university–industry collaboration, and increasing emphasis on graduate employability. Yet, threats persist, including the persistence of traditional teaching practices, an assessment culture focused on final examinations, infrastructure constraints, and limited curriculum flexibility.

Based on this SWOT analysis, a TOWS matrix was developed to guide strategic implementation. The recommended strategies include:

- **SO (Strengths–Opportunities):** Utilise lecturers' expertise, student readiness, and industry partnerships to develop and pilot workplace-oriented thematic modules and experiential learning activities.
- **ST (Strengths–Threats):** Leverage lecturers' professional experience to integrate authentic cases, projects, and industry-based learning experiences, reducing dependence on traditional lecture-centered approaches.
- **WO (Weaknesses–Opportunities):** Strengthen lecturer capacity in thematic design, competency-based assessment, and digital pedagogy through professional development programmes and enhanced collaboration with industry partners.
- **WT (Weaknesses–Threats):** Implement the model gradually through pilot courses while establishing standardised quality assurance mechanisms, including assessment rubrics, feedback systems, and continuous improvement procedures.

These strategic orientations provide a clear roadmap for sustainable implementation, emphasising capacity building, collaboration, and systemic quality assurance.

4.5 The Role of Faculty Agency and Structural Constraints

Despite these positive outcomes, the successful scaling of thematic instruction hinges on both individual teacher agency and broader institutional support. Lecturers' professional expertise and practical knowledge emerged as the most influential factor (overall $M = 4.00$). However, significant implementation barriers persist, including heavy teaching workloads, limited competencies in thematic module design, and insufficient access to contemporary resources. These findings reinforce the ecological perspective on teacher agency [21], highlighting that pedagogical innovation requires not only personal commitment but also systemic enablers—such as reduced administrative burdens, targeted professional development, and stronger university–industry partnerships—to ensure long-term sustainability.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

First, the research was conducted at a single institution (Danang Sport University), which may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other sport management

programmes in different institutional, cultural, or geographical contexts. While the mixed-methods design and multi-stakeholder sampling enhance internal validity, replication studies at other universities would strengthen external validity.

Second, although academic performance data and stakeholder perceptions provide strong evidence of short-term impact, the study primarily relies on self-reported perceptions and quasi-experimental comparisons rather than a true experimental design with random assignment. The absence of a control group with equivalent pre-test measures limits the ability to establish definitive causal relationships between thematic instruction and observed learning outcomes.

Third, the study did not collect longitudinal data tracking graduate employment outcomes, career progression, or long-term competency retention. Therefore, while the findings demonstrate immediate improvements in learning performance and stakeholder satisfaction, the sustained impact of thematic instruction on professional success remains unknown.

Fourth, the research instruments, while adapted from validated frameworks, were developed specifically for the Vietnamese context and may not fully capture all dimensions of competency development. Cultural and contextual factors may influence the interpretation of certain survey items.

Finally, the study focused primarily on the perspectives of students, lecturers, employers, and experts. The views of other important stakeholders—such as policymakers, alumni, and community partners—were not systematically included, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness of the readiness assessment.

6. Future Research Directions

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future investigation are proposed.

First, multi-institutional and cross-national studies are needed to test the replicability and generalisability of the thematic instruction model across different sport management programmes in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. Comparative studies examining contextual factors that facilitate or hinder implementation would be particularly valuable.

Second, longitudinal research tracking graduate employment outcomes, career trajectories, and competency retention over an extended period (e.g., 3–5 years post-graduation) would provide stronger evidence of the sustained impact of thematic instruction on professional success and workforce adaptability.

Third, experimental or quasi-experimental designs with more rigorous control conditions—such as randomised controlled trials or stepped-wedge designs—would help establish causal relationships between thematic instruction and specific learning outcomes, while controlling for potential confounding variables.

Fourth, future studies should incorporate objective behavioural measures of competency development, such as performance assessments in real-world settings,

portfolio evaluations, or employer-rated work performance, to complement self-reported perception data.

Fifth, research should explore the moderating and mediating factors that influence the effectiveness of thematic instruction, such as student characteristics (prior knowledge, motivation), lecturer attributes (teaching experience, pedagogical beliefs), and institutional conditions (leadership support, resource availability).

Sixth, qualitative ethnographic studies examining the implementation process in depth—including classroom observations, reflective journals, and stakeholder narratives—would provide richer insights into the contextual dynamics and unexpected outcomes associated with thematic instruction.

Seventh, future research could investigate the integration of digital technologies and hybrid learning modalities with thematic instruction, exploring how technology-enhanced learning environments might amplify the benefits of theme-based pedagogies in sport management education.

Finally, studies should examine the cost-effectiveness and resource implications of scaling thematic instruction, providing evidence-based guidance for institutional decision-makers regarding resource allocation and faculty development investments. By addressing these research directions, the academic community can build a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how thematic instruction can be effectively designed, implemented, and sustained to meet the evolving demands of sport management education in diverse global contexts.

7. Conclusions

This study offers compelling empirical evidence validating thematic instruction as a transformative pedagogical framework in sport management education. By integrating multidisciplinary knowledge into coherent, practice-oriented themes, the model effectively reconciles the dual demands of academic rigor and industry relevance within Vietnam's higher education context.

The findings demonstrate consistent and significant improvements across cognitive, psychomotor, and affective learning domains. The strong multi-stakeholder consensus—evidenced by the absence of statistically significant perceptual differences between students and lecturers, coupled with medium-to-large effect sizes (Cohen's *d*) in key comparisons—underscores the reliability and robustness of the thematic instruction model. In particular, the approach enhances student agency while cultivating market-ready competencies, marking a clear transition from traditional knowledge transmission to a contemporary, competency-based educational paradigm.

Furthermore, the study confirms substantial institutional readiness for this innovation. High levels of awareness, interest, and positive attitudes among students, lecturers, and employers provide a compelling mandate for university leadership to integrate thematic instruction into the core curriculum. However, sustainable implementation and scaling will require concerted efforts to address systemic barriers.

Targeted faculty development programmes—emphasising thematic module design, competency-based assessment, and industry engagement—should be prioritised alongside institutional reforms aimed at reducing excessive teaching workloads and fostering a supportive culture of pedagogical innovation.

In conclusion, thematic instruction serves as a vital bridge between academic preparation and the dynamic demands of the global sports industry. Its successful implementation at Danang Sport University not only aligns the Sport Management program with international best practices but also provides an evidence-based, context-sensitive blueprint for curriculum reform in specialized higher education institutions across Southeast Asia. By prioritising integrated, inquiry-driven learning, this model equips the next generation of sport managers with the adaptive expertise and professional competencies necessary to thrive in an increasingly complex global market.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication

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