

## Original Paper

# The Study of the Development and Changes in Vietnam's University Entrance Examination System Over Forty-Five Years

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the 45-year evolution of Vietnam's university entrance examination system from 1975. Analyzing the examination system changes during different historical periods reveals the underlying social, political, and educational contexts. The study finds that the system has transitioned from a unified examination to multiple examinations and, more recently, to a "dual-purpose" examination model. Furthermore, the research analyzes the main reasons behind this transformation, its achievements, limitations, and challenges, and proposes practical recommendations. These changes reflect the achievements of Vietnam's education reforms and the growing emphasis on personalized student development.*

### Keywords

*Vietnam, University Entrance Examination, Education Reform, Achievements and Challenges, Recommendations*

## 1. Introduction

Vietnam's advanced education entrance examination system has experienced significant metamorphosis since 1975, mirroring the nation's socio-profitable development and evolving educational doctrines. As Chen's (2005) and Luo's (2004) work on post-reform Vietnam post-reform education, former exploration highlights the system's connection to public policy and societal requirements yet lacks a

specific focus on the entrance examination's elaboration. This paper fills this gap by exhaustively assaying the system's changes over 45 times and relating underpinning patterns and long-term trends. The analysis will explore the driving forces behind these changes in public macroeconomic programs, evolving societal demands for professed labor, and global educational reform trends. The study will objectively estimate the reforms' advantages and disadvantages, erecting upon Zhao's (1999) exploration of the broader environment of educational reform. Eventually, it will propose practical advancements to enhance educational equity, quality, and social mobility, contributing to the healthy development of Vietnamese advanced education.

This paper uses a literature study (sanctioned documents of the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam, university websites, and academic literature (studies, journals, public and transnational papers) on university entrance examinations from 1975 to date to explore the significant changes, achievements, strengths, and limitations of the reform of Vietnam's council entrance examination system from 1975 to date. The content identifies changes in examination content, format, admission medium, and policy that reflect public policy directions and changing social gift requirements. The study highlights the system's uniqueness, suggests new directions for development, and provides valuable recommendations for Vietnam and other developing countries facing similar higher education reform challenges.

## **2. Historical Transformation of Vietnam's University Entrance Examination System**

### *2.1 The Post-National Unification Period (1975-1980)*

After the unification of Vietnam in 1975, higher education entered a new stage of development, and the university entrance examination system also underwent major adjustments. This period (1975-1980) marked the shift from decentralization to integration of higher education in Vietnam, and the competition for admission became increasingly fierce. Compared with the past, college admission is no longer just a simple exam, but has gone through a "double test": The first is the high school graduation examination, which tests the basic knowledge and skills that students have mastered in high school and lays the foundation for subsequent university entrance examinations; the second is the university and college entrance selection examination, which takes place in the candidate's local area. This move significantly reduces candidates' difficulties in having to move everywhere and creates more favorable conditions for candidates across the country to participate in the exam. For example, students from remote counties in the northern mountainous areas no longer have to travel long distances to Hanoi to take exams, saving time and economic costs and reflecting the country's emphasis on educational equity. This nationally unified examination has attracted teachers from many universities to participate in propositions and marking, and also attracted a large number of students to actively participate in the competition. The winners of the exam will be admitted to various colleges and universities on a selective basis, and students with particularly outstanding results may also have the opportunity to be sent to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and other socialist countries for further study. This not only broadens their horizons, but also cultivates more high-level talents for the country.

However, the examination system during this period also had obvious shortcomings. The examination content mainly focuses on rote memorization of basic knowledge and basic skills. The examination method is single, lacks flexibility and creativity, and it is difficult to comprehensively examine students' comprehensive quality and development potential. For example, the examination rarely involves the examination of practical application ability. Students often only focus on the study of textbook knowledge and ignore the cultivation of practical ability. This single and rigid examination model is difficult to meet the personalized development needs of different students, limits the comprehensive development of talents to a certain extent, and lays the foundation for subsequent education reforms. Although the examination system during this period promoted the rational allocation of higher education resources and improved the efficiency of talent selection to a certain extent, it also exposed its inherent limitations and provided important lessons for subsequent reforms.

### *2.2 The Multiple Examinations Period (1981-2001)*

1981-2001 witnessed a significant restructuring of Vietnam's higher education entrance examination system, coinciding with broader educational reforms. Beginning with the shift from literacy classes to an 11-year, and subsequently a 12-year, national curriculum (completed by 1993), the system moved from a single, centralized examination to a decentralized model with multiple, institution-specific exams. This change, partly influenced by Western models, aimed to improve admissions efficiency and better align student choices with available programs. Students gained the ability to apply to multiple universities, increasing their chances of acceptance. However, this decentralized approach, involving a nearly month-long examination period, created significant challenges. The extended timeframe imposed substantial financial and psychological burdens on candidates and their families, as illustrated by reports of students traveling alone to urban centers, families providing extensive support, and even instances of candidates and families resorting to makeshift accommodation. Furthermore, the system inadvertently fueled the growth of a "test-prep" industry, particularly in urban centers, exacerbating inequalities and contradicting the stated policy of equitable access to higher education.

This multi-exam system's increased competition and complexity demanded significant adaptability and resilience from students, who faced intense academic pressure, logistical challenges, and fierce competition. This period, remembered vividly by those graduating high school in the 1970s and 80s, involved successive examinations at various levels. The decisions regarding university and program choices often created additional family stress. The experience, therefore, represents a formative period for many Vietnamese, shaping values and perspectives and offering valuable insights for future educational policy. A comprehensive analysis of this era's examination system is crucial for understanding its successes and failures and informing future reforms.

### *2.3 The "Three-common" Examination Period (2002-2014)*

In 2002, Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training initiated significant reforms to enhance fairness and transparency in university admissions, introducing the "Three-common" examination system: common examination papers, common examination dates, and common admissions results. The reform

replaced multiple institution-specific exams with one high school graduation exam and three higher-education entrance exams. The high school graduation examination was centrally set by the Ministry of Education and Training, with provincial and municipal authorities responsible for administration and marking. Examination dates were determined according to the Ministry's academic calendar. Only candidates with a high school graduation certificate were eligible to participate in the three annual examinations in early July. For instance, in 2002, the first university entrance examination covered subjects of Category A (July 4th-5th), the second covered Categories B, C, and D (July 9th-10th), and the third was the higher vocational school entrance examination (July 16th-17th).

Vietnam's 2002 "Three-common" examination system, which had been lauded for enhanced fairness and a decline in cheating due to its centralized tests and standardized papers (Nguyen Duc Nghia, 2014), also posed significant challenges. The great difficulty and expense of the exams had fueled a dramatic rise in exam-oriented, rote teaching and learning, which led to a boom in private tutoring centers, especially in big cities like Hanoi. During this period, journalistic investigations highlighted the number of students per classroom—too many so that teachers paid zero attention to the student's individual needs—and the students' immense pressure, resulting in a clash with the basis of educational systems and public alarm.

In 2004, to reduce the fierce competition surrounding admissions, a minimum admission score system was established, which led to a more stable admissions process whereby 70% of students were admitted to their desired institution. At the same time, the 2007 "unified" plan to merge assessments for high school graduation and university entrance faced significant push-back. Sadly, despite several lengthy, involved rewrites, the plan was finally abandoned as too premature for not being adequately vetted, providing a cautionary tale about the necessity of careful planning in educational reform. The "Three-common" and "unified" systems have provided important lessons for Vietnam and countries aspiring to better educational equity and reform their examination system.

#### *2.4 The "Dual-purpose" Examination Period (2015-2020)*

On 9 September 2014, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education approved a reform plan to merge high school graduation and university entrance exams into a single "National High School Examination," effective in 2015. This unified exam, organized by the Ministry, aims to complete high school education and facilitate university admissions. The exam is conducted regionally at 38 universities, with teachers as invigilators. Test scores certify high school graduation and facilitate university admissions. Candidates seeking higher education must take four subjects: three required (Mathematics, Literature, and a Foreign Language) and one elective (Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, or Geography). Those applying for graduation and university must complete the necessary subjects for their chosen institution. Candidates applying only for university admission need only take the institution's specified subjects. For students with poor foreign language resources, elective subjects may be substituted. The exam features both objective and subjective questions, varying by subject. It occurs from 1 July to 4th, with candidates allowed to apply for up to four majors in the same institution and 16

choices. Candidates can modify or cancel their applications during the application period, and the institution's president makes refund decisions.

In 2016, 120 examination centers were established. The first round of admissions allowed candidates to apply to a maximum of two universities and two majors each, limiting their choices to four. Candidates needed help changing their selected universities or majors. In the second round of supplementary admissions, candidates could apply to three universities and two majors, but changes in choices were still restricted.

The Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam issued Notification No. 05/2017/TT-BGDĐT for the 2017 exam, continuing the "dual-purpose" system since 2014. This system, organized by local governments and universities, encouraged candidate participation and supported holistic educational development while reducing rote learning. Exams lasted 2.5 days, with high school and university teachers supervising and grading to ensure fairness.

However, in 2018, serious cheating incidents emerged during local exams, leading to manipulated scores and accountability for several officials. The fallout from these incidents was significant for the education sector.

On 19 April 2019, the Ministry introduced new regulations focused on optimizing exam organization, enhancing management and security, and improving technology use to prevent future cheating. Nonetheless, the unexpected outbreak in 2020 marked the end of the "dual-purpose" exam model that had been in place for five years.

### *2.5 From 2020 to present: A New Examination Route*

Since 2020, Vietnam has reformed its high school graduation examination system, renaming it from the "National High School Graduation Examination" to the "High School Graduation Examination". This change aims to ensure that students complete high school and allows for a more flexible university admission process, enabling applicants to compete for spots at any university. The new system resembles that of the 1990s to 2001 but allows universities to coordinate multi-batch admissions and set their exam content. Despite initial anxiety, students have adapted well. Deputy Minister of Education Nguyen Van Phuc emphasized the examination's adherence to safety principles, strictness, and transparency to boost candidates' confidence. Furthermore, in 2020, universities eliminated self-composed entrance exams, easing the burden on students.

In 2021, the admissions system was revised to include online applications, limiting the changes candidates could make to their choices and clarifying that admissions would rely solely on graduation exam scores. In 2022, the application window was extended, allowing candidates to make more informed decisions after receiving their test results. By 2023, the admissions process will have improved through better integration of multi-sourced data. The high school graduation exam structure will remain unchanged from 2019 to 2023 to avoid imposing additional stress on 2024 graduates.

### **3. Reasons for the Reform of Vietnam's University Entrance Examination System**

#### *3.1 The Needs of Societal Development*

Vietnam's rapid economic expansion has led to diverse social demands for talent. After over 35 years of reform, the country's economic model has shifted from extensive to intensive growth, highlighting the urgent need for a high-quality talent training system. The current integrated model of annual unified examinations no longer meets these diverse needs. By reforming its deficiencies, we can maintain the quality of our human resources and ensure national socioeconomic development. Consequently, Vietnam's education system has successfully reformed the university entrance examination to align with socioeconomic realities.

#### *3.2 The Demands of National Development*

Based on the objective laws governing human development in the era of globalization, Vietnam has actively promoted its international integration strategy. After overcoming the socioeconomic crisis in 1996, Vietnam's international integration strategy gradually expanded from the economic to all fields. To cultivate high-quality talent with global competitiveness, that is, "global citizens", Vietnam's higher education reform is imperative. The reform aims to inherit the characteristics of national higher education while benchmarking against common standards of international higher education. The university entrance examination, as the crucial first step in higher education reform, and the optimization of its selection mechanism, coupled with overall reforms to talent cultivation models, will significantly impact the quality of talent development. The national development strategy has created an urgent need for higher education reform, driving profound changes within the education system.

#### *3.3 Forces Driving Educational Reform*

The Ministry of Education and Training is actively reforming the quality of education in Vietnam, which has evolved over 75 years since the 1945 August Revolution. During the reform period, the Communist Party prioritized education as a cornerstone of national development. To address modernization demands, the 8th Plenary of the XIth Central Committee issued Resolution 29 on 4 November 2013, aiming for comprehensive education and training reform to support industrialization, modernization, and international integration in a socialist market economy. This propelled higher education reforms directed toward quality and productivity, complementing its national development objectives. Vietnamese higher education institutions are projected to reach advanced regional standards by 2030. Furthermore, this will provide better opportunities for students to participate in majors and have their majors on the entrance examination system, promoting development and eliminating differences in education.

#### *3.4 Development of the Industrial Revolution*

The rapid evolution of knowledge and information technology during the Fourth Industrial Revolution has created new challenges for talent training and university admission models. This dissertation examines the long-standing university admission system, which has significantly changed due to the fast-paced development of professional knowledge and information access. Traditional subjective

examinations, reliant on manual scoring, are increasingly replaced by objective assessments that are primarily machine-graded, enhancing scoring efficiency. Additionally, information technology has enabled the digital management of admission data, allowing candidates to easily access personal information, academic backgrounds, significant selections, and mock admission scores through a national higher education website. Consequently, reforming university entrance exams has become a global trend in higher education, and Vietnam must adapt to this shift. On a broader scale, national competition has transformed into a focus on human resources and technology, making the quality of human resources a critical factor in competitive advantage.

#### **4. Achievements, Challenges, and Recommendations for the Reform of Vietnam's University Entrance Examination System**

##### *4.1 Achievements*

Vietnam's university entrance examination system has achieved significant accomplishments during its 45-year reform process, reflected in increased higher education enrollment rates, optimized admission procedures, and positive impacts on socio-economic development.

Firstly, record growth in enrollment rates in higher education: Statistics from the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) in 2023 showed that over a million students across the country registered for the high school graduation exam, of which 546,686 were admitted to higher education institutions, the highest admission rate at 53.12% in nearly nine years. The number of admissions has almost doubled relative to 2004-2007 figures (217,300, 240,600, 285,300, and 363,600). This achievement directly indicates the popularization of higher education in Vietnam with many improvements, proving that this change has directly raised the population with higher education, bringing about a rich store of human capital for national development.

Second, optimization and facilitation of the admission system: The reform is reflected not only in the increase in enrollment rates but also in the optimization and facilitation of the admission system. Specifically: 1) Transparency in information access: Information such as admission plans, admission methods, and program information is publicly released through official university websites, ensuring information transparency and reducing unfairness caused by information asymmetry. 2) Simplification of registration processes: Online application systems have replaced the previous cumbersome paper-based applications and on-site material submission, significantly improving registration efficiency and eliminating geographical restrictions, providing candidates with a more convenient application experience. 3) Diversification of admission methods: In addition to the traditional admission method based mainly on high school graduation exam scores, universities have introduced various admission pathways, such as admissions based on skill tests, professional exams, or comprehensive quality assessments, providing candidates with a broader range of choices and more effective talent selection.

Third, positive impacts on socio-economic development: The increase in higher education enrollment rates has had multiple positive impacts on Vietnam's socio-economic development: 1) Reducing unemployment rates: According to the 2012 labor force employment survey data from Vietnam's General Statistics Office, among the unemployed population nationwide that year, junior high school graduates accounted for as high as 24.2%, while those with university degrees and above accounted for only 10.1%, more than twice the former. The popularization of higher education helps improve the quality of workers, reduce unemployment rates, and optimize the labor force structure. 2) Increasing income levels: Studies (such as Le Ngoc Hung, 2016) show that workers with university degrees generally earn higher incomes than those without professional technical training, almost twice as much. Higher education has become an essential means of increasing income and social mobility. 3) Promoting intangible capital accumulation: As revealed by the research of Nobel Prize winners in Economics Gary Becker and Amartya Sen, and famous sociologists Collins, Coleman, and Bourdieu, educational investment is critical to the accumulation of intangible capital (human capital, cultural capital, and social capital). In 2005, intangible capital accounted for 45% of Vietnam's per capita wealth; this proportion was as high as 81% in developed countries. Continually developing higher education will further increase Vietnam's intangible capital proportion, promoting sustainable economic and social development.

In conclusion, Vietnam's university entrance examination system reform is an essential component of the country's educational system reform and has achieved significant accomplishments. Future reforms should be further deepened, focusing on educational equity, quality, and innovation in talent cultivation models to better meet the demand for high-quality talent in national economic and social development.

#### *4.2 Limitations and Challenges*

Vietnam has recently made significant progress in reforming its university admissions system. However, the results could have been better, and numerous challenges remain, impacting the quality of higher education and the overall quality of graduates and ultimately hindering national human resource development. These challenges include:

**First, Student Choice Dilemmas and Information Asymmetry:** Despite increased access to higher education, students still need help choosing majors, selecting universities, and understanding the admissions process and deadlines. A lack of information transparency leads to better-informed student decisions, hindering optimal choices. For example, there is a lack of standardized, publicly accessible channels providing information on different universities' curricula, training programs, and faculty strengths, making effective comparisons difficult for students. Concerns also remain regarding the fairness and impartiality of the admissions process.

**Second, Fairness and Impartiality of Admissions:** The fairness of different admissions methods is a significant concern for the Ministry of Education. The Ministry urges universities to conduct in-depth analyses and comparisons of admission results and student academic performance across different admissions methods to ensure fairness and impartiality. However, some universities lack strict



enforcement of admissions regulations, and severe cheating incidents occur during both the high school graduation examination and university admissions processes. Examples include grade inflation, manipulation of scores, and even buying scores – practices that persist despite repeated bans. This is closely linked to the over-reliance of some universities on high school grades as the primary admissions criterion, creating opportunities for such fraudulent activities. The cheating scandal of 2018 is a prime example.

Third, Over-Enrollment Leading to Declining Educational Quality: Widespread over-enrollment has resulted in insufficient faculty, strained teaching resources, and a significant impact on the quality of teaching and the effective implementation of talent cultivation programs. Unreasonable teacher salaries, subsidies, and incentive policies exacerbate the adverse effects of mass enrollment, leading to low teacher morale, high turnover rates, and the loss of valuable human resources. In 2022, the nationwide number of teacher departures reached 16,000, representing a 1% attrition rate. Ultimately, this leads to a decline in the quality of graduates and an inability to meet the demands of society and businesses for skilled talent.

Fourth, Mismatch Between Graduate Quality and Industry Needs: A survey of 60 industrial service companies in Ho Chi Minh City on the quality of university graduates within five years of graduation revealed that only 5% were rated as excellent, 15% as good, 30% as average, and a staggering 40% as unsatisfactory. This assessment was based on multiple dimensions: theoretical knowledge, practical skills, foreign language proficiency, work attitude, and professional competence. This indicates a significant gap between the current higher education training model and the actual needs of businesses, with graduates needing more practical application skills to meet industry demands for high-quality talent. This phenomenon also indirectly reflects the disadvantage of Vietnam's workforce in regional competition, particularly in businesses' increasing reliance on automation in human resource management.

In summary, while Vietnam's higher education admissions system reform has made some progress, it faces numerous challenges. To build a more equitable, efficient, and socially responsive higher education system, a collaborative effort from the government, universities, and businesses is required.

#### *4.3 Recommendations*

Constructing an education evaluation system based on integrity, genuine learning and examinations, and the cultivation of high-quality talent requires systemic reform in the following four areas:

First, Enhancing the Reliability and Validity of High School Graduation Standards and Examinations: Eliminate the weighting of formative assessment scores in high school graduation assessments. Raise the passing score for the graduation examination to 2 points. This aims to strengthen the seriousness of high school learning and the authenticity of results, avoiding the bias of formative assessments on final evaluation. Furthermore, in-depth differential analysis should be conducted on schools and regions with significant discrepancies between high school grades and college entrance examination scores (e.g., absolute difference  $\geq 1.5$  points). This analysis should incorporate qualitative research methods such as

questionnaires and interviews to investigate the causes and propose targeted improvements. Establish an independent third-party evaluation mechanism to assess reform measures' effectiveness objectively, identifying and correcting potential deviations early to minimize negative impacts. For example, an educational evaluation agency could be commissioned for independent evaluations, with regular reports published.

Second, Improving High School Diploma Information: High school diplomas should include more comprehensive student academic information, such as formative assessment scores, college entrance examination scores, individual subject scores, and the discrepancies between subject scores. This gives students and parents a more objective and holistic picture of student abilities to aid in making more informed decisions regarding further education or career paths. For example, a "Comprehensive Academic Ability Assessment" indicator could be added to the diploma to reflect students' learning abilities and development potential comprehensively.

Third, Promoting Diversified University Admissions Models: Universities can explore diversified admissions models. While considering college entrance examination scores, they should also appropriately consider high school academic performance and non-cognitive factors such as extracurricular activities and social practice. This will help establish a university application evaluation system aligned with international standards. This reduces examination pressure and more effectively selects talented individuals with comprehensive qualities. For example, universities could adopt a model similar to the Common Application used in US universities, establishing a unified university application platform to facilitate student applications and enable comprehensive university evaluations.

Fourth, Strengthening Vocational Education and Diversified Evaluation Mechanisms at the High School Level: High schools should strengthen vocational education, fostering students' vocational skills and professional qualities. Simultaneously, an objective and fair diversified evaluation mechanism should be established to provide a more comprehensive and practical assessment of student learning outcomes, stimulating students' learning initiative and promoting individualized development and sustained success. For example, a competency-based assessment system could be implemented to evaluate students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes comprehensively.

## 5. Conclusion

The 45-year development of Vietnam's university entrance examination system demonstrates continuous evolution and refinement alongside societal progress and educational reforms. These changes reflect the Vietnamese education sector's ongoing exploration and experimentation with educational reform and a growing emphasis on students' individualized development. This reform reflects societal and national needs for high-quality talent and constitutes a critical strategic element within Vietnam's educational reforms. Vietnam's education system is leveraging the advantages of scientific and technological advancements for transformation and development. Despite significant

breakthroughs, examination cheating, score manipulation, and the overproduction of graduates needing more practical skills to meet real-world demands remain pressing concerns.

Further in-depth research by the Vietnamese government and relevant agencies comparing Vietnam's admissions and enrollment practices with those of other countries is necessary. This will guide universities, high schools, and related entities in strictly adhering to university admissions and graduation examination regulations. It will also ensure that Vietnam's university entrance examination system continues to evolve towards greater scientific rigor, fairness, and efficiency in the future.

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