

## COUNTRY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

# Reforming University Admissions in Vietnam

*Mai Thi Truc Le and Khue Van Tran*

This paper examines the evolution of Vietnam’s university admission system over the past three decades, highlighting key reforms aimed at improving fairness, accessibility, and educational quality. The study explores the challenges and successes of each reform phase, emphasizing the shift toward competency-based and digital assessments. It supports a holistic education approach to training university students in meeting the needs of societal development and reveals an effort to expand opportunities for private universities within the system.

Since 1991, the Vietnamese university admission system has undergone significant reforms. Transformations have focused on three priorities: fairness, accessibility, and quality. Each reform phase has responded to the evolving demands of Vietnamese society and the challenges of managing access to higher education in a low-income country. By documenting the reforms, this paper provides insights for educators and policy makers who have experienced similar challenges in balancing equity, accessibility, and modernization in university admissions.

### 1991–2001: A Fragmented and High-Stakes Model

In the early 1990s, the structure of university admissions in Vietnam was characterized as highly centralized yet fragmented. From 1991 to 2001, each university held its own entrance examination, with four main subject groups called *Khô* (blocks): A (Math, Physics, Chemistry), B (Math, Biology, Chemistry), C (Literature, History, Geography), and D (Math, Literature, English/French). This structure, in which students’ success was determined solely by test performance, created an inflexible admission pathway, which limited the ability to transfer scores between institutions.

Test-takers felt significant pressure. First, the tests were extremely competitive, as university quotas were limited and exam results determined students’ futures. Second, candidates often had to travel to major cities, primarily Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, to take the tests, which posed financial and logistical difficulties for families in rural areas. Furthermore, the exams were scheduled immediately after the national high school graduation examination, leaving students with minimal time for recovery and contributing to high stress levels.

### 2002–2014: The “Three Commons” Model

In 2002, the “three commons” model was introduced, which involved common exam questions, a common test date, and common results for all universities. This was a significant step

in standardizing entrance exams in Vietnam. By applying national cut-off scores, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) contributed to a fairer system and introduced the possibility of applying to more universities. However, although more testing centers were established in other cities such as Can Tho, Quy Nhon, Vinh, and Hai Phong, testing centers were still located in urban areas, meaning that access challenges for students in remote areas endured. Hence, while students’ university choices improved, long-distance travel remained a persistent challenge.

### 2015–2019: Integration and Localization

In 2015, the high school graduation examination was merged with the university entrance exams into an exam called “national high school graduation” to reduce the testing burden. Compared to previous models, this period saw a significant shift in subject selection. Initially, university-bound students were required to take the core subjects (Mathematics, Literature, Foreign Language) and one or more additional subjects based on the requirement of their intended major. However, by 2017, the modified exam format included the three core subjects and one of the following two subject groups: either Natural Sciences or Social Sciences. This encouraged students to broaden their horizons and reduced the overspecialization common under the earlier model.

A prominent strength of this reform was the decentralization of exam centers. From 2016 onward, testing was carried out at district-level high schools, which reduced travel-related costs and risks for students. The introduction of multiple-choice questions also marked a milestone toward modern assessment, as it moved away from testing rote learning.

However, there were several issues. In 2015, technological problems and the handling of university preferences led to confusion and dissatisfaction. In the following years, the limited variance in exam scores because of the structure of multiple-choice testing made it difficult to distinguish top-performing candidates. This lack of differentiation led some universities to

develop their own entrance assessments, highlighting a gap between national testing and institutional selection needs.

## 2020–2024: Diversification of Admission Pathways

In 2020, the national high school graduation exam was renamed “the high school graduation exam,” signaling a shift toward a more flexible and diverse admissions framework. Multiple admission methods were introduced, including national exam scores, high school GPA, competence entrance exam, direct admission, and hybrid admission. This diversified approach reflects a global trend toward holistic admissions, giving students multiple ways to demonstrate their potential. With this method, universities were allowed to have greater flexibility in designing their admissions criteria, although this raised concerns about the transparency and consistency across institutions.

In this phase, candidates were required to take four tests, including three mandatory (Math, Literature, and Foreign Language) and one elective, either the Natural Science or the Social Sciences cluster. This helped reduce the overall exam load while maintaining academic breadth.

## 2025 and Beyond: Toward Digital Transformation

In 2025, the exam was conducted in a new format. Students were required to take two compulsory subjects, including Literature and Mathematics, and two elective subjects chosen from those studied in the last year of high school (e.g., Foreign Language, History, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Geography, Economic and Legal Education, Informatics, or Technology), representing a continuous effort to reduce academic pressure by minimizing the number of exam subjects.

Additionally, several highlights include decreasing the number of exam sessions from four to three, focusing on assessing students’ abilities, and increasing the weight of high school process assessment from 30 percent to 50 percent. Students who possess valid foreign language or Vietnamese literature test certificates are exempt from taking a foreign language or Vietnamese literature exam, signaling greater alignment with international assessment standards.

Moreover, the current reform emphasizes digital transformation, employing online exam registration and

adjusting the exam monitoring and grading procedures to address previous limitations. These transformations are part of a broader strategy to modernize Vietnam’s examination system, preparing for a future transition to digitalized testing.

## After 2030: Digital Exams as the New Norm

After 2030, the MOET will gradually roll out computer-based exams for multiple subjects in venues that meet necessary conditions. When facilities and equipment for online exams are judged to be satisfactory across all cities and provinces, the high school graduation exam will become fully computer-based. This process aims to ensure fairness, minimize costs and time, and optimize the quality of the examination. As part of a broader digital transformation strategy, this reform reflects Vietnam’s commitment to modernizing its assessment system, aligning with global trends in educational technology and data-driven evaluation.

## Implications for Higher Education in Vietnam

Vietnam’s university admission system has seen significant improvement. Most notably, high school national exams have shifted to focus on students’ competencies. This transformation has several implications for higher education. Regarding assessment, students’ learning process should be included in the evaluation of their performance, fostering learning motivation and fairness. Regarding training, universities should develop not only students’ subject-specific knowledge but also their language and soft skills. Without these essential skills, students will struggle to remain competitive in the job market and integrate into the global economy.

Vietnamese private universities have also benefited from these reforms. During the initial period (1991–2001), they experienced difficulties in attracting students from broader geographical locations and high-performance candidates. The “three commons” period, when standardized tests were introduced, allowed these universities to reach a broader range of applicants from different places. The next period (2015–2019) was more beneficial for them, with more test centers and the introduction of online applications improving access to private universities. From 2020 onward, the diversity of admission methods and better application of technology in exams gave private universities greater flexibility to design their recruitment strategies. This has allowed them to attract a wider range of candidates, both geographically and academically.

---

Mai Thi Truc Le and Khue Van Tran are lecturers at FPT University, Can Tho Campus, Vietnam. E-mails: [MaiLTT15@fe.edu.vn](mailto:MaiLTT15@fe.edu.vn) and [KhueTV@fe.edu.vn](mailto:KhueTV@fe.edu.vn).

