EISSN: 2622-9668 | PISSN: 2622-982X
Volume 19 Nomor 2 August 2026: 352-368
DOI: 10.30996/mk.v19i2.133618

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Expansion without Justice: Social Inequality and the Political Economy of Higher Education in Vietnam

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Article History:
Submitted:
29-05-2026
Received:
01-06-2026
Accepted:
25-08-2026

Keywords:
higher education; social justice; inequality; education financing

Abstract

Since the Đổi Mới reforms, Vietnam has experienced rapid expansion in higher education, reflected in rising enrolment rates and institutional growth. However, increased participation has not been accompanied by equitable access. Persistent disparities across income, ethnicity, and geography raise critical questions about whether expansion has advanced social justice or merely redistributed educational privilege. This study aims to critically examine inequality in access to higher education in Vietnam and to evaluate whether current financing and internationalization policies align with principles of social justice. The research employs a mixed analytical approach. Quantitative analysis is conducted using Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), Education Attainment Ratio (EAR), and logistic regression to identify determinants of tertiary enrolment based on income, ethnicity, gender, and parental education. These empirical findings are interpreted through a normative framework grounded in Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice, encompassing redistribution, recognition, and representation. The findings reveal extreme inequalities in access, particularly between income quintiles and ethnic groups. Higher education financing relies heavily on household contributions, shifting risk to poorer families and rendering access regressive. Internationalized programs function as tuition-based tracks that reproduce social class divisions. Overall, higher education expansion in Vietnam operates less as a mechanism of social mobility than as a system of stratification, failing to fulfill its normative promise of social justice.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, Vietnam has undergone a profound transformation in its socio-economic structure following the implementation of the Đổi Mới reforms.[1] These market-oriented reforms have not only accelerated economic growth but have also reshaped the country's higher education landscape.[2] Universities have expanded rapidly, enrolment rates have increased significantly, and higher education has become a central pillar of Vietnam's national development strategy.[3] This expansion is often celebrated as a success story of post-socialist reform, signaling progress toward human capital development and global integration. However, beneath these impressive aggregate figures lies a more troubling reality: the expansion of higher education has not translated into social justice. Instead, it has increasingly reproduced and institutionalized inequality.

The rise in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Vietnam is frequently cited as evidence of improved access to tertiary education. Over time, more young people have entered

[1] Tran Nhuan Kien and Yoon Heo, "Doi Moi Policy and Socio-Economic Development in Vietnam, 1986–2005," *International Area Review* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 205–32, doi:10.1177/223386590801100112.
[2] Duy Hop To, "Some Characteristics of the Changing Social Structure in Rural Vietnam under Doi Moi," *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 10, no. 2 (October 1995): SJ10-2F, doi:10.1355/SJ10-2F.
[3] Martin Hayden and Pham Thi Ly, "Higher Education Access and Inclusion: Lessons from Vietnam," in *Mitigating Inequality: Higher Education Research, Policy, and Practice in an Era of Massification and Stratification* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2015), 19–33, doi:10.1108/S1479-358X20150000011003.

universities and colleges than ever before, suggesting a democratization of educational opportunity. Yet this apparent inclusivity masks persistent, and in some cases intensifying, inequalities across income groups, ethnic communities, and geographic regions. Students from affluent urban households continue to dominate university enrolment, while those from low-income families, rural areas, and ethnic minority backgrounds remain disproportionately excluded. The paradox is striking: higher education has expanded, but justice has not followed. Access has increased in numerical terms, yet opportunity remains unevenly distributed.

This paradox raises a question at the heart of this study: is Vietnam's higher education system genuinely expanding opportunities, or is it merely redistributing privilege under the guise of massification? Framed differently, has the expansion of higher education functioned as a vehicle for social mobility, or has it become a mechanism through which existing social hierarchies are reproduced and legitimized? Addressing this question requires moving beyond descriptive indicators of access and enrolment, and toward a normative evaluation grounded in theories of social justice.

Much of the existing literature on higher education in Vietnam, and in many other developing and transitional economies, has focused primarily on access statistics, enrolment growth, and institutional expansion.[4] While such analyses are important, they often treat inequality as an unfortunate but incidental by-product of development, rather than as a structural outcome of policy choices. This study takes a different stance. It argues that inequality in access to higher education in Vietnam is not an unintended side effect of expansion, but rather the product of deliberate design features embedded within the higher education system itself.[5] Tuition-based financing models, unequal household contributions, selective internationalized programs, and uneven regional investment have collectively reshaped higher education into a stratified system that privileges certain social groups over others.

Central to this transformation is the increasing privatization of educational costs. While higher education continues to be rhetorically framed as a public good essential for national development, in practice, a substantial proportion of its financial burden has been shifted onto households. Tuition fees and associated living expenses have risen sharply, making higher education increasingly dependent on family resources rather than individual merit or social need. As a result, access to university education is mediated less by academic capability than by economic capacity. This trend fundamentally challenges the notion of equal opportunity and calls into question the social justice claims often associated with higher education expansion.

The emergence of internationalized and high-quality programs further complicates this landscape. These programs are frequently promoted as symbols of modernization and global integration, offering instruction in English, foreign-aligned curricula, and enhanced

[4] Vu Hoang Linh, "An Overview of Access to and Inequality in the Education System of Viet Nam," *Asia-Pacific Development Journal* 19, no. 1 (August 29, 2012): 37–62, doi:10.18356/57405f5e-en.
[5] Kimberly Ann Goyette, "Stratification and the Emergence of the Postsecondary Private Education Sector in Vietnam," *Comparative Education Review* 56, no. 2 (May 2012): 197–222, doi:10.1086/661183.

employment prospects.[6] Yet access to such programs is overwhelmingly determined by the ability to pay higher tuition fees, rather than by academic merit alone. Consequently, internationalization operates not as a universal uplift in educational quality, but as a mechanism of internal stratification within the higher education system. Rather than narrowing inequality, it risks deepening social divisions by creating parallel educational tracks that serve different social classes.[7]

To critically examine these dynamics, this study adopts Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice, which conceptualizes injustice as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing redistribution, recognition, and representation.[8] From this perspective, inequality in higher education cannot be reduced to economic disparity alone. Instead, it must be understood as a tripartite injustice that simultaneously involves unequal distribution of resources, systematic misrecognition of marginalized groups, and the exclusion of disadvantaged populations from decision-making processes.

The redistributive dimension of injustice is evident in the stark disparities in access to higher education based on household income. Students from wealthier families enjoy vastly greater opportunities to enrol in universities, complete degrees, and participate in high-quality programs, while those from poorer backgrounds face financial barriers that often prove insurmountable. This unequal distribution of educational resources undermines the principle that higher education should function as a pathway to social mobility and economic inclusion. Equally is the dimension of recognition. Ethnic minority groups in Vietnam continue to experience structural disadvantages that extend beyond material deprivation. Cultural marginalization, linguistic barriers, and geographic isolation interact with economic constraints to limit their access to tertiary education. These forms of misrecognition are not merely symbolic; they have tangible consequences for educational participation and success. When higher education systems fail to accommodate diverse cultural and social backgrounds, they implicitly privilege dominant groups and reinforce patterns of exclusion.[9]

The dimension of representation further deepens this injustice. Policy decisions regarding higher education financing, admissions criteria, and program design are typically made without meaningful participation from those most affected by inequality. Low-income families, rural communities, and ethnic minorities have limited voice in shaping the policies that govern access to higher education. As a result, the system reflects the priorities and perspectives of more advantaged groups, perpetuating a cycle in which inequality is both produced and normalized through institutional processes. By applying Fraser's tripartite framework, this study reframes inequality in Vietnam's higher education system as a comprehensive social justice issue rather than a narrow policy challenge. It argues that expansion without redistribution, recognition, and representation cannot be considered just,

[6] Huu Thanh Minh Nguyen and Hoang My Thieu, "Well-Being and Capability Approaches to Social Injustice in Internationalization of Higher Education: Evidence from Vietnam," *International Journal of Education, Teaching, and Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (August 17, 2023): 191–213, doi:10.47747/ijets.v3i3.1335.
[7] Tran Minh Duc, "Addressing Gender Issues in Education, Training for Vietnam's Ethnic Minorities," *Jurnal Mengkaji Indonesia* 4, no. 1 (July 1, 2025): 118–57.
[8] Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (London: Routledge, 1997).
[9] Hayden and Thi Ly, "Higher Education Access and Inclusion: Lessons from Vietnam."

regardless of how impressive enrolment figures may appear. Justice, in this sense, requires more than numerical inclusion; it demands structural conditions that enable all individuals to participate in higher education on genuinely equitable terms.

This justice-based approach also enables a critical reassessment of internationalization in Vietnamese higher education. While internationalization is often presented as an inherently progressive reform aligned with global standards, this study contends that it can function as a stratifying force when implemented without attention to equity. When access to internationalized programs is contingent upon financial capacity, internationalization becomes a mechanism for redistributing privilege rather than opportunity. Such developments risk transforming higher education into a positional good, valuable precisely because access is limited, thereby undermining its role as an instrument of social justice.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to make three key contributions. First, it shifts the analytical focus from access statistics to justice-based evaluation, arguing that measures of enrolment and attainment must be assessed through normative frameworks that address inequality and fairness. Second, it provides an empirically grounded critique of higher education financing in Vietnam, highlighting how household-based funding models exacerbate socio-economic disparities. Third, it offers a critical interrogation of internationalization as a policy strategy, challenging the assumption that global alignment necessarily promotes equity.

In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to broader debates on higher education reform in transitional and developing economies. Vietnam's experience is not unique; similar patterns of expansion accompanied by persistent inequality can be observed across the Global South. By situating the Vietnamese case within a social justice framework, this study underscores the need to rethink higher education policies that prioritize growth over equity. Expansion, when decoupled from justice, risks entrenching the very inequalities it purports to overcome. Ultimately, this paper argues that higher education expansion in Vietnam represents a critical juncture. It can either serve as a transformative force that advances social justice, or it can continue to operate as a sophisticated mechanism for reproducing privilege. The outcome depends not on enrolment figures alone, but on the normative commitments that guide policy design. Without a deliberate and sustained focus on redistribution, recognition, and representation, the promise of higher education as a pathway to a more just society will remain unfulfilled.

2. Methods

This study employs a mixed analytical approach that integrates quantitative empirical analysis with normative evaluation grounded in social justice theory. Quantitatively, the research analyzes nationally representative secondary data to examine patterns of access and inequality in Vietnam's higher education system. Key indicators include the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and the Education Attainment Ratio (EAR), which are used to capture disparities across income groups, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location. To identify determinants of tertiary education enrolment, a logistic regression model is applied, estimating the effects of household income, parental education, ethnicity, and other individual characteristics on the probability of enrolment.

Beyond statistical measurement, the study adopts a normative justice-based evaluation to interpret empirical findings. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's framework of redistribution, recognition, and representation, quantitative outcomes are critically assessed to reveal how observed inequalities reflect deeper structural injustices embedded in higher education financing and policy design. This combined approach allows the study to move beyond descriptive inequality and toward an evaluative assessment of justice in higher education expansion.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Expansion without Equity

A paradox at the heart of Vietnam's higher education expansion: while access has increased in aggregate terms, equity has not followed. Instead of functioning as a vehicle for social mobility, the higher education system increasingly operates as a mechanism for the reproduction of socioeconomic privilege. This section argues that Vietnam's expansion of higher education represents a form of "growth without justice," where rising enrolment figures conceal deepening structural inequalities. Through the lens of Nancy Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice (redistribution, recognition, and representation)[10], the findings demonstrate that inequality in higher education access is not an accidental by-product of development, but a foreseeable outcome of policy design and financing choices.

Quantitative indicators illustrate the scale of inequality with striking clarity. The GER in higher education has risen significantly over the past two decades, from 9.4 percent in 2000 to over 30 percent by 2014, before slightly declining to 28.8 percent in 2015.[11] While these figures suggest commendable progress in expanding access, disaggregation by income quintile reveals extreme disparities. In 2016, only 5.6 percent of individuals aged 18–22 in the lowest income quintile were enrolled in higher education, compared to 66 percent in the highest quintile.[12] This twelvefold gap underscores that access to tertiary education in Vietnam is overwhelmingly conditioned by household wealth. Similarly, stark inequalities are observed in educational attainment: less than 1 percent of individuals aged 25 and above from the poorest quintile held a college or university degree, whereas the corresponding figure for the richest quintile reached 28 percent.[13] These disparities point to a fundamental failure of higher education policy to correct, rather than amplify, initial socioeconomic disadvantages. Fraser conceptualizes redistribution as justice-oriented restructuring of economic arrangements that generate class-based inequalities.[14] In Vietnam's case, the higher education system does not operate as a redistributive institution; instead, it mirrors and magnifies existing income stratification. The probability of accessing tertiary education is not primarily determined by academic merit or social need, but by household capacity to absorb rising education costs.[15]

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[10] Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*.
[11] Nguyen and Thieu, "Well-Being and Capability Approaches to Social Injustice in Internationalization of Higher Education: Evidence from Vietnam."
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Marek Hrubec, "Towards Global Justice: An Interview with Nancy Fraser," *Sreview.Soc.Cas.Cz*, 2004, https://sreview.soc.cas.cz/pdfs/csr/2004/06/07.pdf.
[15] Linh Vu Hoang and Thùy Anh Nguyễn, "Analysis of Access and Equity in Higher Education System in Vietnam," *VNU Journal of Science: Policy and Management Studies* 34, no. 4 (December 23, 2018), doi:10.25073/2588-1116/vnupam.4163.

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The financing structure of higher education plays a decisive role in this outcome. Household contributions account for approximately 45 percent of total higher education expenditure, a proportion significantly higher than at other levels of education.[16] In 2016, the average household spent approximately 19.5 million VND per year on higher education, compared to only 5.6 million VND for upper secondary education.[17] This sharp cost escalation effectively privatizes educational risk, shifting the burden of financing from the state to families. As a result, higher education becomes a quasi-market good rather than a public entitlement, accessible primarily to those with sufficient financial capital.

This cost-shifting strategy allows the state to expand enrolment capacity without commensurate increases in public spending, but it does so at the expense of equity. Vietnam has not expanded higher education by socializing opportunity; it has expanded participation by transferring costs to households. Such a model contradicts the redistributive logic of social justice, under which public education should function as a leveling mechanism that offsets inherited disadvantages. Instead, Vietnam's higher education system entrenches a form of regressive redistribution, where public subsidies disproportionately benefit students from wealthier backgrounds who are already better positioned to access university education.

Ethnic disparities further illustrate the redistributive failure of the system. Ethnic minority groups continue to lag significantly behind the Kinh/Hoa majority in terms of higher education access.[18] GER figures consistently show lower participation rates among ethnic minorities, even after accounting for overall expansion. These gaps cannot be explained solely by geographic remoteness or academic preparedness; rather, they reflect the cumulative effects of poverty, linguistic barriers, and limited access to quality pre-tertiary education. From Fraser's perspective, this constitutes not only a redistributive injustice, but also a failure of recognition.

Recognition, as conceptualized by Fraser, concerns the cultural and symbolic dimensions of justice, specifically, whether social institutions respect and value diverse identities or instead institutionalize patterns of cultural domination.[19] In Vietnam's higher education system, ethnic minority students face structural misrecognition through curricula, admission processes, and instructional practices that implicitly privilege the linguistic and cultural capital of the ethnic majority.[20] Instruction is overwhelmingly delivered in Vietnamese and, increasingly, in English, disadvantaging students whose first language is neither. Admission examinations are standardized in ways that fail to account for unequal schooling conditions in minority regions, thereby naturalizing disparities as individual deficiencies rather than systemic inequities.

The dominance of urban, majority-oriented educational norms reinforces the marginalization of ethnic minority students, rendering their lower participation rates socially

[16] Nguyen and Thieu, "Well-Being and Capability Approaches to Social Injustice in Internationalization of Higher Education: Evidence from Vietnam."
[17] Ibid.
[18] Vu Hoang and Nguyễn, "Analysis of Access and Equity in Higher Education System in Vietnam."
[19] Amanda Keddie, "Pursuing Justice for Refugee Students: Addressing Issues of Cultural (Mis)Recognition," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 16, no. 12 (December 2012): 1295–1310, doi:10.1080/13603116.2011.560687.
[20] Duc, "Addressing Gender Issues in Education, Training for Vietnam's Ethnic Minorities."

invisible or politically normalized. As a result, inequality is framed as a problem of "capacity" or "readiness," rather than as an injustice requiring structural remedy. This misrecognition compounds economic exclusion, producing a layered form of disadvantage that neither redistribution nor cultural recognition alone can resolve.

Gender patterns in higher education enrolment present a more complex picture. Aggregate data indicate that female students have higher GERs than males at the tertiary level, suggesting that gender parity, or even female advantage, has been achieved. However, interpreting this outcome as evidence of gender justice would be misleading.[21] Qualitative and contextual analysis reveals that higher female enrolment is not the result of deliberate gender-equity policies, but rather of male exit from the education system into the labor market or vocational training. Many young men choose early employment due to economic pressures or social expectations regarding breadwinning, particularly among lower-income households.

This phenomenon illustrates the limits of purely quantitative parity indicators. While gender parity in enrolment may appear to satisfy redistributive criteria, it obscures deeper injustices related to recognition and structural constraint. Women's higher participation does not necessarily translate into equal labor market outcomes, leadership representation, or social power. Nor does it indicate that men are exercising free choice in leaving education; rather, both patterns reflect gendered social roles shaped by economic necessity. Thus, apparent parity masks asymmetric constraints rather than signaling genuine gender justice.

Household background emerges as one of the most powerful predictors of higher education enrolment. Logistic regression analysis confirms that household income significantly increases the likelihood of tertiary enrolment, even after controlling for other variables. Parental education, particularly at the tertiary level, exerts an equally strong effect. Children of parents who have completed higher education are substantially more likely to enrol, highlighting the intergenerational reproduction of educational advantage. This pattern aligns with Fraser's critique of liberal equality frameworks that ignore background conditions, treating unequal outcomes as the result of individual choice rather than structural inheritance. The role of household financing further intensifies these dynamics. As education costs rise, families with greater financial resilience can treat higher education as a long-term investment, while poorer households perceive it as an unsustainable risk. This risk aversion is rational rather than attitudinal, reflecting the absence of robust public safety nets such as comprehensive student loan systems, grants, or income-contingent repayment schemes. In this context, access to higher education is governed less by aspiration than by risk tolerance, which is itself class-determined.

Representation, the third dimension of Fraser's justice framework, provides a critical lens for understanding why these inequities persist despite policy recognition of access gaps. Representation concerns who has voice and decision-making power in defining policy agendas, institutional priorities, and standards of success. In Vietnam's higher education governance, students from low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds are largely absent

[21] Ibid.

from meaningful participation in policy formulation.[22] Decision-making remains centralized, technocratic, and insulated from the lived experiences of marginalized groups.[23] Policy discourse tends to frame higher education expansion in terms of efficiency, competitiveness, and international benchmarking, rather than democratic inclusion. As a result, equity concerns are subordinated to growth-oriented metrics such as enrolment numbers, institutional rankings, and labor market alignment. The voices of those excluded from higher education, or those who exit due to cost constraints, remain largely unheard, rendering injustice politically invisible. This representational deficit allows inequitable financing models to persist without contestation.

The cumulative effect of failures in redistribution, recognition, and representation is a higher education system that expands numerically while narrowing substantively. Access is formally available but materially constrained; participation is encouraged rhetorically but restricted economically; and equity is acknowledged discursively but undermined structurally. In such a system, higher education ceases to function as a public good and instead becomes a positional asset, conferring advantage on those already privileged. These findings challenge celebratory narratives of higher education expansion in Vietnam. While aggregate indicators suggest progress, justice-oriented evaluation reveals a system that redistributes opportunity upward rather than downward. Expansion has not dismantled inequality; it has reorganized it under the guise of modernization and internationalization. Without a fundamental reorientation toward redistributive financing, culturally responsive policy design, and inclusive governance, higher education will continue to reproduce social stratification rather than mitigate it. Vietnam's higher education system exemplifies what Fraser describes as a "normal injustice" embedded in institutional arrangements. The injustice lies not in isolated exclusion, but in the routine functioning of policies that privilege some while marginalizing others. Addressing this condition requires moving beyond access metrics toward a justice-based framework that interrogates who benefits, who bears the cost, and who has the power to decide.

3.2. The Illusion of Internationalized

The rapid internationalization of higher education in Vietnam is frequently celebrated in policy documents and global rankings as evidence of progress, openness, and modernization. English-taught programs, international joint degrees, foreign university branches, and globally benchmarked curricula are framed as pathways toward global competitiveness and social mobility.[24] However, beneath this optimistic narrative lies a structural contradiction: internationalization has not democratized opportunity but has instead intensified stratification within the higher education system. What emerges is an

[22] Thi Tuyet Tran, "Governance in Higher Education in Vietnam – a Move towards Decentralization and Its Practical Problems," *Journal of Asian Public Policy* 7, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 71–82, doi:10.1080/17516234.2013.873341.
[23] Jamil Salmi and Ly Thi Pham, "Academic Governance and Leadership in Vietnam: Trends and Challenges," *Journal of International and Comparative Education* 8, no. 2 (2019): 103–18, doi:10.14425/jice.2019.8.2.103.
[24] Phan Le Ha, "Higher Education, English, and the Idea of 'the West': Globalizing and Encountering a Global South Regional University," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 39, no. 5 (September 3, 2018): 782–97, doi:10.1080/01596306.2018.1448704.

illusion of internationalized justice, an expansion of globalized programs that symbolically signal inclusion while materially reproducing inequality.

Empirical data reveal that international programs in Vietnam are overwhelmingly tuition-based and priced far above the average household's capacity. While standard public university programs charge annual tuition fees ranging from approximately USD 500 to USD 1,000, international or "advanced" programs often require between USD 3,000 and USD 8,000 per year, with some joint-degree programs exceeding USD 10,000 annually.[25] According to household income surveys, more than 70 percent of Vietnamese households earn less than USD 5,000 per year, meaning that participation in international programs is effectively restricted to the top income quintile.[26] In practice, access to internationalized higher education is less a matter of academic merit than of financial capacity.

This financial stratification produces what can be described as a two-track university system. On one track are standard public programs, characterized by large class sizes, limited instructional resources, Vietnamese-language instruction, and weaker links to global academic networks. On the other track are internationalized programs, featuring smaller cohorts, English-medium instruction, foreign faculty, enhanced facilities, and stronger labor market signaling power. These tracks coexist within the same institutions, often on the same campuses, yet they serve fundamentally different social groups and lead to markedly different life chances.

From the perspective of Nancy Fraser's theory of redistribution, this configuration represents a failure of distributive justice. Internationalization in Vietnam has been financed primarily through household contributions rather than public redistribution. Instead of socializing the costs of global integration, the state has effectively privatized them, allowing international programs to operate as revenue-generating units within public universities. As a result, access to globally valued credentials is distributed according to ability to pay rather than social need or collective investment priorities. The expansion of international programs thus does not correct pre-existing inequalities but amplifies them by offering superior educational goods to those who are already economically advantaged.

Data on student composition further confirm this distributive imbalance. Survey-based estimates indicate that students enrolled in international programs disproportionately come from urban areas, particularly Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and from households in the highest income quintile.[27] Ethnic minority students and those from rural or mountainous regions are virtually absent from these programs, with participation rates often below 2 percent. Even when merit-based criteria formally apply, the preparatory advantages required to meet them, such as advanced English proficiency, access to international curricula in secondary education, and private test preparation, are themselves unequally distributed along class and ethnic lines. Meritocracy, in this context, functions less as a neutral selection mechanism and more as a legitimizing discourse for inherited privilege.

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[25] Nguyen Thanh Hien, "Inequality in Investment and Access to Education for Children: An Analysis from the Vietnam Household Living Standards Survey," *JOURNAL OF ASIAN BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC STUDIES* 35, no. 5 (May 1, 2024): 55–70, doi:10.24311/jabes/2024.35.5.3.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Vu Hoang and Nguyễn, "Analysis of Access and Equity in Higher Education System in Vietnam."

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Beyond redistribution, the internationalization agenda also fails on the dimension of recognition. Fraser emphasizes that justice requires not only fair distribution of resources but also equal respect and cultural recognition. In Vietnam's internationalized higher education landscape, global—largely Western—academic norms are implicitly positioned as superior, while local knowledge systems, languages, and educational trajectories are devalued.[28] English proficiency becomes a proxy for intelligence and employability, and international degrees are symbolically elevated above domestic qualifications.

This hierarchy of recognition has tangible consequences. Students in international programs are frequently portrayed as more "modern," "global," and "employable," while those in standard programs are framed as locally bound or less competitive.[29] Such symbolic distinctions reinforce class-based stigma and normalize inequality as a difference in "quality" rather than a consequence of structural exclusion. For ethnic minority students, this misrecognition is compounded by cultural and linguistic marginalization, as international programs rarely accommodate diverse epistemologies or non-dominant identities. Instead of recognizing difference, internationalization imposes a homogenizing global standard that privileges those already aligned with dominant cultural capital.

The gender dimension of internationalized access further illustrates the limits of recognition-based justice. While aggregate data show that women are increasingly represented in higher education overall, their participation in high-cost international programs remains uneven. Women from affluent urban backgrounds are well represented, but those from rural or low-income households face intersecting barriers related to cost, family expectations, and labor market pressures. Gender parity at the aggregate level thus masks deep intra-gender inequalities shaped by class and geography. Recognition without redistribution, in this sense, produces a superficial equality that fails to address structural disadvantage.

The third dimension of Fraser's framework (representation) reveals an even deeper democratic deficit in Vietnam's internationalization strategy. Decisions regarding the design, pricing, and expansion of international programs are typically made by central authorities and university administrators, often in consultation with foreign partners, but with minimal participation from students, families, or marginalized communities. Those most affected by rising costs and stratified access have little voice in shaping policy priorities. Internationalization is thus governed by technocratic and market-oriented rationalities rather than participatory deliberation about social goals.

This lack of representation is evident in student loan and financial aid policies. While loan schemes exist, they are generally insufficient to cover the full cost of international programs and are often tied to strict eligibility criteria that exclude informal-sector households or ethnic minorities lacking formal documentation. Moreover, students and families have limited influence over the terms of these loans, including interest rates and repayment

[28] Jung Hyun Ryu and Anh Thuy Nguyen, "Internationalization of Higher Education in Vietnam: Current Situations, Policies, and Challenges," *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development* 23, no. 3 (August 6, 2021): 227–41, doi:10.1108/IJCED-10-2020-0074.
[29] Le Ha, "Higher Education, English, and the Idea of 'the West': Globalizing and Encountering a Global South Regional University."

conditions. The result is a system in which households assume significant financial risk without meaningful representation in decision-making processes that determine the structure of that risk.

Internationalization also reshapes labor market outcomes in ways that further entrench inequality. Graduates of international programs enjoy disproportionate access to high-paying jobs in multinational corporations, international NGOs, and elite domestic firms. Employers frequently treat international degrees as positional goods, signals of distinction that differentiate candidates even when skill differences are marginal.[30] This positional value reinforces the incentive for affluent families to invest heavily in international education, while simultaneously raising the bar for labor market entry for graduates of standard programs. Education, rather than functioning as an equalizer, becomes a mechanism of relative advantage.

From a justice perspective, this dynamic undermines the egalitarian promise of higher education. When internationalized credentials serve primarily to differentiate elites rather than to expand collective capacity, the social return on educational investment becomes unevenly distributed. Public universities, originally designed as instruments of national development and social mobility, risk being transformed into segmented marketplaces in which access to quality is stratified by price. The narrative of meritocracy plays a central role in legitimizing this stratification. Policy discourse often emphasizes that international programs are open to all who meet academic and language requirements, framing unequal participation as the outcome of individual effort rather than structural constraint. This narrative obscures the cumulative advantages enjoyed by students from wealthier backgrounds and deflects attention away from distributive and representational failures. Meritocracy, in this context, functions ideologically to naturalize inequality and to shield policy choices from normative critique.

Critically, the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam does not occur in a vacuum but interacts with existing inequalities in earlier stages of education. Access to high-quality English instruction, international curricula, and exam preparation is already stratified at the secondary level. International programs at the tertiary level thus crystallize inequalities produced earlier in the educational pipeline, transforming them into durable differences in credentials and labor market outcomes. Without substantial public investment in equalizing preparatory conditions, internationalization merely redistributes opportunity upward. Viewed through Fraser's tripartite lens, the justice deficit of internationalized higher education in Vietnam becomes clear. Redistribution is insufficient because costs are shifted to households rather than being pooled socially. Recognition is distorted because globalized norms are privileged at the expense of local diversity and dignity. Representation is absent because those excluded from international programs have little voice in shaping the policies that govern them. These three dimensions of injustice are mutually reinforcing, producing a system that appears inclusive on the surface but is exclusionary in practice.

The sharp implication of this analysis is that internationalization, as currently configured, operates less as a pathway to global integration than as a mechanism of internal

[30] Ryu and Nguyen, "Internationalization of Higher Education in Vietnam: Current Situations, Policies, and Challenges."

social stratification. Rather than narrowing gaps, it institutionalizes a hierarchy of educational experiences and outcomes aligned with class, geography, and ethnicity. The promise of global citizenship becomes a commodity purchased by the few, while the many remain confined to less valued educational tracks. Addressing this injustice requires rethinking internationalization not as a market strategy but as a public good. From a redistribution standpoint, greater public subsidization of international programs and targeted support for disadvantaged students are essential. Curricula and pedagogies must value local knowledge and diverse identities rather than treating global standards as universally superior. From a representation standpoint, policy-making processes must include the voices of students and communities most affected by rising costs and stratified access. Without such reforms, the internationalization of higher education in Vietnam will continue to offer the appearance of progress while deepening social divides. Expansion alone is not justice, and global integration without equity risks transforming higher education into one of the most powerful engines of inequality in the post–Đổi Mới era.

3.3. Financing Higher Education: From Public Good to Private Burden

The transformation of higher education financing in Vietnam over the past three decades represents one of the most profound yet under-theorized dimensions of post–Đổi Mới educational reform.[31] While policy discourse frequently highlights expansion, diversification, and cost-sharing as necessary responses to fiscal constraints and rising demand, the distributive and normative consequences of these changes have received far less critical attention. Empirical evidence suggests that approximately 45 percent of total higher education costs in Vietnam are now borne directly by households, a proportion that signals a decisive shift away from public financing toward private responsibility.[32] This reconfiguration of financing not only alters who pays for higher education but also fundamentally reshapes who bears risk, who benefits, and whose interests are prioritized within the system.

This shift marks a departure from the conception of higher education as a public good toward its treatment as a private investment with unequal and uncertain returns. While cost-sharing is often justified on efficiency grounds, the Vietnamese case demonstrates that such arrangements can be deeply regressive, imposing disproportionate burdens on low-income households while reinforcing pre-existing inequalities in access and outcomes. Financing, in this sense, is not a neutral technical issue but a central mechanism through which injustice is produced and legitimized.

Data from national household surveys indicate that tuition fees and associated costs, such as accommodation, learning materials, and transportation, constitute a share of household expenditure for families with children in tertiary education. For households in the lowest income quintile, education-related spending can account for up to 25–30 percent of annual income, compared to less than 10 percent for households in the highest quintile.[33] This disparity reveals the inherently regressive nature of the current financing model: the poorer the household, the greater the relative sacrifice required to participate in higher education. In

[31] To, "Some Characteristics of the Changing Social Structure in Rural Vietnam under Doi Moi."
[32] Nguyen and Thieu, "Well-Being and Capability Approaches to Social Injustice in Internationalization of Higher Education: Evidence from Vietnam."
[33] Hayden and Thi Ly, "Higher Education Access and Inclusion: Lessons from Vietnam."

absolute terms, affluent households pay more, but in relative terms, the financial strain on poor households is substantially heavier.

This regressivity is further compounded by unequal access to credit and financial buffering mechanisms. While wealthier households are better positioned to finance education through savings or asset liquidation, low-income families often rely on informal borrowing or high-interest loans to cover costs. Student loan schemes, where available, are frequently insufficient in both coverage and generosity, often failing to account for the full cost of attendance. As a result, households at the bottom of the income distribution shoulder the highest financial risk, facing the possibility of debt without guaranteed returns in the labor market.

Nancy Fraser's dimension of redistribution provides a powerful lens through which to evaluate these dynamics. Redistribution concerns the equitable allocation of resources and burdens across society. In the context of Vietnamese higher education, the current financing regime violates this principle by allocating costs regressively and benefits selectively. Public subsidies, rather than being targeted toward those with the greatest need, are increasingly diluted or redirected toward institutional expansion and revenue-generating programs. The state's retreat from full public financing effectively transfers the burden of educational investment from society at large to individual households, undermining the redistributive function of higher education.

Empirical enrollment data illustrate the redistributive consequences of this shift. Participation rates in tertiary education rise sharply with household income, with enrollment among youth from the top income quintile exceeding 60 percent, compared to less than 10 percent among those from the bottom quintile. These gaps persist even after controlling for academic performance, suggesting that financial constraints, rather than ability alone, play a decisive role in shaping access. Higher education financing thus operates as a gatekeeping mechanism, filtering students not by merit but by economic capacity. The redistribution problem is not limited to access but extends to outcomes. Returns to higher education in Vietnam are highly stratified, varying significantly by institution type, field of study, and program prestige. Graduates from elite or internationalized programs enjoy substantially higher earnings premiums than those from standard public institutions, even when holding similar qualifications. Because access to these high-return programs is itself income-dependent, the financing system effectively channels public and private resources toward reproducing advantage rather than promoting social mobility. Education becomes an amplifier of inequality rather than a corrective force.

Beyond redistribution, the financing shift also raises critical issues of recognition. Fraser emphasizes that justice requires not only fair distribution but also the equal respect and valuation of different social groups. In Vietnam's higher education financing discourse, students and families are increasingly framed as consumers responsible for investing in their own human capital. This framing implicitly valorizes self-reliance and market rationality while stigmatizing those who struggle to pay as lacking foresight or effort. Financial hardship is individualized rather than recognized as a structural constraint. This consumerist framing has symbolic consequences. Students from low-income backgrounds are often compelled to combine full-time study with paid work, leading to longer completion times, lower academic

performance, and higher dropout rates. Yet these outcomes are rarely recognized as manifestations of systemic inequality. Instead, they are interpreted as individual shortcomings. The failure to recognize the structural nature of financial barriers reinforces social stigma and legitimizes unequal outcomes as deserved rather than unjust.

Ethnic minority students experience particularly acute misrecognition within this financing regime.[34] Coming disproportionately from poor and rural households, they face intersecting disadvantages related to income, geography, and language. While nominal fee exemptions or reductions may exist, they often fail to cover indirect costs or to address broader barriers such as limited access to information and administrative complexity. Moreover, the cultural and historical marginalization of ethnic minorities is rarely acknowledged in the design of financing policies, which tend to assume a homogeneous student population. The absence of culturally sensitive recognition mechanisms further entrenches exclusion.

Gender dynamics also complicate the recognition dimension of financing. Although women's enrollment rates in higher education have increased and in some cases surpassed those of men, this apparent parity obscures gendered financial vulnerabilities. Female students from low-income households may face stronger family pressures to contribute economically or to prioritize siblings' education, particularly in rural areas.[35] Financing policies that treat households as unitary decision-makers fail to recognize these intra-household power dynamics, resulting in gendered patterns of exclusion that remain largely invisible in aggregate data.

The third dimension of Fraser's framework (representation) reveals perhaps the most systemic injustice embedded in Vietnam's higher education financing model. Representation concerns who has a voice and influence in decision-making processes that shape social arrangements. In Vietnam, key decisions regarding tuition levels, cost-sharing ratios, and loan schemes are typically made by central authorities and university administrators, with limited consultation with students, families, or marginalized communities. Those who bear the greatest financial burden are the least represented in the formulation of financing policy. This representational deficit is evident in the design of student loan programs. Loan ceilings are often set without meaningful input from borrowers, resulting in coverage that falls short of actual costs. Repayment terms may not reflect labor market realities, particularly for graduates entering low-paying or informal employment. Furthermore, grievance and feedback mechanisms are weak, leaving students with little recourse when financing arrangements prove unsustainable. The lack of participatory governance reinforces a top-down model in which financial risk is imposed rather than collectively negotiated. Representation is also skewed at the institutional level. Universities increasingly rely on tuition revenue to sustain operations and to fund expansion, creating incentives to prioritize fee-paying students and programs. Governance structures often privilege managerial and market-oriented perspectives over those of students and academic staff. As a result, discussions about affordability and equity are subordinated to concerns about financial viability and competitiveness. The voices of low-income students, who are most affected by rising costs, remain marginal in institutional decision-making.

[34] Duc, "Addressing Gender Issues in Education, Training for Vietnam's Ethnic Minorities."
[35] Ibid.

The combined effect of failures in redistribution, recognition, and representation is a higher education financing system that systematically disadvantages the poor while appearing neutral or even progressive. By framing education as a private investment, the state absolves itself of responsibility for ensuring equitable access and outcomes. Risk is individualized, success is privatized, and failure is moralized. This configuration aligns with broader neoliberal logics but sits uneasily with the egalitarian aspirations often associated with education in post-socialist contexts. The notion of higher education as a public good rests on the idea that its benefits extend beyond individual graduates to society as a whole, through enhanced productivity, civic engagement, and social cohesion. Financing higher education primarily through households undermines this logic by disconnecting social benefits from social responsibility.[36] When individuals are expected to shoulder nearly half of the cost, education becomes a speculative investment rather than a collective commitment. For low-income households, this speculation is fraught with uncertainty, as labor market returns are neither uniform nor guaranteed. Empirical labor market data underscore this uncertainty. While average returns to tertiary education remain positive, variance is high, and underemployment among graduates has increased, particularly in fields with oversupply. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who lack social networks and geographic mobility, the risk of low or delayed returns is especially pronounced. Financing policies that ignore this heterogeneity effectively transfer labor market risk onto those least able to absorb it.

The Vietnamese case illustrates the dangers of conflating expansion with equity. Increased enrollment and institutional growth do not automatically translate into fairer outcomes when financing structures are regressive, and governance is exclusionary. Without robust redistributive mechanisms, recognition of structural disadvantage, and inclusive representation, higher education expansion can deepen rather than diminish inequality. Reorienting higher education financing toward justice requires a fundamental shift in policy imagination. Redistribution would entail increasing public investment and targeting subsidies toward students from low-income and marginalized backgrounds, thereby reducing their relative burden. Recognition would require acknowledging the structural nature of financial barriers and designing policies that account for diversity in household circumstances and cultural contexts. Representation would demand the inclusion of students and communities in decision-making processes, transforming financing from a technocratic exercise into a democratic deliberation. Absent such reforms, higher education in Vietnam risks becoming a stratified system in which opportunity is formally open but substantively unequal. The shift from public good to private burden is not merely a fiscal adjustment; it is a normative transformation that reshapes the moral economy of education. When the costs of learning are privatized and risks individualized, justice is not simply deferred; it is actively undermined.

[36] Walter W. McMahon, "The External Social Benefits of Higher Education: Theory, Evidence, and Policy Implications," *Journal of Education Finance* 49, no. 4 (March 2024): 387–421, doi:10.1353/jef.2024.a954739; José-Ginés Mora, "Equity in Financing and Access to Higher Education," *Higher Education in Europe* 22, no. 2 (January 1997): 145–54, doi:10.1080/0379772970220204; Gerald Turkel, "Financing Higher Education: Privatization, Resistance and Renewal," *Journal of Collective Bargaining in the Academy*, no. 1 (May 8, 2012), doi:10.58188/1941-8043.1022.

4. Conclusions

The overall analysis demonstrates that the post–Đổi Mới expansion of higher education in Vietnam has not translated into social justice. While quantitative indicators such as the Gross Enrolment Ratio suggest substantial growth, this expansion has unfolded within a policy architecture that systematically reproduces structural inequalities. Disparities in access across income groups, ethnic categories, and geographic locations are not transitional anomalies but rather predictable outcomes of financing arrangements, governance choices, and the market-oriented trajectory of higher education internationalization.

Drawing on Nancy Fraser's framework of social justice, this study argues that injustice in Vietnam's higher education system is tripartite in nature. In terms of redistribution, the substantial transfer of educational costs to households has produced a regressive system that disproportionately excludes low-income populations. In terms of recognition, dominant narratives of meritocracy and individual investment obscure the structural barriers faced by disadvantaged groups, including ethnic minorities and students from poorer households. In terms of representation, those most affected by inequitable access remain largely absent from decision-making processes shaping higher education policy. This study, therefore, concludes that higher education in Vietnam has shifted from a vehicle of social mobility to a mechanism of social stratification. Without a policy reorientation grounded in redistribution, recognition, and representation, the continued expansion of higher education will increase participation in statistical terms while failing to fulfill its promise as an instrument of social justice.

5. Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who supported and assisted in the writing of this article, particularly our colleagues. We also extend special thanks to the various institutions that provided resources and facilities, as well as to our families for their unwavering support.

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