

Equity-Washing in a Socialist-Market Economy: How Vietnam's Reformed Admissions Landscape Restructures Risk for the Urban Middle-Income Majority

Duong Thuy Nguyen

Research Overview

This paper introduces equity-washing as an analytical concept for reforms that adopt the language of democratisation while structurally intensifying inequality among those nominally included. Drawing on a qualitative case study in Hanoi, it positions Vietnam's admissions reforms within a comparative analysis of socialist-market economies.

Purpose of Study

Comparative scholarship on educational equity has tended to focus on populations excluded from formal systems. This paper shifts attention to a different demographic: students who are structurally included but materially extracted, possessing just enough capital to participate in a reformed system but not enough to do so safely. It proposes equity-washing as a conceptual framework for reforms that invoke the rhetoric of inclusion and global alignment while reproducing stratification among those they nominally serve.

Vietnam offers a comparatively significant case. Between 2017 and 2025, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) shifted from a single national examination to a hybrid model incorporating international credentials such as IELTS, SAT, and ACT alongside domestic alternatives including the VSAT, HSA, and V-ACT. In May 2025, weeks before the national entrance examination, MOET abruptly reversed course, abolishing early admissions and recalibrating scoring through percentile rankings. These dynamics parallel patterns documented in China's gaokao reform debates, where the surface fairness of unified systems masks structurally reproduced urban advantage and a booming shadow education economy. Vietnam, like China, occupies an analytically productive position: a party-state socialist context deploying neoliberal policy instruments without claiming neoliberal identity. The paper asks how urban middle-income students in Hanoi navigate a reformed system that frames participation as opportunity while structuring it as risk, and how equity-washing operates as a transnational mechanism of governance in socialist-market economies.

Research Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, cross-sectional case study design situated within public high schools in Hanoi. Semi-structured interviews with two participants form the core of the data, with each invited to engage in two thirty-minute sessions for rapport and reflection. Interviews elicited detailed accounts of how participants experience the trade-offs of multiple admissions pathways, with emphasis on meaning-making rather than verification of objective conditions, consistent with a social constructionist epistemology.

Sampling was purposive and strategically bounded, targeting middle-income public school students simultaneously engaging with three or more admissions pathways. Rural students, single-pathway candidates, and fully self-taught learners were excluded to preserve analytical clarity. Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, with codes developed inductively. Member checking reinforced participants' epistemic authority. The researcher's positionality as a private tutor working with this demographic is acknowledged as both an analytical resource and an ethical tension, aligning with Ball's (2012) concept of the policy entrepreneur. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Manchester.

Results and Discussion

Four themes emerged. First, support systems function as cultural capital: pathway diversification, framed as democratisation, requires navigational infrastructure unevenly distributed even within the middle-income band. One participant, scaffolded by a mother who had previously guided an older sibling through the system, navigated the reforms with relative confidence; the other, relying on lateral peer networks and reactive self-research, described the process as “pure chaos.” The same policy produced markedly different experiences for students of nominally equivalent socioeconomic status, exposing how flexibility places an implicit demand on students to possess the literacy and networks required to navigate complexity (Ball, 2015).

Second, perceived fairness revealed divergent ideological responses. One student adopted a structurally oriented critique aligned with redistributive justice frameworks (Fraser, 1997; Rawls, 1971), affirming the equity rationale of MOET's 2025 reversal even while personally disadvantaged by it; the other employed a meritocratic logic locating inequality in differential

parental effort. This divergence within a single class complicates assumptions about the political homogeneity of the urban middle class.

Third, policy turbulence operates as neoliberal governance. MOET's reform cycle, marked by rapid introduction, uneven implementation, and abrupt reversal, exemplifies what Rosa (2013) terms social acceleration and what Ball (2015) identifies as performative governance.

Curriculum and assessment were misaligned, and teachers could not deliver the competency-based pedagogy the reformed examinations demanded. Students absorbed this incoherence individually, in patterns paralleling the shadow education dynamics documented in Chinese contexts.

Fourth, students engaged in strategic navigation under constraint. Facing informational overload and institutional opacity, both pursued multiple admissions routes simultaneously, driven not by empowerment but by fear of exclusion. As one noted, classmates “took 3–4 exams simultaneously and failed all.” This paradox of diversification, widening access in theory while intensifying precarity in practice, is the operational logic of equity-washing.

The paper argues that equity-washing is not incidental to these reforms but constitutive of them: the mechanism through which neoliberal risk redistribution is rendered politically legitimate within a socialist-market state. By centring the lived realities of those nominally included but materially extracted, the research contributes a transnational analytical concept to comparative education research.

Keywords

equity-washing; neoliberal governance; admissions reform; socialist-market economy; Vietnam