



How the High-Stakes and College Entrance Exam Affects Students' Perception: Implication on Management Policy in Higher Education

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Abstract

Purpose – Vietnam's education system has undergone numerous changes. One of the significant reforms is the college admissions process which all high school seniors are obliged to go through the High School Graduation Examination (HSGE). Despite its significance, there is lack of research to examine the effects of high-stakes and nationally standardized exams on students' learning experiences. By applying the concept of washback, the purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive qualitative analysis of students' perceptions and learning experiences when preparing for and taking the HSGE.

Research design, data, and methodology – 20 high school seniors were participated in this study. This study utilized a stratified sampling methods and randomly selected participants.

Result – This study revealed that the washback effect of the HSGE strongly existed in students' learning experiences. This study also found that there is a negative washback effect of the HSGE on students' learning, particularly for those living in rural areas although Vietnamese schools and communities shared unequal educational and socioeconomic resources.

Conclusion – The results of this study would be useful for policymakers to provide better assessment system to enhance students' ability and reduce exam pressure. This study also makes suggestions in regard to bringing more formative types of assessment into the high-stakes and nationally standardized exam.

Keywords : Higher Education, College Entrance Exam, Students' Perception and Learning, Management Policy

JEL Classification Code: I21, I23, I28

1. Introduction

Many countries use standardized tests as a national exam to improve the quality of education and training at all levels (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019). Vietnam is no exception to the global fixation on education quality. However, with numerous government reforms, entrance exams for higher education have remained a point of contention in Vietnamese society (Dao & Thorpe, 2015). This resulted from the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)'s decision to combine the high school graduation exam and the college entrance exam into a single High School Graduation Examination (hereinafter referred to as the HSGE) aim to simplify the exam-taking processes and give students a chance to apply multiple colleges and major choices (Pham, 2015). The two examinations, however, did not share the same purposes. According to 2014 statistics, students passed the Grade 12 diploma exam with nearly absolute proportion of 99.02% (Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam, 2014), while the number of students accepted to higher education institutions were limited. Recent modifications regarding the HSGE have been extensively and quickly announced in the media, while officials seldom explain the implications of any policy change and how such changes in its education system can reduce stress and expenses for all students, ensuring transparency and objectivity of the exam. Therefore, new policy adjustment with rationale to reform educational program is necessarily prepared by the government. Subsequently, this will create a view that the exam strategy is a top-down, ever-changing, and provisional initiative (Nguyen, 2020). Additionally, student-centered approaches should be emphasized via substantive and structural education reforms, while there is lack of communication between policymakers and high school students. Therefore, this raises an important question in the field of education in Vietnam, how does the HSGE affect high school students' perceptions?

This study pinpoints factors concerning the question. First, standardized test scores are always utilized in making admissions decisions and distinguish students' priorities in college admissions for all test-takers during the years. While new policies allow students to have a chance to apply more number of colleges and major choices compared to the previous years after completing the HSGE, the test-based admissions system has been criticized for putting an undue load on high school seniors, who should be spending a significant amount of time studying for the exam. Instead of merely completing three independent tests for the college entrance exam, all students must take three additional compulsory tests, including Vietnamese, mathematics, and a foreign language (mainly English), with an individual choice of either natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics) or social sciences (geography, history, civic education). The questions are primarily multiple-choice focusing mainly on theoretical frameworks instead of encouraging students to develop comprehensively. Since there is only a chance to retake the exam without additional alternatives, students need to apply universities overseas only if they could afford to it.

Another problem is generated with the fact that local governments take responsibility for the procedures and control of HSGE rather than universities and colleges. Their responsibilities range from arranging and marking students' test locations to publishing the results. The exam results are ranked based on province, high schools became more competitive and are required to spend more time with senior high school students with burdens. These results imply that both students and teachers must endure severe levels of stress and excessive expectations preparing for the final exam. According to a 2019 poll by the Ministry of Health, 15% of the 95 million Vietnamese have mental disease because of stress, with the majority of the respondents being the young (Nga, 2019). Academic pressure, which comes not only from friends and family but also from society as a whole, is one of the key significant social problems.

Third, given the nature of a make-or-break exam, test security is paramount to the central and local governments at all levels. In fact, cheating has become an urgent issue in Vietnam. Recently, hundreds of students who took the HSGE in 2018 had their results unlawfully boosted (Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam, 2018), sparking a widespread public outcry over the months. After several rural provinces showed disproportionately high percentages of students with better test results, the test scam was discovered (Minh, 2019). Therefore, there has been an increasingly public debate about the transparency and fairness of Vietnam's current college entrance examination system.

Given the extent and importance of Vietnam's admissions process, it became essential to consider students' perspectives on the exam. The extensive use of the examination scores for different purposes has made the washback effect on teaching and learning, both in general education and exams at all levels. By using the concept of washback, defined as the effect of a test on teaching and learning (e.g., Green, 2007; Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004; Alderson & Wall, 1993), this paper aims to find out the perspectives of test-takers about the HSGE and its effects on students' learning experiences. Then, it focuses on elaborating their beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives in Vietnam where standardized test results have been used since 2002 to connect students with higher education institutions via a centralized system. This study centers on answering the following questions: 1) what are students' perceptions and attitudes toward the HSGE, and how does the exam change their learning? And 2) what are the effects of the HSGE on students' learning experiences?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Entrance Exams in Higher Education

Standardized examinations have increasingly become important in many parts of the world due to their functions of assessing students' competence, certifying students' achievement levels, and selecting potential students for higher levels of education (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019). For instance, American students are required to take one or more standardized examinations, such as the American College Testing (ACT) or the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) each year until they achieve expected scores (Carini, Powell, & Steelman, 2000). In addition to the above-standardized tests, universities will review carefully applicants' transcripts, the quality of their high school accomplishment and personal statements that are submitted along with the application, and other verification that correspond to the applicants' high school achievements, such as participation in other contests or extracurricular activities (Rigol, 2003). In contrast, test-oriented education has been practiced in Asian countries for thousands of years. In many Asian nations, students are expected to spend enough time preparing for national examinations by putting extreme pressure on themselves (Allen, 2016). In China, taking the GaoKao test (i.e., the national college entrance examination), which is offered once a year, is seen to be the only option for many Chinese students to get admission to public higher education institutions. Chinese students are permitted to take the test after finishing all high school courses managed by the Chinese Ministry of Education (Muthanna & Sang, 2015). As a result, the GaoKao test tends to emphasize measuring students' academic accomplishments through rote learning rather than developing students' abilities and talents (Zhu, 2014).

Vietnam likewise places a high value on test-based education. As part of numerous Asian countries that adhere to the Confucian worldview, education in Vietnam is seen as the most appropriate means of achieving upward mobility (Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Pham & Fry, 2004). A college degree, particularly one from a prominent public university, is also frequently connected with increased social prestige and job opportunities (Choi & Nieminen, 2013). At the same time this created an assumption that Vietnamese students have a great desire to attend college (Dao & Thorpe, 2015). In comparison to the importance of the entrance test representing degrees and secure positions in the future, there is a paucity of research that concentrates on the HSGE and related policies in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2020).

2.2. The Concept of Washback

This study borrows the concept of washback to explore the perspectives of students toward the HSGE. Washback has received much attention from scholars in the field of education, specifically focusing on applied linguistics (e.g., Green, 2007; Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004; Alderson & Wall, 1993). Hughes (1993) proposed a basic model of washback by distinguishing the effects of washback among participants, processes, and products (see Figure 1). In this model, "participants" are people affected by tests, such as teachers, learners, and administrators, while "processes" focus on participants' activities and actions regarding tests such as teaching methods or learning goals (Hugh, 1993). Meanwhile, "products" refer to the outcomes of these processes including scores on tests, skills, the quality of learning, etc (Hugh, 1993). Drawing on Hughes' (1993) model and literature review on washback, Bailey (1996) further developed the model, when he demonstrated the relationships between linguistic tests and teaching or learning as well as the interaction among different educational factors. According to Bailey (1996), washback was divided into two aspects: (1) the impacts of tests on learners and (2) how tests affect teachers, administrators, and counselors. To illustrate a broader view of the concept, Bachman and Palmer (1996) considered washback at macro and micro levels and found that while the effect of tests on educational systems and the whole society are micro-level examples, learners and learning processes, as well as teachers and teaching methods, are impacted by tests at the micro-level. Given its central interest in test-takers, the design of this study is based on Hughes (1993)' and Bailey (1996)' model and particular attention is paid to washback effects on learners.

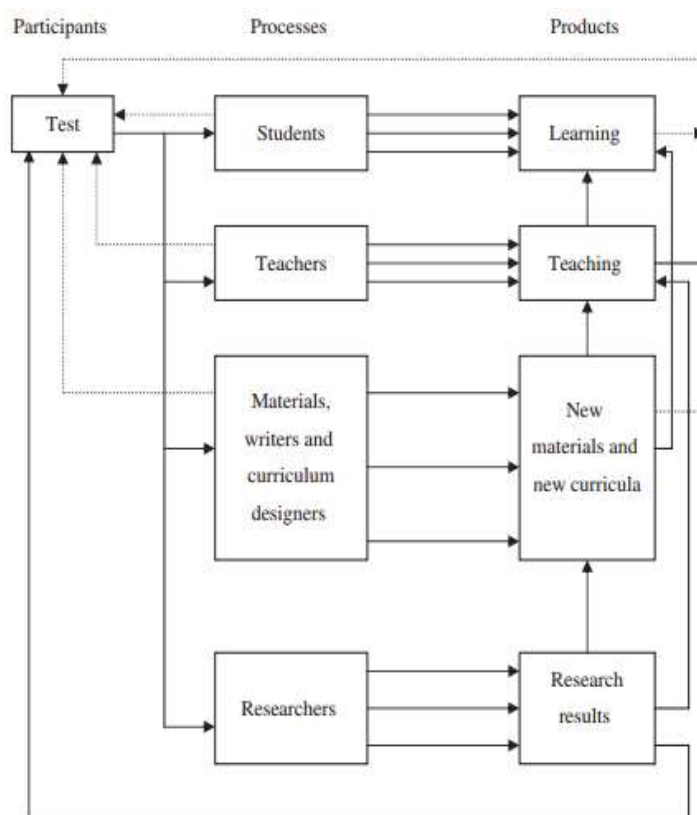


Figure 1: A Basic Model of Washback (Hughes, 1993)

2.3. Washback on Teaching and Learning

An increasing number of studies have focused on investigating the washback effects of linguistic tests and English exams in different contexts and countries. For instance, Alderson and Wall (1993) systematized the investigation of washback issues and suggested a set of possible hypotheses regarding the differences between effects on attitudes and effects on teaching and learning content. However, since most of the relevant studies have examined how linguistic tests impact teaching methods and classroom practices (e.g., Hamp-Lyons, 1998; Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Watanabe, 1996), the effects of washback on students' learning experiences, particularly regarding English exams or high-stakes examinations have not been paid much attention by researchers (e.g., Xiao, Sharpling, & Liu, 2011; Virkiru, 2011; Gosa, 2004; Andrews, Fullilove, & Wong, 2002). The study of Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), which evaluated how internationally standardized tests like TOEFL can affect teaching methods, pointed out that washback effects are different among teachers. Nevertheless, the study by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) also confirmed that there is no solid evidence that following the tests' format can help students improve their scores. Watanabe (1996) acknowledged that teacher-related factors, such as educational background and teaching methods, are more important than the possible effects of an English test in entrance exams. It was further supported by the study of Hamp-Lyons (1998) that poor teaching practices in English classes might result from a pervasive culture within the English language teaching profession instead of being influenced by the format and content of the test itself.

Regarding students' learning, Andrews, Fullilove, and Wong (2002) discovered how incorporating an English-speaking test into entrance examinations for higher education affects students' learning and found that students' vocal performance has significantly improved. The study of Gosa (2004), which examined the effects of washback by analyzing student diaries, confirmed that academic expectations of students have a crucial role in explaining their viewpoints and attitudes toward teaching and learning activities in school. Although practicing test papers is inevitable when preparing for English exams, students can monitor their learning process through metacognitive plans and lowering anxiety through effective strategies (Xiao, Sharpling, & Liu, 2011). Additionally, Virkiru (2011) acknowledged that students tend to perform poorly on subjects and skills that are not included in examinations.

In summary, scholars have attempted to explore the effect of washback in linguistic tests instead of high-stakes examinations, which include English and other subjects, such as mathematics or literature. Hence, we are especially interested in understanding how the high-stakes and nationally standardized exam affects students' learning experiences. This research not only provides a new contextual application of washback regarding entrance exams for higher education but also sheds light on what students think about this national exam.

3. Methodology

3.1. Selection of Research Region

Collecting data from all high school students in Vietnam is not possible for this study. Therefore, we decided to choose Hanoi as the research region because of its student diversity in terms of geographical location and social and ethnic compositions after Hanoi merged and extended its administrative boundaries to include suburbs and rural areas since 2008. Given the huge number of higher education institutions located in Hanoi as well as the volume of students, Hanoi has become the ultimate educational choice for many Vietnamese generations. When it comes to the HSGE, this extension provides a great opportunity to explore the perception of students from different backgrounds.

3.2. Research Design

Apart from collecting policies on entrance exams for higher education, this study also developed the lists of questions to identify students' feelings and perspectives and their learning regarding the HSGE and to find whether this exam influences students' experiences. Comparing to other methods, a qualitative approach was applied in present study because we could explore questions to a deeper level. Additionally, the results of the qualitative research provided inner feelings of respondents based on their experience that might not be revealed from the quantified data. In this paper, the participants consist of 20 students who are randomly selected from different high schools in Hanoi. To participate in this study, students must have the cognitive abilities and verbal skills to assent to the research study and have already taken the HSGE for college admissions. Additionally, we started by utilizing a stratified sampling methodology to identify individuals from two separate locations before randomly picking 20 high school seniors. Since areas of Hanoi consist of urban and non-urban districts, this study selected 10 students from rural areas and another 10 students from non-rural areas.

Table 1: Sociodemographic of the Interviewees

#	Name	Year born	Gender	High school location	Date of Interview
1	A	2002	Female	Rural	04/02/2021
2	B	2002	Male	Urban	04/02/2021
3	C	2002	Male	Rural	04/02/2021
4	D	2002	Female	Urban	04/02/2021
5	E	2002	Female	Rural	04/03/2021
6	F	2002	Male	Rural	04/03/2021
7	G	2002	Female	Urban	04/03/2021
8	H	2002	Female	Urban	04/03/2021
9	I	2002	Female	Rural	04/06/2021
10	J	2002	Female	Rural	04/06/2021
11	K	2002	Male	Urban	04/06/2021
12	L	2002	Male	Urban	04/06/2021
13	M	2002	Female	Rural	04/07/2021
14	N	2002	Male	Urban	04/07/2021
15	O	2002	Female	Urban	04/07/2021

16	P	2002	Female	Rural	04/07/2021
17	Q	2002	Female	Rural	04/08/2021
18	R	2002	Male	Urban	04/08/2021
19	S	2002	Male	Rural	04/08/2021
20	T	2002	Female	Urban	04/08/2021

To examine the students’ perceptions about the HSGE, this study prepared interview questions that were used during data collection. The questions were developed based on the literature and the research questions, focusing on students’ perceptions and their learning experiences toward the HSGE. We specifically focused on how the exam changes students’ perspectives and how such understanding has an impact on learning experiences.

After informing the students about the objectives of the study, the interviews were conducted with students. During the interviews, students were asked to share their backgrounds, future plans, and motivation behind their educational decisions. Also, we made a note of interview results and observations during each interview. When interviews were completed, all interview data was translated into English. This study identified significant similarities and differences across students and analyzed major patterns. By acknowledging personal beliefs, we attempted to guarantee that the results would reflect students’ perspectives rather than those of us.

Table 2: Key guiding questions

Perceptions	How do you perceive when taking the national examination? Is the exam difficult for you? If you can only use one word to describe the national examination, what will be the one word?
Purpose of the exam	Do you think that the national examination can properly measure students’ abilities and achievements? Should universities properly use the results of this exam for their admissions? If so, why?
Cheating	What do you think about cheating on the exam? Why does this happen?
Students’ learning experiences	How do you think the national examination has impacted your learning experiences? Do you think that the national examination influences your extracurricular activities? If so, how?

3.3. Data Analysis

This study summarized and characterized the students’ replies to the questions along with some comments offered by the respondents. This study applied the thematic analytical methodology to evaluate coded data, which is known as a method for encoding and assessing qualitative data based on reoccurring themes (Boyatzis, 1998). The thematic method enabled us to uncover and compare themes across interviewees’ institutional and situational contexts, considering that respondents came from various personal backgrounds and attended school in different settings.

4. Findings

4.1. A High-stakes and Nationally Standardized Exam

As mentioned, in Vietnam, students in their final year of high school are required to take only a single exam, that is, the national high school graduation examination, instead of taking two separate exams for different purposes that were applied in the past. In addition, current policies allow students to apply to an unlimited number of colleges and majors with chances to make an amendment to their choices after knowing the final scores. During the interviews, many students expressed that the examination process was complicated, college options should become diverse and significant, and the exam could classify students’ academic level, while the test itself remained difficult. Furthermore, embracing the advantages of this admission

reform, they strategically focused on college entrance over high school graduation and believed that an excellent score on the exam would be a ticket to a top university and a better life in the future. For instance, a rural student, A, stated the following:

I believe that the HSGE is extremely important for all students, especially rural students like me. This is the only one way to be admitted to renowned universities, so I feel stressed and overwhelmed at that time. However, I also feel very comfortable when taking the exam at my own high school instead of going to universities. My family also saves a lot of money because we do not have to go to the city or rent a room when taking the exam. After knowing my final scores, I can adjust my choices to have a better chance of being admitted to university.

Most rural students could not take the IELTS or achieve the national prize to get a place at university; therefore, these students have to try their best to achieve high scores at this exam. In C's response, it was confirmed that the exam was essential, but the level of the exam questions was much lower than he expected.

This exam has always been a battle with generations of Vietnamese students, but I find this year's exam questions were not difficult. It was very easy to get 8 points (out of 10) but getting 10 points requires a lot of research and analysis.

Interviewees, A and C who are low-income rural students expressed extra burdens of achieving high scores in the HSGE. During the final year of high school, many students often devoted themselves to the exam preparations, and they practiced exams almost every day with books and exam papers seen piled up on their desks. However, B, a student living in the urban area felt very relaxed as she already had been accepted by a renowned university in Hanoi when she submitted her IELTS score and high school transcripts. He also added that he must pay a very large amount of money to take English courses as well as take IELTS tests several times to get his expected result. The following includes the content from the interview:

My experience has been pleasant since I had acquired an IELTS certification, which made my university enrollment much less stressful. I just need to pass the floor score to be officially accepted. IELTS preparation is expensive, especially I need a higher band score to meet the university's requirements. Nevertheless, I still study hard another subjects at school in order to demonstrate my abilities and learning process.

This seemed not to be a major concern for students who received an admission letter from their expected colleges and universities before taking the exam because they just needed to pass the universities' floor score, which was significantly lower than the admitted score. Those rural students are at a disadvantage to their wealthy, non-rural counterparts are subject to the criticism of standardized tests.

As of 2021, the HSGE is no longer the only way to get into university, but all students have to pass the HSGE before choosing which options they should apply for college admissions. Even some students already get admitted by universities, if they fail in this exam, it means that they cannot go to universities. An interviewee, B, a student from a gifted school said that the exam only aims to screen hard-working students and completely ignores other factors. While other methods are usually required to students who have a good GPA, a high IELTS score, extracurricular activities, and either an interview or essay test, it was limited in some international universities and colleges instead of being widely applied in universities. Interviewee, B stated the following.

The exam is acceptable in terms of measuring students' academic performances by considering knowledge acquired from twelve years of education. However, a student deserves to take more than one single test. The current system does not truly evaluate and determine students' full potentials and inner capabilities based on only one exam. HSGE only assess some subjects with extremely difficult question, while it does not assess other aspects of student's abilities. It should have another exams or tests to assess student's performances.

Interviewee, B, is currently a first-year student at a renowned university in Vietnam. He added that the exam preparation did not help him much in studying at university, except for English. He also said that "After the exam, that knowledge is not very helpful, so they usually don't stay in my head. In high school, my teachers just teach me how to take the exam and tell me the right answers while they refuse to hear different voices." His language skills could only be useful for test-taking, not for interacting with others. It seems that the HSGE is facing mounting criticism over its effectiveness as it diminishes students' college readiness and ignores expression of individual creative abilities.

4.2. Applying Exams for College Admissions

In Vietnam, although colleges or universities are allowed to establish their own admission requirements, all students have to take the HSGE administered by the government. However, recently, there has been movement in Vietnam which attempts to reform the entrance examination system. The movement endeavors to diversify the criteria utilized in admissions decisions. Besides HSGE, there are different ways to enter into universities. The additional admission system is to evaluate candidates

based on independent tests that are organized by some schools and other documents' reviews including English certificates (i.e., IELTS/TOEFL), high school's transcripts, and other documents offered by schools. Significant problem has raised due to inequalities that come from this approach rather than HSGE. Students who got admitted based on this approach, don't have to aim for higher scores from HSGE.

Interviewee, E who lives in a rural area doubted the fairness in the case of other types of admission procedure beside HSGE as she could not have an opportunity to study English tests to get certificate due to lacking English centers.

Since the HSGE does not fully assess candidates' abilities, it is not the fairest way for universities to choose their students. However, many students need to rely on HSGE, since they do not have enough money to study and take English tests such as the IELTS. Students who expect to get admission based on the additional admission system also aim to receive extra scores such as outstanding performance from well-known contests in the national science and technology contest or receive the name as a national-level excellent student.

Meanwhile, an interviewee, H, a student from the urban stated the following.

I think that even though most of Vietnamese universities apply the HSGE's result, these universities also review other results. For example, additional ability assessment tests organized by some universities are increasingly important. Therefore, potential candidates could be selected by applying other types of criteria adopted by each university.

The interviewee, H also added that students have to take the HSGE and then take tests organized by schools to participate in the ability assessment tests. Therefore, test-takers can enter into university by providing additional tests in addition to the HSGE. However, in real situation, in interviewee H could not make a plan to study IELTS due to personal reasons, therefore, she aims to get higher scores in the HSGE. Even though she lives in urban area, studying IELTS is very expensive, therefore small number of students can have an opportunity to study IELTS/TOEFL to fulfill the requirements.

The results of finding reveal that there were perceived inequalities in the form of college admission among students as many universities accepted international language certificates and high school transcripts, while some test-takers could earn bonus marks besides HSGE. This approach has been becoming entangled in controversies over fairness and equality in the field of education as it disproportionately benefits to test-takers. Therefore, some of them are more likely to get better resources and opportunities to excel in an area.

4.3. Student's Learning Experiences

Many interviewees perceived that going to college has been their ultimate goal after the twelve years of academic career. Students were under tremendous pressure to gain higher scores of HSGE. Some of them mentioned that they were worried because they may not achieve their expected score in the exam. Students were also under a lot of pressure due to the high expectations from their parents and teachers, which eventually could influence their academic outcomes. Even though there are negative aspects, some interviewees also believed that the HSGE provide motivation to study harder. The following results are stated by an interviewee, J.

The HSGE has a high influence on my study. At the beginning of my 3rd year, I have to wait to see whether the MOET changes regulations regarding the exam because my learning styles would be changed accordingly. At that time, I spend most of time on studying, taking more supplement classes in school until at night, while I spent little time to relax and hang out with friends.

According to the interviewee, J's response, it was clear that apart from going to school, she also took some extra classes regarding the exam. Attending extra private tutoring classes and public-operated classes helped them increase their scores significantly. An interviewee, I mentioned positive aspects in terms of learning.

Preparing the exam helps me check and improve the level of my abilities and weaknesses.

The interviewee also perceived that although she had a plan for the exam and solved many multiple-choice test questions, she still had concerns about the true meaning of the exam. Furthermore, most students did not have a chance to participate in extracurricular activities or clubs due to allocation of their majority of time for studying. Students believed that the final exam

results are the only indicator to measure their success.

4.4. Cheating on the Exam

MOET has issued standards and guidelines regarding cheating on the exam, ensuring a “fair” playing ground by placing emphasis on academic infractions. Despite these rules, students are caught cheating on the exam. Arguments have broken out after the recent national high school exam fraud exposed systemic problems. Pressures on higher scores engage students on cheating. Interviewee Q stated the following.

Students think that cheating on the exam is quite normal as many of them are not confident in their knowledge but want higher scores. Cheating makes the competition unfair to judge a contestant.

Among all students, cheating on the exam was considered unacceptable in any situation as it is not fair for those who study in earnest and try their best. Some people attributed this issue to the expectation of students’ parents since many of them want their children to be on top in school. Possibly, it may come from the laziness of students who want to get a high mark and fame without efforts. Interviewee L perceived the following.

This is because of the laziness of students and the heavy workload of the curriculum at school. Students have a lot of subjects to learn, while they could not arrange their time to study all of them, especially some subjects that require memorization. Moreover, some curriculum focuses too much on theory, which makes students bored and hard to understand.

Interviewee L’s response recalled the exam scandal in 2018 and argued that if being admitted to renowned universities by submitting “fake” scores, it could be difficult for them to study well because they lack fundamental knowledge. He also mentioned the following.

Cheating should be prohibited since it is absolutely unfavourable. From 2018 scandal, when students from three provinces illegally manipulated the scoring system posed an alarming question about the true clarity of any exams. Fortunately, this was discovered and prevented on time, otherwise that could lead to severe results. If one of these students cheated his or her score admitted to a medical school with serious lack of academic credentials, he or she may stand the possibility of killing patients in the future.

Interviewees who participated in this study desired to have a fair exam for all candidates, reflecting their efforts and time during the interviews.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Discussion and Conclusions

Drawing on Hughes’s (1993) and Bailey’s (1996) model, this study explores students’ perspectives toward the HSGE, a national examination that determines students’ high school graduation and admission to higher education in Vietnam. The washback effect of the HSGE strongly exists in students’ learning experiences despite recent reform efforts. Nevertheless, due to diverse the college admission procedures, high school students have severe burden and confuse with inconsistency. Although Vietnamese schools and communities shared unequal educational and socioeconomic resources, there is a negative washback effect of the HSGE on students’ learning, particularly for those living in rural areas.

The result of this study provides an analysis of Vietnamese students’ college perceptions in Hanoi based on the qualitative data. Several findings are particularly intriguing and notable. First, despite the recent reforms to expand access to higher education and affirmative action policies to give students better opportunities for college entrance exams, there are gaps between rural and non-rural students, when it comes to the HSGE. While non-rural students tend to apply more options to be accepted by universities, getting higher score from HSGE is key issue for rural students to enter into universities. Additionally, this study reveals that there was inequality in the case of college admission among students, as some universities adopted new system by accepting international language certificates and documents such as high school transcripts, while some test-takers cannot take this opportunity due to unavailability to attend additional English classes, lack of chance to receive special documents to prove outstanding performance, and financial burden. Many students are under much stress because of exam-centric schooling, and unexpected policy changes stated every academic year. Consequently, the HSGE put much pressure on

students' learning experience, enduring years of stress and high expectations for their final school exam to enter into the universities. Additionally, interviewees address economic burdens associated with entrance exams due to reasons such as IELTS preparation costs, travel costs, etc. A previous study by Rosinger, Ford, and Choi (2020) revealed how the importance of various admissions criteria related to economic inequities.

Some interviewees perceived that the exam can be considered a motivation for high school students to study harder and acceptable in measuring students' academic performances based on the knowledge acquired from twelve years of education. However, as the primary exam, the HSGE should improve ways to help critical thinking rather than focus on memorization of mass amounts of information. Tests will help enhance learning if administered in a way that encourages it rather than the exclusive reliance on the recollection of contents or concepts learned in preparation for the exams. The HSGE is facing mounting criticism over its effectiveness as it diminishes students' college readiness and ignores the expression of individual creative abilities. Therefore, a shift in focus from testing to learning can also help students cope with the anxiety that many associates with exams.

Third, exam-driven education adds to a student's workload and limits his or her ability to learn using the methods that are most beneficial for him or her. Regularly, high school students are overburdened with schoolwork that surpasses their typical memory capacity, allowing them to repeat knowledge but lacking the intellectual depth to synthesize or appreciate abstract concepts (Maltese, et al., 2012). As a result, they turn to cheat to pass tests, which is ubiquitous in secondary schools, universities, and society at large (McCabe, 2005).

Finally, relevant agencies must have consistent policies, forming a linking pin between policymakers, teachers, and students (Fuhrman, 1993). Therefore, policies regarding the HSGE should consistently be enforced by scrutinizing mechanisms instead of changing every academic year. This helps high school students prepare well for the exam and discover new aspects of their personal development (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). The conclusion of this study also provide managerial implications how to improve higher education by adopting better entrance exam that will eventually help foster overall development of Asian region via human capital.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

The current study is the first to investigate students' perceptions of the national high school graduation examination in the context of Vietnam. This study contains some limitations. First, because the study is limited to Hanoi, while the future study will add other regions to generalize the study. Students' viewpoints on the test may differ in cities and regions in Vietnam, where the number of higher education institutions is significantly smaller than in Hanoi. To build a more rigorous and comprehensive image of Vietnam's education system as a whole, further research should be performed in other places that are similar to or significantly different from Hanoi. Second, since the Vietnamese college admission policy is frequently revised, changes announced after the data collection period may have an impact on the students' perceptions. Third, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an influence on teaching and learning, as well as test scheduling, thereby significantly changing the perception of students about this exam. There are also concerns that geographically or economically disadvantaged students will be left even further behind because of the Internet connection. Future research might help fill the gap with follow-up surveys and interviews conducted over time and space. A future research might also consider college entrance examination with economic impacts.

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