

# Internationalization in Vietnamese Higher Education - Advancing sustainable development goals through international student recruitment: The case of Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF)

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## ***Abstract***

The global landscape of international student mobility is marked by an almost threefold increase in mobile students and a substantial shift toward multipolarity and the rise of emerging educational institutions. Internationalization of Higher Education is recognized as an indispensable component in sustainable development. Countries like Vietnam are increasingly recognized as a promising destination for international students in Asia, driven by economic growth, affordable education, and targeted recruitment strategies. Continued improvements in institutional quality, student services, and international partnerships will be key to sustaining and expanding Vietnam's appeal in the global education market, fostering diversity and contributing to national soft power. This study aims to comprehend the cognitive decision-making process and the factors influencing international students' choices to study and remain in Vietnam. Using a case study approach, the research explores the decision-making processes, employing pull-push marketing frameworks and SWOT analysis to assess institutional strategies. Findings reveal that while Vietnam is emerging as an attractive destination for international students, recruitment success is primarily driven by operational factors, economic prospects, institutional reputation, and targeted marketing strategies, including social media and brand positioning. However, challenges such as limited resources, language barriers, and ad-hoc internationalization approaches persist, potentially hindering the sustainability and quality of knowledge production. By focusing on institutional quality and enhancing the student experience, Vietnamese HE strengthens its international appeal and actively supports the attainment of global development objectives, particularly contributing to SDG 4, the broader HE role in achieving the full set of SDGs through human formation and knowledge production.

**Keywords:** internationalization in higher education, Sustainable Development Goals, cognitive process of decision-making, pull-push marketing, SWOT model

# **Internationalization in Vietnamese Higher Education - Advancing sustainable development goals through international student recruitment: The case of Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF)**

## **1. Introduction**

### *1.1 Global Background*

The global landscape of international student mobility (ISM) has undergone a significant transformation, marked by an almost threefold increase in mobile students and a substantial shift toward multipolarity and the rise of emerging educational institutions. Traditional core destination countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia now increasingly share the field with regional and non-Anglophone hubs in Asia, Europe and the Middle East, reshaping long-standing core-periphery patterns in global higher education (Teichler, 2017; Tran & Marginson, 2018; Glass & Cruz, 2023). This diversification reflects broader trends in the internationalization of higher education (IoHE), which is no longer confined to student flows but encompasses transnational partnerships, branch campuses and joint programs aimed at enhancing global competitiveness and knowledge exchange.

At the same time, IoHE is recognized as an indispensable component in the sustainable development of higher education systems, as it contributes to the advancement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through capacity building, knowledge transfer and fostering inclusive, intercultural learning environments (Chankseliani & McCowan, 2021). However, recent disruptions, most notably the Covid-19 pandemic, have exposed the vulnerability of ISM to global crises, leading to temporary declines, altered directional flows and the rapid expansion of virtual mobility and hybrid forms of international engagement (Zayim-Kurtay et al., 2025). These dynamics underscore that contemporary ISM is simultaneously expanding, diversifying and being reconfigured, providing both opportunities and challenges for higher education systems seeking to leverage internationalization for sustainable development.

### *1.2 Vietnam Background*

Countries like Vietnam are increasingly recognized as a promising destination for international students in Asia, driven by economic growth, affordable education, and targeted recruitment strategies. Vietnam's higher education institutions have begun to actively position themselves within regional student markets by developing niche programs, improving English-medium offerings, and leveraging the country's cultural and economic dynamism to appeal to diverse cohorts of international learners (Tran & Marginson, 2018; Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). Emerging evidence also points to Vietnam's dual role as both an emerging host and an exporter of international education, as universities seek to attract foreign students while continuing to send Vietnamese students abroad, thereby embedding internationalization within broader strategies for human-capital development and global engagement (Tran & Marginson, 2018; Nguyen, 2020; Pham et al., 2024).

Within national policy discourse, internationalization of higher education in Vietnam is framed as a strategic lever for enhancing institutional quality, modernizing governance, and supporting socio-economic development (Tran & Marginson, 2018; Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Hoai et al., 2023). University leaders increasingly view internationalization as a core strategy to meet SDG 4 objectives, which are particularly quality, equity, and sustainability in education, while also contributing to wider SDGs related to economic growth, innovation and global partnerships (Nguyen, 2020; Lai et al., 2019). Recent statistics show that the number of international students in Viet Nam has reached its highest level in nine years, reflecting both national-level initiatives and

intensified efforts by universities to upgrade programs, services and marketing to foreign students (Government News, 2024; Sai Gon News, 2024). Ho Chi Minh City, in particular, is striving to become a leading education hub, with local universities expanding international programs and collaborating with municipal authorities to attract and retain international students as part of the city's development and soft-power agenda (Tran & Marginson, 2018; Tuoi Tre News, 2025).

In this context, focusing on international student recruitment and retention at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF) is especially pertinent. UEF operates at the intersection of national internationalization policies and the city's ambitions to build a competitive, globally connected higher education ecosystem, where continued improvements in institutional quality, student services and international partnerships will be key to sustaining and expanding Vietnam's appeal in the global education market (Tran & Marginson, 2018; Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024).

### *1.3 Literature Review*

Research on the IoHE highlights diverse concepts, models and trajectories, including comprehensive, market-driven and partnership-oriented approaches, with increasing emphasis on sustainable, student-centered strategies (Hung & Yen, 2022; Kohl et al., 2022). In Vietnam, internationalization has advanced but remains constrained by limited resources, language barriers and often ad hoc, project-based initiatives, which can weaken strategic coherence and long-term impact (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021; Hoai et al., 2023). The push-pull framework has been widely used to explain ISM, including Vietnam as an emerging host. Push factors include constrained opportunities and uncertain economic prospects at home, while pull factors toward Vietnam and specific institutions encompass scholarships, favorable economic outlook, institutional reputation, Vietnamese language and Vietnam studies programs, affordability and geographic proximity (Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). Beyond recruitment, international students' experiences and satisfaction that are shaped by teaching quality, services and campus environment, strongly influence loyalty and decisions to stay or leave, linking ISM to the sustainability of internationalization and long-term competitiveness (Lai et al., 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024).

From a sustainability perspective, internationalization is increasingly framed in relation to SDG 4 and broader SDGs, stressing that purely marketization-oriented recruitment risks undermining quality, equity and institutional commitment to holistic sustainable development (Hung & Yen, 2022; Kohl et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2024). Whole-institution approaches that align marketing, academic quality, student support and governance with sustainability principles are therefore seen as crucial for attracting and retaining international students in ways that reinforce educational and social outcomes (Hung & Yen, 2022; Kohl et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on the cognitive decision-making processes and factors shaping international students' choices to study and remain in Vietnam, using a case study design that applies push-pull marketing logics and SWOT analysis to examine institutional strategies (Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024).

### *1.4 Conceptual Framework*

Building on the literature, the study adopts an integrated conceptual framework with three interrelated components. First, a push-pull framework for international student mobility is adapted to the Vietnamese context to capture how home-country pressures and Vietnam institution-specific attractions jointly shape international students' initial decision to enroll (Kim Khanh & Ngoc, 2022; Hung & Yen, 2022). Second, the analysis draws on cognitive decision-making and theory-of-action or planned behavior perspectives, which conceptualize study and stay decisions as multi-stage cognitive processes involving perceptions, evaluations and intention formation rather than single, one-off choices (Wang & Ruhe, 2009; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). This lens is used to examine how students interpret push-pull factors, institutional messages and lived experiences when deciding whether to remain in Vietnam after graduation. Third, a sustainable internationalization framework links recruitment

practices, student experiences and outcomes aligned with SDG 4, emphasizing that marketing strategies and institutional positioning must be integrated with efforts to ensure quality, equity and long-term student loyalty (Hung & Yen, 2022; Kohl et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2019). In combination, these perspectives guide the case study in analyzing how Vietnamese universities, which are through push-pull-oriented marketing and strategic choices identified via SWOT analysis, shape international students' cognitive decision-making about studying and staying in Vietnam, and how such processes can support more sustainable internationalization trajectories (Hung & Yen, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024).

## **2. Research Objectives and Questions**

Building on global and Vietnamese debates on internationalization, push-pull dynamics, cognitive decision-making and sustainable internationalization, this study examines the Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance (UEF) as an emerging Vietnamese institution seeking to attract and retain international students in ways aligned with the SDGs. The overarching objective is to understand how institutional strategies, student decision-making and the wider policy environment interact in shaping a sustainable international student base at UEF and in Vietnam.

The study pursues four specific objectives. First, it analyses how UEF's internationalization and recruitment strategies, which are including strategic partnerships, English-medium provision, participation in external quality schemes, student support services and digital marketing that align with principles of sustainable internationalization and selected SDGs, particularly SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). Second, it identifies and interprets key push-pull factors and cognitive decision-making processes shaping international students' choices to study at UEF and their intentions to remain in Ho Chi Minh City or Vietnam after graduation, with attention to perceived academic quality, support, and career prospects. Third, it develops a SWOT analysis of UEF's recruitment and retention practices, assessing internal strengths and weaknesses (e.g. partnerships, services, limited global brand, language and procedural barriers) and external opportunities and threats (e.g. ASEAN collaboration, scholarships, regional competition, degree recognition and geopolitical uncertainty). Finally, it formulates evidence-based recommendations to enhance sustainable internationalization and international student recruitment at UEF in ways that contribute to education for sustainability and SDG-related outcomes in Vietnam's higher education sector.

These aims are addressed through three guiding research questions: (1) In what ways do UEF's internationalization policies, programs, partnerships and marketing practices support sustainable internationalization and SDG commitments, and how is this perceived by institutional leaders, staff and international students? (2) Which push-pull factors, perceived institutional and city-level attributes, and cognitive decision-making processes most strongly shape international students' decisions to choose UEF or Vietnam and to stay after graduation? (3) What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats emerge from a SWOT analysis of UEF's international student strategies, and how can these insights inform more sustainable, SDG-aligned internationalization and recruitment at UEF and comparable institutions in Vietnam?

## **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design to examine how UEF positions itself within Vietnam's evolving landscape of IoHE and inbound ISM. A single-institution focus enables an in-depth exploration of institutional strategies, stakeholder logics and decision-making processes in an emerging, niche destination context, complementing broader work on Vietnam as a host country and on push-pull dynamics in Asia-bound mobility.

Evidence is drawn primarily from institutional and policy documents, complemented by basic quantitative indicators. At the national level, Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) statistics on inbound students

(18,500 in 2020-2021, rising to 22,000 in 2023-2024) provide a macro picture of Vietnam's growing, yet still modest, visibility as a receiving system. At the institutional level, UEF International Institute records for 2020-2024 (56 international students: 31 full-time bachelor, 2 joint-program, 23 exchange) are used to situate UEF's scale and portfolio relative to national flows and patterns observed at larger public universities 25. These figures are treated descriptively to contextualize, not to generalize.

Documentary sources include UEF strategic and marketing materials, partnership agreements, internal reports on international programs and services, and national policy texts on internationalization and sustainable development. Together they surface how international students and partnerships are framed in terms of quality, equity, branding and SDG-related aspirations, resonating with wider debates on sustainable internationalization and university positioning in Vietnam.

Data analysis follows a hybrid deductive-inductive thematic strategy. Deductive codes are derived from push-pull models (national vs institutional pull factors), cognitive and theory-of-action perspectives on decision-making and retention, and frameworks on sustainable internationalization and partnerships. Inductive coding allows emergent themes (e.g. language support, visa logistics, virtual mobility) to refine the analytical frame.

On this basis, a structured SWOT matrix is constructed, triangulating coded themes, numerical indicators and secondary literature to identify internal strengths/weaknesses and external opportunities/threats in UEF's recruitment and retention of international students within Vietnam's competitive and policy environment.

#### **4. Case Context: UEF and Vietnam's Internationalization**

Vietnam has progressively reformed its higher education system, developing a more enabling policy and legal framework to advance internationalization, particularly in relation to inbound student mobility, cross-border education and institutional partnerships. National strategies priorities international cooperation, quality assurance, joint training programs and international research collaboration as key mechanisms for enhancing system competitiveness and building human capital. Although Vietnam has traditionally been perceived as primarily a sending country, recent trends indicate that its universities are increasingly positioning themselves as hosts for international students. Most inbound students originate from within Asia and are drawn by scholarships, favorable economic conditions and specialized programs. MOET statistics show an increase in international students from 18,500 in 2020-2021 to 22,000 in 2023-2024, suggesting a gradual consolidation of Vietnam's status as a regional education hub despite disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, national policies on international cooperation, degree recognition and institutional autonomy generate both enabling conditions and constraints for universities aiming to attract and retain international students in ways consistent with the SDGs.

Within this evolving landscape, UEF, a private institution located in Vietnam's largest and most dynamic metropolis, occupies a strategic position. UEF contributes to national internationalization efforts and to the aspiration of building Ho Chi Minh City as an education and innovation hub. The university has begun to construct an international profile through strategic partnerships with institutions in the Philippines and other countries, active exchange schemes, joint training initiatives and engagement with external quality frameworks such as QS Stars. These efforts parallel broader strategies used by Vietnamese universities to enhance global visibility and attractiveness. UEF has also invested in student services and recruitment infrastructure, including a Center of Consultancy and Student Recruitment and a range of support services frequently identified as operational pull factors. Its use of digital and social media marketing reflects contemporary, sustainability-oriented recruitment practices. Between 2020 and 2024, UEF enrolled 56 international students (31 full-time bachelor, 2 full-time joint, 23 exchange), a modest yet diverse cohort that underscores both its emerging international profile and the opportunities and challenges associated with building sustainable, SDG-aligned internationalization in Vietnam.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 *Pull Factors and Decision-Making to Study at UEF/Vietnam*

The findings confirm a multi-layered set of pull factors at both national and institutional levels, consistent with prior Vietnam-focused research. At the country level, students highlighted Vietnam's bright economic prospects, perceived job opportunities and relatively affordable cost of living and tuition as central attractions, echoing evidence that economic outlook and scholarships are decisive in choosing Vietnam and similar developing destinations. Political and geographical proximity, cultural familiarity within ASEAN, and interest in the Vietnamese language and culture further reinforced the pull of Vietnam for regional students. At the institutional level, UEF's location in Ho Chi Minh City, reputation in business-related fields, English-medium and joint programs, and the promise of "practical, career-oriented" training was frequently cited, aligning with wider findings that institutional reputation, field-specific strength and program niche are critical. Students described being influenced by family, friends, alumni and social media content, similar to patterns observed in other Asian recruitment contexts. Decision-making accounts reflected a cognitive weighing of financial feasibility, perceived employability, institutional trust and self-efficacy, consistent with theory-of-action and push-pull frameworks that emphasize reasoning processes rather than purely structural drivers.

### 5.2 *Experiences, Retention and Intentions to Stay*

International students' experiences at UEF or Vietnam were generally positive but ambivalent in ways that strongly shaped intentions to remain after graduation. Consistent with research on intra-Asian mobility, students valued supportive staff, peer networks, and scholarships, which sustained satisfaction and short-term persistence. However, challenges related to the Vietnamese language, limited integration with local students, bureaucracy (visas, residency), and uneven access to internships were recurrent, mirroring barriers identified for other international cohorts in Vietnam and developing destinations. Decisions about staying in Ho Chi Minh City or Vietnam combined perceptions of city attributes (safety, cultural vibrancy, economic dynamism) with assessments of long-term career prospects and adaptability, echoing evidence that city image and perceived cultural fit are central to graduate retention. Some students expressed strong intentions to stay for work, citing Vietnam's growth and regional connectivity, while others anticipated onward mobility or return home due to concerns about degree recognition, wage levels or family obligations, consistent with broader findings on immigration and repatriation intentions.

### 5.3 *SWOT Analysis of UEF's Internationalization and Recruitment*

The SWOT synthesis shows that UEF's strengths center on its strategic location, growing international partnerships, English-medium offers, and an emerging recruitment infrastructure, including digital and social media marketing that aligns with innovative, sustainable recruitment models in Asia. Student testimonies underscored the value of responsive staff, scholarship opportunities and flexible program pathways as concrete advantages, in line with pull-factor studies in Vietnamese institutions. Key weaknesses include limited global brand recognition, fragmented international marketing, language barriers in academic and administrative communication, and constrained on-campus housing options. These internal constraints parallel those identified for Vietnamese and other emerging-destination universities seeking to scale inbound mobility.

Opportunities arise from national and city-level ambitions to position Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh City as regional education hubs, growing intra-ASEAN mobility, and the diffusion of customer-oriented, innovative marketing strategies (e.g., multilingual websites, data-driven social media campaigns) that have proven effective elsewhere in Asia. Expansion of scholarships, internships with international firms, and co-branded programmes with reputable partners were seen as high-impact levers, echoing recommendations from Vietnam-based

recruitment research. Threats include intensifying regional competition, global shocks (pandemics, geopolitical tensions), evolving immigration and degree-recognition regimes, and Vietnam's still modest visibility in key sending markets, consistent with cross-country analyses of emerging destinations. Overall, the SWOT suggests that UEF's sustainable, SDG-aligned internationalization will depend on leveraging its urban location and partnership ecosystem while systematically addressing language, support and recognition issues that shape both attraction and long-term retention.

## 6. Discussion

This study positions UEF within the broader reconfiguration of ISM, where emerging destinations increasingly compete with established hubs. The findings show that international students' decisions to choose and remain at UEF reflect intertwined push-pull factors, cognitive decision-making processes and institutional conditions shaped by Vietnam's evolving internationalization agenda. Home-country constraints (cost, limited program diversity, political or economic uncertainty) intersect with Vietnam's pull factors, which are affordability, perceived safety, cultural proximity within Asia, and Ho Chi Minh City's dynamism, as well as UEF-specific attributes such as partnerships, English-medium opportunities and personalized support services.

At the institutional level, UEF's efforts to build an international profile through strategic partnerships, participation in QS Stars and the development of student support infrastructure demonstrate alignment with dimensions of sustainable internationalization, particularly quality enhancement and long-term collaboration (SDG 4 and SDG 17). However, the modest scale of inbound students and their concentration in a limited range of programs underscore persistent weaknesses, including constrained brand visibility, limited English-taught provision and practical barriers relating to visas, accommodation and language.

Students' experiences and retention intentions suggest that UEF's strengths in personalized support, social environment and city-level opportunities can partially offset structural constraints, but only when coupled with clear academic and career pathways. The SWOT analysis indicates that UEF's sustainability as an internationalizing institution will depend on its capacity to leverage ASEAN and regional collaboration, digital marketing and scholarships while mitigating threats from regional competition and uncertainty in global mobility. Overall, the case illustrates how an emerging Vietnamese university can contribute to SDG-aligned internationalization, while also revealing the fragility of such efforts in a still-developing policy and reputational environment.

## 7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This case study concludes that UEF's internationalization and student recruitment strategies are beginning to support sustainable internationalization but remain at an early stage of development. The university benefits from its location in Ho Chi Minh City, its targeted partnerships, and a supportive service ecosystem, which together function as important pull factors in attracting and retaining a small yet diverse international cohort. At the same time, structural weaknesses that limited global recognition, language barriers, visa and accommodation challenges, and constrained academic breadth in English restrict its ability to scale up and to fully realize SDG-related contributions.

To advance sustainable internationalization, several recommendations emerge. First, UEF should gradually expand high-quality, fully English-taught programs in fields linked to Vietnam's development priorities and labor-market needs, ensuring robust quality assurance and international accreditation. Second, the university should deepen and diversify strategic partnerships (e.g. dual degrees, joint research, co-branded programs) that strengthen SDG-oriented teaching and research, while enhancing global visibility. Third, UEF should invest in integrated digital marketing strategies and narrative branding that communicate its distinctive value proposition as a safe, affordable, and opportunity-rich study destination.

Fourth, student-centered policies are required to improve the international student experience: streamlined

admissions and visa guidance; proactive pre-arrival orientation; expanded accommodation options; and comprehensive academic, language, cultural and career support, including internships and employer engagement in Ho Chi Minh City. Finally, embedding SDG principles more explicitly into institutional strategies, curricula and partnerships would position UEF not only as a receiver of international students but as an actor contributing to equitable, mutually beneficial internationalization within Vietnam and the region.

**Limitations and Future Research** - This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it draws on a single institutional case with a relatively small number of international students, which constrains the generalizability of the findings beyond UEF and similar emerging institutions. Second, the analysis relies primarily on qualitative data and institutional/national statistics; without large-scale survey data, the study cannot quantify the relative weight of different push–pull factors or systematically compare subgroups (e.g. by country of origin, program type or length of stay). Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits insight into how students’ perceptions and retention intentions evolve over time, particularly in response to policy or institutional changes.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Comparative multi-case studies across Vietnamese and ASEAN universities would enable analysis of divergent internationalization trajectories and recruitment models, including public-private and center-periphery contrasts. Mixed-methods designs incorporating longitudinal surveys, follow-up interviews and graduate tracer studies could provide a deeper understanding of cognitive decision-making, adaptation processes and post-graduation mobility or employment outcomes. Further work is also needed to operationalize and measure “sustainable internationalization” in the Vietnamese context, including indicators that capture equity, reciprocity, environmental impact and SDG-related educational contributions. Studies examining the perspectives of domestic students, academic staff, employers and policy-makers would offer a more holistic view of how international student recruitment intersects with national development strategies and labor-market dynamics. Finally, research on the role of digital marketing, online reputation and transnational alumni networks in shaping Vietnam’s attractiveness as an education hub would provide practical insights for institutions like UEF seeking to build a resilient, SDG-aligned international student base.

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