

Centralization vs Flexibility: Comparative Study of Education Policy in Sudan and Vietnam

Saifaldin Idris Onia

University of Khartoum, Sudan

Email : saifonia89@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

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* Saifaldin Idris Onia

This study comparatively analyzes national education policies in Sudan and Vietnam to understand the structural and institutional differences in the education systems of the two countries. Using a qualitative approach of comparative case studies, data is collected through studies of official documents, reports of international institutions, and academic literature. The analysis was conducted through a thematic-based content analysis, which encompassed the structure of the education system, language and curriculum policies, as well as quality strategies and the role of institutions. The results show that Sudan implements a fully centralised model with strict central government control over all aspects of policy, including a uniform curriculum and language of instruction (Arabic), with no room for local innovation. In contrast, Vietnam implements a centralised policy model with flexible implementation, leaving room for adaptation at the school and university levels. The structure of Vietnam's education system is more adaptable, supported by a bilingual policy (Vietnamese and English), as well as a comprehensive quality strategy that includes improved budgets, teacher quality, and institutional autonomy. This study suggests that differences in institutional approaches have a significant impact on the effectiveness of implementation and innovation in education.

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INTRODUCTION

Education policy reflects the way the state shapes its identity and development direction (Luo, 2024; Schiff, 2022; Wong & Liem, 2022). Sudan and Vietnam demonstrate two different approaches in responding to the challenges of modernizing education. Sudan implemented a centralised system after the 1989 revolution, emphasizing the uniformity of the Arabic language, a single national curriculum, and complete control of the central government through the Federal Ministry of Education and NCCER (Kaiser, 2025b, 2025a; Slom, 2024). The 6-3-3 structure and the national exam are the main control tools in all levels

of education. In contrast, Vietnam combines national policy standardization with limited autonomy at the school and university levels. The 5-4-3-4 structure and bilingual (Vietnam–UK) policy support internationalization and flexibility of implementation. Differences in socio-political context help shape policy direction: Sudan faces instability and limited resources (Elamin et al., 2024; Homeida, 2023; Verhoeven, 2023), while Vietnam has experienced consistent economic growth and gradual reforms (Huyen et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2022; Van Le & Tran, 2024). This comparison illustrates how different policy designs yield contrasting educational orientations and outcomes.

Previous research has extensively examined education policy in various contexts, but most of it is single-case and partially thematic. This study is important because it provides an empirical basis for understanding how education policy responds to social and technological change. Chan (2023) emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive education policy framework in responding to the integration of AI technology through pedagogic, governance, and operational dimensions. Rajabalee & Santally (2021) show how learner satisfaction and engagement have a significant impact on performance in online modules, providing important implications for institutional policy. In Europe, Joris et al. (2022) criticize competency-oriented civic education policies for failing to achieve their emancipatory goals. Meanwhile, studies of Sudan and Vietnam reveal a striking difference: Sudan emphasizes the centralization of the curriculum and state control (H. Ali et al., 2022), whereas Vietnam has successfully combined national standardization with local innovation (Li & Qamruzzaman, 2023). However, there have not been many studies that compare the two contexts qualitatively and structurally.

This research offers novelty by combining three main domains of education policy—system structure, language and curriculum, as well as quality strategies and institutional roles—in a single framework of qualitative comparative analysis between Sudan and Vietnam. In contrast to previous research, which tended to be thematic or focused on a single case, this approach enables a more comprehensive mapping of policy patterns across contrasting socio-political contexts. This analysis broadens the understanding of how the combination of national standardization and institutional autonomy shapes the direction and outcomes of education in developing countries. Its contribution is conceptual, theoretical, and practical, as it offers an analytical framework that can serve as a reference in the formulation of cross-border education policies with diverse system characteristics.

This study aims to compare education policies in Sudan and Vietnam across three main domains: education system policies and structures, national languages of instruction and curriculum, and quality improvement strategies and institutional roles. This research focuses on a thematic analysis of national policies, education policy documents, and institutional implementation frameworks in both countries. This research not only identifies differences and similarities but also interprets how social, political, and economic contexts shape policy design and outcomes. The aim is to generate a deeper understanding of how the combination of standardisation and autonomy implementation can affect educational attainment in two developing country contexts, as well as to make a theoretical and practical contribution to the development of cross-border education policies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative design with a comparative approach (Mattke et al., 2022; Rooduijn et al., 2024; Thomann et al., 2022), focusing on an in-depth exploration of the national education policies of Sudan and Vietnam. This design was chosen because it allows for a systematic contextual analysis of policy dynamics and institutional structures in two countries with contrasting institutional characteristics. The type of research used is a comparative case study, with two central case units analyzed in parallel to identify structural similarities and differences. A comparative approach within the framework of qualitative research enables the exploration of the meaning behind the policy, as well as an understanding of its effects on the implementation of the education system (Cabero-Almenara et al., 2023; Riedel et al., 2024; Sedighi et al., 2025).

Data collection was conducted through the study of documents, including official policies, education laws, reports from international institutions (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank), as well as relevant academic publications from Sudan and Vietnam. This method was chosen because it allows for longitudinal and cross-contextual analysis of education policy. Researchers play an active role as interpretive instruments to interpret the structural dynamics contained in the document. The research was conducted through a desk study. The data credibility technique is carried out through source triangulation, confirmation of theories with data results (convergence of data and theories), and cross-literature reading. The focus of the data is directed at three thematic domains: the structure of the education system, language and curriculum policies, quality strategies, and the role of institutions.

Data analysis was conducted using a content analysis approach based on comparative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Herzog & Kelly, 2023; Humble & Mozelius, 2022). This technique was chosen because it enables the systematic identification and categorisation of policy themes from two distinct contexts. The analysis process consists of four stages: (1) data reduction based on thematic domains (system structure, curriculum policies, role of institutions); (2) the presentation of data in the form of descriptive-comparative tables and narratives; (3) interpretation based on the theory of policy institutionalism; and (4) inductive drawing of conclusions. Interpretation accuracy is maintained through triangulative reading and cross-source validation (He et al., 2025; Shrivastav & Bag, 2024; Yusmaneli et al., 2025). This approach ensures the credibility of the results and allows for an in-depth understanding of the implications of centralistic and adaptive policies. By comparing the two models of education management, this analysis shows the role of institutional structure and capabilities in shaping the effectiveness of implementation and the space for policy innovation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Education System Policy and Structure

The patterns of national education policies and the structure of the education systems in Sudan and Vietnam show fundamental differences in their orientation and implementation mechanisms. Education policy encompasses strategic direction, planning, curriculum formulation, and the management of the national education system. The structure of the education system encompasses various education levels, learning durations, transition paths, and quality control mechanisms, including national exams. In Sudan, education policy is highly centralized and is fully controlled by the central government through the Federal Ministry of Education as well as *the National Curriculum Centre for Educational Research* (NCCER). The structure of education also tends to be standard and hierarchical, with limited room for adaptation.

In contrast, Vietnam implements strong national policies while providing flexibility at the implementation level, particularly in schools and universities. The structure of the education system is more concise and open to vocational paths. This difference is important to analyze because it has direct implications for the flexibility of implementation and effectiveness of education policies in both countries.

Sudan and Vietnam both have strong national education policies, which their central governments control. However, there are significant differences in the level of implementation. Sudan implements a fully centralized model, in which all aspects of policy, planning, and implementation are designed by the

center and run uniformly across the region. There is no room for schools or districts to innovate. In contrast, Vietnam implements policy centralization with decentralization of implementation. Governments establish national frameworks, while schools and universities have limited flexibility in adapting to local contexts. In the system's structure, Sudan employs a 6+3+3 pattern, with an emphasis on national examinations at each level, while Vietnam implements a compact 5-4-3-4 pattern, offering flexible pathways to vocational education. This difference reflects two patterns of system management: a rigid hierarchy versus an adaptive structure.

In Sudan, all schools follow a national curriculum, and instruction is conducted in Arabic. The structure of the 6+3+3 system is applied uniformly, with a standard exam at the end of each level as a quality control tool. Teachers admitted that they lacked the space to adjust the curriculum to regional conditions. The central ministry determines planning and policy entirely. Vietnam has shown a more flexible system. Primary schools follow a mandatory 5-year structure and are free of charge. After that, students can proceed to the general or vocational secondary track. Some schools add local programs or industry partnerships. Universities have the flexibility to determine the curriculum of choice. The 5-4-3-4 structure offers students the opportunity to tailor their educational pathways to meet their economic and social needs.

Table 1. Comparison of Education System Policies and Structures

Aspects	Sudan	Vietnam
Policy model	Complete centralization, central control	Centralize policies with flexible implementation
Planning	Ministry & NCCER, top-down	The ministry sets the framework, and the implementation is adapted locally
System structure	6+3+3, national exam at every level	5-4-3-4, flexible to vocational pathway
Language of instruction	Single Arabic	Vietnamese main, English additions
Institutional innovation space	None	There is a school and university adaptation room

The implementation of education policies in Sudan and Vietnam shows striking differences in terms of the flexibility and structure of their systems. In Sudan, all schools are required to follow a single national curriculum with Arabic as the only language of instruction. The structure of the 6+3+3 education system is uniformly enforced throughout the region, with a national standard test at the end of each level serving as the main instrument of quality control. Teachers lack the flexibility to adapt teaching materials to local conditions, as the central ministry fully determines planning and policies. In contrast, Vietnam implements a more flexible and responsive system. Basic education lasts for five years and is compulsory and free of charge. After that, students can choose a

general or vocational intermediate path. Several schools develop local programs or partner with industry, while universities have autonomy in designing their curriculum choices. The 5-4-3-4 structure provides space for students to adjust their educational path to social and economic needs. A comparison of the main aspects of the education policies and structures of the two countries is presented in Table 1.

A comparison between Sudan and Vietnam reveals significant differences in the policy patterns and structure of their education systems. Sudan implements a fully centralized model, in which the central government has absolute control over the planning, curriculum, and structure of the education system. The 6+3+3 system is uniformly enforced throughout the region, with the national exam serving as the main instrument of quality control. This condition closes the space for local innovation and institutional adaptation to the regional context. In contrast, Vietnam adopts a strong national policy model but provides flexibility at the implementation level. The structure of the 5-4-3-4 system creates a more adaptive educational pathway, while schools and universities have an active role in adapting policy implementation to local needs. These differences illustrate two contrasting approaches to education governance: Sudan focuses on uniformity and central control, while Vietnam emphasizes flexibility within the framework of a directed national structure.

Language of Instruction and National Curriculum

The language of instruction and the national curriculum system play a strategic role in directing the educational orientation of a country. The language of instruction serves as a gateway to global knowledge and competence, while the curriculum reflects the ideological values, development priorities, and flexibility of the education system. Sudan employs a uniform model, with a single language of instruction and a centrally developed national curriculum. Arabic is used at all levels of education, while English is only taught as an additional subject. The national curriculum is designed by the *National Curriculum Centre for Educational Research* (NCCER) and is enforced uniformly, with no room for adaptation to local contexts.

In contrast, Vietnam uses Vietnamese as its primary language and English as an additional language of instruction within the framework of its internationalisation policy in education. The ministry sets the national curriculum, but schools and universities have the flexibility to make local adjustments as needed. This comparison is crucial for understanding the language policy orientation and curriculum flexibility in supporting the national education goals of the two countries.

Sudan and Vietnam both establish national curricula and language of instruction policies through their central governments, but their orientations and

levels of flexibility show apparent differences. Sudan uses Arabic as the sole language of instruction, reflecting its ideological orientation and efforts to strengthen national unity and identity. The curriculum is centrally designed by the *National Curriculum Centre for Educational Research* (NCCER) and is applied uniformly across regions, without allowing for local adaptation. Instead, Vietnam combines the national language with the policy of internationalization by using English as a second language of instruction. The curriculum is set nationally by the ministry, but schools and universities are given the authority to make adjustments according to local needs and requirements. This comparison reveals that Sudan implements a homogeneous and highly centralised language and curriculum policy. In contrast, Vietnam develops a standardised policy pattern that is adaptable to local contexts and global demands. The comparison of the main aspects is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Languages of Instruction and National Curriculum

Aspects	Sudan	Vietnam
Main languages of instruction	Single Arabic at all levels	Vietnamese is the primary language
Use of foreign languages	English as an additional subject only	English is used as a second language of instruction in many schools and universities.
Curriculum formulation	Compiled nationally by NCCER, it is highly centralized	Determined nationally by the ministry, but allows room for local adaptation
Curriculum innovation space	No room for adjustment at the school level	Schools and universities can add local programs or content tailored to their specific context.
Language policy orientation	Emphasizing national ideology and uniformity	Combining national identity with an internationalization orientation of education

A comparison of language policies and national curricula shows a clear difference in orientation between Sudan and Vietnam. Sudan adopted a uniform and ideological model, with Arabic as the sole medium of instruction and a centralised national curriculum that left no room for local adaptation. This model emphasises the unity of national identity and central control over educational content. Instead, Vietnam combines national language with internationalisation through the use of English, while also giving schools and universities the flexibility to innovate in their curricula. These differences illustrate two different approaches: Sudan emphasizes national homogeneity and ideology, while Vietnam emphasizes adaptation to local contexts and global demands through more open language policies and curricula.

Quality Strategy and Institutional Role

The strategy to improve the quality of education and the role of institutions in the management and implementation of education policies show the fundamental differences between Sudan and Vietnam. The quality improvement strategy includes aspects of financing, teacher quality development, curriculum, infrastructure, and evaluation systems. Institutional role refers to the extent to which schools and universities are empowered to implement policies, manage resources, and innovate. Sudan faces significant challenges, including financing gaps, limited access to education, low institutional capacity, and the central government's dominance in nearly all aspects of management. In contrast, Vietnam has a more systematic quality improvement strategy, which includes curriculum reforms, improving teacher qualifications, investing in research and technology, and granting universities limited autonomy to innovate.

A comparison of quality strategies and institutional roles shows a sharp difference between Sudan and Vietnam. Sudan still relies on formal policies without adequate financing support and without meaningful authority over educational institutions. Schools rely on community participation for funding, while the central government fully controls universities. This has an impact on low service quality and stagnation of institutional innovation. In contrast, Vietnam employed a more comprehensive strategy, characterised by increased budgets, curriculum reforms, teacher capacity building, research investment, and granting limited autonomy to universities. Universities in Vietnam play a crucial role in curriculum development, industry collaboration, and the publication of scientific research. These differences show that systemic quality strategies and strong institutional roles contribute to the progress of Vietnam's education system, while Sudan's top-down approach limits quality and adaptability.

The gap in access to education in Sudan remains substantial. Approximately 3 million children aged 5–13 years are out of school, and around 560,000 children are at risk of dropping out of school (UNDAF, 2018). Limited learning facilities, low-quality teachers, and inefficient system management exacerbate educational conditions. This situation is exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing political crisis, which hinders the sustainability of education services. Schools have no autonomy in strategic decision-making, while universities are entirely under the control of the National Council of Higher Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

On the other hand, Vietnam has shown significant progress in improving the quality of education. The government allocates 6.3% of GDP for education and 1.05% for higher education (Elamin et al., 2024). Schools expand access, improve teacher qualifications, update curriculum, and build educational

infrastructure. The university has flexibility in program and financial management and is active in international research and cooperation, indicating a more progressive institutional role.

Discussion

A comparative analysis of the education policies of Sudan and Vietnam reveals contrasting patterns, yet they diverge from the equally dominant role of the state. Sudan implements a comprehensive centralisation model, featuring a single national curriculum, Arabic as the sole language of instruction, a 6-3-3 education structure governed by national standard exams, as well as top-down planning by ministries and the NCCER. In contrast, Vietnam combines strong national policies with flexibility of implementation in schools and universities. The 5-4-3-4 structure offers flexible pathways to vocational education, expands the use of English as part of the internationalization strategy, and provides educational institutions with room for adaptation in implementing the curriculum. This comparative pattern shows three main aspects: (1) differences in the degree of centralization and autonomy of the implementer; (2) differences in language and curriculum orientation (ideological vs internationalization); and (3) differences in quality improvement strategies and institutional roles. The primary similarity lies in the state's strong role as a determinant of policy direction. The difference appears in the way implementation is carried out at the level of educational institutions.

These comparative findings reinforce and expand the literature on differences in education policy models in developing countries. Sudan exhibits significant gaps in access and quality due to a combination of centralisation and inadequate financing support (Alsoukhni et al., 2025; Elhassan et al., 2025; Qaddour et al., 2025). This model is consistent with findings about the ideological role of Sudanese education policies that limit local adaptation (M. Ali & Mann, 2023; Ansoms et al., 2022; Sennesael & Verhoeven, 2025). On the other hand, Vietnam's findings align with the study by Hoai et al. (2023), which demonstrates the success of combining core standardization with local innovation in improving learning outcomes and equity. The higher education literature also notes the positive effects of university autonomy on academic performance and innovation (Chan, 2023; Rajabalee & Santally, 2021; Wong & Liem, 2022). The contribution of this research lies in the systematic preparation of a comparative analysis of three thematic domains, thereby clarifying how different policy and institutional patterns affect the orientation and outcomes of the education system in the two country contexts.

The framework of policy institutionalism is used to interpret the differences between Sudan and Vietnam. Sudan reflects a classic hierarchical

model, in which the state has complete control over the national curriculum, language of instruction, level structure, and evaluation. In this model, the "formal rules" of the centre dominate the behaviour of educational actors, resulting in minimal local adaptation. In contrast, Vietnam employs a hybrid model: the state maintains core standards but grants limited autonomy to schools and universities to interpret and adapt policies. This approach aligns with the theory of tiered governance, which emphasizes the importance of combining central standardization and local innovation to enhance the system's effectiveness (Huyen et al., 2023; Nguyen, 2022; Verhoeven, 2023). The granting of university autonomy has been proven to strengthen institutional capacity and research competitiveness (Chan, 2023). However, the Sudan case demonstrates that standardisation without adequate financial support and implementation capacity is insufficient to achieve quality equity. This emphasizes the importance of the variable "implementation capability" in the theoretical framework, as a determinant of education policy outcomes.

Through these discussions, this study found a fundamental difference between the two education policy models. Sudan represents an entirely centralised model with strong central control but minimal implementing and financing autonomy, resulting in uniformity that limits innovation. Vietnam represents a model of a combination of core standardization and limited autonomy that supports local adaptation, institutional innovation, and quality improvement. The main contribution of this research lies in the systematic mapping of three policy domains—system structure, language and curriculum, as well as quality strategies and institutional roles—in the context of two developing countries. These results expand the education policy literature by emphasizing the importance of hybrid policy design, which involves maintaining national standards while empowering local implementers. Theoretically, these findings enhance our understanding of how implementation capabilities are a crucial determinant of policy design effectiveness. In terms of policy and practice, this study provides a concrete direction for countries with centralized systems to carry out a gradual transformation towards adaptive and competitive education governance.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms the fundamental differences between the policies and structure of the education system in Sudan and Vietnam. Sudan features a fully centralized model with strict central government control over the curriculum, language of instruction, and educational structures, resulting in uniformity but limiting local innovation and adaptation. In contrast, Vietnam implements a targeted national policy that leaves room for flexibility at the implementation

level, particularly through a 5-4-3-4 structure that opens vocational pathways and promotes institutional autonomy in schools and universities. This difference reflects two paradigms of education governance: the hierarchical-ideological model in Sudan and the adaptive-hybrid model in Vietnam. Conceptually, these findings affirm the importance of a balance between national standardization and local empowerment as a prerequisite for the effectiveness of education policies. This research opens up new directions for developing countries to develop an adaptive, inclusive, and competitive education system through a layered yet integrated governance approach.

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