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# Selecting “elite genes” isn’t science. It’s social engineering



Genetics | Opinion Piece

*Tran Anh Tuan, Director of Hanoi's Department of Science and Technology, speaks at the Capital Youth Conference, December 17, 2025. Photograph: CTV Vietnam*

**A Vietnamese official proposed screening children for elite genes from birth. He called it talent development. Scientists have another word for it.**

The field of genetics gives us a powerful tool to revolutionise human science, and a weapon to launder political biases into biological narratives. Most scientists understand the difference. Tran Anh Tuan did not.

On December 17 2025, the Director of Hanoi’s Department of Science and Technology proposed a scheme called Next 1.000 - a youth talent programme that would select “[elite genes](#)” from birth, or even before birth, and fast-track those children through special training. The proposal was presented at a conference attended by the Hanoi People’s Committee and the Capital Youth Association.

Tuan claimed the programme would create a highly skilled workforce for Hanoi by identifying gifted children, funding their education abroad, then requiring them to serve the city for at least five years upon return. On paper, it sounds like a patriotic investment in talent retention. But an opportunity reserved for a chosen few is hardly an opportunity at all, and public policy should expand educational access rather than restrict it.

The backlash was immediate. Faced with public outrage, Tuan dismissed the idea as an “[accident](#)”, but it was an accident with real consequences. Within a month, he stepped down. Yet his swift resignation should not reassure us. The problem is the idea itself, not just the man who voiced it. Strip away the glossy title of “talent development” and the proposal becomes discrimination dressed as science.

And who, exactly, would be chosen? Genetic screening for personal traits is neither cheap nor conclusive. It is difficult to imagine the Vietnamese government diverting large public funds toward a scientifically dubious initiative. In practice, the programme would favour families wealthy enough to register and pay for testing. In other words: privilege would select for privilege. The label of “elite genes” would not simply reflect social advantage; it would appear scientifically justified.

Beyond its social concerns, the proposal collapses under scientific scrutiny. There is currently no evidence that genetic information can be used to identify “geniuses”. Genes do play a role in the inheritance of intelligence, but not in a way that allows us to select “elites”. The largest meta-analysis to date, involving 14.5 million twin pairs, found an average [heritability of 49%](#) across traits. But this number represents many characteristics besides intelligence, like height or behaviour. Heritability does not predetermine an individual’s life. Intelligence, creativity, leadership, and empathy emerge through environment and biology together. Never biology alone.

“Elite genes”, therefore, do not truly exist. When researchers examined nearly 270,000 individuals, they identified [205 genomic regions](#) associated with variation in intelligence. Intelligence is influenced by hundreds of genes, each contributing a very small effect. Selecting the right genes to train elites is not only technically unfeasible, but also deeply unethical.

Tuan's suggestion to screen children before birth was particularly alarming. Preimplantation genetic testing (PGT) is primarily used to detect single-gene disorders or chromosomal abnormalities that may cause early death or severe impairment in embryos. It is not a talent scout. In the UK, polygenic screening for traits like IQ is banned outright. Tuan was proposing to do, as public policy, what most of the scientific world has explicitly ruled out.



*Polygenic embryo screening that promises predictions about intelligence, health or physical traits is not permitted in the UK. Photograph: Alamy*

Genetics aside, the educational philosophy of selecting children early and placing them into tailored programmes remains questionable. A 2021 study drawing on two decades of data across 75 countries found that separating children into academic tracks earlier tends to increase inequality without improving overall performance. It widens the gap between students, leaving more young people struggling to reach basic skill levels. If this is Hanoi's strategy for developing and retaining its talent pool, it would achieve the opposite.

Debates over the role of genetics in educational inequality are far from new. Professor Robert Plomin, a geneticist at King's College London, sparked controversy in 2018 when he and partners claimed that differences in exam performance between selective and non-selective schools mirrored the genetic differences between pupils. Once socioeconomic factors were accounted for, the genetic differences between school types disappeared. As the Guardian warned of such work: "we must not elevate discrimination to a science: allowing people to climb the ladder of life only as far as their cells might suggest."

Programmes like Next 1.000 risk reshaping how young people define their own worth. Children who are selected would grow up believing they carry superior genes, while those left out would grow up believing the opposite. This reinforces social hierarchy rather than nurturing talent.

History has shown us where such beliefs inevitably lead. Emerging in the late 19th century and reaching global influence by the early 20th century, *eugenics* promised human improvement but instead legitimised discrimination and violence against marginalised communities. Vietnam is a country of 54 ethnic groups, with stark educational inequality between urban and rural areas. Can the government promise to provide equal screening opportunities to all children across the country, or would this deepen the socioeconomic gap? I think the answer is obvious.

As a Vietnamese and a biologist-in-training, this Next 1.000 proposal strikes me on both counts. Scientifically, it is indefensible. But it also goes against Vietnamese values built upon solidarity and community. We thrive by adding to one another, not subtracting. A project designed to divide our people has no place in a public conference, and neither in our future.