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University Autonomy at Public Universities in Vietnam: Current Situation and Solutions

¹ Hoang Thi Thu Trang, ² Tran Thi Huong, ³ Vu Thuy Duong

^{1,2} University of Labour and Social Affairs, Hanoi, Vietnam

³ Trade Union University, Hanoi, Vietnam

Corresponding Author: **Hoang Thi Thu Trang**

Abstract

University autonomy is an important aspect of the higher education reform process in Vietnam, aiming to meet societal needs and promote international integration. It has been implemented in Vietnamese higher education for over two decades, alongside the establishment and development of professional management. University autonomy is currently being actively implemented in Vietnam through

various mechanisms and policies, particularly in terms of financial autonomy. This research article examines the current situation of university autonomy in public universities in Vietnam, highlighting the challenges faced during its implementation and proposing solutions to enhance the autonomy of public universities in Vietnam in the future.

Keywords: University Autonomy, Public Universities, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Comprehensive education reform is the sole responsibility of the education sector and the shared responsibility of our political system. Education plays a crucial role in training human resources to meet the demands of nation-building, protection, and development. Since Resolution 29 of the Party Central Committee on comprehensive education reform was issued, it has provided motivation for managers, educators, and scientists to actively participate in activities to successfully implement the education reform agenda set by the Party and the State. So far, education has undergone significant transformations from policy to practice and has yielded remarkable results. General education has witnessed impressive changes and has been recognized as a prominent event in the regional education landscape, contributing to Vietnam's inclusion in assessment rankings alongside countries with developed education systems. In this context, higher education in our country is also undergoing a process of change and innovation to meet the demands and requirements of society and the world. The experience of countries with developed higher education systems lies in autonomy in management, administration, content, curriculum, and enrollment. In Vietnam, in recent years, university autonomy has been widely discussed because it allows universities to break free from constraints and develop their own direction within the overall development of Vietnamese education. However, university autonomy is currently facing various challenges during implementation and execution.

The autonomy of higher education institutions in our country is currently a matter of concern for both society and relevant departments. Granting autonomy to these institutions is necessary in order to enhance their operational effectiveness, improve the efficiency of state management in education and training, and ultimately elevate the quality of human resources to meet regional and international integration requirements. Researching the autonomy of public higher education institutions in the current context is essential and timely, as it will serve as a basis for proposing solutions to strengthen the autonomy of these institutions and innovate the state's methods of managing higher education.

2. The Theoretical Foundation of University Autonomy

University autonomy is not a new concept in higher education. It exists worldwide, including in Vietnam. Depending on the context of each country, the concept of university autonomy can be understood differently. However, in general, university autonomy can be seen as a method of organizing and managing the activities of the institution in relation to stakeholders, especially the role of the state. It is a way for universities to have control over their own affairs and make decisions that benefit all parties involved. This includes considering the interests of relevant stakeholders, particularly the state.

Autonomy can be expressed at two levels: the level between the university and the state, and the level between the university and its internal departments. Autonomy can also be procedural-the right to decide on means and methods to achieve

predetermined goals-or substantial-the right to decide on goals as well as program activities. Autonomy can also be seen as conditional power: universities can only have autonomy when they meet national standards or pre-established standards according to public policies. Despite being viewed from various perspectives, university autonomy can still be broadly defined as the ability of a university to operate in the way it chooses to achieve its mission and goals.

University autonomy is the freedom of the university to decide its own tasks, demonstrating its proactive ability to develop and implement its own strategies without being constrained by macro-level regulations and management. It is the comprehensive ability of the university to operate in a chosen manner to achieve its mission and goals. Autonomy also brings advantages to universities because a fundamental principle behind autonomy is that higher education institutions will function better.

In Vietnam, the concept of "university autonomy" has emerged in the past two decades. University autonomy in our country is understood as universities being able to operate independently according to legal regulations, taking responsibility for their actions, and having a partially institutionalized structure in each field of higher education activities.

According to the Higher Education Law (2012) ^[1], the term "Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions" was introduced, and in 2014, the new university regulations were issued. Accordingly, university autonomy in our country is understood as universities being able to operate independently according to legal provisions, taking responsibility, and being partially institutionalized in each field of activity of educational institutions.

Law No. 34/2018/QH14, amending and supplementing certain provisions of the Higher Education Law. The right to autonomy for universities includes:

1. The autonomy in academic and professional activities: The right to issue and organize the implementation of internal regulations on enrollment, training, science and technology, and cooperation at home and abroad in accordance with the law; Determine and publicly announce the enrollment methods and criteria as prescribed by the Ministry of Education and Training, except for the fields of national defense and security, which are implemented according to the regulations of the direct management agency; Decide on the organization and management methods of training for different levels and forms of education; develop, evaluate, and issue training programs in accordance with the regulations on the National Qualifications Framework of Vietnam on standard training programs; decide on scientific and technological activities in accordance with the law; and exercise other autonomy rights in academic and professional activities in accordance with the law.
2. The public universities have the autonomy to organize their administrative structure and personnel according to the regulations of the Law on Higher Education, the Law amending and supplementing certain articles of the Law on Higher Education, and the current regulations on establishing, reorganizing, and dissolving public career units. They have the right to autonomously organize their administrative structure and personnel to fulfill their professional tasks, but they are not allowed

to increase the number of employees receiving salaries or salary levels (including both salary and allowances) from the state budget. The universities must issue and implement internal regulations on organizational structure and personnel, as well as exercise other autonomy rights regarding organizational structure and personnel in accordance with the Law on Higher Education, the Law amending and supplementing certain articles of the Law on Higher Education, and relevant laws.

3. The public universities exercise their autonomy over finance and assets in accordance with the provisions of the Law on Higher Education, the Law amending and supplementing certain articles of the Law on Higher Education, and the current regulations on the autonomy mechanism of public career units. The universities must issue and implement internal regulations on finance and assets, as well as exercise other autonomy rights over finance and assets as stipulated by the Law on Higher Education, amending and supplementing certain articles of the Law on Higher Education, and other relevant laws.

3. The Current Situation of Autonomy in Public Universities in Vietnam

Over the past decade, the issue of autonomy in higher education in Vietnam has undergone significant positive change. From being a centralized system under strict state management through the Ministry of Education and Training, universities have gradually been granted autonomy, as evidenced by state legal documents.

- Autonomy in university management and administration.

In Vietnam, the university level is responsible for the overall management and operation of the university, under the guidance of the Party Committee, the University Council, and the Principal, along with advisory support from functional units including departments, faculties, and centers. The departmental level manages the training and scientific research activities of the affiliated branches. The subject departments directly implement academic activities in training, science, and technology. The centers are responsible for implementing scientific and technological applications, technology transfer activities, and providing training.

Currently, the country has 154 out of 170 public universities that have established university councils in accordance with Law No. 34 and Decree No. 99. The establishment of university councils in affiliated schools under ministries, sectors, and localities has reached a rate of 91.18%. 77% of universities have implemented comprehensive and extensive autonomy, which has brought about positive results.

- Financial autonomy

Financial autonomy allows public universities to diversify their sources of funding in order to ensure the selection of a high-quality team and the implementation of academically innovative activities according to the institution's strategy. University autonomy also helps higher education institutions promote the process of socializing education, upgrade infrastructure and equipment to meet teaching and scientific research requirements, and serve the community.

As of the beginning of 2023, 32.76% of universities ensure regular and investment funding (group 1), while 13.79% of universities ensure regular funding (group 2). To enhance the financial capacity of institutions, from 2018 to 2021, the total revenue of autonomous higher education institutions increased, as did the regular funding from sources outside the state budget; average income increased by 20.8% for lecturers and 18.7% for management staff. The percentage of lecturers earning over 200 million VND per year increased from 19.4% to 31.34%; the percentage earning over 300 million VND increased from 0.75% to 5.97% after 3 years of autonomy implementation.

- **Autonomy in terms of personnel**

Autonomous higher education institutions have proactively reviewed and restructured their organizational structure and personnel towards leaner and more efficient operations. The role of the School Council has been specified and enhanced in the management of activities in most higher education institutions. They have actively increased the number of faculty members while reducing administrative staff. Additionally, they have attracted a team of excellent lecturers and experts to contribute to teaching and scientific research, aiming to improve the quality of education, expand the scale, and increase income for faculty members. They have also promoted the process of socializing education, upgraded facilities and equipment to meet teaching and research needs, and served the community. They have established connections with the labor market to ensure practical training, strengthened control over expenditures, increased savings, and efficiency in resource management and utilization.

According to the statistics from the Ministry of Education and Training until the end of 2021, the proportion of lecturers to the total number of staff, lecturers, and workers in higher education institutions accounts for 71%, the largest in the university's workforce structure, more than double the number of management and administrative specialists. The proportion of lecturers with a doctoral degree has increased from 25% (in 2018) to over 31% (in 2021). The proportion of professors and associate professors has also been steadily increasing each year (professors increase by an additional 0.5% per year; associate professors increase by an additional 5-6% per year). The proportion of teaching assistants with a university degree has decreased significantly (decreased by over 50% from 2016 to 2021).

- **Autonomy in recruitment and training.**

According to the survey results, over 80% of schools responded that they have implemented comprehensive and extensive autonomy in admissions and training, leading to positive outcomes (over 85%).

In addition to opening new training programs and developing collaborative training programs both domestically and internationally, universities are actively adjusting their training programs to meet the needs of learners, innovating advanced teaching methods, approaching international training standards and programs, proactively enhancing quality assurance and education quality accreditation, and creating a healthy competitive environment in admissions to attract talented students.

The enrollment scale for general education students tends to decrease, while the enrollment scale for advanced training programs, high-quality training programs, training programs

in collaboration with foreign countries, and English-language training programs tends to increase. The examination and admission process is being innovated to be honest and objective but gentle, reducing pressure and costs. From 2019 to 2021, universities have implemented various methods for admissions.

Many training programs are linked to universities around the world, and advanced training programs continue to be of interest to many higher education institutions. As of December 2021, there are 408 active training programs in the country that are linked to foreign countries. Among them, autonomous higher education institutions have approved a total of 186 training programs with foreign countries, including 124 programs at the undergraduate level, 58 programs at the master's level, and 4 programs at the doctoral level.

According to the survey results, from the beginning of 2018 to December 31, 2021, there were 818 self-governing higher education institutions offering training programs, including fields that meet the demand for human resources in new areas such as data science, business analysis, IoT and applied artificial intelligence, digital arts, robotics and artificial intelligence, and digital marketing.

The main classification by country is still comprised of training programs in partnership with universities in the United Kingdom (101 programs), the United States (59), France (53), Australia (37), and South Korea (27); countries with developed higher education systems and reputable universities that rank highly worldwide, such as New Zealand (16 programs), Germany (10 programs), and Belgium (10 programs). The majority of these international training programs are in the field of economics and management, accounting for 64% (including 85 out of 408 business administration programs). Programs in the fields of science and technology make up 25%, while social sciences and humanities account for 8%, and other fields such as medicine, pharmacy, and law only make up 3%.

- **Academic autonomy**

Over 65% of schools surveyed have implemented comprehensive and extensive academic autonomy, with positive results (over 80%) in scientific and technological activities.

In terms of science and technology, the number of international articles in the Web of Science (WoS) database has increased by 3.5 times in 4 years; the number of articles in the SCOPUS database of universities has increased by over 4 times. The output of projects, initiatives, and ministry-level scientific and technological programs from affiliated units under the Ministry has significantly increased in recent years, averaging 25% per year.

Higher education institutions are becoming more proactive in deciding research directions and participating in scientific and technological tasks, thereby transferring research and technology results to organizations and individuals both domestically and internationally. In particular, institutions under the Ministry of Education and Training have seen an increase in international scientific publications, domestic publications, patents, and other intellectual properties over the years. Many topics and tasks have made significant contributions to industries and the socio-economic development of the country and its localities. The number of accredited higher education institutions is also increasing. As of June 30, 2022, according to domestic standards, there

are 266 educational institutions that have completed self-assessment reports for cycle 1, 22 educational institutions that have completed self-assessment reports for cycle 2; 174 higher education institutions and 11 pedagogical colleges recognized by domestic educational quality assurance organizations as meeting quality standards; 705 training programs have completed self-assessment reports; and 470 training programs have been recognized as meeting quality standards according to the standards set by the Ministry of Education and Training. According to international standards, there are 7 universities evaluated and recognized based on the evaluation standards of the High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES) and AUN-QA, and 308 training programs evaluated and recognized by 10 reputable foreign educational quality assurance organizations.

According to the 2021 USNEWS ranking of countries in the field of education, Vietnam ranks 59th, climbing 5 spots compared to 2020. However, it still ranks behind some countries in the Southeast Asian region, such as Singapore (21st), Malaysia (38th), Thailand (46th), Indonesia (54th), and the Philippines (55th). Vietnamese universities continue to be highly ranked and improve their positions in reputable international rankings. In 2022, there was a significant leap as Vietnam had 5 representatives included in THE ranking; 5 Vietnamese universities made it to the Best Global Universities ranking for 2022; an additional 2 universities (total of 5) were listed in the QS World University Rankings 2023; 10 universities were included in the Webometrics ranking; 5 universities were listed in THE Emerging Economies University Rankings 2021; 11 universities were ranked in the QS Asian University Rankings 2022; and finally, 7 universities were featured in THE Impact Rankings for 2022.

▪ Limitation

University autonomy is a new and complex mechanism that requires the synchronization of multiple factors, processes, and activities. Therefore, during the implementation process, there have been obstacles and limitations that are difficult to avoid.

1. **Autonomy in university management:** For the university Board: In reality, universities have found that the activities of the university Board are often confused and merely reactive. The role and functions of the university board are not clear and comprehensive. The authority of the university board is not affirmed in the organizational structure of most universities. The relationship between the Party Committee, Principal, and university Board in universities is still overlapping and unclear.
2. **Financial autonomy:** The financial resources of public universities are limited and not diversified. Public universities have three main sources of funding: (i) Budgetary funds from the state; (ii) Tuition fees; (iii) Revenue from service activities, scientific research, and technology transfer. According to the assessment of the Ministry of Education and Training, tuition fees are one of the most important sources of funding for public universities. The universities have not yet explored and generated revenue from selling practical, applied research products to the market.
3. **Personnel autonomy:** The policy of using human resources to maximize the effectiveness of budget

resources as a means of innovating management models and practices has not been very effective. The policy tools for implementing autonomy are still limited in terms of organizational autonomy in personnel selection, appointment, and dismissal in many higher education institutions.

4. **Autonomy in training:** The training fields and methods of some universities are not diverse enough to meet the increasingly diverse and demanding learning needs of society, which poses many difficulties in the admissions process.

* Some solutions to increase autonomy in public universities in Vietnam

Autonomy in University Management

In order to enhance autonomy within the educational organization, the management system of universities must continue to be improved, while also ensuring reasonable assignment and delegation between units. Universities need to review the functions and tasks of departments, committees, and units in the field of education, with a focus on assigning the Education Department to carry out its functions correctly. Additionally, there should be a recommendation to the Ministry of Education and Training to promptly issue specific regulations regarding the university Council and the relationship between the university Council and the Party Committee. The university is completely autonomous in organizing its work and personnel, while also being responsible to state agencies for its decisions regarding organization and personnel.

Financial Autonomy

Financial management plays a crucial role in the process of implementing financial autonomy. This is a key issue to ensure that autonomy and responsibility are fully and objectively carried out, fairly, and transparently. Universities need to diversify training methods, adjust tuition fees to both cover training costs and address social policies for students. Enhancing the connection and responsibility of businesses and revenue-generating units in coordinating and sharing training costs. Establishing an open mechanism and environment for universities to carry out research services, technology transfer, and other revenue-generating social services.

Personnel Autonomy

With the aim of building a sufficient and high-quality faculty and management staff and surpassing standards to achieve autonomy in the field of education, universities need to enhance decentralized recruitment to units, establish recruitment standards for faculty; develop a reasonable recruitment process for staff, and use and allocate the right people for the right tasks according to their abilities and strengths.

Autonomy in Training

The prerequisite for successful autonomy is that educational institutions must regularly innovate their training programs by integrating scientific research, enhancing practical skills for both teachers and students, adopting learner-centered teaching and learning methods, strengthening connections with businesses, establishing training links between different fields and schools within and outside the country, introducing new fields of study based on practical needs,

and diversifying training professions.

Autonomy in Testing and Evaluation

One of the fundamental conditions for achieving autonomy and accountability is for each university to have an evaluation system in place, involving both teachers and students. This will gradually enhance teaching methods, learning approaches, and research efforts to establish the reputation of each institution. It is necessary to make the learning outcomes transparent. Innovations should be made in training management, teaching methods, assessment and evaluation methods, as well as learning approaches. Conducting evaluations by teachers and students towards the training management department and the teaching activities of teachers is essential. Gathering feedback from learners helps the university obtain valuable information for general management purposes.

4. Conclusion

Autonomy and accountability are two inseparable aspects of an issue. Strengthening autonomy without placing requirements for accountability risks leading to an unregulated government, decreased quality, and short-term interests. Conversely, enhancing accountability while limiting autonomy will constrain universities, not foster natural operation, flexibility, and the ability to meet diverse societal demands. Maintaining appropriate state intervention through legal tools, regulations, and finances and gradually relinquishing direct interference in micromanagement is necessary to increase autonomy for universities. On the other hand, to effectively utilize market forces and provide the right motivation for higher education, the participation of social forces within and outside of academia is needed to regulate and enhance the accountability of universities.

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