

Vietnam's University Autonomy Policy: An Educational Policy Analysis Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of university autonomy policy in Vietnam from the 1990s to the present, within the broader context of the country's transition to a knowledge-based economy and the globalization of higher education. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of university autonomy and the New Public Management (NPM) model, the study employs a qualitative policy analysis approach using secondary data from legal documents, government reports, and official statistics provided by the Ministry of Education and Training. The analysis reveals notable progress in the development and implementation of university autonomy policies, particularly in areas such as institutional self-governance, academic staff development, financial capacity, and research productivity. However, despite these advancements, the implementation process continues to face significant challenges. These include inconsistencies in the legal and regulatory framework, disparities in institutional governance capabilities, limited accountability mechanisms, and ongoing dependence on state funding. The persistence of these barriers has impeded the realization of full autonomy across the higher education system. In response, the article proposes a set of strategic policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the sustainability and global competitiveness of Vietnamese higher education. These include comprehensive legal reforms to ensure policy coherence, the substantive empowerment of university governing boards, the acceleration of digital transformation in management and instruction, and the promotion of robust university–enterprise partnerships. By addressing both structural and contextual constraints, these measures aim to support a more autonomous, accountable, and innovation-driven higher education system in Vietnam.

Keywords: university autonomy, education policy, Vietnam, higher education governance, public sector reform

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and the transition to a knowledge-based economy, higher education plays a key role in improving the quality of human resources and national competitiveness. One of the modern educational governance trends applied by many countries is the autonomous university model, with the goal of increasing autonomy for educational institutions in governance, finance, academics and human resources, while promoting transparency, efficiency and engagement with society.

In Vietnam, the policy of university autonomy was formed in the early 1990s and has been gradually institutionalized through important legal documents such as Decree 16/2015/ND-CP, the Law on Higher Education 2012 and amended in 2018, as well as Decree 99/2019/ND-CP. During the implementation process, university autonomy has achieved initial results, contributing to the innovation of governance models, increasing financial efficiency, enhancing research capacity and improving training quality. However, this policy is also facing many challenges, such as lack of synchronization in the legal system, differences in the level of implementation between schools, and limitations in social supervision.

Summarizing practices, analyzing achievements and identifying bottlenecks in the university autonomy policy is necessary to propose improvement orientations suitable to the requirements of higher education development in the new period. This article focuses on assessing the current status of university autonomy policy implementation in Vietnam, analyzing the achieved results, identifying remaining challenges and proposing policy solutions to promote more sustainable and effective autonomy in the coming period.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method with a policy analysis approach, to synthesize, evaluate and compare legal documents, practical reports and secondary data related to the process of implementing university autonomy in Vietnam.

2.1. Research design

The study is designed according to the public policy analysis model, including the following steps: (1) collecting and systematizing legal documents related to university autonomy; (2) analyzing policy content and the level of change through the stages; (3) synthesizing practical data from reports and statistics of the Ministry of Education and Training, universities and educational research organizations; (4) evaluating the achievements, limitations and factors affecting the effectiveness of policy implementation; (5) Proposing policy improvement orientations in line with the context of higher education development in the new period.

2.2. Data sources

The main data sources include: (1) Legal documents such as Decree 16/2015/ND-CP, Law on Higher Education (2012, revised 2018), Decree 99/2019/ND-CP, Resolution 77/NQ-CP, Resolution 58/NQ-CP...; (2) Summary reports and official statistics of the Ministry of Education and Training (2018–2023 period); (3) Documents of seminars and workshops on university autonomy organized by universities and educational institutions; (4) Academic articles and research from domestic and international journals related to university autonomy policies.

2.3. Data processing method

The data was processed using content analysis, combined with qualitative synthesis techniques. The documents and data were coded according to the following topics: (1) scope of autonomy; (2) implementation results; (3) limitations - challenges; and (4) factors affecting policy effectiveness. The coding and comparison were done manually to ensure consistency in analysis and to draw conclusions close to reality. 2.4. In-depth interview method This study uses in-depth interview method to deepen the related concepts (university autonomy, effectiveness of university autonomy implementation, education policy, education policy analysis, etc.) and propose to improve the policy on university autonomy. The authors interviewed 06 people, including 01 former leader of the Ministry of Education and Training; 01 former Director of the Department of Higher Education; 01 university president; 01 independent expert from an international organization; 01 expert in the field of Economics; 01 university lecturer. The results obtained from in-depth interviews were synthesized, analyzed, selected and inherited by the authors, used in the process of conceptualization, analysis and synthesis.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

3.1. Theoretical basis

3.1.1. Concept of university autonomy

University autonomy is a concept that refers to the level of freedom and autonomy that a higher education institution is granted to conduct administrative, financial, academic and personnel activities, within the current legal framework. According to OECD (2003), university autonomy includes four main pillars: (1) academic autonomy; (2) organizational and personnel autonomy; (3) financial autonomy; and (4) administrative autonomy. University autonomy is not simply about reducing State intervention, but also includes accountability mechanisms, especially accountability to society, learners and stakeholders. The results of in-depth interviews also show that experts have a high consensus with the definition of OECD (2003) when it is said that university autonomy includes four main pillars.

3.1.2. University autonomy in modern education management

According to the new model of governance in public education (New Public Management – NPM), university autonomy is one of the reform tools to improve the efficiency, flexibility and responsibility of educational institutions. This model promotes the shift of the State's role from “direct operator” to “supervisor, funder and evaluator of results”. Studies such as Estermann & Nokkala (2009) indicate that a high level of autonomy is often associated with an independent assessment system, a quality accreditation system and a flexible labor market, in which universities are able to adapt quickly to changes and be more creative in training and research. During an in-depth interview, the economist emphasized the efficiency, flexibility and responsibility of educational institutions.

This expert said: Autonomy must aim for that goal. Educational institutions can absorb some of the thinking on economic management to apply to modern educational management.

3.1.3. Factors affecting the effectiveness of university autonomy

Research by Berdahl (1990) and Neave (1998) shows that the effectiveness of university autonomy policies depends on three main factors: (1) the level of completion of the legal framework; (2) the internal capacity of the educational institution (administration, finance, staff); and (3) the mechanism for monitoring and evaluating results. In addition, in the context of digital transformation, new factors such as the ability to apply technology, data culture, and linkage with businesses are also playing an increasingly important role in improving the quality and effectiveness of university autonomy.

3.1.4. University autonomy in the context of Vietnam

In Vietnam, university autonomy is understood as the transfer of authority from the governing body to universities in deciding on organizational structure, recruitment - appointment, building and implementing training programs, financial management and scientific research activities. However, the actual level of autonomy between universities is still very different, reflecting differences in resources, governance traditions, as well as in understanding and applying policies. This theoretical basis is the foundation for assessing the implementation status and determining policy recommendations in the following content section.

3.1.5. Analysis of Education Policy

a. Education Policy

Education policy is a form of public policy that reflects the will of the State or competent organizations in orienting, organizing and operating educational activities to achieve human, social and national development goals. This policy includes a system of legal documents, regulations, programs and operating mechanisms in the entire education system. Education policy components: (1) Policy objectives: Comprehensive human development; improving the quality of human resources; international integration; ensuring fairness in access to education. (2) Developing subjects: Government, Ministry of Education and Training, National Assembly, international organizations (in some cooperation). (3) Affected subjects: Students, teachers, lecturers, education managers, parents and educational institutions. (4) Implementation resources: State budget, public-private partnership, international aid sources and private investment.

Commonly used policy tools in education include: (1) Legal tools: Law on Education, Law on Higher Education, decrees and guiding circulars. (2) Financial tools: Budget allocation per student, scholarships, tuition fee exemptions. (3) Organizational and administrative tools: Establishment of school councils, university autonomy, quality assessment. (4) Information tools: Educational communication, publication of school rankings, training quality scorecards.

b. Education policy analysis process

Phase	Content
Identify the problem	Identify shortcomings in the education system such as: low training quality, regional disparities, inequality in access to education, exam pressure...
Agenda	The government makes the issue a policy priority; interest groups and public opinion create pressure.
Policy development	Draft laws, decrees, circulars; develop national action programs; determine specific goals.
Policy implementation	Implement decentralization to localities, issue guidelines, allocate budgets, train education managers...
Policy Review	Monitor output, outcome, impact; adjust as needed.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. History of the formation of university autonomy policy in Vietnam

University autonomy policy in Vietnam began to take shape in the early 1990s, in the context of innovation in educational management thinking and the trend of international integration. From a university education system

operating under a centralized planning mechanism, Vietnam gradually shifted to a decentralized governance model, focusing on efficiency and quality.

Trial phase (1993–2005): In 1993, Decree No. 90/CP and then Decree No. 97/CP, Decree No. 16/CP marked the first step in granting autonomy to universities in terms of organization and expertise. However, during this period, autonomy was still mainly understood in terms of administrative decentralization, with a very limited level of self-determination, especially in the fields of finance and human resources.

Legal formation stage (2005–2015): The Law on Education (2005) and the Law on Higher Education (2012) were the first documents to lay a clear foundation for the concept of “university autonomy” with four pillars: organizational structure, academics, finance and human resources. Resolution No. 14/2005/NQ-CP on fundamental and comprehensive innovation of Vietnamese higher education in the period 2006–2020 also affirmed the importance of perfecting the policy on developing higher education in the direction of ensuring autonomy and social responsibility of higher education institutions. Decree 43/2006/ND-CP and then Decree 16/2015/ND-CP regulating the financial autonomy mechanism for public service units, including universities, have significantly expanded the scope of autonomy. This period marked the shift from the subsidy mechanism to the model of "the state orders, educational institutions implement".

Acceleration and institutionalization period (2015–present): In 2014, the Government issued Resolution 77/NQ-CP on piloting the innovation of the operating mechanism for a number of public universities in the period 2014–2017. This was an institutional breakthrough when for the first time, schools were given the right to decide on the organization of the apparatus, recruitment and appointment of senior personnel, and more initiative in using the budget. After the 2018 revised Law on Higher Education was passed by the National Assembly, Decree 99/2019/ND-CP officially established a specific legal framework for implementing comprehensive autonomy throughout the system. Decree No. 60/2021/ND-CP has overcome the shortcomings in the implementation of Decree No. 16/2015/ND-CP, contributing to the completion of the legal basis for the operation of public service units in the direction of granting full autonomy in terms of organization, personnel and finance; encouraging public service units that are eligible to carry out equitization. Along with that, Resolution 58/NQ-CP (2021) and specialized guidelines have helped expand the scope of autonomy to more universities, while emphasizing the role of the university council as the central governance institution in the autonomy model. The history of the formation of university autonomy policy in Vietnam can be modeled as follows (see figure 1):

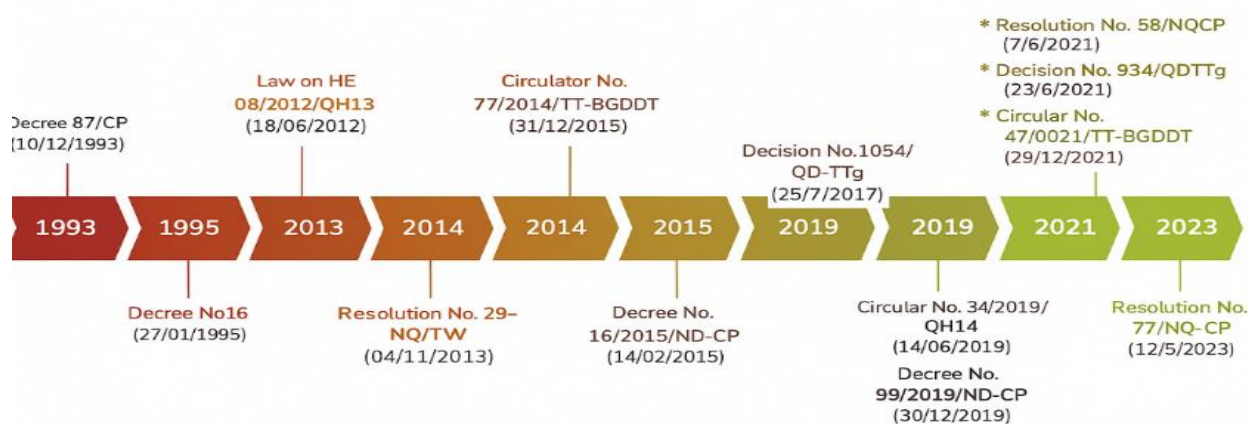


Figure 1: Modeling the History of the Formation of University Autonomy Policy in Vietnam

3.2.2. Achievements in the Implementation of University Autonomy Policy

After nearly three decades of gradual and controlled implementation, the university autonomy policy in Vietnam has recorded many positive results, reflected in both legal aspects, internal governance, training quality, scientific research and competitiveness of higher education institutions.

a. Expanding the scale and scope of autonomy

As of 2023, 141/232 universities met the conditions for implementing autonomy according to regulations, accounting for 60.8% of the total number of universities nationwide. Of which, the rate of public universities with university councils - a mandatory condition for implementing the autonomy mechanism - reached 154/170 schools, equivalent to 90.6%. This shows a clear step forward in perfecting the university governance institution according to the autonomous model.

b. Improving teaching capacity and staff

The autonomy policy has encouraged schools to be more proactive in recruiting, training and retaining high-quality teaching staff. The proportion of lecturers with a doctoral degree has increased from 25% (2018) to 31% (2021). At the same time, the average income of lecturers in autonomous schools increased by 26.1%, creating motivation for long-term commitment and improving teaching quality.

c. Improving enrollment efficiency and training quality

Thanks to increased autonomy in developing and implementing training programs, many universities have become more flexible in enrollment and opening new majors. The annual enrollment rate reached 97.8% of the target in 2021, reflecting a clear improvement in the capacity of schools to regulate input.

d. Increasing research productivity and scientific publications

During the period from 2016 to 2022, the number of international scientific articles (SCOPUS/WoS) of autonomous public universities increased 3.5–4 times, demonstrating the effectiveness of increased investment in research and policies to encourage international publications.

e. Increasing transparency and professionalizing university governance

The establishment of university councils, the development of organizational and operational regulations, and the clear division of roles between the university council and the principal have helped many universities move closer to a modern governance model, increasing democracy, openness, and transparency in the decision-making process.

These results show that the university autonomy policy in Vietnam not only reforms management but also creates a real driving force to improve the quality of education, research, and international integration. However, in addition to the achievements, this policy still faces many challenges, which will be presented in the next section.

3.3. Limitations and challenges

Although the university autonomy policy in Vietnam has achieved some positive results, the implementation process still faces many significant limitations and challenges. First of all, the human resource management and lecturer recruitment mechanisms at many higher education institutions are not really flexible, causing difficulties in attracting and retaining high-quality human resources. The system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of autonomy implementation is still lacking in synchronization, leading to inconsistent implementation and difficulty in ensuring quality.

In addition, the ability of universities to decide on their own training programs still has many problems, not flexible enough to adapt to the rapid changes of the labor market and practical requirements. In terms of finance, most universities are still heavily dependent on the state budget. The uneven financial autonomy among universities increases the gap in training quality and development among educational institutions.

In addition, the goal of creating a competitive environment in the higher education system to promote innovation and improve quality has not yet been clearly effective. The current training system still lacks connection with the practical needs of the labor market, reducing the efficiency of using human resources after training. Moreover, the capacity to implement autonomy of public universities is still very different, reflected in the large gap in scientific research activities and international publications.

The above challenges require strong and synchronous reforms in institutions, governance, as well as sustainable development strategies in the coming time.

3.4. International experience

Research on some countries with developed higher education systems shows that the effective implementation of autonomy policies depends largely on the level of real autonomy of educational institutions, while requiring transparent monitoring mechanisms and a stable legal framework. In countries such as the US, France, the UK and the Netherlands, university autonomy policies are designed with a high level of decentralization and a clear

management and monitoring system, creating conditions for educational institutions to maximize their internal capacity.

In the US, universities are granted full autonomy in financial, human resources and academic management, allowing them to be flexible in recruiting, developing training programs and mobilizing social resources. The 2007 LRU Law of France allows public universities to be proactive in recruiting and managing finances, contributing to improving the efficiency of resource use and attracting talent. In the Netherlands, independent accreditation and monitoring bodies such as NVAO were established to ensure output quality and accountability, clearly separate from the governing body.

Singapore – Conditional comprehensive autonomy model. The state converts public universities into autonomous universities but still maintains strategic control through: Long-term investment funds; Macro-policy guidance such as student numbers, priority majors. Strengths: Academic, financial, and human resource autonomy, but still has high accountability.

Korea – Autonomy linked to competition and quality. Universities are autonomous in terms of enrollment, tuition fees, and training programs. The state does not intervene administratively but uses a competitive financial mechanism (funding by performance). National quality accreditation and ranking agencies help ensure transparency.

Germany – Autonomy comes with public accountability. Autonomy is granted with clear commitments on output (training and research effectiveness). Have an effective monitoring system through indicators (KPIs) and periodic evaluation.

Policy recommendations for Vietnam:

It is necessary to clearly distinguish between “empowerment” and “directed supervision”, ensuring that schools have the right to make decisions but still within the national strategy.

Strengthen the independent inspection and ranking mechanism to ensure quality instead of management by administrative orders.

University autonomy should be closely linked to the public and periodic assessment process, especially for public schools using the state budget.

It is necessary to encourage the socialization of education, develop university funds and establish real university councils, representing many social sectors, not just those in the apparatus.

International experience shows that: University autonomy is not just “empowerment”, but an ecosystem of power, responsibility and accountability. Vietnam should: Have a clear autonomy roadmap, not rush; Build a system to ensure quality and control risks; Promote the role of society, businesses and learners in school governance. In order for the university autonomy policy to be truly effective in Vietnam, it is necessary to continue to promote the real empowerment of universities in core areas, while establishing an independent monitoring system that operates on the basis of output assessment criteria to ensure transparency, consistency and effectiveness in the policy implementation process.

3.5. Proposal to improve the policy

In order for the university autonomy policy to be effective and sustainable, it is necessary to synchronously implement many solutions in terms of law, administration and operating model. First of all, it is necessary to amend and improve the relevant legal system, especially the Enterprise Law and guiding documents, to create a clear legal corridor for the autonomous university model, university-enterprise and enterprises originating from universities (spin-off). Adding regulations on the right to establish, contribute capital, and manage enterprises of universities will promote research activities, technology transfer and knowledge commercialization in the academic environment.

In addition, it is necessary to build mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of implementing autonomy in a transparent and objective manner. The university council needs to be given real power in governance, financial supervision, human resources and development strategy of the university. Along with that, the innovation of training programs needs to be carried out in an open, flexible direction, linked to practical needs and the labor market, through increased cooperation with businesses and labor-using organizations.

A strategy to develop a high-quality teaching staff is also a key factor, including a competitive recruitment policy, appropriate remuneration, and opportunities for professional development through international training, research and academic exchange programs. At the same time, promoting digital transformation in higher education according

to a 5-step roadmap - from digitalizing data, improving governance, to building a digital culture - will help schools improve operational efficiency, quality management and interaction with learners.

Finally, it is necessary to promote international cooperation to enhance competitiveness, attract resources and learn from successful autonomous university models in the world. University autonomy policy in Vietnam can only be successful if it is designed as a synchronous system, has a clear implementation mechanism and is suitable for the characteristics of the domestic socio-economic context.

4. CONCLUSION

University autonomy policy is an inevitable trend in the context of globalization and educational innovation, aiming to improve the operational efficiency, training quality and competitiveness of higher education institutions. In Vietnam, the implementation of university autonomy in recent years has achieved many positive results, especially in improving the quality of staff, improving financial capacity, enhancing scientific research activities and international integration. However, besides those achievements, there are still many challenges such as lack of synchronization in the legal framework, limitations in governance mechanisms, uneven levels of autonomy among institutions, and significant dependence on the state budget.

To maximize the effectiveness of the autonomy policy, more comprehensive and extensive reforms are needed, from perfecting the legal system, strengthening the role of the university council, promoting digital transformation, to developing the university-enterprise model and promoting international cooperation. Only by building an autonomous, transparent and innovative higher education ecosystem can Vietnam improve the quality of human resources, promote socio-economic development and affirm its position on the regional and global education map. Limitations of the study: The study mainly uses qualitative methods and policy analysis based on secondary data (legal documents, reports, seminars), not combined with field investigations, surveys of learners, lecturers or university leaders to obtain empirical data from multiple perspectives.

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