

University autonomy in Vietnam: From education policy analysis-based perspective

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Abstract

This research specified the development and implementation of university autonomy in Vietnam based on education policy analysis, which is different from the traditional consideration of university autonomy as a trend or a progress. The findings point out that university autonomy in Vietnam is a part of education and training policies in general, and of Higher education policies in particular. It has been presented, specified and legalized in relatively detailed way in current laws and regulations. On the basis of education policy analysis, university autonomy in Vietnam is a system of the State's viewpoints and goals for higher education, as well as approaches and measures to achieve such goals in a specific period of the country's development. It has a decisive role in raising the people's intellectual levels and nurturing the national human resources, especially the highly-skilled ones and the talented. All in all, methods of university autonomy in Vietnam should be adjusted or newly created during implementation.

Keywords: University, University Autonomy, Education Policy, Education Policy Analysis.

Theoretical background on education policy analysis

Policy

A policy can be defined in various ways. For example, a policy refers to standards to carry out a mission. It is in effect for a particular period of time in a specific field. The contents and approaches in a policy are basically in line with a country's or organization's directions (Vietnamese Encyclopedias, 1995, cited in Nguyen Cong Giap, 1998).

Policies can be either clear or implied decisions of approaching guidelines for future decisions, of planning, maintaining or delaying actions, or instructing the implementation of existing decisions (World Bank, 1994, cited in Nguyen Cong Giap, 1998).

According to Nguyen Cong Giap (1988), policies on certain issues are short-term decisions in daily management or specific subject matters. A mono-program policy specifies ways to design programs in a specific field, while a multiprogram one involves programs in various fields. Moreover, strategic decisions are associated with policies with a larger scope. New policies are often formed when a problem arises at the time. Choices of policies may be made in different ways which have been categorized into four types: systematic, spontaneous, special and imported policies.

In the author's perspective, a policy refers to a system of the State's viewpoints and targets in a sector or across sectors, which includes approaches and measures to reach those targets in a specific period of the country's development. It has a decisive role in a country's socioeconomic and political development.

Education policy

According to Nguyen Tien Hung (2017), higher education policies greatly affect the enhancement of the people's intellectual levels and development of national human resources, especially the highly-skilled and talented ones. Educated and trained human resources are considered the most precious resources in the society and the possible sources of added values for the economy. Planning and implementing education and training policies should currently take into consideration the continuous, constant and flexible nature of education and training, which means they can take place anywhere: in family, in the workplace or schools or within social relationships. Among such settings, classroom education has the most decisive role.

In other words, education and training policies must facilitate everyone to be schooling in any school or education and training institution.

Education policy analysis

According to Nguyen Tien Hung (2017), an education policy making is a three-phase process including eight steps related to research, analysis, consultation and information synthesis to design, implement, assess and amend the policy. The three phases are policy design, policy implementation and policy amendment. The eight steps are analyzing current education situation, drafting choices of education policy, assessing the choices, consulting and deciding the policy, planning policy implementation, implementing the policy, monitoring the implementation and evaluate its effects, and amending and redesigning the policy.

According Nguyen Cong Giap (1998), while researching for development of education and training policy, Vietnamese researchers highly prioritized systematic approach. This not only reflects in the settings of their research projects in the past, which were the country's centrally planned economy then, but also in recent studies despite greater access to more general methodology in education and training. To develop education and training policies, systematic approach to address existing issues is of great importance.

University autonomy in the world

According to Nguyen Anh Tuan (2022), the Overview report on university administration trends worldwide by World Bank (2008) presents four university administration models with four levels of university autonomy: state-control model as in Malaysia, semi-auto model like France and New Zealand, semi-independent model as in Singapore and independent model in the UK and Australia. In the state-control model, higher education institutions are still autonomous to a certain extent due to financial and practical reasons; and the state cannot control all of their activities. On the other hand, in the independent model, the state still has some interference in the institutions' strategies and have the right to request their accountability at a high level.

Vu Thi Phuong Anh (2011) stated that research also showed that in several developed countries, there existed both independent and state-controlled universities. Besides, ways to address types of higher education institutions depend on their scale and type of training, and vary from countries to countries. Their levels of autonomy are also different.

The European University Association points out four crucial factors that contribute to universities' capabilities to make decisions related to their own issues, namely autonomy in the organization, operations, choice of Principal/Director, Board of Administration/ University Council, financial autonomy, academic autonomy (in training and technological science), and staffing autonomy which is autonomy in recruitment and proper use of staff in line with the university's interests (Monaco, 2005).

According to Ingemund Hagg (2009), when comparing universities in different countries, it can be clearly seen that their levels of autonomy are different. Where universities are highly autonomous, the government only takes control in sector 4 (specialization standards) and 7 (administration and finance). Where the institutions are autonomous at a medium level, the government can have more greater impacts in sector 3 (training curricula and teaching activities) and 6 (management). Meanwhile, in countries where universities have low levels of autonomy, the governments can intervene in all aspects of their operations.

University autonomy in Vietnam

According to Nguyen Minh Thuyet (2014), amid the extensive regional and international integration, university autonomy has become an inevitable trend in Vietnam. In the last two decades, university autonomy in general, and staffing autonomy in particular, in higher education in the country has had remarkable progress. While in the past, Ministry of Education and Training took control of all activities, higher education institutions have now gradually gained autonomy in staffing, academics and finance, which is reflected in legal documents issued in the last 10 years.

Nguyen Anh Tuan (2018) shares that in Vietnam, the trend of university autonomy is closely linked with the State's roles (or intervention) through laws and legal documents. Initially, the State represented by Ministry of Education and Training adopted the state-control model where all higher education institutions were under the State's strict control in all aspects (organization, mechanism, academics, finance, etc.). However, such roles of the State have been gradually changed. Article 10 in Decision no. 153/2003/QĐ-TTg issued by the Prime Minister clarifies that "Universities are autonomous and accountable for planning and making plans for their development, and organizing training, planning, technological, financial, international networking and staffing activities under existing laws." After that, Article 14 in 2005 Law on

Education included specific regulations on higher education management appointment and decentralization, and autonomy and accountability enhancement in higher education institutions. This means universities have autonomy and accountability as required by the law and their charter (Article 60). At the same time, the Government also issued Resolution no. 14/2005/NQ-CP on November 2, 2005 on basic and comprehensive innovation in Vietnam's higher education in 2006-2020, which confirmed the significance of perfecting policies on higher education development towards universities' autonomy and social accountability insurance, the State's and society's roles of monitoring and assessment.

In addition, Direction no. 296/CT-TTg on February 27, 2010 by the Prime Minister on innovation of education in 2010-2012 also specified that education management renovation included the state's management in education and of institutions as the breakthrough in comprehensive innovation of higher education. The Prime Minister also assigned the Ministry of Education and Training crucial missions of review, supplement and amendment of the existing legal documents and developing new ones regarding university establishment, enrolment, training organization, financial management, quality management, recruitment with clear regulations on the teaching staff's responsibilities and benefits in teaching and scientific research, relationships between the administrators, university council, the Party's committee and associations in universities. This helped to facilitate universities and colleges to implement their autonomy and accountability to the society and the State under the Law on Education.

To encourage public higher education institutions to proactively and effectively exploit and utilize resources for better training quality and State budget saving without diminishing poor students and social-welfare beneficiary' opportunities to access higher education, in the 2014-2017 Pilot scheme of innovating operations in four universities under Ministry of Education and Training, the Government issued Resolution 77/NQ-CP on October 24, 2014 on pilot innovation of operations in public higher education institutions in 2014-2017. Based on the results of this pilot scheme, the Government made proper adjustments in planning macro policies on university autonomy afterwards.

The Law on Education specified that universities are autonomous in the following aspects: (1) Curriculum, coursebook and teaching plan development, (2) Enrolment, training and

acknowledgement of graduation, (3) Structural organization, (4) Resources mobilization, management and utilization, and (5) International and domestic cooperations.

Hoang Thi Xuan Hoa (2012) confirmed that university autonomy is not only an inevitable trend of development of global universities, but it is also the survival trend for Vietnamese ones. However, due to typical characteristics, university autonomy in Vietnam has its own features and is implemented on the basis of a market-oriented socialist economy. Tran Khanh Duc (2014) identified university autonomy as a part of the national policies on education and human resources development in Vietnam. He thought that only when universities were highly autonomous would they be able to adequately fulfil their mission of high-quality labor training. Nguyen Kim Dung and Tran Quoc Toan (2015) pointed out the roles of the State and State management in university autonomy policies in Vietnam. The researchers categorized levels of university autonomy into five levels characterized by different criteria. Bien Van Minh (2016) compared university autonomy policies with “Contract 10” in agriculture. To be more specific, imitating the methods of “Contract 10” would allow universities to liberate their creativity and proactiveness. However, “Contract 10” in higher education is far more complicated and requires specific roadmap. Tran Khanh Duc and his colleagues (2019) developed a theoretical framework on human resources and human resources management at schools of all levels.

University autonomy in Vietnam from education policy analysis-based perspective

Roles of the State in University autonomy policies in Vietnam

Analysing theories related to policies, university autonomy in Vietnam can be considered a subject matter in a policy as it bears all traits of an education policy. In Vietnam, university autonomy policies are closely linked with the State’s impacts through the legal system and documents. In the past, the State represented by Ministry of Education and Training adopted the state-control model in which higher education institutions were placed under the State’s strict control in all aspects of operations (i.e. organization, mechanism, academics, finance, etc.). However, such roles have been gradually shifted from control to monitoring.

To be more specific, Article 10 in Decision 153/2003/QĐ-TTg by the Prime Minister clearly

stated that “universities are autonomous and accountable under the existing laws on their development planning and organization of training, plan, technology, finance, international cooperation and staffing.”

Article 14 in 2005 Law on Education has pointed out education management appointment and decentralization and autonomy and accountability enhancement in education institutions.

Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP by the Government on November 2, 2005 on basic and comprehensive renovation of Higher education in 2006-2010 involved articles on eliminating the roles of a governing ministry and developing a mechanism of the State’s ownership representatives in public higher education institutions.

Joint circular 07/2009/TTLT-BGDDT-BNV on April 15, 2009 by Ministry of Education and Training and Ministry of Home Affairs provided instructions on autonomy and accountability for carrying out their responsibilities, organizing mechanism and payroll in their units, recruiting, managing and appointing staff and officers. In general, university autonomy in Vietnam has been institutionalized, specified and equipped with sufficient legal framework.

Results of University autonomy policy implementation in Vietnam

Positive results

According to the Central Propaganda Committee (2023), there are 154 out of 170 (or 90.6%) higher education institutions nationwide that have established their University council in according with Law no. 34 and Decree 99. The universities under ministries, industries and localities with such establishment made up for 91.18%. The majority of universities which have been autonomous intensively and extensively, accounting for 77%, have good performance. Expected to comprehensively revolutionize higher education, up to the present, university autonomy implementation has proved to achieve certain positive results, gradually transforming awareness and organization of implementation. This transformation originates from the objective needs and development trends in higher education in the world and is promoted by the State’s and Party’s proper directions, guidelines and policies. As a result, state management agencies illustrate their determination in promoting autonomy, developing document system of autonomy implementation in accordance with Law no. 34/2018/QH14, developing some effective

autonomy model and paving the way for extensive implementation across higher education system.

According to Ministry of Education and Training (2022), the Party's leading roles have become more important since university autonomy started to be implemented. Universities' Party committees serve as a leader in all aspects and fields, especially in principle making. A survey by the Ministry with Principals, the Party's Committee Secretaries and University council chairmen revealed that more than 80% of the respondents agreed with the direction and policies of autonomy implementation with the enhanced leading roles of the universities' Party's Committee. From 2003 to 2018, the roles and actual powers of university councils were specified in Law no. 34 by the National Assembly. This marks an important step allowing public higher education institutions to implement autonomy in organizing their mechanisms. The survey also showed that more than 80% of the participating universities which have implemented autonomy extensively and intensively in enrolment and training have got positive operation results. Over 65% of the universities with extensive and intensive autonomy implementation in scientific and technological activities have acquired positive results.

Ministry of Education and Training (2022) reported that all autonomous universities had proactively reviewed and perfected their mechanisms and staff in a streamlined and effective way. University autonomy also helped them accelerate education socialization and improve their facilities and equipment to better meet the conditions of teaching, scientific research and community services. The universities' accountability also promoted the institutions' public and transparent operations with their databases for the state's management agencies' monitoring being developed and dedicated regulations on accountability implementation as substitute for Circular 36/2017/TT-BGDDT being drafted to synchronize with the databases.

According to the Central Propaganda Committee (2023), university autonomy has contributed to a healthy competitive environment. To February 28, 2022, there were 274 higher education institutions finishing their self-assessment report, 174 ones that had been externally accredited in terms of education quality and acknowledged to meet the standards of education quality, 591 training curricula finishing self-assessment, and 470 ones externally accredited with 308 ones

acknowledged to meet quality standards. On October 24, 2014, the Government issued Resolution 77/NQ-CP on piloting innovation in mechanisms in public higher education institutions in 2014-2017. In pursuant to this Resolution, the higher education system has made remarkable progress in their internal power with their resources and capabilities maximized. Up to the present, there have been 142 out of 232 institutions satisfying the conditions of autonomy under Law on Higher education amended and supplemented in 2018.

According to the Central Propaganda Committee (2023), in terms of staffing, since they were chosen to pilot autonomy, universities gradually developed a proper staffing structure. To be more specific, they launched competitive policies to appeal to lecturers with high professional and scientific research competence. The proportion of lecturers with doctoral degree has increased from 25% in 2018 to 31% in 2021. In terms of finance, up to now, 32.76% of the universities have been able to cover their recurrent and investment expenses (Level 1), and 13.79% of them can insure their recurrent expenses (Level 2). Regarding the institutions' financial capability enhancement, from 2018 to 2021, the total revenue of most of the autonomous ones increased, the total revenue excluding the State's funding for recurrent expenses also rose, lecturers' average incomes increased by 20.8% while those of the managers also rose by 18.7%. After three years of autonomy implementation, the percentage of lecturers who earned more than 200 million VND/year increased from 19.4% to 31.34%, and that of those who got above 300 million VND also rose from 0.75% to 5.97%.

University autonomy policies have created a healthy competitive environment where the universities are encouraged to invest in their training quality to enhance their competitiveness in attracting excellent students, aiming at sustainable and actual development. The statistics exhibited that the scope of enrolment for mainstream curricula has shrunk, while that of the advanced, fast-track, foreign joint training ones and English training ones has expanded. The new method of objective examination and enrolment has helped to reduce pressure and save costs. In the period of 2019-2021, universities might enroll students in different ways.

According to Ministry of Education and Training (2022), the number of internationally published articles in journals listed in Web of Science (WoS) has increased by 3.5 times after four years and that in SCOPUS-listed journals has increased by 4 times. Products from ministry-level research projects and scientific and

technological programs by universities under the Ministry have also remarkably risen in the recent years with the percentage of 25%/year. Some institutions have achieved good positions in university ranking systems by prestige global ranking organizations. In 2022, Quacquarelli Symonds Education Organization (QS) published its Field-based university ranking. For example, in the field of technology and engineering, there were five Vietnamese universities in top 500; in the field of business and economics, there were two in Times Higher Education; and in the field of social sciences, there were three.

The Committee also points out that university autonomy is a part of education renovation. In Vietnam, this has been implemented and brought about positive changes under the Party's and State's consistent directions and policies in the last three decades. University autonomy is also a part of renovation, modernization and globalization of higher education, and a stage in the transformation of higher education models from the centrally planned economy period to the market-oriented one. It can be considered a revolution of fundamental and comprehensive innovation of higher education. With such renovation, higher education in Vietnam has gained several remarkable achievements, especially after the Law on Higher Education was amended and supplemented. To be more specific, a lot of higher education institutions have been changing their mechanism and gradually showing their proactiveness. As a result, they have become more active with higher competitiveness, contributing to great changes in awareness, operations, theories and practicalities in the higher education system.

Emerging issues in University autonomy policy implementation in Vietnam

According to the Central Propaganda Committee (2023), approaches to the nature, meaning and roles of university autonomy are so unclear that even managers and lecturers in several higher education institutions, researchers in education and authorities still interpret it in different ways, leading to ineffective autonomy implementation in the institutions. Additionally, concepts of "governing ministry" or "direct managing agency" are controversial. University autonomy is a new complicated concept which requires various factors, stages and activities in sync.

The Committee also shares that the legal framework for university autonomy implementation guidelines specified in Law on Education and instructing Decrees is still in need

of proper amendment and supplement to be in line with the current situation. For example, in certain institutions, autonomy is misinterpreted as financial autonomy; or some others, when developing their comprehensive autonomy scheme, consider it the discontinuation of the state's funding for both recurrent and investment expenses.

Ministry of Education and Training (2022) points out that the relations between the power and responsibilities of University Councils and the Principals, between Universities and Colleges or Schools have not been distinguished. There still exist several inadequacies in the relations between universities and the governing agencies. To be more specific, some governing agencies still want to "govern" universities in their administration. However, at the same time, several institutions wish to be "autonomous" under the control of a governing ministry as they are not confident enough to operate independently and seek for support and funding from the ministry. Autonomy and accountability are two sides of a coin with close link and mutual impacts. The State's roles in these aspects, especially in perfecting the legal framework to ensure equality and fairness in autonomy implementation, are undeniable. However, such implementation has not been effective in certain institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the Party's and State's current directions on university autonomy in the recent time, the author would like to make several recommendations related to amendment of Law on Education and Decrees outlining and instructing the enforcement of Law on Higher Education, facilitating to address and overcome difficulties and obstacles in Law on Higher Education enforcement.

To ensure universities' stable development, it is necessary to address the following issues: establishment of schools and colleges under the control and management of a higher education institution, cooperation of colleges and universities into an institution, regulations on University council establishment procedures for newly-formed universities and procedures of new-term University council at the end of the current term with contents related to the university leadership team (a new concept), regulations of procedures of University council chairman and member replacement, regulations on dismissal and discharge of University chairman and members in public higher education institutions and their affiliated universities and colleges, regulations on the roles and powers of a

university's direct management agency, regulations on procedures of establishment and acknowledgement of University council and appointment of the chairman and director, regulations on organizing higher education quality accreditation, regulations on university autonomy.

The roles of the University council chairman and principal must be specified to ensure effective performance in reality as at present, principals are still the one to hold the core vital power in the university operations. Therefore, there should be specific regulations on a university administrative mechanism, allowing to overcome existing obstacles before a new council is formed or a new term of the university council starts. At the same time, such regulations will also enable universities to completely address issues related to the relations between power and responsibilities between the University council and Principal, and between institutions and their affiliated universities in administration.

Moreover, it is important to make clear the roles of the State, University council and Principal in their three-side relations. To be more specific, Principals are in charge of daily running of universities in training, scientific research and social services, and have the highest power and responsibilities in specialization and academic matters. These are the important core tasks that a principal must carry out, and also what a University council should not interfere directly. Instead, the University council must hold collective responsibilities of making directions and policies, and especially planning innovation in the university in all aspects, including specialization and academics, to keep up with the needs of the society, students and labor market, to prevent and address issues arising during innovation and to be responsible for such planning.

Education quality accreditation should be considered the means to ensure balance between autonomy and accountability. Higher education quality accreditation facilitates better awareness towards the roles, duties and power of the Principal in the relation with the University Party's Committee and University Council, as well as the state's management agencies, which allows the search of best practices in such relations.

Conclusion

Education and training is characterized by its highly social activities; therefore, an education and training policy may serve as either a leverage to boost the development of the field or to deter it.

This means that policy can be an obstacle hindering the innovation of the national education. Hence, developing education and training policies has a vital role in administration and management of all activities in the field, and is a mission requiring not only specialized knowledge in education and training, but also technical and policy-making skills.

Based on education policy analysis, university autonomy in Vietnam is a system of viewpoints and goals set forth by the State in higher education, alongside approaches and measures to achieve those goals in a certain period of the national development. This also has a decisive role in enhancing the people's intellectual and developing national human resources, especially those who are highly skilled and talented.

To improve the effectiveness of university autonomy policies in Vietnam, it is significant to promote propaganda of, improve the awareness towards and have a consensus viewpoint of the subject matter, continue to perfect a clear, unified and strict legal framework and monitoring mechanism, distinguish and clarify the relations among university's institutions with proper coordination and assignment and appointment of roles, powers and responsibilities in administration, management and operations, innovate higher education financial mechanism, and do research and accelerate socialization through cooperation between the public and private sectors in higher education.

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