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University autonomy: A historical overview and contextual analysis in Vietnam



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Abstract: University autonomy has become a pivotal issue in the context of global efforts to improve higher education's contribution to social equity and socio-economic progress. In the field of higher education, the creation and dissemination of knowledge play a crucial role in promoting social equity and socio-economic development. This paper focuses on the role of university autonomy in addressing the emerging challenges and opportunities facing higher education. By employing content analysis and drawing upon secondary sources, the paper outlines the historical development and characteristics of university autonomy models worldwide and in Vietnam. Policy measures implemented to encourage university autonomy in Vietnam are also discussed in detail. Additionally, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of university autonomy by reviewing relevant academic studies. In the discussion and conclusion, the paper highlights the critical importance of collaboration and consensus from the educational community and society at large in fostering university autonomy. Only with such support can a truly autonomous higher education environment flourish and adequately meet the increasing demands of society.

Keywords: Higher education institutions, Policy initiatives, University autonomy.

1. Introduction

According to Pienaar and Bester [1] higher education plays a vital role in students' personal and professional development, promotes research and knowledge creation, serves the community, and facilitates technology transfer. Higher education also contributes to ensuring equality and social justice while providing a highly qualified workforce. However, higher education institutions are currently facing numerous challenges, including performance management, career development, work overload and role conflict, financial constraints, inadequate support for research and teaching, as well as discrimination and various managerial issues. In addition, several new challenges have emerged, including the need to adapt to the rapid advancements in science and technology, the increasingly demanding requirements of the labor market, as well as the trends of globalization and international collaboration, and an educational philosophy that emphasizes lifelong learning, creativity, and connectivity [2]. In this context, university autonomy is regarded as a strategic solution to optimize the functioning of the higher education system and effectively respond to societal demands [2, 3]. Higher education policy in Vietnam has demonstrated significant efforts to develop and refine mechanisms for university autonomy. However, to ensure the effective implementation of these policies, it is essential to conduct thorough analyses and comparisons of the global and Vietnamese contexts of university autonomy. This will help identify opportunities and challenges and draw lessons from international experiences to advance the process of university autonomy in Vietnam.

This paper is conducted in the form of a literature review, employing content analysis as its primary method. The analysis is based on secondary sources, including scholarly articles and scientific reports

on the historical development of university autonomy models worldwide, Vietnamese government policy documents related to university autonomy, and academic studies examining the current state of autonomy in public universities in Vietnam, with a particular focus on the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. The paper aims to elucidate the characteristics and historical evolution of university autonomy models globally, outline the policy measures adopted to promote autonomy in public universities in Vietnam, and provide an overview of relevant scientific research to offer a comprehensive and well-grounded understanding of this issue.

2. Literature Review

2.1. A Historical Overview of University Autonomy Models Around the World

The concept of university autonomy (UA) can be traced back to the fourth century AD, when Saint Augustine proposed that universities should be self-governing and adaptable to the societal context [4]. Over time, the meaning and scope of this concept have evolved, reflecting the development and transformation of education systems worldwide. The historical progression and defining characteristics of university autonomy models can be summarized in four main stages as follows:

Medieval Model: During the 12th and 13th centuries, universities such as Bologna and Paris emerged and are regarded as the earliest models of university autonomy. These institutions were primarily governed by professors and students, with special charters safeguarding their autonomy from external interference. This laid a solid foundation for the development of European universities and educational systems [5]. The two key features of this model were "internal self-governance" and "protection of academic freedom." Accordingly, professors and students had the authority to manage and oversee the university's operations independently, and specific statutes were enacted to protect the freedom of research and teaching from external pressures.

Humboldtian Model: Developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the early 19th century in Germany, this model emphasizes the integration of teaching and research. Humboldt advocated that universities should enjoy academic and research freedom, free from tight state control. The University of Berlin, established under Humboldt's guidance, became the prototype for many modern universities around the world [6]. This model highlights three key features: (1) academic freedom, granting both students and faculty the liberty to choose and investigate academic subjects; (2) a close and unified relationship between teaching and research, fostering a creative academic environment; and (3) an emphasis on financial matters for the first time—although receiving state support, universities retained the right to self-manage their finances. The Humboldtian Model underscores the importance of academic freedom as a driver for continuous institutional development and innovation.

French Model (Grandes Écoles): The French Grandes Écoles system is characterized by highly regulated curricula and substantial state control, yet it is widely recognized for its excellence in education and research [7]. This model represents a distinctive approach to autonomy, combining strict oversight of academic programs and discipline with institutional self-regulation. A key feature that differentiates this model from others is that curricula are specifically designed to meet the demands of particular professional sectors, facilitating students' integration into the labor market. Additionally, this model illustrates the necessity of maintaining a certain level of state oversight to ensure educational quality while simultaneously granting higher education institutions the autonomy to adapt and develop independently.

Anglo-Saxon Model: This model is predominantly found in the United Kingdom and the United States. Universities operating under this model are managed primarily by professional administrators rather than by academics. Institutions are encouraged and expected to actively seek funding from non-governmental sources, establish partnerships with industries, businesses, and research foundations, and operate under a financially autonomous framework. Within this collaborative and diversified funding environment, accountability is strongly emphasized. Universities develop reporting mechanisms and are held responsible to stakeholders for their activities and performance outcomes. This model highlights

the significance of professional management and financial autonomy, enabling institutions to optimize resources and enhance operational flexibility [8].

Table 1. Summary of University Autonomy Models and Their Key Characteristics.

Historical Context	Model	Main Features
12th–13th centuries	Medieval Model	Internal Self-Governance
		Protection of Academic Freedom
Early 19th century	Humboldtian Model	Protection of Academic Freedom
		Integration of Teaching and Research
		Financial Autonomy
19th century	French Model	Strict Control over Curriculum Quality
		Strong Emphasis on Career Orientation
19th century to present	Anglo-Saxon Model	Professional Management
		Financial Autonomy
		Accountability

Source: (Author's synthesis based on sources Inglis [5]; Berchem [6]; UNESCO [7] and Henkel [8].

Thus, it can be observed that university autonomy has, from an early stage, gradually become a prevailing development model for universities worldwide. Over time, university autonomy models have adapted and evolved with an emphasis on expanding academic self-governance, integrating higher education with research, and designing curricula that respond effectively to the practical demands of the labor market. Furthermore, a fundamental aspect of university autonomy lies in the principles of efficient and transparent management, which encompass the ability to mobilize and manage financial resources independently, oversee human resources, proactively ensure accountability to stakeholders, develop flexible operational mechanisms, and foster effective knowledge creation. Through the process of adaptation and transformation, the conceptual scope of university autonomy has become more refined. In essence, university autonomy describes and highlights the rights of universities to self-manage and self-govern their internal operations without excessive interference from external entities such as the government or other organizations. This includes the freedom to teach, conduct research, mobilize and manage financial resources, and manage personnel. University autonomy enables higher education institutions to make independent decisions regarding their policies, strategies, and operational methods, while assuming full accountability to best meet society's growing need for a highly skilled workforce.

2.2. Policy Initiatives to Promote University Autonomy in Vietnam

The goal of developing a highly qualified workforce capable of meeting the demands of integration and sustainable development, along with improving the quality of higher education in line with international standards, has become one of the top priorities of Vietnam's education sector in recent years. Since Vietnam's accession to the World Trade Organization [9] the country has entered a phase of globalization and has been operating in an increasingly competitive environment across all sectors, including higher education [10]. The rising demand for university education, coupled with the emergence of diverse ownership models of higher education institutions, has rendered the traditional state management mechanisms inadequate [11]. Consequently, the orientation towards university autonomy has emerged as an appropriate governance choice in this context.

In fact, the notion of university autonomy (UA) is not new in Vietnam's education policy documents. As early as after 1986, official state documents had already employed terms such as "educational reform," "educational innovation," "autonomy," and "self-responsibility" (e.g., Resolution No. 14/1979/NQ-TW, Resolution No. 04/1993/NQ-TW). The Education Law of 2005 reaffirmed the rights of universities to exercise autonomy and self-responsibility. The enactment of the Higher Education Law No. 08/2012/QH13 marked a significant milestone in the formal legalization of university autonomy, providing a legal framework for enhancing institutional autonomy in higher education institutions. However, the implementation of university autonomy has been assessed as falling

short of expectations due to multiple limitations, including issues related to budget allocation mechanisms, weak financial capacity, limited awareness of autonomy and delegation of authority, inadequate management capabilities, and the cumbersome nature of administrative structures [12, 13].

Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP dated October 24, 2014, issued by the Government, on piloting the renewal of operational mechanisms for public higher education institutions for the period 2014–2017, was considered a form of "liberation" that granted public universities the right to exercise autonomy and self-responsibility in developing institutional development plans and organizing activities such as education and training, scientific research and technology, international cooperation, financial planning, organizational structure, and human resources management. During this pilot phase, four public universities implemented the pilot autonomy scheme: National Economics University, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Foreign Trade University, and Hanoi University. In the following period (2017–2020), an additional 19 public universities participated in the pilot implementation.

However, according to statistics from the Ministry of Education and Training in 2022, out of these 23 universities, only 20 continued to meet the criteria to be included in the list of 141 higher education institutions eligible for autonomy under Decree No. 60/2021/ND-CP. This decree stipulates that a higher education institution may implement autonomy if it meets the following requirements: establishment of a university council, issuance of operational regulations, delegation of authority and accountability, and development of an autonomy scheme. Notably, six out of seven member institutions of the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City have begun implementing university autonomy, with a particular focus on financial autonomy since 2021, including the University of Economics and Law (in 2022) and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (in 2023).

Table 2.Key Milestones in Advancing University Autonomy in Vietnam's Public Higher Education Institutions.

Post-1986	The concept of <i>educational reform, innovation, autonomy,</i> and <i>self-responsibility</i> first appeared in official Party and State documents (e.g., Resolution No. 14/1979/NQ-TW, Resolution No. 04/1993/NQ-TW).
2005	The Education Law reaffirmed the rights of higher education institutions to exercise autonomy and self-accountability in academic and administrative matters.
2012	Higher Education Law No. 08/2012/QH13 provided a clear legal basis for expanding university autonomy nationwide.
2014-2017	Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP (October 24, 2014) piloted renewed operational mechanisms for public universities, granting autonomy in planning, finance, human resources, and governance. Four leading universities joined the pilot phase.
2017-2020	Pilot program expanded: 19 additional universities granted pilot autonomy status. Monitoring and evaluation of pilot outcomes conducted by MOET.
2021–present	Decree No. 60/2021/ND-CP institutionalized university autonomy, setting criteria (e.g., university council, operational statutes, autonomy schemes). 141 public universities are eligible, including key member universities of Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City.

In relation to accountability, the current Law on Higher Education clearly stipulates that higher education institutions must be accountable to their owners, students, society, competent regulatory bodies, and other stakeholders for: (1) implementing standards, quality policies, and commitments to ensuring the quality of their operations; (2) publicly disclosing annual reports on key performance indicators; (3) publicly disclosing the salaries, bonuses, and benefits of leadership positions, and conducting financial audits; (4) publishing financial statements on their official websites; and (5) fulfilling other reporting and accountability obligations as prescribed by law (see Table 3).

Table 3.Legal Provisions on Key Aspects of University Autonomy in Vietnam.

Aspect of Autonomy	Legal Provision		
Definition of the Right to Autonomy of Higher Education Institutions	"The right to autonomy means the right of a higher education institution to define its own goals and choose how to achieve those goals; to make decisions independently and take responsibility		
(1) Organizational Autonomy and (2) Personnel Autonomy	"The right to organizational and personnel autonomy includes formulating and implementing internal regulations on organizational structure, workforce structure, job categories, standards, and remuneration for each position; recruiting, employing, and dismissing lecturers, staff, and other employees; and making decisions on managerial and administrative personnel in accordance with the law." (Clause 4, Article 32)		
(3) Academic and Professional Autonomy	"The right to academic and professional autonomy includes formulating and implementing standards, quality policies, opening new programs, student admission, training activities, scientific and technological activities, and domestic and international cooperation in compliance with the law." (Clause 3, Article 32)		
(4) Financial and Asset Autonomy	"The assets of a public higher education institution shall be managed and used in accordance with the principles of public asset management and use. Higher education institutions are permitted to use public assets for business activities, leasing, joint ventures, and partnerships as prescribed by law, for the purpose of developing higher education, on the principle of preservation and development, in line with the educational environment." (Clause 1, Article 67)		

Source: Higher Education Law, No. 34/2018/QH14, effective from July 1, 2019.

2.3. Studies Assessing the Current State of University Autonomy in Vietnam

Existing studies on the current state of university autonomy in Vietnam mainly focus on three key thematic areas:

- (1) an overview and analysis of legal documents that articulate the perspectives and provisions allowing for institutional autonomy in higher education institutions;
- (2) comparative analyses of university autonomy models worldwide and in Vietnam to provide a foundation for proposing an appropriate autonomy model for the Vietnamese context;
- (3) empirical studies examining the current practice of autonomy at specific higher education institutions, including both the advantages and the challenges encountered. The following sections will detail the main findings within these three thematic groups as reflected in previous research

Sharing a common perspective that university autonomy represents a new governance orientation in Vietnam's higher education sector, several scholars have analyzed the content of higher education laws across different periods — from the Education Law of 1998 to the amended Education Law of 2019. The general objective of these analyses is to highlight the key features of university autonomy, to demonstrate shifts in perceptions of educational governance, to examine changing approaches to the levels of autonomy and delegation of authority over time, and to identify the remaining legal inconsistencies regarding the autonomy mechanism in Vietnam's higher education [10, 14, 15]. A common conclusion drawn from these studies is that there are still notable limitations in the practical mechanisms for autonomy and delegation of authority, due to overlaps and even contradictions among different legal provisions. Do Duc [10] argues that while there has been positive progress in legal understanding of university autonomy, it still lacks a "thorough," "consistent," and "synchronized" implementation, particularly given contradictions in the implementation mechanism between "boundary conditions" such as laws, policies, and traditions and "actual conditions" such as administrative apparatus and audit systems.

To develop a university autonomy (UA) model that is most appropriate for Vietnam's specific economic, cultural, political, and social context, several scholars have conducted comparative analyses of UA models in various countries and developed indicator frameworks to measure the degree of autonomy in Vietnamese higher education institutions Mai, et al. [3] and Tuan, et al. [16]. Mai, et al. [3] provided a comparative overview of university autonomy models in countries such as France, Germany, and China. Their analysis highlighted differences in how autonomy operates across four dimensions—

organizational, financial, personnel, and academic—demonstrating that there is no single universal model. Based on these findings, the authors proposed policy adjustments for Vietnam's university autonomy framework.

Specifically, in terms of organizational governance, decision-making power in public universities should be separated from the Party Committee's authority within the institution. Financially, the state should continue to provide budget allocations to public universities and should not eliminate public spending on higher education per student. Regarding personnel management, the system should move towards a market-based mechanism, where staff positions are retained based on performance and contributions, rather than the current permanent tenure system. For the academic dimension, the state should maintain a robust monitoring mechanism to ensure educational quality, and the quality assurance framework should be designed with careful consideration and alignment with international standards.

Tuan, et al. [16] emphasized the need for a set of indicators to measure the level of university autonomy in Vietnam. Drawing on European scorecards and autonomy indicators, the authors conducted a study that included policy content analysis and in-depth expert interviews, aiming to develop and pilot an indicator framework tailored to the Vietnamese context. This research identified similarities and differences between European and Vietnamese higher education institutions. The pilot study tested the framework across four groups of universities: (1) the Vietnam National University system, (2) autonomous public universities, (3) conventional public universities, and (4) private universities. The results indicated that the Vietnam National University and conventional public universities appeared to have similar levels of autonomy across most indicators, except for certain indicators such as the authority to open or terminate degree programs and the decision-making power to establish or dissolve affiliated units—areas where the Vietnam National University holds greater autonomy than conventional public universities.

The third group of studies mainly focuses on the current implementation of autonomy in public universities in Vietnam and discusses solutions to enhance the effectiveness of UA [17-19]. According to Nguyen [13] financial autonomy is the most challenging aspect to implement due to public universities' long-standing tradition of heavy reliance on state budget subsidies. The autonomy mechanism can benefit institutions with substantial non-state revenue sources, allowing them to increase staff income and improve the quality of education and research. Conversely, for institutions with limited financial capacity, autonomy has yet to demonstrate its full effectiveness. Proposed solutions revolve around improving the legal framework, adopting flexible management and organizational mechanisms, strengthening accountability through inspection, supervision, and transparency, and encouraging universities to proactively diversify revenue streams beyond tuition fees.

Nguyen and Nguyen [18] based on a survey of 100 public universities, found that autonomy has positively impacted institutional revenue generation, promoted more efficient and effective use of financial resources, improved staff income, and enhanced universities' proactiveness in training, scientific research, and technology transfer.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a literature review approach and employs content analysis as the main method. The analysis is based on secondary sources, including (i) scholarly articles and scientific reports on the historical development of university autonomy models worldwide, (ii) Vietnamese government policy documents related to university autonomy, and (iii) academic studies examining the current status of autonomy in public universities in Vietnam, with a particular focus on the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City.

4. Research Findings

The findings of this study reveal that university autonomy has undergone a long historical evolution and has been conceptualized through diverse models worldwide. From the Medieval and

Humboldtian traditions emphasizing internal governance and integration of teaching and research, to the French and Anglo-Saxon models highlighting strong state oversight and professional management, each model demonstrates unique approaches to balancing institutional freedom with societal accountability. This historical perspective shows that no universal model fits all contexts, and successful autonomy relies on adaptability to specific cultural, economic, and political conditions.

In Vietnam, the concept of university autonomy has gradually become a cornerstone of higher education reform. Key policy milestones include the recognition of autonomy in the National Assembly of Vietnam [20] its formalization in the National Assembly of Vietnam [21] and the pilot implementation under Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP (2014–2017). By 2021, Decree No. 60/2021/ND-CP institutionalized autonomy for 141 public universities, with notable examples such as the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City actively exercising financial and organizational autonomy. Legal frameworks have clearly defined autonomy across organizational, personnel, academic, and financial dimensions, alongside strict accountability requirements.

The discussion highlights that despite substantial progress in developing a legal and institutional framework for university autonomy in Vietnam, practical challenges remain—particularly in financial capacity, governance competence, and consistent delegation of authority. Comparative insights from international models demonstrate that there is no universal approach; instead, models should be tailored to the national context. The paper emphasizes the need for Vietnam to refine its regulatory framework, develop culturally appropriate operational models, and establish robust autonomy indicators. Furthermore, the impact of autonomy should be assessed not only at the organizational level but also in terms of its influence on faculty and staff motivation, student satisfaction, and overall institutional development. The paper calls for greater consensus and cooperation among stakeholders to cultivate an environment where autonomy can truly thrive.

5. Conclusion

In the context of the diverse challenges and emerging opportunities currently facing higher education, the implementation of university autonomy (UA) policies in Vietnam can be regarded as a crucial strategic adjustment. Although considerable efforts have been made to develop an institutional autonomy framework, multiple limitations and challenges persist and require further resolution. Existing research and analyses emphasize the importance of improving the legal framework, developing appropriate operational models, and establishing robust indicators to measure the effectiveness and progress of autonomy in higher education institutions.

However, it is important to note that assessing the effectiveness of university autonomy should not be limited to the organizational or institutional level alone; rather, it should also consider its impact on all relevant stakeholders, including faculty members, staff, workers, and students. Additionally, learning from international experiences plays a vital role in developing and optimizing Vietnam's higher education system.

Current research and analyses on university autonomy in Vietnam primarily focus on the need to refine the legal framework, identify governance models and measurement tools that are culturally appropriate, and explore the positive and negative impacts of autonomy on certain higher education institutions. Overall, there remains a gap in the literature, as no study in Vietnam has yet provided an in-depth analysis of the impact of university autonomy on individual work performance or on how faculty and staff contribute to the prosperity and development of their institutions. A notable finding shared by global research and a limited number of Vietnamese studies is that university autonomy brings significant benefits and opportunities for the advancement of the higher education sector. The beneficiaries of autonomy are not only universities or educational organizations but also faculty and students. Furthermore, autonomy has been widely recognized for its role in empowering faculty, particularly in academic and professional domains, while also positively influencing faculty satisfaction within the work environment.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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