

From Institutional Autonomy to Accountability for Higher Educational Leadership in Vietnam

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Abstract

Institutional autonomy plays a significant role in attempts to define international standards of university governance. Institutional accountability is enforced and can have important implications for institutional autonomy. Leaders of higher education institutions in Vietnam do not at present have much institutional autonomy and accountability within their governance. This study aims to investigate the impacts of the governance forms in Vietnamese higher education institutions from the perception of the nation and discusses the central importance of institutional autonomy and accountability for leadership in higher education. Standards for the governance of institutional autonomy and accountability in Vietnamese universities are advanced. This study was used as evidence from Hanoi University of Science and Technology for applications of institutional autonomy and accountability.

Keywords: institutional autonomy, institutional accountability, leadership, Vietnamese higher education.

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a rapid change in the educational systems of Vietnam in general and in higher education in particular. The change in higher education can be seen very clearly in the data concerning the expansion of the existing institutions as well as in the establishment of many new universities and colleges in all parts of Vietnam. Higher education in Vietnam has greatly expanded in the past two decades. There were 101 universities and colleges in the country in 1987, as compared to 421 in 2013. The number of students enrolled in higher education increased from 133,000 in 1987 to over 2,1 million in 2013, an increase of 16 times of student enrollment within the interval of 22 years. The number of faculty has increased over 4 times, from 20,000 faculty members in 1987 to over 87,682 in 2013 (Ministry of Education and Training in Vietnam, abbreviated as MOET, 2013).

With rapid socio-economic changes, twenty-first century higher education faces major challenges in its governance systems, curriculum, mission focus, external relations, research, and financing (Shin & Harman, 2009). A report from Vietnam's MOET the development of Higher Education in Vietnam is undoubtedly faced with many challenges including the inability to meet the demands of industrialization, modernization, international integration and the learning needs of the people (MOET, 2009). According to Department of State the United States of America and Ministry of Education and Training, Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2009), Vietnam is under the "pressing need for significant modernization of Vietnam, higher educational system, including fundamental changes in governance, institutional autonomy, financing and administration, faculty hiring, promotion and salary structure, as well as in curricula and the modalities of teaching, evaluation, and research".

Institutional autonomy refers broadly to a university's power to determine its own goals and programs and to determine how they will be pursued (Berdahl, 1990), provides a protective shell for individual academic autonomy. Institutional autonomy plays a significant role in attempts to define international standards of university governance. Its importance derives from the fact that research universities, in order to achieve their distinctive mission, must have a great deal of decision-making freedom, particularly in matters related to self-governance, financial management, the appointment of members of academic staff, the selection of students, the choice of curriculum, and the determination of academic standards (Tight, 1992). According to Article 60 of the Education Law in Vietnam (2005), states that autonomy and self-accountability as defined by laws and by their charters in the following aspects: (1) developing educational programmes, syllabi, teaching and learning plans for authorized educational fields, (2) planning enrolment quota, conducting enrolment, organization of educational process, recognition of graduation and issuance of degrees, (3) organizing the institution's organizational structure; recruiting, administering, using and compensating faculty and staff members.

The international trend over the past 30 years has been for top-down regulatory control of these universities by the state to be replaced by steering mechanisms that are more respectful of the need for institutional autonomy. These new steering mechanisms include quality assurance, performance-related funding, exposure to the market, community participation in governance and requirements for public disclosure about institutional performance (Dao & Hayden, 2009). Unfortunately, Vietnamese higher education institutions expect to remain accountable to the state and do not at present have much institutional autonomy.

The study purpose was to investigate the impacts of the governance forms in Vietnamese higher education institutions from the perception of the nation and discusses the central importance of institutional autonomy and accountability for leadership in higher education. Standards for the governance of institutional autonomy and accountability in Vietnamese university are advanced.

Methodology

This study used the method of reviewing documents. According to Creswell (1994), documents include public documents namely minutes of meetings, newspapers and private documents journals, diaries, letters and so on. This study used methods of collected information from available books, publications, research studies, journal, articles, and websites on institutional autonomy and accountability.

This study was used as evidence from Hanoi University of Science and Technology for applications of institutional autonomy and accountability for following reasons: (1) its strategic domestic partner is Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology, (2) it has recently on August 2009 become evident that planning by MOET is well advanced regarding a possible governance structure - planning for a 'new model' research university, (3) MOET has promulgated general regulation of institutional autonomy and accountability for HUST, and (4) it will operate within a framework of international standards of institutional autonomy.

The Concepts of Institutional autonomy and accountability

As Table 1, institutional autonomy is distinguished into two: substantive autonomy and procedural autonomy (Berdahl, 1971). Substantive autonomy covers the sphere of academics and research, specifically autonomy over areas related to curriculum design, research policy, awarding degree, etc. Procedural autonomy covers the non-academic areas which overlap with many financial matters. Governments across the board interfere substantially on procedural issues but vary in terms of their interference in substantive issues. In Asian countries (including Vietnam), both areas of institutional autonomy are limited. However, worldwide there is a push towards institutional autonomy across the board as innovation in substantive areas requires resources and in order to generate those resources, procedural autonomy is necessary.

Table 1
Different Types of Institutional Autonomy

Substantive (academic and research)	Procedural (non-academic areas)
Curriculum design	Budgeting
Research policy	Financing management
Entrance standards	Non-academic staff appointments
Academic staff appointment	Purchasing

Institutional autonomy plays a significant role in attempts to define international standards of university governance (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Snyder, 2002; Henkel, 2005; Moses, 2007). The concept is most easily understood as a set of conditions that have as their basis the need to protect individual academic autonomy. Institutional autonomy essentially is the degree of freedom of the university to steer itself or alternatively the condition where academia determines how its work is carried out (Bladh, 2007). Estermann and Nokkala (2009) indicated that institutional autonomy refers to the constantly changing relations between the state and higher education institutions and the degree of control exerted by the state, depending on the national context and circumstances. According to Berdahl (1990) institutional autonomy being manifested substantively by the power of the university or college in its corporate form to determine its own goals and programmes, and procedurally by the power of the university or college in its corporate form to determine the means by which its own goals and programs will be pursued.

The ways in which institutional accountability is enforced and can have important implications for institutional autonomy. Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, and Arnai (2008) identify the principal forms that institutional accountability can take, including: (1) quality assurance; (2) performance-related funding; (3) market mechanisms; (4) participation of external stakeholders on the governing bodies; and (5) public disclosure of institutional performance. Universities generally prefer this approach to one based on compliance with regulations because it leaves them with more freedom to manage their own affairs. A concern that many universities express, however, is that the costs of producing data for the purposes of demonstrating achievements across a wide range of performance indicators can be excessive (Santiago et al., 2008). According to Hayden and Dao (2009), the purposes of institutional accountability are varied. One important purpose is to demonstrate public accountability, that is, the accountability of a university to its various stakeholders, including the state, the community, employers, professional associations and alumni. Other purposes served by institutional accountability include the need to demonstrate appropriate standards of probity and risk management.

The Relationship between Institutional Autonomy and Accountability

Autonomy and accountability of public agencies are two sides of the same coin, yet often they are examined separately and at only one point in time. According to Albornoz (1991) the concepts of autonomy and accountability are closely linked. University autonomy seems in turn to depend on the prevailing political system, since democracy by its nature guarantees autonomy, while the authoritarian forms of political organization deny the concepts of autonomy; under authoritarian system, the activities of the state are centralized and the universities are treated as appendages of the government. On the other hand, the same concept of the accountability is often used to support the claim that any form of accountability negates the principle that the university must manage its own affairs without external interference.

The “Higher Education Policy” Journal devoted one of its last year’s issues entirely to the “changing frontiers between autonomy and accountability”, led by the conviction that autonomy and accountability are “amongst the topics that remain of constant concern to academia on the one hand and to those who act in the name of the public on the other” (Neave, 2001).

Institutional Autonomy in Higher Education Systems

As may be seen from Table 2, public research universities in Vietnam are by far the most constrained in terms of institutional autonomy. Though recent decrees have provided them with more freedom, the situation is that, across all of the important areas, including the award of qualifications, curriculum content, the selection of students, and the appointment of senior academic staff, ultimate control remains in the hands of ministries. There is not yet, however, a well-developed appreciation of how institutional autonomy works, and so moves to encourage its development are limited and cautious. The structure of the governance system for the ‘new model’ research universities in Vietnam, having regard to an official expectation that they should be of international quality Table 2 which draws again on Tight’s (1992) account of institutional autonomy, presents an overview of the reasonable expectations these universities might have if they are to be institutionally autonomous.

Table 2

Expectations for Institutional Autonomy in Vietnamese higher education

Variables	Expectations
Freedom to be self-governing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - freedom of the governing board to determine its own membership needs and to appoint its own chair (subject to endorsement by the Minister for Education and Training) - freedom of the governing board to appoint the chief executive officer (whether referred to as rector or president) - freedom of an academic committee (chaired by the chief executive officer) to manage all institutional academic affairs (subject to the ultimate authority of the governing board for resources) - freedom to own intellectual property and capital assets
Freedom to exercise corporate financial control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - freedom of the governing board to allocate the institutional budget - freedom to engage in forward financial planning for the institution - freedom to engage in income-generating initiatives - freedom to assign student load across different study programs
Freedom to make staffing decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - freedom to select, appoint and, if necessary, dismiss academic and administrative staff - freedom to decide on income levels, appointment levels (including to professor) and employment conditions for staff
Freedom to select students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - freedom to select students for admission on the basis of academic and equity criteria
Freedom to decide on curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - freedom to accredit study programs, - freedom to decide on modes of teaching and learning.
Freedom to assess and certify the academic performance by students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - freedom to set own examinations, - freedom to determine the academic criteria for assessing student performance, and to determine the requirements for the award of degrees (including PhDs)

Institutional accountability in higher education system

It is essential that increased autonomy for the proposed 'new-model' research universities should be accompanied by more contemporary and more sophisticated methods of achieving institutional accountability. According to Hayden & Dao (2009), the proposed "new model" research universities must be able to demonstrate: (1) public accountability, (2) financial accountability, and (3) internal accountability. As the proposed "new model" research universities will initially and possibly for many years to come, be heavily dependent upon funding by the Government of Vietnam, mechanisms are required to assure the State that their use of these funds is consistent with national priorities and conforms with usual requirements for probity.

As Table 3, Santiago et al., (2008) presents an overview of the kinds of institutional accountability obligations that the proposed 'new model' research universities might be required to meet.

Table 3

Obligations for Institutional Accountability in Higher Education

Variables	Obligations
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Quality assurance	- need to establish institutional procedures for assuring key stakeholders, that academic standards are being maintained and that resources are being used efficiently and effectively
Performance-related funding	- need to respond appropriately to State priorities, expressed through funding mechanisms, for the achievement of specific performance targets and for levels of performance against key performance indicators
Market mechanisms	- need to respond appropriately to market signals regarding the demand for programs, the cost of programs and the cost-effectiveness of different forms of program delivery
Participation of external stakeholders on the governing bodies	- need to involve key external stakeholders through having relevant nominees on the governing board
Public disclosure of institutional performance	- need to have available all operational details, including financial details, for external audit' - need to produce an Annual Report documenting high-level achievements and an account of any risks affecting the institution, - must comply with Regulation on Public Disclosure of Educational Institutions of National Education System

Hayden and Lam (2007) showed that an indication of the preferred direction of future change is provided by Vietnam's Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA), adopted in 2005 for implementation by 2020. In HERA, the Government committed to providing universities with legal autonomy, giving them the right to decide and be responsible for training, research, human resource management and budget planning. Second, HERA proposed to eliminate line-ministry control and develop a mechanism for having State ownership represented within public higher education institutions. Third, HERA proposed to develop a system for quality assurance and accreditation for higher education. Fourth, HERA proposed to develop a higher education law.

Evidence from Hanoi University of Science and Technology (HUST) in Vietnam

In August 2009, it has recently become evident that planning by MOET is well advanced regarding a possible governance structure for HUST. The University will operate within a framework of international standards of institutional autonomy. Specifically, the University Council, on behalf of the University, will have:

- freedom to be self-governing in terms of developing institutional goals and a development strategy – but all key appointments and the membership categories of the governing board to be decided by MOET;
- freedom to exercise corporate financial control, including the freedom to set tuition fees – but the extent of the freedom to exercise corporate control is not entirely clear;
- freedom to make staffing decisions – but freedom only to propose appointment with the title of professor;
- freedom to decide on the curriculum; and
- freedom to assess and certify the academic performance of students.

Interestingly, there appears to have been no discussion to date about a freedom to select students, which is a

significant emphasis on the importance of a high concentration of talent (including students) as being important to the acquisition of ‘world-class’ status (Salmi, 2009). The main areas of institutional accountability being considered include:

- quality assurance – there is reference to HUST being required to announce information about its quality assurance system;
- participation of external stakeholders on the governing bodies – there is an expectation that the governing board will include members with a knowledge of State priorities;
- public disclosure of institutional performance – this aspect is very heavily emphasised, with HUST being required to inform MOET about all aspects of its financial arrangements, its staffing profile and its student body.

In the documentation currently available about MOET’s proposal for HUST, considerable emphasis is placed on regulating HUST in terms of its structures, appointments and relationship with the State. The development by MOET of key performance indicators for HUST is critical to the ability of the State to employ sophisticated forms of performance-management. The university must be encouraged to propose performance indicators for the new college, and to develop an appropriate quality assurance framework that will assure the university that the new college is attaining high academic standards in a cost-effective manner.

Conclusion

Changing expectations of universities’ contributions to a knowledge-based economy and society over the last decade have transformed the relationship between the state and higher education institutions. University governance and the degree of control exerted by the state have become the subject of much debate. Higher education institutions in Vietnam do not at present have much institutional autonomy. There is a natural reluctance on the part of legislators to give up direct bureaucratic control of a sector that is of significant national economic importance as a source of new knowledge and of labor market expertise. Furthermore, there is uncertainty on the part of many in the sector about what institutional autonomy actually implies, what it might require in terms of new accountability relationship.

Institutional autonomy also comes in a variety of forms, each negotiated with whichever level of government has jurisdiction for granting it. There is, in other words, no set template for institutional autonomy, which means that Vietnam will need over coming years to engage in a process of discovery of a form of institutional autonomy that is authentic and sustainable in its political, social and economic setting. At least in Vietnamese higher education include the following: proper legislative provision for the existence of institutional autonomy, the harmonizing of regulatory provision concerning the national government and the higher education sector, the clarification of a wide range of accountability relationships, the development of relevant expertise and infrastructure for the exercise of institutional self-governance; and the building of confidence and trust in the processes of institutional self-governance. As legislators in Vietnam have come to see, higher education institutions that are free of external interference - are generally better able to attend to their long-term social responsibility to preserve the culture and heritage of society, generate new knowledge, and transmit that knowledge to future generations. It also provides a strong measure of protection for academic freedom.

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