



# UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY POLICY IN HUMAN RESOURCES: CASE STUDY IN VIETNAM

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**Abstract** - University autonomy in the field of human resources is a matter of concern in policy as well as higher educational thinking in Vietnam. Currently, there are more than 20 Vietnamese universities conducting autonomy in terms of human resources according to the state's university autonomy policy. In fact, the understanding, implementation and application of this policy in the educational environment of each university is different, so the positive or negative changes at more than 20 universities are also quite diverse, creating cognitive obstacles for policy makers. The article approaches from the perspective of public policy to analyze the actual implementation and actual changes of 23 universities when conducting autonomy in the field of human resources, in order to provide an overview of this issue and offers several policy implications for Vietnam.

**Keywords:** *Policy, university autonomy, human resources, Viet Nam, university*

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Literature review

The university autonomy subject in Vietnam has been studied by many scholars. The concepts of university autonomy, the connotations of university autonomy are clearly presented (Pham Van Khanh, 2016), (Phan Dang Son, 2016), (Le Ngoc Hung, 2019), (Nguyen Thi Nen, 2020), (National Assembly of Vietnam, 2020), (Pham Tat Thang, 2021). There are studies showing the world's model and experience of university autonomy (Diep Phuong Chi, 2018), (Viet Ha, 2018); models of university autonomy in Vietnam (Pham Thi Lan Phuong, 2015), (Dang Van Dinh, 2016) to learn from experiences and propose solutions for Vietnam in the upcoming time. Discussing the actual state of autonomy in universities, especially about difficulties and solutions, many authors have a general approach (Nguyen Loc, 2020), (Truong Tuan Linh & Nguyen Phuong Thao, 2020). , (Nguyen Minh Thuyet, 2014) or get into specific cases of Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh City University of Agriculture and Forestry (T Hoai, 2021), Hanoi National University (Hoang Thi Xuan Hoa, 2021), Hue University (Nguyen Tai Nang, 2020). Besides, there are also many researches that offer solutions to cope with difficulties and challenges in implementing university autonomy policy in Vietnam such as training solutions, scientific research, international cooperation, human resources development, facilities development, financial management (Nguyen Tai Nang, 2020), (Duc Huy-EdLab Asia, 2021); on perception (Minh Hanh, 2020).

Through researches, the author realizes that up to now, there has not been a systematic and in-depth scientific work on the actual status (with official data) of universities after implementing the autonomy policy in Vietnam in the field of human resources. The article discusses the positive changes and challenges in the autonomy process of universities in Vietnam, thereby proposing some recommendations to improve policies for Vietnam.

### 2. THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AUTONOMY IN VIETNAM

During the research, the author found that there are many different understanding of educational autonomy. First of all, the autonomy of an educational institution is the right to self-organize and manage its activities in an active and creative manner in order to perform its functions, tasks and missions of an institution. The subject of autonomy is the leader of that educational institution. The autonomy of educational institutions is understood in two levels: The higher level is the autonomy of educational institutions over the right to operate and control of the state management agency in charge of education



and training. The lower level is the internal autonomy of the educational institution (Pham Van Khanh, 2019). Since then, when referring to the concept of "university autonomy", it is referring to the changing relationships between the state and universities (N.V. Varghese, Michaela Martin, Thomas Estermann). University autonomy is the freedom of the higher education institution to make decisions and enforce decisions on the internal activities of the university without state control or interference. Any influence, if any, of the state must be based on the law. University autonomy is university institutional autonomy, which means autonomy of the university. This autonomy is institutionalized by the system of policies and laws of the state. University autonomy in Vietnam is in accordance with the law, associated with self-responsibility and partially institutionalized in each field of operation of the university (Le Ngoc Hung, 2019).

In European countries, university autonomy is recognized from two aspects: (i) free from the control and limitations of state management agencies, the labor market, service providers and political influences, (ii) the freedom to make decisions about how the university is organized and its mission goals.

Autonomy can also be only procedural - the right to decide the means and ways to achieve a predetermined goal, or substantial autonomy - the right to determine the goals as well as the program of activities. Autonomy can also be seen as conditional rights: Universities can have autonomy only when they have met national standards or established standards under public policies. University autonomy is also said to be the university's ability to operate in the way it chooses to achieve the mission and goals set by the university (Hoang Thi Xuan Hoa, 2012). University autonomy can also be understood as the university's right to decide its mission and operation program, ways and means of carrying out that mission, and at the same time take responsibility before the public and the law for all its decisions and activities. This is a form of management suitable for organizations that do not belong to the administrative system (the system has superiors and subordinates; subordinates are appointed by superiors and must follow decisions of superiors). Normally, university autonomy includes four aspects: organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, academic autonomy and human resources autonomy (Nguyen Thi Nen, 2020).

Although viewed from many different perspectives, in Vietnam it is still necessary to understand the concept of university autonomy according to the Vietnam Education Law: *"Autonomy is the right of the universities. Universities are allowed to define their own goals and choose how to achieve them; self-determination and accountability for specialized activities, academic programs, organizational, human resources, financial, asset and other activities on the basis of law and the capacity of the university"*.

Although the approaches to university autonomy are diverse, they have also shown the core content that is the self-determination of universities in the following aspects: objective, mission, vision, action, method, accountable for their decisions and activities. In this study, the connotation of university autonomy in Vietnam will be understood as in the Law on Higher Education of Vietnam in 2019 including the following contents:

First, autonomy in academia, in specialized activities including promulgating and implementing standards, quality policies, opening majors, enrollment, training, scientific and technological activities, domestic and international cooperation in accordance with the provisions of law.

Second, autonomy in organization and human resources includes issuing and implementing internal regulations on organizational structure, employees structure, category, standards and benefits of each job position; recruiting, employing and dismissing lecturers, officials and other employees, deciding on administrative personnel in the higher education institution in accordance with the provisions of law.

Third, the autonomy in finance and assets includes issuing and organizing the implementation of internal regulations on revenue sources, managing and using financial resources, attracting investment capital, tuition policy, scholarship policy for students and other policies in accordance with the law.

Fourth, accountability of the university for the owners, learners, society, competent management agencies and stakeholders in terms of: standards, quality policies, regulations, comply with regulations, take responsibility before the law if fail to comply with regulations, firmly commit to the quality of



operations, publicize annual reports on the operational results on the website of the university; showing periodical and irregular reporting to the owner and competent management agency; explain the salary, bonus and other benefits of the management board of the university at the conference of cadres, civil servants and employees; perform audits of financial statements, annual settlement reports, audits of investment and procurement, explain the operation of the university to its owners and competent management agencies; transparently publicize the annual financial statements and other contents on the website of the university in accordance with the regulations of the Ministry of Education and Training; and other matters subject to other forms of settlement as prescribed by law (Vietnam National Assembly, 2019).

Accordingly, the first three components are the three elements that go into the nature of university autonomy in Vietnam, thereby leading to the accountability component in university autonomy. The aspect of human resources autonomy is presented in detail in the research results section.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

The author uses the main methods which are document research, statistical analysis method, sociological investigation method (survey, in-depth interview) and policy analysis method.

The document research method is used by the author to study Vietnam's (original) policy documents on educational autonomy to find out the concept, nature, intention and main pillars of university autonomy in Vietnam. In addition, the author coordinates the use of discipline and interdisciplinary methods including statistical data analysis, surveys from official information sources of 23 universities representing disciplines such as: Economics, technology, humanities... to present the current situation as well as the experiences of 23 universities in terms of human resources autonomy. On that basis, the author uses the method of comparison, analysis and synthesis to make big discussions: How have the Universities made positive changes? What challenges do Universities have to deal with? What are the recommendations to improve the autonomy policy in Vietnam?

The documents used by the author are mostly secondary data. Those are the information and data collected from official sources of the Vietnamese government and 23 universities in the survey area, which are investigated, statistic, synthesized and processed by the author. To give an objective perspective on the implementation of autonomy policy at universities in Vietnam, the author conducted interviews with a number of professors who are scientists and leaders of universities, and have been directly conducting or doing research on university autonomy in Vietnam.

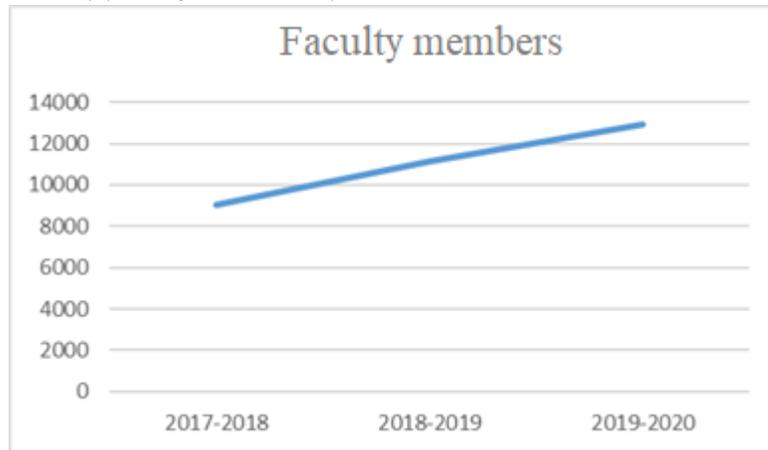
### 4. RESEARCH RESULT

#### *The first is autonomy in human resources (personnel, quantity)*

Vietnam's university autonomy policy empowers and creates a broad legal corridor for Vietnam's autonomous universities to have human resource strategies and policies in line with their disciplines, objectives, and mission such as: promulgating and organizing the implementation of internal regulations on the organizational structure of human resource management, labor structure, category, standards and benefits of each job position; recruiting, employing and dismissing lecturers, officials and other employees, deciding on personnel in accordance with the provisions of law...(Vietnam National Assembly, 2019). On that basis, 23 autonomous universities of Vietnam have seriously exercised autonomy in human resources, especially in terms of lecturers. According to the survey, most of the 23 autonomous universities in Vietnam focus on recruiting lecturers and improving the quality and qualifications of the lecturers. Firstly, about the recruitment, all universities have a recruitment plan and seriously implement that plan. Most universities make plans according to the actual staffing needs of faculties and departments. Universities conduct recruitment according to regulations on personnel in autonomous universities with procedure such as: determining needs, planning, and announcing recruitment (publicly posted on the internet, mainly official websites of the universities) with clear content on the number, subjects, positions and recruitment criteria, announcement of entrance exam, announcement of results...

From 2017 to the end of 2020, the total number of faculty members of 23 autonomous universities has increased significantly from 9,028 lecturers to 12,933 lecturers. This data proves the interest and investment of universities after autonomy in increasing the number of lecturers for teaching (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of faculty members of 23 autonomous universities in Viet Nam

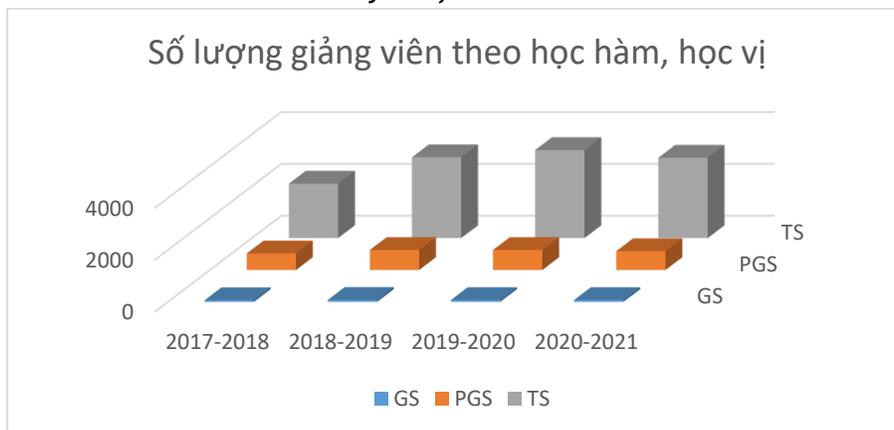


Source: Survey on website of 23 universities and in policies of 23 universities on human resources

Going into the details of the survey data, besides the fact that most universities tend to increase the number of faculty members, there are still a few universities that keep the same number, such as the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, University of Commerce, Can Tho Medical University, and at the same time a few Universities that increase or decrease non-periodically such as Hanoi Open University, Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry, Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi Industrial Textile Garment University. To explain the above phenomenon, most cases are attributed to the fact that the lecturers have reached retirement age and the university has not yet recruited new lecturers.

In terms of the quality and qualifications of the lecturers, the author analyzes and evaluates them according to academic ranks and degrees. This is a common and acceptable assessment criterion because the areas of expertise of the lecturers are very different as well as the methods of teaching, assessing in different universities. From the perspective of academic ranks (Professor, Associate Professor), academic degree (PhD, Master), the survey results showed that 23 universities all have the number of lecturers with academic ranks and degrees (PhD) increases year by year, although it is not a spike (see table 2).

Table 2: Number of Professors, Associate Professors, Doctors of 23 Autonomous Universities in Vietnam over the years from 2017 to 2021



Source: The author surveyed on the website of 23 universities and in the policies of 23 universities on human resources



The percentage of lecturers with high academic ranks and degrees at universities fluctuates from year to year, but it can be seen that by the academic year 2020-2021, this rate has clearly increased and exceeded that of previous years. (see Table 3). This positive change shows partly the efforts of autonomous universities in improving the qualifications of the lecturers to enhance the quality of teaching. This result comes from the fact that the autonomous universities have paid close attention to the training of lecturers as well as strengthening the recruitment of high-quality lecturers, on the basis of Vietnam legal framework is becoming more and more open, creating more favorable conditions.

*Table 3: Proportion of Professors, Associate Professors and Doctors in the total number of faculty members of 23 universities over the years*

Academic ranks, degrees	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Professor	0.75%	0,69%	0,56%	0,77%
Associate professor	7.08%	6,93%	5,98%	7,33%
Doctor	23.20%	27,92%	26,25%	31,24%

*Source: Survey on website of 23 universities and in policies of 23 universities on human resources (Note: Doctor does not include Professor and Associate Professor)*

## CONCLUSION

### *Positive transformation and opportunities for universities*

After a period of autonomy, the results from the autonomy process of 23 universities in Vietnam have shown some positive changes from thinking and institutions to the adaptation of the autonomy universities.

The first is about the transformation of thinking, which happened foremost in the leaderships and lecturers. 23 autonomous universities have changed their minds before the only choice: develop in order to survive when there is no longer the support of the State. The University board was aware of the challenges when Universities implement autonomy, aware of their role and importance to the fate of the University. This forces the University Council to make clear, reasonable and effective decisions in line with the situation and development trends. In addition, the change in thinking of officers and lecturers is also noticeable in the autonomy of 23 universities. Faced with the pressure of teaching reputation to achieve the output standards accepted by the labor market, many lecturers have become aware of the need to improve themselves in terms of qualifications, manners and ideas. With the encouragement from the university's leaders, the lecturers of 23 universities have tried their best to develop themselves in terms of qualifications. The academic ranks and degrees of the lecturers are improving and tend to increase over the years.

Second, completing the institution of the University in the process of autonomy is inevitable comes from a change in thinking. 23 autonomous universities in Vietnam have always focused on vision, mission, development strategy and action plan to the challenges of independent existence in a society that competition on education is increasingly fierce. The University Councils are gradually completing strategies, policies and regulations in the way that are not only right and sufficient but also suitable to the characteristics of the University and meet the needs of society. Therefore, improve its reputation and increase the efficiency of enrollment - the key to the University's survival.

Third, on the basis of changes in thinking and institutions, the autonomous universities in Vietnam have had changes in the state of adaptive performance which is basically good. Most of the schools have focused on increasing the number and improving the qualifications of the lecturers with the aim of improving the training quality to meet the output standards of the training program and the needs of the

society, to attract the candidates during the enrollment period. The domestic and international cooperation activities have brought the universities great advantages: the exchange of lecturers with dozens of international experts, hundreds of international lecturers have enhanced their position and created a compete environment so that the lecturers in the universities have to make more efforts and try harder.

### ***Negative transformation and challenges for universities***

Besides positive transformations, universities still have many challenges in the process of autonomy:

First of all, the challenge is related to the contradiction between the quality and quantity of lecturers and the opening of new majors as well as increasing enrollment. This is a difficult problem for Vietnamese autonomous universities. When the policy of higher education autonomy gives a high degree of autonomy to the University Council and this also means that the University Council has full authority to decide on the opening of majors and increasing enrollment target. With a very convincing argument that increases jobs, incomes of workers and universities, it is completely understandable to open a new major and increase enrollment. However, due to the recruitment and training of personnel, there are some barriers related to mechanisms, policies and demand responsiveness, so the number of qualified lecturers is not enough. A typical example is the Vietnam Academy of Agriculture - a multidisciplinary and multi-level training institution with 55 undergraduate majors, 83 majors, 22 master's degrees, and 18 doctoral training disciplines. The Academy not only trains agriculture, aquaculture, veterinary, but also trains business, economics, management, engineering technology and social sciences. In particular, the Academy has 5 advanced and high-quality training programs taught in English. While the number of faculty members of the Academy is only 604 personnel. Lecturers have to train in a large number of disciplines and specialties can easily lead to overload in teaching and threaten the school's training quality.

Next is the conflict between the need to improve training quality and the actual human resources mechanism. Currently, at many autonomous universities in Vietnam, there is still a mechanism for using human resources as the same way as before being autonomous. For example, if you are recruited as a lecturer, you will definitively have to be assigned to the class. Therefore, the environment is not really competitive in the way that if the lecturer is not able to teach, he/she will be fired or changed working position ..., which lead to the situation that many lecturers have a dependent mindset, refusing to develop themselves in terms of teaching methods and updating new knowledge while society has a very high demand for output standards.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

### ***Some policy implications for Vietnam***

In the context of globalization, the trend of deep integration of Vietnam is facing with difficulties and challenges in implementing the university autonomy policy in the field of human resources, the article would like to offer policy implications for Vietnam as follows:

First, complete the mechanisms and policies on university autonomy in the field of human resources to ensure that the quantity and quality of lecturers are suitable for opening new majors and increasing enrollment. This is a difficult problem for managers. Therefore, in addition to complete the national policy - for the Ministry of Education and Training, it is necessary to advise and make decisions in the way that not too idealizing lecturers with the criteria of teaching hours and teaching quality. While the number of lecturers is limited, the number of majors and students are increasing gradually which makes lecturers overload in teaching (teaching too many hours - high overtime rate, multiple shifts in a day).

Second, many autonomous universities in Vietnam still not publish information. For example, when carrying out this research, the author contacted relevant department to ask for data, but there was no respond. It is clear that accessing information about learners and parents is quite difficult, even though the policy clearly states that information must be public and transparent. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the monitoring mechanism (regularly and seriously) for the transparency of policies and information of autonomous universities to provide accurate and up-to-date information. By doing that, the

choices of learners will be improved as well as creating a competitive mechanism among universities to enhance the quality of teaching.

Third, universities need to have plans on improving the quality of lecturers through training and self-training with domestic and foreign professional courses. There is no data that clearly shows the specific training courses on the content of the autonomous universities in Vietnam. In fact, it is possible that autonomous universities also have training courses, but the professional improvement for teaching and scientific research is unclear.

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