

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE
MODELS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAM

*UM ESTUDO COMPARATIVO DOS MODELOS DE GOVERNANÇA UNIVERSITÁRIA
AUTÔNOMA E SUAS IMPLICAÇÕES PARA O VIETNÃ*

*UN ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO DE LOS MODELOS DE GOBERNANZA
UNIVERSITARIA AUTÓNOMA Y SUS IMPLICACIONES PARA VIETNAM*



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ABSTRACT: This study examines university autonomy through a comparative analysis of governance models in Finland and Sweden (Nordic model), the University of California in the United States (Anglo-American model), and Thailand (Southeast Asian model). Using a qualitative comparative approach, it analyzes governance structures, levels of autonomy, and accountability mechanisms across different higher education systems. The findings show that university autonomy is context-specific, shaped by political traditions, institutional cultures, and regulatory frameworks. The Nordic model emphasizes regulated autonomy under strong public oversight, while the Anglo-American model highlights institutional independence and market-oriented governance. The Southeast Asian model reflects managerial reforms within a developing context. Based on these insights, the study proposes implications for Vietnam, emphasizing that effective autonomy requires not only legal decentralization but also coherent governance structures, leadership capacity, and accountability systems. University autonomy should be viewed as a systemic reform balancing institutional flexibility with public responsibility and social equity.

KEYWORDS University autonomy. University governance. Comparative analysis. Higher education reform. Accountability.

RESUMO: *Este estudo examina a autonomia universitária por meio de uma análise comparativa de modelos de governança na Finlândia e na Suécia (modelo nórdico), na Universidade da Califórnia, nos Estados Unidos (modelo anglo-americano), e na Tailândia (modelo do Sudeste Asiático). Utilizando uma abordagem qualitativa comparativa, analisa estruturas de governança, níveis de autonomia e mecanismos de responsabilização em diferentes sistemas de ensino superior. Os resultados indicam que a autonomia universitária é específica ao contexto, sendo moldada por tradições políticas, culturas institucionais e marcos regulatórios. O modelo nórdico enfatiza uma autonomia regulada sob forte supervisão pública, enquanto o modelo anglo-americano destaca a independência institucional e uma governança orientada ao mercado. O modelo do Sudeste Asiático reflete reformas gerenciais em um contexto em desenvolvimento. Com base nesses achados, o estudo propõe implicações para o Vietnã, enfatizando que uma autonomia eficaz requer não apenas descentralização legal, mas também estruturas de governança coerentes, capacidade de liderança e sistemas de responsabilização. A autonomia universitária deve ser compreendida como uma reforma sistêmica que equilibra flexibilidade institucional com responsabilidade pública e equidade social.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Autonomia universitária. Governança universitária. Análise comparativa. Reforma do ensino superior. Responsabilização.*

RESUMEN: *Este estudio examina la autonomía universitaria mediante un análisis comparativo de modelos de gobernanza en Finlandia y Suecia (modelo nórdico), en la Universidad de California en Estados Unidos (modelo angloamericano) y en Tailandia (modelo del Sudeste Asiático). Utilizando un enfoque cualitativo comparativo, analiza las estructuras de gobernanza, los niveles de autonomía y los mecanismos de rendición de cuentas en diferentes sistemas de educación superior. Los resultados muestran que la autonomía universitaria es específica del contexto, siendo moldeada por tradiciones políticas, culturas institucionales y marcos regulatorios. El modelo nórdico enfatiza una autonomía regulada bajo una fuerte supervisión pública, mientras que el modelo angloamericano destaca la independencia institucional y una gobernanza orientada al mercado. El modelo del Sudeste Asiático refleja reformas gerenciales en un contexto en desarrollo. Con base en estos*

hallazgos, el estudio propone implicaciones para Vietnam, enfatizando que una autonomía efectiva requiere no solo descentralización legal, sino también estructuras de gobernanza coherentes, capacidad de liderazgo y sistemas de rendición de cuentas. La autonomía universitaria debe entenderse como una reforma sistémica que equilibra la flexibilidad institucional con la responsabilidad pública y la equidad social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Autonomía universitaria. Gobernanza universitaria. Análisis comparativo. Reforma de la educación superior. Rendición de cuentas.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, university autonomy has become a central theme in higher education reforms worldwide, reflecting a broader shift from state-centered control toward decentralized governance and performance-oriented management. Governments increasingly perceive autonomous universities as more flexible, innovative, and responsive to societal demands, particularly in contexts characterized by rapid globalization, massification of higher education, and intensified international competition (Christensen, 2011; Shattock, 2014; Enders et al., 2013). Within this reform trajectory, autonomy is often associated with enhanced institutional effectiveness, improved academic quality, and stronger links between universities and socio-economic development (Privot & Estermann, 2018; Zapp et al., 2021).

However, international experience suggests that university autonomy is neither a uniform concept nor a universally successful reform instrument. Different countries adopt diverse governance models depending on historical traditions, political cultures, and administrative systems (Holmén, 2022; Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014). While some systems emphasize strong institutional independence and market-oriented mechanisms, others maintain substantial state involvement through regulatory frameworks, funding controls, and quality assurance systems (Degn & Sørensen, 2015; Balle Hansen et al., 2012). Consequently, autonomy reforms may generate unintended consequences, such as managerial dominance over academic communities, erosion of collegial governance, and tensions between accountability and academic freedom (Alleman et al., 2017; Christensen, 2011).

In the European and Nordic contexts, autonomy reforms are closely intertwined with broader transformations in public administration and constitutional traditions. Studies on Finland and Sweden, for instance, indicate that global governance trends interact in complex ways with national political cultures, producing hybrid models that combine formal institutional independence with strong public oversight (Holmén, 2022; Bull, 2018; Wenander, 2019). Similar dynamics are observed in other regions, where universities are granted expanded managerial powers but remain embedded in dense regulatory environments (Douglass, 2015; Degn, 2015; Peters, 2018). These cases highlight that autonomy is not merely a legal status but a multidimensional governance arrangement involving power distribution, decision-making structures, and accountability mechanisms.

In developing and transitional contexts, the autonomy agenda is often driven by expectations of improving efficiency, reducing public expenditure, and fostering institutional

competitiveness. Yet empirical evidence reveals persistent challenges related to leadership capacity, internal governance conflicts, and limited stakeholder participation (Jarernsiripornkul & Pandey, 2018; Hien et al., 2022). The transformation from traditional bureaucratic control to autonomous governance requires not only legal reforms but also profound changes in organizational culture, managerial competencies, and institutional norms (Narikka & Nurmi, 2013; Sundberg, 2014).

In Vietnam, university autonomy has emerged as a strategic policy orientation in higher education reform, particularly since the early 2010s. Recent studies indicate that Vietnamese universities have gradually obtained greater discretion in academic programs, financial management, and organizational structures; however, the overall autonomy remains constrained by strong ministerial control and fragmented regulatory frameworks (Do & Mai, 2022; Hoa, 2022). Empirical research further points to limited participation of academic staff in governance processes, weak institutional accountability systems, and uneven leadership capacities across institutions (Hai & Anh, 2022; Mai et al., 2022). These issues suggest that autonomy in Vietnam is still largely procedural rather than substantive, focusing more on formal decentralization than on genuine governance transformation.

Despite a growing body of literature on university autonomy in Vietnam and internationally, comparative analyses that systematically examine governance models across different national contexts remain relatively limited. Most existing studies concentrate either on single-country cases or on general policy discussions without explicitly connecting international experiences to practical policy implications for Vietnam (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017; Casson, 2019). This gap highlights the need for comparative research that not only maps institutional arrangements but also interprets their relevance for specific national reform agendas.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of selected international models of autonomous university governance, focusing on three key dimensions: governance structures, levels of institutional autonomy, and accountability mechanisms. By examining how different countries balance autonomy and state control, the study seeks to identify patterns and lessons that may inform the ongoing reform of higher education governance in Vietnam. Ultimately, the paper argues that successful autonomy is less about formal legal status and more about the coherence between institutional design, leadership capacity, and regulatory environments.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

University Autonomy

University autonomy is widely regarded as a fundamental principle of modern higher education systems and a core element of governance reforms worldwide. In general terms, autonomy refers to the degree to which higher education institutions possess the authority and capacity to make decisions independently from direct state control in key areas of their operations (Shattock, 2014; Pruvot & Estermann, 2018). Rather than implying complete independence from public oversight, autonomy is commonly understood as a reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and universities, in which the role of government shifts from detailed administrative control toward strategic steering and performance-based regulation (Enders et al., 2013; Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014).

In the comparative literature, university autonomy is typically conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing at least four interrelated dimensions: academic autonomy, organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, and staffing autonomy (Pruvot & Estermann, 2017; Hien et al., 2022). Academic autonomy refers to the institution's authority over curriculum design, research agendas, student admission, and academic standards. Organizational autonomy concerns the freedom to determine internal governance structures, establish or dissolve units, and appoint executive leadership. Financial autonomy involves the ability to manage budgets, set tuition fees, allocate resources, and generate external income. Staffing autonomy relates to recruitment, promotion, evaluation, and remuneration of academic and administrative personnel.

Importantly, autonomy is inseparable from the principle of accountability. Contemporary governance frameworks emphasize that increased institutional freedom must be accompanied by mechanisms of transparency, quality assurance, and public responsibility (Christensen, 2011; Zapp et al., 2021). In this sense, autonomy does not signify the withdrawal of the state but rather the transformation of governance from hierarchical control to indirect regulation through funding formulas, accreditation systems, and performance indicators (Degn & Sørensen, 2015; Peters, 2018). As demonstrated in European and Nordic contexts, even highly autonomous universities remain embedded in dense regulatory environments that define their missions, strategic priorities, and social obligations (Holmén, 2022; Wenander, 2019).

In developing and transitional systems, the meaning of autonomy is often shaped by reform discourses emphasizing efficiency, competitiveness, and financial sustainability. However, empirical studies reveal that autonomy reforms may generate uneven outcomes due to limited managerial capacity, weak institutional cultures, and persistent bureaucratic traditions (Jarernsiripornkul & Pandey, 2018; Narikka & Nurmi, 2013). In Vietnam, autonomy is formally recognized in higher education policies, yet practical implementation remains constrained by strong ministerial intervention and fragmented legal frameworks (Hoa, 2022). This suggests that autonomy should be understood not merely as a legal status but as an evolving institutional practice that depends on governance arrangements, leadership quality, and organizational learning (Mai et al., 2022; Hai & Anh, 2022).

University Governance

University governance refers to the set of structures, processes, and relationships through which authority is exercised, decisions are made, and institutional goals are pursued within higher education institutions. Unlike management, which focuses primarily on day-to-day operational activities, governance concerns the strategic direction, distribution of power, and mechanisms of control and accountability (Shattock, 2014; Pruvot & Estermann, 2018). It encompasses both internal arrangements, such as governing boards, academic councils, and executive leadership, and external relationships with governments, stakeholders, and society at large (Christensen, 2011; Enders et al., 2013).

From a comparative perspective, governance models vary significantly across national systems, reflecting differences in administrative traditions, political cultures, and historical trajectories. Classical collegial models emphasize shared decision-making among academic staff and strong professional autonomy, whereas managerial models prioritize executive authority, strategic planning, and performance management (Ahlbäck Öberg & Sundberg, 2017; Alleman et al., 2017). In recent decades, many systems have moved toward hybrid governance arrangements that combine elements of collegial participation with corporate-style boards and strengthened leadership positions (Degn, 2015; Erkkilä & Piironen, 2014).

A central issue in contemporary governance debates concerns the balance between institutional autonomy and public accountability. While autonomous governance structures are expected to enhance flexibility and responsiveness, they may also lead to the marginalization of academic voices and the concentration of power in managerial elites (Christensen, 2011; Sundberg, 2013). Empirical evidence from Nordic and European reforms

indicates that governance transformations often reduce the influence of traditional collegial bodies in favor of external board members and professional managers, raising concerns about democratic legitimacy and academic self-governance (Ahlbäck Öberg & Wockelberg, 2016; Balle Hansen et al., 2012).

In this study, university governance is conceptualized as an institutional framework that mediates the relationship between autonomy and accountability. Governance structures determine how autonomy is exercised in practice, how decisions are legitimized, and how conflicts between academic values and managerial imperatives are resolved (Privot & Estermann, 2017; Zapp et al., 2021). Therefore, analyzing governance arrangements is essential for understanding not only the formal degree of autonomy but also its actual implications for institutional performance, academic freedom, and social responsibility.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative comparative research design to examine how different higher education systems have institutionalized autonomous university governance and how these arrangements have shaped the balance between institutional freedom and public accountability. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research focused on institutional configurations, governance structures, legal authority, and regulatory mechanisms, which required interpretive analysis rather than statistical measurement.

The study was conducted as a cross-national comparative analysis. Instead of aiming to generalize through large scale quantitative indicators, the research sought to generate analytical insights by systematically comparing representative national cases. Each case was treated as an analytical unit, allowing the study to capture governance logics, reform trajectories, and institutional tradeoffs embedded within different political and administrative contexts.

Case Selection

Three representative cases were selected to reflect contrasting governance traditions and reform trajectories. The Nordic model included Finland and Sweden and represented regulated public autonomy embedded in strong state steering. The Anglo American model referred to the United States University of California system and represented high institutional

independence and market-oriented governance. The Southeast Asian model referred to Thailand and represented managerial autonomy reforms in a developing and transitional context.

The selection followed a maximum variation logic and aimed to capture diverse governance regimes rather than statistically representative samples. These cases were selected because they illustrated distinct ways of organizing university autonomy and were widely discussed in international governance literature. The contrast among these models allowed the study to identify design tradeoffs, reform risks, and transferable governance patterns.

Data Sources

The study relied on three main categories of qualitative data.

First, legal and policy documents were collected for each case, including higher education laws, governmental decrees, institutional statutes, and regulatory frameworks. These documents were used to identify the formal distribution of authority, the legal status of universities, and official governance arrangements.

Second, international policy reports were reviewed to situate national reforms within broader global trends in higher education governance. These sources provided contextual understanding of common reform instruments such as performance-based steering, accountability regimes, and quality assurance systems.

Third, academic literature was systematically reviewed to interpret governance transformations, internal power shifts, and the practical consequences of autonomy reforms. This literature supported deeper analysis of institutional dynamics that were not fully visible in formal legal texts, such as managerialization, erosion of collegial governance, and stakeholder participation.

The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation and enhanced analytical credibility.

Analytical Framework

The analysis applied a uniform analytical framework across all cases, which was directly derived from the conceptual framework and operationalized to generate the comparative results. The framework consisted of three core analytical dimensions.

The first dimension focused on governance structures, including legal status of universities, composition and authority of governing bodies, and distribution of power between boards, executive leadership, and academic bodies.

The second dimension examined levels of autonomy across four domains, including academic, organizational, financial, and staffing autonomy.

The third dimension focused on accountability mechanisms, including external and internal oversight systems such as quality assurance, accreditation, audits, reporting requirements, and performance evaluation.

All documents and studies were coded according to these three dimensions. For each case, within case analysis was first conducted to construct a structured institutional profile. Subsequently, cross case comparison was performed to identify similarities, differences, and recurring patterns across the three models.

RESULTS

Results of the Comparative Analysis of Selected Countries

Three representative cases were selected to reflect different governance traditions and reform trajectories: the Nordic model (Finland and Sweden), the Anglo-American model (United States – University of California), and the Southeast Asian model (Thailand). The comparison focuses on three main dimensions: governance structures, levels of autonomy, and accountability mechanisms.

Table 1

Comparative overview of autonomous university governance models

Dimension	Nordic Model (Finland & Sweden)	Anglo-American Model (USA – UC)	Southeast Asian Model (Thailand)
Legal status	Independent public corporations / foundations	Independent public institutions	Autonomous public universities
Governing body	University board with external members	Board of Regents	University council
Role of state	Strategic steering, performance-based funding	Indirect policy framework	Regulatory supervision
Academic autonomy	High	Very high	Moderate–high
Financial autonomy	High but dependent on public funding	Very high, diversified income	High, tuition-dependent
Organizational autonomy	High	Very high	High
Staffing autonomy	High	Very high	High
Accountability mechanisms	Quality assurance, contracts with state	Market competition, accreditation	Government audits, internal review

Main risks	Decline of collegial governance	Marketization, inequality	Managerial dominance, equity issues
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Note. Compiled by the authors based on document review.

Nordic model: Finland and Sweden

The Nordic countries represent a governance model in which strong institutional autonomy is embedded within a robust public accountability system. In Finland, universities were transformed into independent legal entities, either as public corporations or private foundations, which granted them extensive organizational and financial autonomy. Governing boards are responsible for strategic planning, leadership appointment, and financial oversight, while the state steers institutional behavior through performance contracts and funding mechanisms (Holmén, 2022; Narikka & Nurmi, 2013).

Sweden follows a similar pattern, although universities formally remain part of the public sector. Governance reforms strengthened executive leadership and external board participation, while reducing direct ministerial control. However, empirical evidence indicates a gradual weakening of collegial governance, as academic staff participation in strategic decision-making has declined (Ahlbäck Öberg & Sundberg, 2016; Sundberg, 2013). This shift reflects a broader trend toward managerial governance and professionalized leadership (Degn & Sørensen, 2015).

Overall, the Nordic model demonstrates that autonomy can coexist with strong public oversight, but also reveals tensions between efficiency-oriented governance and democratic academic participation (Ahlbäck Öberg & Wockelberg, 2016; Balle Hansen et al., 2012).

Anglo-American Model: United States (University of California)

The United States represents a highly decentralized and market-oriented model of university governance. The University of California system is governed by a powerful Board of Regents, which holds ultimate authority over academic, financial, and organizational matters. This governance structure enables universities to exercise extensive autonomy in curriculum design, faculty recruitment, and resource allocation (Douglass, 2015).

Financial autonomy in this model is particularly strong, as institutions rely heavily on tuition fees, research grants, and private funding. The role of the state is primarily indirect, focusing on broad regulatory frameworks rather than detailed administrative control (Peters, 2018). This environment encourages institutional competition, innovation, and strategic differentiation.

However, extensive autonomy also introduces significant risks. Market pressures may increase inequality between institutions and social groups, while managerial governance can marginalize academic self-governance and collegial decision-making (Christensen, 2011; Shattock, 2014; Zapp et al., 2021). The Anglo-American model thus highlights the trade-off between flexibility and social responsibility.

Southeast Asian Model: Thailand

Thailand illustrates autonomy reforms in a developing and transitional higher education system. Several public universities have been converted into autonomous institutions with independent legal status and governing councils as the highest decision-making bodies (Jarernsiripornkul & Pandey, 2018).

These reforms significantly increased organizational and financial autonomy, allowing universities to restructure internal units, recruit staff, and diversify income sources. Executive leadership gained substantial power, enabling faster decision-making and strategic planning.

Nevertheless, empirical evidence reveals major challenges. Academic staff participation remains limited, and governance tends to be centralized in managerial elites. Financial autonomy has also increased dependence on tuition fees, raising concerns about equity and accessibility for disadvantaged groups (Jarernsiripornkul & Pandey, 2018; Christensen, 2011). Accountability mechanisms are still evolving, leading to ambiguity in the relationship between institutional independence and state supervision.

IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAM

The comparative analysis demonstrates that university autonomy should not be interpreted as a single standardized policy model, but rather as a context-specific governance arrangement shaped by political traditions, institutional cultures, and regulatory environments. International experience shows that autonomy may take multiple forms, ranging from regulated public autonomy to market-oriented independence or managerial efficiency-driven models. This diversity suggests that Vietnam cannot simply replicate any foreign model, but must design a governance framework aligned with its own institutional conditions and development priorities.

A first common pattern observed across international cases is the transformation of the state's role in higher education governance. Instead of exercising direct administrative control,

governments increasingly adopt indirect steering mechanisms based on strategic planning, performance evaluation, and institutional contracts. For Vietnam, this implies a necessary shift from micro-level approval systems toward macro-level policy guidance. The state should focus on setting long-term development goals, quality standards, and accountability frameworks, while granting universities greater discretion in academic, organizational, and financial decisions.

A second major trend concerns the internal redistribution of power within universities. Autonomy reforms tend to strengthen executive leadership and professional management structures, often reducing the influence of traditional collegial bodies. While this shift may improve institutional efficiency and strategic coherence, it also raises the risk of excessive managerial dominance and weakened academic participation. In the Vietnamese context, this highlights the importance of balancing leadership authority with meaningful involvement of academic staff and stakeholders in governance processes.

A third shared feature across models is the increasing complexity of accountability. As universities gain more autonomy, traditional hierarchical supervision becomes less effective, and new forms of oversight are required. These include external quality assurance systems, transparent reporting mechanisms, and performance-based evaluation. For Vietnam, this implies that autonomy cannot be implemented without a parallel strengthening of accountability institutions.

Overall, the comparative findings suggest that autonomy is neither inherently positive nor inherently problematic. Its impact depends largely on governance design, leadership capacity, and the coherence of the regulatory environment. For Vietnam, autonomy should therefore be treated as a systemic governance reform rather than a purely legal decentralization measure.

Table 2

Key implications for university autonomy in Vietnam

Dimension	Current challenges in Vietnam	Implications from international models	Policy recommendations
<i>Governance structure</i>	University councils have limited real power; blurred roles between governance and management	Strong governing boards with strategic authority and external members	Strengthen authority of university councils; clarify governance–management separation
<i>Policy framework</i>	Fragmented regulations; strong ministerial control	Strategic steering instead of administrative control	Simplify legal framework; shift to performance-based regulation
<i>Managerial capacity</i>	Limited leadership training; weak strategic management	Professionalized university leadership	Implement systematic leadership training programs
<i>Accountability mechanisms</i>	Weak quality assurance; limited transparency	Independent accreditation and public reporting	Strengthen external quality assurance systems

<i>Equity and access</i>	Risk of increased tuition dependence	Public funding remains core responsibility	Maintain state subsidies and student support schemes
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Note. Compiled by the authors based on document review.

Reconfiguring Governance Structures

International experience highlights that effective autonomy requires strong internal governance. In Vietnam, although university councils have been formally established, their authority remains constrained, and many strategic decisions are still subject to ministerial approval. This limits institutional flexibility and weakens accountability at the organizational level.

Comparative models suggest that governance bodies should be granted real strategic power, including authority over leadership appointment, institutional strategy, and financial planning. External stakeholders such as industry representatives, local authorities, and alumni should participate meaningfully in governance structures to enhance social relevance and public trust. At the same time, academic staff participation must be safeguarded to prevent excessive concentration of power in executive leadership.

Redesigning Policy and Regulatory Frameworks

Another key implication concerns the role of the state. International models demonstrate a shift from direct administrative control toward strategic steering through funding mechanisms, performance contracts, and quality assurance frameworks. In Vietnam, however, regulatory overlap and frequent policy adjustments create uncertainty and hinder long-term institutional planning.

A coherent policy framework should be developed, focusing on outcome-based regulation rather than procedural compliance. Government agencies should prioritize setting broad development goals, monitoring institutional performance, and ensuring quality standards, while allowing universities greater discretion in academic and organizational decisions.

Enhancing Managerial and Leadership Capacity

Autonomy reforms require strong institutional capacity. Without competent leadership, autonomy may result in inefficient management, financial risks, and governance failures. Many Vietnamese universities still operate under traditional administrative cultures, where decision-making remains centralized and strategic planning is limited.

Leadership development should therefore become a central component of higher education reform. This includes professional training in strategic management, financial governance, quality assurance, and digital transformation. Universities should also invest in internal governance systems that support evidence-based decision-making and transparent management practices.

Strengthening Accountability and Quality Assurance

International experience consistently emphasizes that autonomy must be accompanied by robust accountability mechanisms. For Vietnam, this implies strengthening independent accreditation agencies and improving national quality assurance systems. Universities should be required to publish regular performance reports and engage in external evaluation processes.

Accountability should cover not only financial performance but also academic quality, research output, social engagement, and graduate employability. Transparent reporting and stakeholder engagement are essential for building public trust and legitimizing institutional autonomy.

Balancing Autonomy and Equity

Finally, autonomy reforms must be carefully regulated to avoid widening social inequalities. Increased financial autonomy may lead to higher tuition fees and unequal access to higher education. International experience shows that even highly autonomous systems maintain strong public funding and student support schemes.

For Vietnam, this highlights the need to preserve the social mission of higher education. Autonomy should not undermine equity, regional development, or access for disadvantaged groups. Instead, it should be aligned with broader national goals of inclusive and sustainable development.

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 - **Author contributions:** Phan Trung Kien (*lead author*): Conceptualization, research design, methodology, supervision, writing – original draft. Elena Shmeleva: Consultation, manuscript review and validation. Bui Van Quan: Literature review, data interpretation. Le Thi Ngoc Thuy (*corresponding author*): Supervision, validation, manuscript coordination. Mai Quoc Khanh: Data analysis, writing support. Tran Trung Tinh: Methodological support, review. Ngo Thi Trang: Editing, formatting, final proofreading.
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