

BALANCE BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: MEASURES TO INNOVATE UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

In the context of globalization and innovation in higher education governance, establishing a balanced relationship between autonomy and accountability has become an urgent requirement. This study uses the method of document analysis to explore the internal unity and contradiction between these two concepts, thereby proposing specific measures to innovate university governance. Although autonomy and accountability are often viewed as two opposite poles, in-depth analysis shows that they have a dialectical and complementary relationship. Autonomy is the basis for universities to develop creativity, innovation and adaptation, while accountability is a tool to ensure that universities operate effectively, transparently and respond to public interests. The study proposes some governance implications to ensure the symbiosis between autonomy and accountability, and at the same time form a two-way interaction between autonomy and accountability, in order to promote the sustainable development of universities in the new era.

Keywords: Autonomy, Accountability, Higher Education Institutions, Higher Education Governance

1. Introduction

Universities are considered special organizations based on the function of providing or contributing to the provision of a special commodity for society, which is knowledge (Marginson, 2016). In order to carry out their tasks and bring this benefit to the community, universities need a special level of freedom, including academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Therefore, the autonomy mechanism plays an important role in the development of universities, and is also a prerequisite for academic freedom in universities (Matei & Iwinska, 2018). In essence, academic freedom and university autonomy refer to the freedom or liberty of individuals within the university and the university itself to carry out activities aimed at fulfilling the core mission of the university, namely to pursue and contribute to the production of knowledge through research and scholarly exchange, as well as to transmit and disseminate knowledge (through teaching and learning). This means that special freedoms are granted to universities to perform social functions, not for the benefit of the university itself or the personal interests of individuals within the

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university (Ren & Li, 2013). To achieve such autonomy, universities need to be clear about their responsibilities (Berdahl, 1990).

The relationship between autonomy and accountability began to attract the attention of American higher education circles in the 1970s (Kallison & Cohen, 2010). This relationship is a manifestation of the unity between the opposing sides of power and responsibility of each university. The balance between university autonomy and accountability is a key issue that needs to be addressed in the process of modernizing the management system and improving the governance capacity of higher education (Christensen, 2011). However, this issue has not yet attracted the due attention of policy makers.

Vietnam's higher education is currently entering a period of stable development. Vietnam has gradually institutionalized the viewpoints and contents of Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW on educational innovation into State policies and laws. In 2018 and 2019, the Law amending and supplementing a number of articles of the Law on Higher Education (2018) and the Law on Education (2019) was issued, creating a legal corridor for innovation activities in higher education. In the governance and operation of the higher education system, Vietnam has gradually increased the autonomy of universities. The autonomy and accountability of universities have been stipulated in the Law on Higher Education (Law No. 43, 2018), helping schools to maximize their proactiveness, creativity, improve operational efficiency, increase competition and diversify types of education, ensuring the good implementation of the school's mission and goals. Granting autonomy associated with accountability, while creating a favorable mechanism for higher education institutions to implement autonomy is an inevitable and necessary trend to meet the requirements of the country's socio-economic development and international economic integration.

In the practice of innovation in higher education governance, the relationship between autonomy and accountability is often considered from two perspectives: either emphasizing one-sided university autonomy while ignoring accountability, or valuing accountability of higher education while ignoring university autonomy (Maassen et al., 2011). So, specifically, what is the relationship between autonomy and accountability of universities? Why is the balance between autonomy and accountability necessary for innovation in higher education governance? This study will attempt to answer those questions.

2. Research method

The study uses qualitative methods to analyze the complexity and specific context of autonomy and accountability at universities. Unlike previous studies that often use quantitative methods to survey to measure satisfaction or implementation of policies, this study uses document analysis to delve into how stakeholders in higher education, including leaders, lecturers, and learners, have exercised their autonomy and accountability. Secondary documents used in English, Chinese, Vietnamese, and English include academic articles and education policies of various countries to explore the in-depth and diverse aspects of two contents: university autonomy and accountability. The keywords searched and collected by the author include: university autonomy, accountability, university governance, useful experiences, etc. from nearly 40 research articles. The contents are synthesized into necessary information for research purposes. This approach not

only fills the academic gap on the role of accountability in the context of university autonomy, but also contributes to expanding the discussion on whether increased autonomy corresponds to increased accountability or leads to new forms of power asymmetry in governance.

3. Results

3.1 Concepts of autonomy and accountability

University autonomy is the necessary degree of independence from external intervention that a university needs to be able to carry out internal governance and organization (Christensen, 2011), with main activities such as: generating and using financial resources outside the public budget, allocating financial resources within the university, recruiting staff, building standards for learning, training, research and freedom in organizing and conducting research and teaching. Typically, university autonomy includes the following seven elements: 1) Personnel: recruitment and appointment of teaching staff and senior administrative staff; 2) Students: admission, learning process, discipline; 3) Training programs and teaching activities: methods, exams/tests, content, textbooks; 4) Professional standards: degree standards, quality assessment standards and accreditation; 5) Research and publication: postgraduate training, priority for research topics, freedom to publish; 6) Administration: councils, departments, Student Association; 7) Administration and finance: budget, operating costs, equipment and material costs, seasonal work, extra-budgetary funds, responsibility regulations (Anderson & Johnson, 1998). Beside, can also be summarized in 4 major criteria: academics, human resources, organization and finance (Jarensiripornkul & Pandey, 2018).

The European University Association (EUA) uses a scorecard system to assess university autonomy, with three versions below, with more updated indicators in each version (Estermann et al., 2011; Estermann & Nokkala, 2009; Pruvot & Estermann, 2017).

Table 1. Three versions of EUA's university autonomy

Version	Dimensions	Number of indicators	Scoring system	Source
Version 1 (2009)	Academic, Organisational, Staffing, Financial	More than 30 indicators	Weighting based on the importance of each indicators	Estermann & Nokkala (2009)
Version 2 (2011)	Academic, Organisational, Staffing, Financial	39 indicators	Combine weighting and deduction method	Estermann et al. (2011)
Version 3 (2017)	Academic, Organisational, Staffing, Financial	39 indicators	Combine weighting and deduction method	Pruvot & Estermann (2017)

In Vietnam, Autonomy is the right of a higher education institution to self-determine its goals and choose how to achieve them; self-decide and be accountable for professional, academic, organizational, human resources, financial, asset and other activities on the basis of legal regulations and the capacity of the higher education institution. University autonomy is one of the key tasks of the Education and Training sector that needs to be resolved from 2016, with the highest goal of: “Improving the quality related to autonomy for institutions and implementing state management in a new way to improve the quality of higher education from autonomous higher education institutions” (Viet Nam Communist Party, 2013). Vietnam is often interested in university autonomy including at least 4 areas: 1) Academic autonomy: Self-determination on training programs, training methods, training fields, scale, scope, quality assurance, training linkage, degree granting and language of instruction, investment in scientific research; 2) Financial autonomy: Self-finding and allocating funds, tuition fees, accumulated surplus profits; 3) Organizational autonomy: Establishing organizational structure, regulations, signing contracts, electing leaders; 4) Autonomy in personnel: Responsible for recruitment, salary, appointment, dismissal (Van & Hien, 2018). Beside, Tuan et al., (2021) proposed a number of indicators used to assess the level of university autonomy in Vietnam using the above 4 contents including:

Table 2. Description for University Autonomy Indicators

No	Dimension	Vietnam's university autonomy indicators
1	<i>Academic</i>	Decision of overall student number; Decision of student admission procedures and criteria; Open and termination of degree programmes; Selection of language of instruction; Selection of quality assurance mechanisms; Selection of quality assurance providers; Decision of curriculum and content of degree programmes
2	<i>Financial</i>	Ability to borrow money; Ability to keep surplus; Ability to own buildings; Decision of tuition fees for Vietnamese students; Decision of tuition fees for international students
3	<i>Organisational</i>	Appointment and dismissal of the Rector/President; Appointment and dismissal of Chairperson of University Board; Decision on establishing and closing of subsidiary units; Appointment and dismissal of Chairperson of Science and Education Committee
4	<i>Staffing</i>	Recruitment of Vietnamese staff; Recruitment of international staff; Salaries and bonus payment for Vietnamese staf; Salaries and bonus payment for international staff; Decision on professor promotion, evaluation, reward, and fire; Decision on senior administrative staff promotion, evaluation, reward and fire; Decision on staff training and development

Accountability means showing results in a responsible manner, including the appropriate use of resources that the organization owns in a reasonable and legal way, to achieve the set goals (Dressel, 1980). Accountability is often used with the same meaning as: responsibility, answerability, liability, which are terms related to the expectation of responsibility. Accountability

is the recognition of responsibility for every action, every product, every process or policy that we put forth in leading, managing, and performing work. Accountability is the ability to fulfill the obligation of full information, the ability to justify one's actions in the past or the future, and to be punished if that action violates ethical and legal rules. (Pham, 2012). In education, accountability is linked to monitoring internal performance and aligning decisions with target outcomes (Fatima & Suraiya Ibrahim, 2024).

Vietnam considers accountability as the responsibility of higher education institutions to report and provide transparent information to learners, society, competent management agencies, owners and stakeholders on compliance with legal regulations and proper implementation of regulations and commitments of higher education institutions (Viet Nam National Assembly, 2018). University autonomy has always been accompanied by an increase in the accountability and responsibility of higher education institutions (but not the capacity to exercise autonomy). Historically, universities have always been subject to some form of control and have undergone periodic reforms, and this process is undoubtedly a form of “accountability” (Van & Hien, 2018). While “autonomy” is an inherent feature of traditional concepts of educational institutions, “accountability” is a principle related to innovation. Determining how these two issues can be reconciled for the greater good of universities and the important processes of national and international development, is a significant challenge for the contemporary academic world.

3.2 The dialectical unity of autonomy and accountability

From the perspective of the historical development of higher education in the world, university autonomy is a system and spirit that has existed since the emergence of universities in the Middle Ages, while accountability in higher education only appeared in the 1970s (Fang, 2011). Since the emergence of accountability, university autonomy has historically been integrated with accountability in higher education. Generally speaking, autonomy is the premise and origin of accountability, while accountability is the result and guarantee of autonomy, both complement each other and coexist harmoniously.

3.2.1 Autonomy is the origin of accountability

If university autonomy is the right that universities have continuously maintained in the long-term historical development process, and accountability is understood as the agreement to carry out the responsibility of university education and fulfill the mission, then autonomy is the premise and root of accountability. The implementation of accountability must be based on respecting the autonomy of universities and not infringing on the necessary autonomy of universities.

The interaction between responsibilities and rights is a basic principle in the governance process. If autonomy is the necessary right for universities to develop academic freedom, scientific research and lead social trends, then accountability is the obligation that universities must fulfill, and it is also the external mission and social service that universities perform. Universities will thrive when they are rooted in university autonomy and academic freedom, which help universities fulfill their missions and responsibilities assigned by society. In other words, university autonomy is achieved through the process of fulfilling social responsibilities, promoting social development,

and interacting with the external environment. Therefore, university autonomy and academic freedom are valuable sources for universities to fulfill their social responsibilities (Wang & Liu, 2014).

Autonomy promotes accountability and makes accountability more meaningful. Autonomy is not a privilege but a prerequisite for ensuring that universities effectively fulfill their missions and responsibilities. Only with full autonomy can the higher education system liberate itself, gain the freedom to adapt to the environment, make strategic adjustments, and take positive actions. With the prerequisite of respecting university autonomy, “each university will have full freedom to decide how it can respond to the changing needs and opportunities from the outside world” (Bok, 1982). Expanded autonomy forces institutions to take responsibility for their strategic development choices, develop long-term plans, and enhance their sense of mission and organizational image (Kaiser et al., 2014). By accepting accountability, higher education institutions not only meet the needs of their stakeholders, assume corresponding social responsibilities, and fulfill corresponding social obligations, but also help universities form a positive adaptive mechanism for self-continuation and development.

3.2.2 Accountability as a mechanism to protect autonomy

In the modern context, when universities are granted greater autonomy, a new mechanism is needed to ensure that these organizations operate in the public interest and meet the needs of society. That mechanism is accountability. Accountability is an important means for universities to protect their independence and prevent unnecessary interference from government agencies or external forces (Trow, 1996). This is especially true in the context of universities moving from a purely academic model to an applied model to serve socio-economic development.

The accountability mechanism is not simply a monitoring mechanism, but also an opportunity for universities to innovate and affirm their values. By making their mission transparent and linking it to societal expectations, universities can demonstrate their performance, thereby strengthening public and government trust. This reduces the risk of unjustified intervention, ensuring the sustainability of institutional autonomy.

The dialectical relationship between autonomy and accountability is clearly demonstrated by global trends. The case of Russia is a typical example that increasing autonomy without strong internal control mechanisms can lead to a crisis of confidence (Kaiser et al., 2014). Since the 21st century, to address the crisis of public trust caused by excessive university autonomy, the Russian government has introduced accountability mechanisms to provide necessary checks and balances on autonomy. The movement to increase accountability in higher education has taken place in the context of increasing university autonomy. Accountability is therefore an important “guarantee” for the effective exercise of university autonomy, especially when public funding is increasingly performance-based.

3.3 The Conflict Between Autonomy and Accountability

Autonomy is a natural attribute of any independent, autonomous social organization or institution. University autonomy reflects the tendency to value a university as an independent

entity and not interfere with it from outside. In contrast, accountability in higher education reflects the tendency to view higher education institutions as organizations that depend on external resources and accept outside interference. In this approach, autonomy and accountability are at two opposite ends. The correlation between these two factors will lead to a situation: if autonomy is high and accountability is low, it will lead to abuse of public trust, while low autonomy and accountability will inevitably lead to duplication and impoverishment of educational and research activities (Volkov & Melnyk, 2018).

3.3.1 Excessive autonomy affects accountability

Universities are places for exploring and creating knowledge, so they have unique organizational characteristics and operating models, different from other organizations. Academic activities and scientific research determine the position and reputation of universities, and also determine the development orientation of these schools. Although they are proactive in exploring, have academic freedom and autonomy, no educational institution can have absolute independence, especially when it is a part of the national education system (Leveille, 2006). Therefore, if university autonomy is excessive, it will lead to universities abusing their autonomy, lacking corresponding responsibility constraints, ignoring the needs of stakeholders, directly affecting the implementation of accountability in higher education.

University autonomy has two meanings: one is that the university as an organization is resistant to interference from external forces, and the other is that university affairs are decided independently in the name of the collective rather than the name of the individual. “Universities are one of the most conservative organizations of all social organizations” (Burton, 1984). Although universities may have liberal and open leaders in foreign affairs, they are conservative and rigid when it comes to domestic issues. Nowadays, the premise for the existence of public higher education is the realization of national interests and the demonstration of the popular nature of public higher education, which determines the necessity of implementing accountability in public higher education.

As higher education becomes a matter of concern for the whole society, the openness of higher education becomes increasingly evident. The implementation of university accountability requires higher education institutions to establish transparent mechanisms to serve society and bring benefits to society. Overemphasizing autonomy will lead to problems that reduce public trust, which will affect the implementation of higher education accountability (Tomi et al., 2022). Autonomy without the intervention of external forces will affect the survival of higher education institutions. For example, in the 1990s, Russia made unprecedented changes to expand the autonomy of universities. During this transition, due to the overemphasis on university autonomy, the limitations on responsibility that come from independent education were ignored, accountability was devalued and questioned. For a time, abuse of power and abuse of power in universities were rampant, many universities deviated from their mission and public expectations, eventually causing a crisis of public trust.

3.3.2 Excessive accountability damages autonomy

As higher education plays an increasingly important role in society, funding for higher education institutions from external stakeholders is increasing. In this trend, accountability agencies require higher education to take on more and more responsibilities, and expectations about the value of higher education are expanding (Zumeta, 2011). Accountability is defined as a set of responsible action mechanisms to achieve the stated goals. Universities have a responsibility to use the resources allocated by society well and to achieve the corresponding organizational goals wisely and legitimately; universities have a responsibility to continue to collect sufficient evidence to demonstrate the achievement of goals; a responsibility to re-evaluate whether the evidence supporting the goals is economical, effective and appropriate; universities have a responsibility to continue to innovate to improve the effectiveness of existing methods and find more effective methods (Bastedo et al., 1999). As more responsibilities become more and more burdensome for higher education institutions, it will lead to a situation where higher education institutions will not be able to fulfill their responsibilities well. At this point, external stakeholders, especially the Government, will intervene in higher education institutions that have not fulfilled their responsibilities as guardians of the public interest, demanding greater influence and control over the operations and internal affairs of higher education institutions. At that time, external interventions will limit the autonomy of universities.

In some countries, university leaders often complain that governments confuse accountability with excessive control. Even in countries that prefer to rely on market forces rather than government control to guide the development of their higher education systems, governments have difficulty reducing their control over public universities (Salmi, 2009). For example, in the 1980s, the UK higher education accountability movement was strongly implemented, challenging the 3A principle of universities at that time (academic freedom, academic autonomy, academic neutrality). With the popularity of accountability in higher education, it became the main driving force to respond to the challenges of a fiercely competitive market. Therefore, universities have a dual role of maintaining a sufficient distance from external pressures without being criticized by society, while at the same time responding to external demands and being accountable for obtaining adequate support (Berdahl, 1990).

3.4 Establishing a dynamic balance between autonomy and accountability

3.4.1 Forming a two-way interaction between autonomy and accountability

Like two sides of a coin, autonomy and accountability are indispensable elements in a higher education governance system effective learning. The World Bank report points out that good governance is characterized by predictable, open and informed decision-making, as well as professional administrative bodies that act to promote the public interest (World Bank Group, 2022). Autonomy is a fundamental feature of good governance in higher education institutions, allowing institutions to make their own decisions on internal matters such as curriculum, research, personnel and finance. In contrast, accountability requires institutions to be transparent and accountable for their activities to stakeholders. The 1998 UNESCO Declaration also emphasized that the autonomy of higher education institutions must be built on a foundation of clear and transparent accountability from governments, parliaments, students and the wider society (UNESCO, 1998).

Most countries in the world have enacted policies to improve the governance structure of higher education and decentralize the management and supervision of universities to achieve the dual goals of autonomy and accountability. More and more governments around the world are shifting from a control system to a supervision system of higher education (Fielden, 2008). Countries that have traditionally emphasized university autonomy such as the UK, the US, and Italy have gradually increased accountability in reforming higher education governance while countries that have traditionally emphasized accountability such as Russia, Sweden, and France have begun to emphasize granting autonomy to universities. Robert Berdahl believes that universities have a dual role. They must maintain sufficient distance from external pressures without being criticized by society, while at the same time, they must respond to the demands of the outside world and take responsibility for gaining adequate support (Berdahl, 1990).

3.4.2 Positive combination of autonomy and accountability

The relationship between autonomy and accountability needs to be built on harmony, avoiding unnecessary tension. In particular, autonomy must be accompanied by responsibility: Autonomy is only meaningful when used responsibly. A university granted autonomy without accountability can lead to abuse of power, waste and inefficiency. Conversely, accountability must also respect the academic autonomy of universities.

Positive tension: Autonomy and accountability create a necessary tension. This tension is not a negative conflict, but a driving force for both sides to continuously improve. The university granted autonomy will have to make greater efforts to demonstrate operational efficiency, while the management agencies will have to build objective, fair and effective monitoring mechanisms. The success of reforming higher education governance depends not only on whether universities have sufficient autonomy, but also on how they use that authority responsibly. When authority and responsibility are unified, higher education institutions will develop sustainably, contributing positively to the overall development of society.

The success of higher education governance reform depends not only on whether higher education institutions can have sufficient autonomy, but also on whether the recipients of authority can use authority appropriately. The unity of authority and responsibility is one of the core principles of modern public administration. The so-called accountability after autonomy refers to the premise that external stakeholders hold higher education institutions accountable and urge higher education institutions to fulfill their social responsibilities and expand social service functions in order to maintain the traditional mission of higher education and promote university autonomy. External stakeholders actively intervene in higher education issues to ensure that the development of higher education does not deviate from the requirements of social development and external expectations. However, the key point to be observed in this process is not to violate the autonomy of the university. Autonomy is very important for the implementation of the social functions of higher education and the implementation of the accountability system. If higher education loses its inherent traditional spirit, that is, the spirit of autonomy, and blindly serves external requirements, then the higher education institution risks becoming alienated from other educational institutions.

To establish this balanced relationship, the following principles should be followed in policy making and system design: 1) Clear decentralization: There should be a transparent legal framework that clearly delineates areas where universities are autonomous (such as academics, finance, human resources) and areas where accountability is required (such as training quality, financial transparency). 2) Focus on results: Instead of controlling the process, management agencies should focus on assessing the outputs of universities, through indicators such as the quality of graduates, scientific publications, and contributions to the community. 3) Transparency and publicity: Universities need to proactively publicize information about operations, finances and evaluation results to build trust with society.

4. Governance implications

Innovation in higher education governance is a global trend, aiming to improve the quality, efficiency and adaptability of the system. In this process, establishing a balanced, dynamic relationship between autonomy and accountability is a core principle, ensuring success and sustainability.

First, higher education should maintain a certain distance from society. When creating this distance, society will not impose continuous demands on universities, and universities will not become slaves to politicization or marketization. In addition, higher education institutions need to avoid being too dependent on external resources. When reducing excessive dependence on external resources, implementing accountability will help universities enhance their autonomy.

Second, higher education institutions must always clearly perceive and choose their responsibilities. As a social organization with specific functions, higher education institutions always have boundaries in meeting social needs and fulfilling social responsibilities. Needs are always endless but resources are limited. Therefore, the responsibilities that higher education undertakes are limited, not unlimited. In order to avoid harming the autonomy of universities by having to undertake too many responsibilities, higher education institutions must have a full understanding, screening and selecting their responsibilities. At the same time, they still need to be aware of the importance of university autonomy, know how to refuse and keep a distance from unreasonable requests from the outside.

Third, accountability is carried out by independent third parties. Accountability includes not only internal accountability with universities as the main body but also external accountability carried out by independent third parties. Both monitor and complement each other. For accountability to be scientific, objective and fair, on the basis of internal accountability in universities, it must also be carried out by a third party independent of universities and responsible entities, in order to provide the government and the public with scientific information, objective and fair accountability and value-neutral accountability reporting. Carrying out accountability by an independent third party can effectively avoid the harm to university autonomy caused by stakeholders in accountability influencing or even manipulating accountability.

Fourth, strongly promote the role of the University Council. The University Council is considered an important link, an indispensable institution when granting autonomy in university governance. However, many universities have regulations on the authority and responsibility of

the University Council that become barriers because in reality, the University Council has not been able to fully promote its role. Therefore, it is necessary to further strengthen the role of the University Council and recommend that universities expand the selection of external members to the University Council. This is truly a gap in the research on university governance in the context of autonomy in countries with developing higher education.

Fifth, strengthen quality assessment (and recognition), the final step in the quality assurance process, which should be considered a tool for the State and society to monitor the implementation of autonomy and responsibility of universities. On the other hand, quality accreditation will, in fact, force universities to build an internal quality assurance system, helping universities gradually improve their autonomy and sense of responsibility so that they can make their own decisions and take ultimate responsibility for these decisions in training, scientific research, community service and financial activities. In this way, the State can shift from a governing State to a supervising State (an administrative state to a rule of law state) and minimize the issuance of institutions (deregulation) that have been implemented for a long time.

5. Conclusion

Autonomy, as a precious tradition of universities, has always been considered inviolable. Accountability, as a necessity for the development of university autonomy, is also an inevitable trend of the modern education management system. The conflict between the two sides is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed and resolved in the era of accountability in higher education. Losing autonomy will make universities become tools of the government and society, and losing accountability will make universities ignore social responsibilities and public expectations. The issue of university autonomy and accountability lies at the heart of governance reform, and is also a very sensitive and difficult point to change, because it touches on the existing interests of many people. University autonomy must go hand in hand with accountability as two sides of the same coin. Therefore, only by promptly resolving the contradiction between university autonomy and university accountability and effectively balancing the tension between the two can universities inherit the tradition of autonomy, while assuming corresponding social responsibilities and playing their proper roles.

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