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Steering at a Distance: A Qualitative Case Study of Institutional Autonomy at a Vietnamese Public University

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education

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Abstract

In 2012, the Vietnamese government enacted the Higher Education Law to give public universities institutional autonomy. Since passage of the law, the term institutional autonomy has become contested; different interpretations have arisen among different actors concerned with implementing the policy. In a qualitative case study, I explore the meaning of autonomy in the context of Vietnamese higher education where the legacy of centralized governance is strong. To understand what autonomy means in this context, I use thematic analysis and interpretive policy analysis, and draw on state steering theory (Wright, 2019b) as a theoretical framework through which to gain insight on tensions between autonomy and control. Data sources include government policy documents, semi-structured interviews with seventeen senior leaders from one Vietnamese public university, and internal university policy documents. I argue that autonomy in Vietnamese higher education involves steering at a distance whereby the legacy of Vietnam's centralized governance system adds more control over the university. The autonomy policy has given the Vietnamese public university a higher level of status with more power to make decisions but has not made it independent of the state. The enactment of autonomy policy in Vietnam highlights tensions between the top-down authoritarian way in which the law and policy are enacted through the state's centralized governance model and how the policy enters into institutions and becomes meaningful to actors. The present study addresses gaps in the literature on university governance and education policy, and offers unique insights on the complexities of autonomy in Vietnam. I recommend that all actors involved in the autonomy policy take into consideration the different meanings of autonomy to better understand and to be more responsive to how the policy is actually taken up in the institutions.

Keywords

Institutional autonomy, control, accountability, university governance, interpretive policy analysis, state steering theory, higher education, public universities, centralized governance model, post-Soviet context

Summary for Lay Audience

In 2012, the Vietnamese government enacted the Higher Education Law to officially mark the granting of autonomy to public universities. After passage of the law, the key term institutional autonomy became controversial—because the ministries continued to apply control measures to public universities. In this qualitative case study, I explore the meaning of autonomy in the context of Vietnam’s higher education system where the legacy of centralized governance is strong. I draw on state steering theory (Wright, 2019b) as a theoretical framework to gain insights on tensions between autonomy and control. I use thematic analysis and interpretive policy analysis to analyze data which include semi-structured interviews with seventeen leaders at one Vietnamese public university, policy documents released by the government, and documents internal to the university. I suggest that a new meaning of autonomy as steering at a distance emerges in Vietnamese higher education, but the legacy of centralized governance system adds more control over the university. The institutional autonomy policy gives a public university a higher level of status than other universities in Vietnam, with more power to make decisions, but does not give it independence from the state. The present study addresses a gap in the literature by offering insights on the complexities of autonomy in the context of centralized governance in Vietnam. I recommend that both policymakers and university actors take into consideration the different meanings of autonomy when the policy is enacted to better understand and to be more responsive to how the policy is working in the institutions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2012, the Vietnamese government enacted the Higher Education Law to officially give public universities institutional autonomy. With this policy, university leaders were granted decision-making authority and responsibility for the primary areas of finance, personnel, teaching, research, and organization (Higher Education Law, 2012). The government had identified institutional autonomy as a pressing policy initiative in the industrialization and modernization of the higher education sector in the new context of globalization (Central Government, 2005). In fact, the reform policy originated in new expectations the Vietnamese government and society were developing concerning the role of public universities in the globalized knowledge economy and in view of the growing dependence of Vietnam's economic competitiveness on knowledge generation and technological innovation (Madden, 2014). As the European University Association (2017) had indicated, "Institutional autonomy is widely considered an important prerequisite for modern universities to develop their institutional profiles and to deliver their missions efficiently" (p. 7). In the knowledge economy, it is the mission of universities to produce graduates with the skills demanded by the labor market and to turn research ideas into innovative products. The autonomy policy was an attempt by the Vietnamese government to improve the efficiency and competitiveness of universities in developing the nation's human resources and in advancing knowledge in support of Vietnam's increasingly market-driven society.

The Vietnamese government had also developed new policy proposals to address the lack of effectiveness of the existing governance model in Vietnam's higher education sector (Central Government, 2005). The centralized bureaucratic system through which ministries controlled all institutional decision-making processes had been criticized for hampering the flexibility,

efficiency, and innovation of public universities (Dao & Hayden, 2010). As well, the egalitarian norms and values of a subsidized system in which everyone is equally remunerated without differentiation, recognition, or appreciation of their efforts had demoralized academic staff who had no motivation to improve education quality, advance knowledge, or seek academic excellence (Ngo, 2019). It became, therefore, necessary to change the management approach. The expectation was that granting institutional autonomy would help to optimize university performance.

A particularly important aspect of the Vietnamese government's objective in implementing the reform policy was the reduction of financial burdens on the national budget, which had been overwhelmed by an increase in the number of universities and in student enrolments since the transition from elite to mass higher education (World Bank, 2019). Under the old, centralized governance model, the Vietnamese government subsidized all financial aspects of public universities and was responsible for any financial losses (Tran, 2014). The system had become too large, however, and required excessive expenditure from the national budget.

The global context and ineffectiveness of the existing governance model has thus led to the decentralization of Vietnam's higher education system and to the transfer of decision-making authority and responsibility from the ministries to the public universities themselves. Institutional autonomy, as it has been infused into the law, was intended by the Vietnamese government to push public universities to work more efficiently and to achieve new missions in the global knowledge economy. In the present study, I examine how different policy actors understand the concept of autonomy as that policy has been enacted in one Vietnamese public university.

Problem Statement

The granting of institutional autonomy to public universities in Vietnam is a response of the Vietnamese government to the shifting context of the global knowledge economy and to the rise of

neoliberalism (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) and is not unique to Vietnam. Despite its widespread use in higher education policy worldwide, however, the concept is not uniformly applied or interpreted; precisely how it is taken up depends upon context—on local history, culture, and geo-political conditions. In Vietnam, after the passage of the Higher Education Law, the term institutional autonomy itself has immediately become contested with different interpretations of the concept arising among multiple policy-relevant actors. Indeed, governmental ministries could still apply certain control measures over public universities, leading university leaders to question what autonomy meant when curriculum was still managed by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and public universities remained strongly accountable to the ministries (Tran, 2014)—and when university governing councils had to be elected according to the ministry’s plan (Duong, 2019). For its part, the MOET (2018) maintains that the autonomy policy has untied and set public universities free to a maximum level by giving them the right to determine their own development strategies and methods for implementing their objectives.

The uptake of autonomy policy in Vietnam’s higher education system is in tension with the legacy of the centralized bureaucratic model of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s unified leadership. Adopted from formerly Soviet countries, the centralized system relies heavily on central planning, with ministries having control over all decision-making within public universities (Huisman et al., 2018). Tensions between state control and delegation of power have led to controversy in Vietnam about the meaning and nature of institutional autonomy, controversy which has been widely reported in both news media and scholarship (Hong, 2018; Thanh, 2016; Tran, 2014). Consequently, implementation of this pressing policy initiative has been delayed; only 23 of 170 public universities had adopted the policy as of November 2019 (Ngoc, 2019). Exploration of the meaning of institutional autonomy in the centralized

governance context of Vietnam is, thus, timely, and, one hopes, a significant step toward increasing the responsiveness of public universities to this fundamental reform policy.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the present study is to develop a better understanding of institutional autonomy in Vietnam's higher education context and to inform a more transformative approach to policy practices. As the most pressing policy in Vietnam's higher education sector, institutional autonomy has attracted particular attention from many scholars, both in Vietnam and other countries. Most studies have explored the degree of autonomy of Vietnamese public universities (Vo & Laking, 2020; Vo, 2018; Dao, 2015; George, 2011; Le et al., 2017; London, 2010; Dao & Hayden, 2010) and identified challenges in implementing the policy (Tran, 2009; Tran, 2014; Vo, 2018; Dang, 2013). Researchers have indicated that autonomy in Vietnam's universities is very limited but they have not dug deeper into the underlying mechanism of autonomy as a new governance model to understand why it is limited. Most importantly, while institutional autonomy has been an essentially contested concept during the enactment process, little attention has been given to the meaning of the concept itself. Over-reliance on policy documents as the primary source of information has offered limited insight into the various understandings that different actors such as university leaders and academics hold about the concept.

I aim in the present study to address these gaps in understanding by exploring the multiple meanings of institutional autonomy in the Vietnamese context where the legacy of centralized governance structures is strong. I aim to make a theoretical contribution to the existing literature on university governance and higher education policy by examining autonomy as a new governance model in the neoliberal context. To achieve this goal, I draw on state steering theory (Wright, 2019a, b, c, d) as a theoretical framework within which to develop insight on tensions between

autonomy and control, both of which factor into the autonomy policy. Through a qualitative case study of a Vietnamese public university, I explore how autonomy is understood in a centralized governance context, not only in Vietnam but also in other post-Soviet countries undergoing reform processes in response to the influences of the global knowledge economy. I argue that a better understanding of the principles and working mechanisms of institutional autonomy at one Vietnamese public university provides insights into the complexities of autonomy and sheds light on tensions that emerge as different meanings of autonomy influence how the policy is implemented. Actors may acquire a more informed understanding of policy and develop a response that better aligns with the state's aims in enacting the policy.

I also strive in the present study to make a methodological contribution to the study of higher education policy in Vietnam through use of an interpretive policy analysis approach (Yanow, 2000, 2007) and identification of different communities of meaning concerning institutional autonomy. Specifically, I analyze policy objects and metaphors that participants used to articulate their interpretations of policy concepts. The primary data sources are policy documents released by the Vietnamese government, semi-structured interviews with seventeen senior leaders at one Vietnamese public university, and internal university policy documents. I brought the viewpoints of multiple actors into the policy enactment process and address the gap in the literature which to date has mainly focused on the top-down visions of policymakers.

Research Questions

The primary focus of the present study is the tension between decision-making authority and accountability in one Vietnamese public university. The following research question and sub-questions guide the study:

Primary research question:

- What does institutional autonomy mean in the context of Vietnamese higher education given the legacy of centralized governance system?

Research sub-questions:

- How are institutional autonomy, accountability, and university responsibility presented in the policy documents?
- How do actors in a Vietnamese public university understand decision-making authority within the new policy?
- What do accountability measures in the Vietnamese government's discourses about institutional autonomy mean to university actors?
- How is institutional autonomy enacted through the relationship between actors' understandings of decision-making authority and accountability in this one institution?

Positionality of the Researcher

I was born in Vietnam, a developing country in South East Asia. For most of my life, I was raised in a centralized and power-distant culture in which children were required to listen to parents unconditionally, students required to listen to teachers unconditionally, and protest was never allowed. As a Vietnamese citizen, my freedom as an individual to correct parents and teachers was very limited but, growing up, I had opportunities to experience education systems in countries of the global North including Australia, the Netherlands, and Canada where I learned about very different cultures. In Vietnam, we usually call them western cultures to emphasize that western people have much more freedom and liberty than people do in eastern cultures. I have been asking myself: In which culture are people nurtured to grow up to flourish and to live to their potential?

The Vietnamese higher education system that I experienced as a lecturer for nine years was also centralized and power distant. It worked just like the system I experienced in my family

and school—the leaders had ultimate power. I experienced inefficient management approaches at the university level which limited flexibility and innovation. Cameras, for example, were set up in classrooms to check that the lecturers were doing their jobs and fingerprint checking machines were used to ensure the presence of staff during the working day. Such a management approach—focused on controlling daily behavior instead of outcomes—is, in my view, inefficient for a working environment that needs flexibility and innovation to create knowledge and provide human resources for the country. Consequences of the governance system, including a decrease in working morale and a brain-drain of lecturers which have had consequences for the quality of education, have been observed and reported (Ngo, 2019; Welch, 2016a).

Enactment of the autonomy policy has engendered hope for Vietnam's higher education system, but I come to this study with both optimism and pessimism. On one side, I strongly believe that the reform policy is desperately needed if Vietnamese public universities are to become integrated into the globalized knowledge economy. Vietnamese people have a long-life learning tradition, and this is an opportunity for my country to flourish in an economy that focuses on knowledge and values it as capital. On the other side, I am pessimistic because of the huge challenges public universities face in implementing a policy that is inconsistent with the centralized culture and politics, and with the history of the country. For 1000 years, Vietnam has been colonized by foreign nations such as China, France, and America, and the government is cautious about opening the door to foreign influences and values. In terms of culture, Vietnam has a very systematic, centralized, and power-distant culture at many levels—from that of the family to the school and the working place. Most significantly, in terms of politics, I have been told all my life that the guidelines and policies of the Communist Party are always right. In Vietnam, the freedom of individuals, and the autonomy of public universities as institutions, is

limited. Communist ideology, however, is no longer tenable in a world that is becoming flat, a world in which so much is no longer limited by national boundaries. My own experience of resistance to change and renovation of conservative forces in the university has led me to want to explore how the new policy initiative is being implemented in that environment.

My experience of Vietnam's higher education environment has inevitably shaped my view of the institutional autonomy policy. In choosing the state steering theory as a theoretical lens, I am joining a group of scholars who are pessimistic about the perverse effect of a policy that acknowledges the dominance of central control. As my experience in Vietnam's higher education setting is not something I can easily suppress or escape, it is crucial that I do not misinterpret or disregard other's experiences and perspectives that do not align with mine. Despite the potential for bias caused by my positionality, a potential I acknowledge, my experience with Vietnam's higher education system and my proximity to the socio-political context I am studying allows for greater insight and, if anything, helps me to challenge preconceived notions and theories.

Definition of Key Concepts

Key concepts within this study include the following: institutional autonomy, decision-making authority, accountability, self-responsibility, the state, the government, policy actors, and the policy enactment process.

Institutional autonomy. The concept of institutional autonomy is defined differently across disciplines and fields. In the present study, I use the concepts of institutional autonomy and autonomy interchangeably to refer to autonomy at an institutional level, that is, at the level of a public higher education institution. The working definition for the present study is informed by key aspects of a new governance model as described in literature such as that of Wright (2019a, b, c, d) and Ørberg and Wright (2019) on the state steering theory. Institutional autonomy of a public

higher education institution involves three aspects: decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility.

Decision-making authority. Decision-making authority is the power of a university to make decisions on matters such as teaching, research, personnel, finance, admission, and enrollment (Enders et al., 2013).

Accountability. Accountability is the obligation of an institution or individual to provide information about, or justification for, their actions, along with the sanction for failing to comply with or engage in appropriate activities (Brinkerhoff, 2004). Bovens (2007) defines accountability as "a social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other" (p. 184). Ørberg and Wright (2019) argue that accountability involves the state's interventions in the performance of a public university through an array of instruments by which the state can steer and develop the university. They view accountability as a control mechanism, with the terms steering and control used interchangeably in the literature.

Self-responsibility. Self-responsibility imposes responsibility for decisions and financial sources on the universities rather than on the state (Yokoyama, 2008). Self-responsibility means the university is expected to handle all consequences resulting from its own decisions and cover all expenses related to its activities.

The state and the government. The State of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a governance system which includes the National Assembly, the President, the Government, the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuracy, and the local governing apparatus (Constitution, 2013). The Government is the highest state administrative body of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The executive body of the National Assembly exercises all executive power. The Government is responsible to the National Assembly and reports to the National

Assembly, the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, and the President (Constitution, 2013). I use the terms state and government to refer in a general way to the offices and agencies that carry out the functions of governing.

Policy actors. In the present study, policy actors include those involved in the institutional autonomy policy such as legislators, policymakers, and other people “involved in making meaning of and constructing responses to policy through the processes of interpretation and translation” (Ball et al., 2012, p. 625), such as university leaders.

The policy enactment process. For the present study, policy enactment is viewed as a process, which is contested and subject to different interpretations as it is enacted (rather than implemented) (Ball et al., 2012). I use the definition provided by Ball et al. that “policy enactment involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualization, that is, the translation of texts into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualized practices” (p. 3).

Organization of the Thesis

I organize this thesis into nine chapters. Following this introductory chapter, I begin Chapter 2 by offering a literature review on institutional autonomy with a focus on its meaning as a new mode of governance, its accompanying accountability mechanism, and self-responsibility. I then offer a review of existing studies on institutional autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education context and locate the knowledge gap to identify my study's focus. In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of my theoretical framework, a framework that centers on theoretical concepts based on the state steering theory, to lay the grounds for explaining the principles and mechanisms of the institutional autonomy model in Vietnam's higher education system.

In Chapter 4, I present my research methodology. I explain the choice of a qualitative instrumental case study to address the research questions. I describe thematic analysis and

interpretive policy analysis as two approaches that I employ to analyze data derived from the Vietnamese government's policy documents, semi-structured interviews with university leaders, and internal university policy documents. In Chapter 5, to facilitate an understanding of the tensions between the decision-making authority and accountability that is the focus of this study, I lay out the context in which the autonomy policy has been enacted.

In Chapter 6, I present thematic findings from my document analysis concerning the meanings of autonomy and the relationship between these meanings. These findings indicate that autonomy gives a Vietnamese public university the right to make its own decisions; yet it also means the university is accountable for its decision-making and self-responsible for financial resources as well as consequences of its decisions. Collectively, decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility are bounded in a mutually dependent relationship to form the meaning of autonomy.

In Chapter 7, I present findings concerning participants' understandings of decision-making authority and accountability within the institutional autonomy policy, based on my analysis of policy objects and metaphors. These artifacts are significant carriers of meaning used by participants to articulate their interpretations of policy concepts on autonomy. The findings have indicated different interpretations—different communities of meaning—of decision-making authority and accountability. Although the state has delegated decision-making authority to the Vietnamese public university, there are conditions and limitations attached. As well, two conflicting communities of meaning exist concerning accountability, with one group seeing it as a constraint on autonomy and the second arguing that it should be expected that accountability be implemented by the state to limit gaming practices.

In Chapter 8, I answer the research questions and offer a discussion of my overall findings. I argue that a new meaning of autonomy as steering at a distance (Wright & Ørberg, 2008) has emerged in Vietnamese higher education, but the legacy of the centralized system adds more state steering, which makes the university be more tightly controlled. The autonomy policy, therefore, gives the Vietnamese public university a higher status than other universities in the country and more power to make decisions, rather than independence from the state. I conclude in Chapter 9 with a summary of the overall thesis, research contributions, and implications for future policymaking and practice. Limitations of the research and areas for future research are also presented.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this literature review, I aim to identify the major debates and key concepts that inform my study of institutional autonomy. I also seek to locate a gap in the literature on institutional autonomy and describe the contribution my study will make to the understanding of university governance in the Vietnamese context. The review is structured in four sections. I first introduce key concepts such as the knowledge economy, globalization, neoliberalism, and New Public Management to acknowledge the context within which university reform has taken place in Vietnam. Next, I present key strands of studies on institutional autonomy, focusing on institutional autonomy as a new mode of governance, its accompanying accountability mechanism, and on self-responsibility. I then discuss accountability as a crucial part of institutional autonomy in the neoliberal context. Finally, I review existing studies on autonomy in the context of Vietnamese higher education, locate the knowledge gap, and identify my study's contribution.

University Governance in the Globalized Knowledge Economy

Over the last two decades, public universities worldwide have undergone significant reforms in response to the influences of the globalized knowledge economy (Wright, 2019a). The contemporary global economy is characterized as knowledge-based, which means, according to Olssen and Peter (2005), that knowledge has become the most crucial form of capital. Furthermore, innovation and the commercialization of knowledge have become critical to a nation's economic development (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). International organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union, and the World Bank have urged governments to make universities the key drivers of that knowledge economy if they want their countries to succeed. Adjusting education programs to produce graduates with the skills

demanding by the labor market and to turn research ideas into innovative products has significantly changed the organization and purpose of universities. As Wright (2019a) indicates, higher education institutions have become more business-like, strategically led, and market oriented.

University Governance

Conceptually, university governance is defined as a formal, multi-level arrangement that allows the institution to perform effectively and move towards achieving academic excellence (Shattock, 2006). The internal governance structure of a university often includes a governing board and executive leadership with strong decision-making authority. University governance, in this sense, is viewed at an institutional level and from the position of university leaders. Wright (2019b) envisions university governance, from the standpoint of state management agencies, as the policymakers designing legal and financial frameworks, steering technologies, and providing incentives for universities to enact themselves in particular ways. Wright sees university governance in terms of how the university orders its affairs and manages its relationship with the state. These different perspectives on university governance are subject to change in the shifting contexts of globalization and neoliberalism.

Globalization

Under the conditions of globalization, the way in which universities are governed has shifted; the move has been from government to governance (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). National governments, with their rules and hierarchical imposition of a bureaucratic administrative structure, are no longer the only authority over universities. Instead, a range of other national and international policy actors have become involved in the policy process and in education governance. This is a feature of globalization that Altbach and Knight (2007) highlight, in which the societal, political, and economic forces push 21st century higher education toward greater

international involvement. From a financial perspective, globalization has created a global market in which universities participate (Austin & Jones, 2016). Joining that world market requires universities to adapt and respond to the demands of the globalized knowledge economy.

Neoliberalism

The social imaginary of globalization that has underpinned the shift in university governance worldwide in recent decades is neoliberalism. According to Harvey (2007), neoliberalism places a heavy focus on market efficiency and individual liberty. The rationale is that human well-being is best cultivated by liberating the skills of individuals within a system featuring free-market principles (Hughes, 2003). Within higher education, neoliberalism has introduced a new mode of governance which does not require the state's withdrawal but rather a transformation of its role from one of control to one of supervision (Enders et al., 2013). The state is viewed as an evaluative mechanism, steering universities from a distance and creating institutions for the market to produce its benefits (Huisman, 2009). Accordingly, marketization has become a characteristic of university governance (Marginson, 1997), evidenced in the use of business language in university settings. Universities in New Zealand, for example, are operated as corporations (Shore, 2010); a university degree in Australia is referred to as a commodity to be sold within the supply-demand rule of the market (Thornton, 2004). Ultimately, the neoliberal imaginary of globalization has brought about a discourse that reduces the state's direct intervention and increases the power of market mechanisms, which have become a new technology of control.

New Public Management and Managerialism

One aspect of the new managerial state associated with the transition from government to governance is New Public Management, which has been copied from the private sector and infused into public institutions. New Public Management is a market-driven management culture that focuses

on performativity in terms of measurable outputs to improve effectiveness and efficiency in the public sector (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). European universities have adopted this management approach to deal with the consequences of socio-economic and political developments such as budget constraints and massification (Deem, 2001). Sometimes, New Public Management is called managerialism, a reference to changes in how publicly funded institutions are governed following the widespread restructuring of welfare services in Western societies (Teelken, 2012). By using performance indicators to measure and improve productivity of public universities, managerialism has brought about significant changes in governance practices in many capitalist societies. In addition, as a neoliberal theory, it has provided rationales for sweeping reforms in the governance of the higher education sector.

Decentralization

Central to New Public Management and the new shape of governance are the efforts to decentralize the educational administration system. Decentralization refers to the delegation of tasks from higher to lower levels of government (Overman, 2016). Pan (2006) argues that decentralization changes the relationship between the government and a university from a highly centralized governance system to a structure of loose central control. The concept is often used interchangeably with devolution, a catch-all term for granting decision-making authority and autonomy under some conditions. As a positive effect, devolution to an institutional level will give each institution more independence and freedom to perform academic functions, ensuring flexibility, accountability, and diversity of the higher education system (Tran, 2014).

Decentralization can be implemented under democratic devolution, functional decentralization, or fiscal decentralization (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). While democratic devolution promotes democracy and equality, functional and fiscal decentralization are institutionalized to achieve

social efficiency, which is often linked to technologies of accountability or the transfer of control over funding sources to local institutions.

Overall, the rapidly changing context of the globalized knowledge economy has forced changes in university governance. As the global context suggests, the traditional model of state control has shifted to state supervision. Under state control, the government is the dominant regulator that controls most aspects of public universities from curriculum, degree requirements, examinations, admissions, and the appointment of leaders and staff (Dao & Hayden, 2010). Under a state-supervising model, the government's intervention in the decision-making process of autonomous universities is limited. The government only supervises the higher education system's activities through accountability mechanisms to assure academic quality. Limited to a supervision role, the government respects institutional autonomy, inspires the self-governing capability of public universities, and becomes a mechanism by which to optimize the productive, self-governing capacity of the university.

Institutional Autonomy

The concept of autonomy has been discussed extensively in the literature under different terms such as university autonomy, institutional autonomy, academic freedom, self-governance, independence, and setting universities free. Yet, no complete consensus exists on the meaning of autonomy. Here I review major debates on autonomy, summarizing them in four categories: autonomy as academic freedom and self-governance; autonomy as a new mode of university governance; degree of institutional autonomy; and the changing state-university relationship under the regime of autonomy.

Autonomy as Individual Academic Freedom and Self-Governance

In early studies on this topic, scholars defined university autonomy as academic freedom—the freedom of individual academics to teach, research, and pursue truth without fear of punishment or termination of employment (Ashby & Anderson, 1966; Berdahl, 1990; Ash, 2006; Enders, 2006). Academic freedom also includes the notion that students are free to learn independently. Behind this traditional interpretation of autonomy lies a rationale based on the principle that freedom of thought is a non-negotiable condition that is necessary to uphold the university's mission to provide society with scientific knowledge (Neave, 2012). The principle also implies that a state would benefit from an institution that has extensive autonomy and is less subject to state interference (Krejsler, 2019a); the state is, therefore, expected to defend academic freedom. Autonomy in the traditional sense is also interpreted as self-governance, that is, that a university has the power to govern all matters concerning admission, curriculum, assessment, recruitment, finance, and research, without outside control (Ashby & Anderson, 1966; Berdahl, 1990; Tight, 1992; Anderson & Johnson, 1998). Ultimately, university autonomy is "the freedom of an institution to run its own affairs without direction or influence from any level of government" (Anderson & Johnson, 1998, p.8). In general, the classical meaning of autonomy highlight the freedom of individuals to teach, learn, and conduct research; the right of an institution to govern itself with the power that resides within individual academics; and the ideology to protect universities from external influences.

Autonomy as a New Model for University Governance

In the neoliberal context, the meaning of autonomy has expanded to include the influences on the university of external stakeholders such as the state, market, and society. Also, the locus of decision-making power has shifted from an individual to an institutional level—to a

so-called institutional autonomy (Capano & Pritoni, 2019; Yokoyama, 2008; Piironen, 2013; Enders et al., 2013). A vast body of literature has explored institutional autonomy as a new form of governance that emphasizes a mutually dependent relationship between autonomy and accountability, with universities being situated as autonomous and self-responsible subjects within the market-driven dynamic (Yokoyama, 2007, 2008, 2011; Maassen et al., 2017; Maassen, 2017; Amsler & Shore, 2017).

Control Mechanisms of Autonomy. With the change in the meaning of institutional autonomy has come a crucial role for accountability. Huisman (2018) argues that public universities are gradually being granted more institutional autonomy, that is, more authority to make decisions on their own matters, but that at the same time government is implementing accountability measures to keep track of the university's behavior and performance. The concept of accountability was early introduced by Neave (1988, 2001) in relation to two contrasting private and public definitions of autonomy. While the former refers to ideas of autonomy in the concepts of academic freedom and self-governance, the latter highlights the influences of external stakeholders and the university's accountability to them.

Following Neave's initial idea, scholars have developed diverse conceptualizations of accountability in higher education, understanding it primarily as a control mechanism accompanying the delegation of autonomy to public institutions (Yokoyama, 2008; Enders et al., 2013). Drawing on the Japanese context, Yokoyama (2008) conceptualizes control mechanisms of autonomy through accountability as the technology of governance. Involving the application of performance indicators, the technology of governance is designed to be a robust steering system that can push the efficiency of university performance. Also, the university is intended to become a self-governing subject that can independently navigate and compete in the market-

driven dynamic. Like Yokoyama (2008), Olssen et al. (2004) characterize this neoliberal governance technique as a new and advanced technology of control, that is, as governing without governing. The advantage of a technology of governance or a technology of control is that it can combine a self-driving technology of operation within the university with substantive control by the state. However, by using the term technology, the governance model points to a commercialized ethos which emphasizes competition with other institutions for funding and students rather than collaboration.

Wright and Ørberg (2008) describe the working mechanism of institutional autonomy, in which the state steps back from traditional roles of centralized control to make universities autonomous in performing their tasks, and, at the same time, continues to implement control mechanisms, as steering at a distance. Institutional autonomy keeps its meaning as a control model but with a combination of university independence and state control. The concept of steering at a distance, however, sounds gentle and can make university leaders feel like they have been given autonomy even though they might be more tightly controlled than before, and even though the control mechanisms, in which accountability is crucial, are better articulated.

Self-Responsibility of Public Universities. According to Rizvi and Lingard (2010), the desired product of neoliberal education policy is a self-responsible and self-capitalizing institution. The autonomy governance model aims to hand over responsibility to public universities to make them responsible for their own performance and respond efficiently to the market. As Yokoyama (2008) argues, neoliberalism has brought the notion of responsabilization into the meaning of autonomy in Japanese public universities. Responsibilization imposes responsibility for decisions and financial sources on the universities rather than on the state and means the university is expected to handle all consequences resulting from its own decisions and

cover all expenses for its activities. Accordingly, Japan's newly defined notion of autonomy highlights the university's self-governance at an institutional level and its accountability to the state as responsibilities shift from the state to the university.

Other studies in different national contexts have considered how responsibility is linked to the autonomy of universities. In the context of Danish higher education, Wright (2019b) argues that, indeed, in the new mode of governance the state sets parameters for changes and outsources to universities the responsibility to perform. Evidence of responsabilization is also found in an early study conducted in the 1980s by Kickert (1995). In investigating a new concept of government steering applied by the Dutch government, Kickert (1995) found that autonomy signifies a move towards greater self-responsibility for higher education institutions. In Canada, Deering and Sá (2018) also found that autonomy of the universities might include responsibility for the outcomes of past decisions. Furthermore, for some countries in Eastern Europe, decentralization is associated with the transfer of responsibility to public universities without provision of financial support (Painter, 2014). These examples indicate the changing role of the public university as it becomes a governance actor taking on more responsibilities. Kehm (2012) captures this shift of responsibilities in the higher education system:

Responsibilities for higher education governance and policymaking on the system level no longer tend to be the exclusive responsibility of national governments. Some responsibilities have moved up to the supra-national level, and others have moved down to the institutional level through deregulation. (p. 66)

With responsibility moving down to an institutional level through decentralization, the university's self-financing capacity has come to be included in the new meaning of autonomy, as reported by scholars in different contexts such as Vietnam and Malaysia (George, 2011; Le et al., 2017; Sirat,

2010; Verhoest et al., 2004). Wright and Ørberg (2008) emphasize that in the modernized state model of autonomy, universities, their leaders, and academics are given freedom in the sense of individual responsibility for their economic survival.

With an emphasis on the self-responsibility of public universities, institutional autonomy is referred to as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1991; Miller, 2001; Shore & Wright, 2011; Yokoyama, 2008). Technology of the self puts the spotlight on the individual university as a subject that is autonomous, self-reliant, responsible, risk-managing, and performance-focused. In the university landscape, the governing board and university leaders are certainly the central subjects who are empowered to set institutional strategies and maximize the university's benefits (Yokoyama, 2008). However, as Carney (2019) notes, they might be caught between being agents of the government's policy and protectors of self-owning universities.

To conclude this section on autonomy as a new mode of university governance, I emphasize that the autonomous university is accountable to the state and responsible for its performance and financial resources. Autonomy has provided universities with room to maneuver yet government continues to apply steering mechanisms. As Capano (2011) notes about this governance model, the government continues to do its job, which is to "govern"; furthermore, it "has not lost any of its policymaking power but has simply changed the way it steers higher education" (p. 1622). Shore and Wright (2011) note that in these technologies of governance, the legacy of state control is strong. Indeed, the state's political aim is embedded in instruments used to steer universities, instruments known as political technologies (Foucault, 1991). Such political technologies aim to achieve the state's political aims through governing at a distance, yet they remain in the shadows, their operation hard to discern because they conceal their process and mask political aims under a cloak of neutrality.

Degree of Autonomy of Public Universities

Different studies worldwide have explored the degree of institutional autonomy of public universities under the new mode of governance. Most of the findings emphasize the nature of the state's control in the meaning of autonomy. They describe institutional autonomy using different names such as contractual autonomy, regulated autonomy, regulatory autonomy, and conditional autonomy. Yang et al. (2007) uncovered the regulated autonomy of Chinese universities, reporting that although the shackles of public universities were unknotted when the government conferred autonomy, the universities were still "dancing in the cage" (p. 590) because a mixture of enhanced autonomy and increased accountability meant that the autonomy granted by the government was somewhat limited. Yokoyama (2007) noted that market-oriented policies brought about contractual autonomy in public universities in England, autonomy on the condition that objectives set by the government be met and the universities retain their accountability.

Drawing on agency theory, Enders et al. (2013) noted that institutional autonomy was refined as regulatory autonomy in the Dutch context where a new regime of governmental control prompted universities to become strategic actors in the market-driven mechanism. Accordingly, university autonomy included a level of decision-making authority and a level of exemption from accountability. In South Africa, conditional autonomy recognized the state's role in steering public universities towards targeted outcomes while respecting the autonomy of each institution in the substantive fields of their intellectual work (Neave 1988; Hall & Symes, 2005). In addition, the concept of conditional autonomy offered an appropriate principle for guiding the state-university relationship in South Africa in the era of democratic government.

The Changing State-University Relationship Under the Autonomy Model

With a new meaning of autonomy arising in the neoliberal context, many scholars have sought to investigate the state-university relationship. Most contemporary studies have argued that when a public university becomes an autonomous and self-responsible subject, its relationship with the government might change to a contractual relationship (Kivistö, 2005, 2007, 2008; Lane, 2005, 2007; Lane & Kivistö, 2008; Liefner, 2003; Kivistö & Zalyevska, 2015; Rungfamai, 2008; Olssen et al., 2004; Hanushek et al., 2013; Enders et al., 2013; Yokoyama, 2008). For example, a contractual relationship between the principal (the state) and the agent (the university) exists in Denmark, where a university signed a development contract with the ministry. With performance targets specified in the contract, the ministry can orchestrate its influence over the autonomous university despite the change in their relationship. I provide more details about this control relationship in Chapter 3.

With the implementation of autonomy policy, the state-university relationship has changed in different ways in different national contexts. For instance, during the reform and decentralization of Malaysia's higher education system, a shift took place towards a more mutually conducive state-university relationship in which the university was granted more autonomy (Sirat, 2010). However, the state still applied many control mechanisms because public universities were still financially dependent on the state. Importantly for the state in the context of political and economic uncertainty, granting full autonomy to public universities seemed inappropriate and untimely. In contrast to the mutually conducive state-university relationship in Malaysia in which national universities enjoy some level of autonomy, an intense command-and-control relationship developed in Italy despite a comprehensive reform to increase autonomy for state universities (Donina et al., 2015). Specifically, the state did not delegate power to universities and still played

the role of controller rather than supervisor, leaving almost intact the old governance regime. In Japan's higher education system, a bureaucratic relationship between the government and national universities is still in place. Despite deregulation and marketisation which, since the 1990s, advocated more autonomy for universities (Yokoyama, 2008), supreme ministerial power and control over Japanese universities has remained. Different relationships in different contexts notwithstanding, the institutional autonomy model has resulted in an intensive relationship between the state and the university in which the university is controlled even more tightly.

In summary, in this section, I have reviewed key strands of literature on the concept of institutional autonomy. Overall, the meaning of institutional autonomy has expanded from its traditional sense as academic freedom and self-governance into a new concept—that of a mode of governance in the context of neoliberalism. This expansion in meaning has involved a movement in the locus of power from individual academics to the institutions themselves. As a mode of governance, institutional autonomy reflects the mutually dependent relationship between autonomy and accountability, with universities becoming autonomous and self-responsible subjects in a market-driven dynamic. However, the autonomy of public universities is limited, and universities continue to be in intense relationships with the state.

Accountability in Higher Education

In this section, I provide a detailed discussion of accountability, which has become a crucial part of institutional autonomy in the neoliberal context.

Definitions of Accountability

According to Brinkerhoff (2004), accountability is the obligation of an institution or individual to provide information about, or justification for, their actions, along with the sanction for failing to comply with or engage in appropriate activities. Accountability is an obligation,

something an actor is required to do, and stakeholders may ask questions, pass judgment, or even punish or reward the actor. Adopting this viewpoint, Haque (2007) notes that accountability generally means that someone is answerable to someone else about the performance of an assigned task. Both Brinkerhoff (2004) and Haque (2007) view accountability as meaning that institutions and individuals can be held accountable to upper levels of management. They identify critical components of accountability—such as that actors are involved and that an obligation exists to provide justifications—but they do not identify the relationship between actors and stakeholders.

Building on Brinkerhoff's (2004) definition of accountability, Bovens (2007) defines accountability as "a social relationship in which an actor feels an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct to some significant other" (p. 184). Bovens (2007) calls the relationship between an actor and a significant other an accountability forum. Bovens fails, however, to include the issue of power in the accountability relationship. Indeed, the forum is usually very powerful and can determine the rules of the game and enforce their implementation. The state can, for example, decide on a specific mechanism to allocate funding for public universities based on performance.

From the standpoint of state management agencies, Ørberg and Wright (2019) argue that accountability concerns the state's interventions in the performance of a public university through an array of instruments used to steer and develop the university. They argue that accountability is a control mechanism, and use the terms steering and control interchangeably in their literature. One feature of accountability from this perspective is that scholars are often pessimistic about its effects. Accountability can outweigh the decision-making authority that a university is granted (Shore & Wright, 1999, 2000; Kickert, 1995) and is therefore criticized for

being in tension with university autonomy and for an intensive use of control measures which are labeled negatively with such terms as web of oversight (Lane & Kivistö, 2008), the cage (Yang et al., 2007), and multiple strings (Ørberg & Wright, 2019).

Rationales for Accountability

Scholars hold different perspectives on why accountability should be implemented. One argument is that universities, as public or state-funded institutions, have a moral obligation to explain and justify their conduct (Cheng, 2012; Huisman, 2018; Trow, 1996). If public universities receive public funding, they must serve the public interest because the public is investing in them. Indeed, the argument that public universities should be accountable to the state and to the public concerning whether money is spent wisely and used efficiently and effectively has strong justification. Distrust of management, which is often explained by agency theory (Enders et al., 2013; Verhoest et al., 2004; Dougherty & Natow, 2019a; Lang, 1999; Whalen, 1991; Deering & Sá, 2018; Blackmore, 2010), is a second reason for applying accountability mechanisms. Agency theory suggests that if academic units have decision-making authority, they will make self-interested decisions. Therefore, a control mechanism must be in place to monitor their compliance with regulations and limit gaming practices such as manipulating the state's resources behind the scenes to serve their own purposes. As Blackmore (2010) argues, the rise of audit culture in new government strategies indicates that the state does not trust universities.

Ex-Ante Control and Ex-Post Control

My review of the literature has identified two modes of control: *ex-ante* control and *ex-post* control. *Ex-ante* control takes the form of authoritative mandates, rules, or regulations that specify what the subject under control must do and how it is to perform tasks (Verhoest et al., 2004). Such before-the-fact instructions and regulations are intended to compel desired actions

and prevent undesirable activities. The subject of *ex-ante* control is deemed responsible for complying with the rules, and the controller monitors and enforces that compliance. *Ex-ante* control emphasizes control over inputs and processes and leaves the institution with minimal freedom to perform its activities (Lane, 2000). In contrast, goal accomplishment and efficiency rather than rule adherence are primary concerns in the *ex-post* control model (Lægreid & Verhoest, 2010). This model allows the subject flexibility in performing the goals set by the controller. *Ex-ante* control and *ex-post* control represent opposite approaches to control; they are linked to two different accountability systems, one based on compliance, the other on performance.

Compliance-Based and Performance-Based Accountability

Accountability systems are either compliance-based or performance-based. A compliance-based accountability system, which usually characterizes *ex-ante* control, is comprised of many regulations and reporting requirements through which the state monitors a university's compliance through its approving function (Verhoet et al., 2004). This traditional accountability system emphasizes the rules set by the state, rules that a university must follow. It runs counter to a performance-based accountability system (Shaw, 2018) or an outcome-based contract (Lane & Kivistö, 2008), a system widely used to evaluate performance efficiency by indicators and benchmarks. Specific forms of performance-based accountability include performance-based funding, performance management, and performance audit. While a compliance-based accountability system focuses its steering mechanism on inputs and processes, a performance-based system emphasizes outputs and outcomes measured by key performance indicators such as number of student enrolments, number of publications, and graduation rates.

With the move from government to governance and state control to state supervision in the higher education system, many scholars have recommended a change in steering approach (Kickert, 1995; Enders et al., 2013; Verhoet et al., 2004; Hoang, 2017). They suggest that the conferment of autonomy should be accompanied by a shift from a compliance-based accountability system to a performance-based one (Enders et al., 2013). They make the argument that controlling inputs and processes by checking compliance with laws and regulations creates too much direct intervention in the daily activities of semi-autonomous agencies and limits their performance in a market-driven dynamic (Verhoest, 2005). Performance accountability on the other hand allows an agency flexibility to perform tasks with higher levels of efficiency, innovation, and productivity. Despite recommendations to change accountability mechanisms, however, universities worldwide are still subject to both compliance-based and performance-based systems, including a range of measures such as laws, ministerial control, audits, and performance indicators. These instruments indicate that there may be still too much direct intervention in the life of universities which might be limiting the capacity of those universities to thrive in the global knowledge economy.

Reforming Vietnam's Higher Education System and Autonomy of Public Universities

Vietnamese Public Universities in a Globalized Knowledge Economy

University reform worldwide in recent decades have been driven by globalization, the knowledge economy, and the dominant social imaginary of neoliberalism (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Wright, 2019a; Olssen & Peter, 2005). With the goal of industrialization, modernization, and integration in the world's economy, Vietnam has not been immune to these global forces. A body of literature has explored the influences of globalization and neoliberalism on Vietnam's higher education system (Ngo et al., 2006; Nguyen & Tran, 2018; Tran, 2014; Le, 2016; Tran et al., 2017; Nguyen & Tran, 2019; Madden, 2014; Pham, 2011). Most of these studies indicate that

globalization has placed the country under pressure to change; these studies also report on specific policies the Vietnamese government has implemented to reform the higher education sector. Specifically, in 1986, the economic liberalization policy was enacted, marking a shift from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy (Ngo et al., 2006; Tran, 2014).

Following the transition from a centrally planned economy to a socialist economy, the market in Vietnam has taken a more central role in the governance of higher education. The education sector is now considered by the government to be an important element of economic policy and of the nation's competitive advantage in the integration process (Central Government, 2005). This means that Vietnam's public universities have embraced neoliberal practices that foster the role of the market in competition for enrollment, tuition, and funding. As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) remark, the idea of a socialist market economy has become dominant not only in the west but also in Vietnam and China where Communist Parties rule.

The socialist market economy in communist countries is, however, framed by a local version of neoliberalism, which means it is mediated by both global forces and local contexts (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Ngo et al., 2006). Vietnam has attempted to retain two incompatible ideologies—the market and socialism—in its renewal process (Nguyen et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2015). There is always intervention from the state in a socialist-oriented market economy in order to deal with unexpected impacts of neoliberalism such as inequity in access to higher education (George, 2011; Vo & Laking, 2020). Scholars exploring influences of globalization and neoliberalism on Vietnam's higher education system (Tran et al., 2017; Ngo et al., 2006) therefore emphasize tensions between global influences and local values. They also recommend that university reform in post-Soviet contexts like Vietnam should not only aim to address challenges of globalization but also take into consideration the local context and traditional values.

Indeed, reform policies such as those in Vietnam, intended to achieve an economic mission for the higher education sector in the global economy, are widespread amongst countries adopting the Soviet centralized model. The Soviet approach to higher education governance is characterized by centrally planned governance, subsidized finance, tuition free, subordination to many ministries, national curriculum, and guaranteed employment for graduates (Huisman et al., 2018). Basically, in the Soviet model, the state centralizes and subsidizes on the matters of teaching, research, finance, and human resource in the higher education system. Under the conditions of globalization, however, especially after the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991, the model is no longer tenable, and former Soviet nations have reformed their governance systems. Soviet legacies nevertheless are still strong and continue to exert a significant impact on communist countries. For instance, the education policy to modernize and industrialize the country in India is informed by the Gandhian post-colonial initiatives and a neoliberal imaginary, with the value of market efficiency increasingly becoming dominant (Pathak, 2006, as cited in Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Yet, the policy has been implemented in a strict, central planned manner and a Soviet-style five-year plan.

Other studies in different contexts have also reported that governments and universities walk a line between the Soviet legacy and newer global influences to reform the higher education system. In Malaysia, regardless of an inclination towards marketization of higher education, state centralism is still strong (Lee, 2004). Like Vietnam, the Malaysian government is concerned that the higher education system might drift into market-oriented practices with severe consequences for equity and education quality (Sirat, 2010). In Laos, the implementation of autonomy policy notwithstanding, the governance structure underpinning autonomy does not operate in isolation from the social, economic, and political environment in which higher education operates—an environment with a unitary state structure under the overall direction of

the Communist Party (George, 2020). Similarly, despite the quest for autonomy to facilitate the move towards world-class status, Chinese universities have struggled to incorporate international experiences into higher education and to respond to economic globalization while reinforcing political education and preserving the state-prescribed cultural identity (Pan, 2006). These examples indicate the strong legacy of the Soviet governance model, despite the reform efforts of universities in different Asian countries.

During the reform process, most countries in post-Soviet contexts have abolished the line-ministry control over public universities that was a typical feature of the Soviet centralized model. Hungary abolished it in 1993, and China made the same choice in 1998. Line-ministry control is criticized for being redundant and obstructing the efficiency of the decision-making process in higher education institutions (Hayden & Lam, 2007). Yet, line-ministry control still exists in Vietnam, controlling public universities and creating much tension in the implementation of the autonomy policy. Here again is evidence indicating a strong Soviet legacy that cannot be ignored during reform towards the global knowledge economy.

Existing Studies on Autonomy in Vietnam's Higher Education Context

In the literature on reform in the higher education sector, many studies conducted by both Vietnamese and other scholars have explored the implementation of the autonomy policy and the degree of autonomy granted to Vietnamese public universities.

Implementation of the Autonomy Policy in Vietnam. Most studies that have explored the implementation of the autonomy policy in Vietnam indicate that tensions between state-centric values and neoliberal principles have created many practical problems with which the government and universities must deal (Tran, 2009; Tran, 2014; Vo, 2018; Dang, 2013). Using a mixed-methods approach to investigate the rationale and practical implementation of autonomy, Tran

(2009) found a dualistic policy in which two visions of development—the market economy and socialism—find common ground in shaping Vietnam's higher education. Tran (2009) noted that the dualistic policy originates in a debate between conservative forces inside Vietnam's Communist Party and reformers who are responding to the influences of global forces. Although Tran's results were limited to the top-down view held by policymakers, the study revealed that policy implementation in Vietnam is experimental and gradual. Specifically, it has been a lesson-learned process in which policymakers responded to the successes and failures of the policy during its first phase of implementation. The policy was subsequently amended to reflect the outcome of an ongoing debate within the political system about what to do next in the reform process.

Drawing on neo-institutionalism as a solid theoretical framework, Vo (2018) found that autonomy in a socialist context like Vietnam is bound by formal rules and cultural values, and that the reform policy is primarily influenced by dependence on the socialist-oriented market path. Vo recommended building institutions to fit well with the reform plan, especially when the policy is borrowed from western countries with well-developed institutional foundations. Although the study provided valuable insights on the nature of autonomy in Vietnam, its analysis was based on the service provider's perspective, not that of a higher education institution. This could mean that the study was overly concentrated on influences of the market mechanism and its associated problems such as the commercialization of education. Furthermore, the number of documents collected from case studies was small and did not constitute a sufficiently rich source of evidence for in-depth analysis.

Also exploring the autonomy policy, Dang (2013) found no radical changes in the autonomy of higher education institutions. Specifically, institutions remain subject to a highly centralized control system. The MOET and twelve other line ministries rigorously control critical

areas related to administrative independence and academic freedom. Dang identified a big gap between policy intent and policy implementation, a gap caused by tensions between reforming and conservative views about the roles of the state and of universities in governing higher education. Different opinions and perspectives have created a policy paradox. While the Party and the state have enacted policies to grant autonomy to universities, they have also promulgated various accountability regulations that tightly control institutions and limit their independence. Dang's findings, like Tran's (2009) and Vo's (2018), show that the legacy of the socialist state has impeded significant change in policy domains and is the root of many challenges. Dang's study, however, was limited to document review as the source of data and did not include the voices of other actors such as university leaders and academics. Also, the study was conducted in the same year that the Higher Education Law of 2012 was released so it could not have been expected to find radical changes in university autonomy.

Based on the analysis of data collected from two Vietnamese National Universities, Tran (2014) concluded that the adoption of autonomy as a reform policy in Vietnam is not necessarily a good thing. Tran's study contributed to the literature on university governance in Vietnam by pointing out many practical problems in the decentralization process, such as an unclear strategy for successful policy implementation, a lack of financial support, and, most importantly, the limited experience and leadership of institutions in leading the change. Tran drew pessimistic conclusions about the policy; however, the conclusions were not accurate because her study was conducted in the first phase of policy implementation. As well, the theoretical framework for the study, which drew on the concept of decentralization, was not strong enough to provide insights into the complexity of autonomy in the Vietnamese context. Overall, prior studies such as Tran's

have pointed out that problems in implementing the autonomy policy in Vietnam are mainly due to tensions between neoliberal principles and the legacies of the state-centralized model.

Degree of Autonomy of Vietnamese Public Universities. Studies that have explored the degree of institutional autonomy of Vietnamese public universities (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Dao, 2015; George, 2011; Le et al., 2017; Vo & Laking, 2020; Tran et al., 2017; Vo, 2018; London, 2010; Dao & Hayden, 2010) indicate that the institutional autonomy of those universities is very limited, the main reason being that the decision to grant autonomy to higher education institutions is a highly significant matter that is in tension with the legacy of Vietnam's centralized governance model. As Hayden and Lam (2007) remark:

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam enshrines in its Constitution the supremacy of the Communist Party and the ideals of Marxism-Leninism, as well as the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh. Its political system has relied heavily on central planning and the exercise of state control. Its higher education system, though changing rapidly, continues to reflect the legacy of a Soviet model of higher education. An official commitment to granting autonomy to higher education institutions is not, therefore, an insignificant matter. (p. 73)

The institutional autonomy of Vietnamese public universities is limited in two senses: it is contingent on meeting conditions set by the state, and the state directly intervenes in the university's daily activities.

From semi-structured interviews with senior leaders at a Vietnamese university, Dao (2015) acquired evidence that any autonomy granted by the MOET seems conditional. For example, the university can decide to deliver programs but only on the condition that a ministry panel approves new programs. The university can award degrees for undergraduate students but only on blank certificates purchased from the MOET. One condition that most Vietnamese public universities

found very difficult to meet concerned their self-financing capacity—the requirement that the university pay its own operating and investing expenses. In a study of the boundaries of autonomy in Vietnam, George (2011) indicated that the university's autonomy is contingent on its ability to diversify funding sources. Le et al. (2017) seemed to support George's claim in maintaining that institutions having more decision-making authority have better self-financing capacity such as a significant source of revenues from tuition. Overall, although the studies cited here were limited to reporting descriptive findings, they have consistently shown that regardless of the passage of the Higher Education Law to officially mark the transfer of decision-making authority, the level of autonomy a university can enjoy is minimal because of conditions set by the state. These conditions limit the university's autonomy and the opportunity to be granted autonomy.

In arguing the limits of autonomy, scholars also report the state's direct intervention in the university's daily activities and decision-making process. George (2011), for example, reported the MOET's extensive intervention in curricula, not only for compulsory political courses with highly prescriptive content but also for other, non-compulsory specialist courses such as economics and social science. Because most curricula are nationally designed, lecturers have very limited freedom to determine course content. Institutional autonomy is not only limited in academic activities but also in other areas such as human resources and financial management. Tran et al. (2017) have provided evidence of the Communist Party's severe intervention in the university's internal governance structure. The University President, for example, must also hold the position of Communist Party Secretary. Indeed, in any Vietnamese public university, the Communist Party Secretary has the highest level of decision-making power, regardless of the establishment of the University Council under the regime of autonomy.

Drawing on a multiple case study of three public universities, Vo and Laking (2020) found that the state still sets caps on tuition fees for all three universities, whether they are fully or partly self-financing. The findings seem contrary to the content of Resolution 77 (Prime Minister, 2014b) which grants a public university extensive autonomy if it is fully self-responsible for operating and investing expenses. Vo and Laking (2020), however, using data collected from interviews with academics at the universities, identified a gap between policy and practice. Their findings were like those of George (2011) on significant central control over curricula and those of Tran et al. (2017) on the dominance of the Communist Party in the university's governance structure.

Based on descriptive findings on the state's intervention, the studies cited here came to slightly different conclusions about the degree of institutional autonomy in Vietnamese public universities. Vo and Laking (2020) argue that autonomy is growing but does not reflect a broad transfer of decision-making power from the state to public universities. Dao and Hayden (2010) and Le et al. (2017), on the other hand, have concluded that Vietnam's universities do not have any sense of autonomy. Applying Berdahl's (1990) classical conceptualization of autonomy, Dao & Hayden (2010) claim that Vietnamese universities have neither substantive autonomy nor procedural autonomy. Substantive autonomy is the university's power to determine its own goals; procedural autonomy is the university's power to identify its own ways to pursue goals. In examining dimensions of organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, staffing autonomy, and academic freedom, Le et al. (2017) and Tran & Doan (2016) found that Vietnamese universities did not really have any. Academic freedom, the focus of traditional notions of autonomy, is deemphasized, while financial independence is noticeably highlighted.

Different conclusions reported in the studies cited above might be due to differences in the universities from which data were collected and to the time frame within which each study

was conducted. Vo and Laking's (2020) study followed passage of the Revised Higher Education Law in 2018, which means institutional autonomy had already expanded; other studies were conducted years earlier. Furthermore, even if data for all studies had been collected in the same year, the findings could still be very different because the government granted various levels of autonomy to universities based on their financing capacity and accreditation results. The findings must, therefore, be considered in conjunction with detailed information about the case studies and their time frame.

Scholars have sought to explain the lack of university autonomy in Vietnam. London (2010) suggested that fear of change and the MOET's conservative management approach caused educators to distrust initiatives and fail to respond to new demands in the changing context of globalization. Another reason for the slow movement of university reform is the centralized culture that has existed in Vietnam for too long (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Dao, 2015; Tran et al., 2017). Most importantly, lack of institutional autonomy occurs because ministries and the Communist Party are reluctant and even unwilling to give up their control over public universities (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Dao, 2015; Tran et al., 2017). Welsh and McGinn (1999) emphasize that an essential condition for successful decentralization is political support for proposed changes. However, this fundamental condition seems not to have been met in Vietnam; an unwillingness to release the power of political parties and ministries emerges as one of the main challenges to the implementation of the reform plan.

Limitation of Prior Studies and Knowledge Gap. Existing studies have provided valuable insights on several essential features of institutional autonomy in Vietnam's higher education sector. Scholars have reinforced the argument that university autonomy is limited in communist countries, despite the integration of reform agendas into the globalized knowledge

economy (Dao, 2015; George, 2011; Le et al., 2017; Vo & Laking, 2020). Challenges in implementing the policy, mainly owing to tensions between neoliberal ideologies and state-centric values, have been highlighted in several studies (Tran, 2009; Tran, 2014; Vo, 2018; Dang, 2013). These findings are consistent with the international literature on autonomy reported earlier. (Scholars have referred to institutional autonomy by different names such as regulated autonomy, regulatory autonomy, contractual autonomy, and conditional autonomy, emphasizing the state's control in the meaning of autonomy.)

Most research about the Vietnamese context has been limited to presenting descriptive findings about the level of autonomy that public universities have been granted. The focus has been on the power struggle between the state and the university, particularly on the state's direct intervention in the university's daily activities and on the university's efforts to gain decision-making authority. Little analysis has been offered based on a solid theoretical framework. Researchers have attempted to indicate the boundaries of autonomy in Vietnam but have not dug deeply into the underlying mechanism of autonomy to understand why it is limited. Significantly, while the concept of institutional autonomy was contested during the implementation process, little attention has been given to the meaning of the concept itself. Over-reliance on document analysis as the primary data source has led to limited insight into the various meanings that different actors—policymakers, university leaders, and academics—hold on the policy concept.

Contribution of the Present Study. In the present study, I attempt to address gaps in the research through the use of a qualitative instrumental case study and an exploration of meanings of autonomy in the centralized governance context of Vietnam. I focus on tensions between decision-making authority and accountability, and on different communities of meaning re autonomy— notions of autonomy that university leaders shared with me in semi-structured

interviews, and that are articulated by policymakers in policy documents. I argue that a better understanding of the working mechanism of institutional autonomy will provide insights into its complexities, and may help actors develop a more informed understanding of policy and a response that aligns with the state's aims in enacting the policy. I draw on state steering theory (Wright, 2019a, b, c, d) as a theoretical framework to make sense of tensions which emerge in the autonomy policy between autonomy and control. I apply an interpretive policy approach to analyze various communities of meaning and reveal tensions in the implementation of autonomy. In the next chapter, I present the theoretical framework adopted for this study.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I present a theoretical framework grounded in state steering theory. I use this theory to gain insights about the meaning of institutional autonomy in Vietnam's higher education system. The chapter is structured in three parts. First, I introduce state steering theory and justify its use in the study of autonomy in Vietnam. Next, I describe the framework as centering on the concept of *steering at a distance*, a new mode of governance. I then provide a critique of state steering theory focusing on its interpretivist perspective which helps to explain the working mechanism of institutional autonomy in the Vietnamese context.

State Steering Theory and its Relevance to Vietnam's Higher Education Context

State steering theory appears in the literature under different names—the modernizing state model of autonomy (Wright & Ørberg, 2008), the self-ownership model (Ørberg & Wright, 2019), steering at a distance (Kickert, 1995; Vidovich, 2002; Brown, 2021), steering from a distance (Olssen et al., 2004; Marginson, 1997), and governing at a distance (Marginson, 1997; Pam, 2018; Rose & Miller, 2010; Carter, 2018). The key concept of *steering at a distance* indicates a move towards more autonomy and self-responsibility for higher education institutions (Kickert, 1995). Steering at a distance was first introduced as a new paradigm of public governance in the Dutch higher education sector in the 1980s (Kickert, 1995). Since then, the concept has been applied in many different contexts—Australia (Brown, 2021; Vidovich, 2002; Marginson, 1997), Denmark (Ørberg & Wright, 2019), Italy (Donina et al., 2015), China (Yang, 2015), Indonesia (Gaus, 2019; Gaus et al., 2019), and Hong Kong (Mok, 2014)—to explore how governance of higher education was reformed by reducing state control and increasing university autonomy. University reform in Denmark is situated in worldwide reform agendas as a response to the shifting context of the global

knowledge economy. With the deep involvement of Danish politicians and civil servants in international organizations such as OECD that envision universities as the driving force behind the knowledge economy, and with the speedy, extensive, and extreme versions of reform that have arisen in Denmark, this country provides an excellent example through which to explore steering at a distance, a policy that, with globalization, seems to travel globally.

Although state steering theory is based on university reform in European countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands that are different in context and geo-political conditions from Vietnam, I draw on the theory as a theoretical framework to gain insights on autonomy in Vietnam for the following reasons. Governments in both Vietnam and Denmark share the goal of university reform in the global knowledge economy, that goal being to make universities the key drivers of the knowledge economy so that the country will be successful in a neoliberal context. Specifically, the goal is that universities should direct research towards the needs of the knowledge industry, produce a highly skilled workforce, and become market-oriented so they may be effective and efficient in fulfilling these roles. In Vietnam, the government released the Higher Education Reform Agenda in 2005, an agenda reflecting global reform priorities. In Rizvi's (2004) view, this agenda involves a global movement toward the restructuring of higher education. Indeed, governments in both Vietnam and Denmark have adopted many elements of the New Public Management toolkit—establishing the university's governing board to empower university leaders, for example, and employing universal governing techniques such as performance-based accountability. Overall, with its goal of reform in the globalized economy and its similar management techniques, the theoretical framework applied in Denmark is applicable to Vietnam's context.

What makes steering at a distance relevant to the Vietnam context is that it has become increasingly popular and has been applied in many countries around the world including Southeast Asian countries such as China, Indonesia, and Hong Kong where geo-political conditions are similar to those in Vietnam. Mok (2014), for example, argues that steering at a distance is embraced in Hong Kong's public universities as a way to uphold their accountability to the government and preserve their autonomy. Similarly, the steering-at-a-distance mechanism fits well with what is happening in higher education in Indonesia where, despite the implementation of autonomy policy, the government still has a hand in the university's daily activities (Gaus, 2019; Gaus et al., 2019). Strict monitoring and control mechanisms, however, betray the government's half-hearted attitude towards autonomy. Yang (2015) reports profound changes in the way Chinese universities are governed as the state's role shifts from control to supervision and universities are steered from a distance through the market mechanism. These examples of state steering theory in Asian countries strengthen the relevance of the theoretical framework to the Vietnamese context.

Although Vietnamese society is not democratic as is society in Denmark, the Vietnamese government is becoming more open and democratic in policy implementation, and negotiations have taken place between the state and university leaders concerning the autonomy policy. During negotiation processes, university leaders have made recommendations about the content of policies, and the state has adjusted policies where they have determined it reasonable to do so. In this way, the university has been granted more decision-making authority and, although the state still holds ultimate power, the viewpoints of many actors with an interest in the policy have been included in the enactment process. Even in Denmark, however, where a democratic approach to policy (Shore & Wright, 2011) ensures that the voices of all relevant actors are included, the power of those voices is not evenly distributed. As Wright (2016) reported

concerning a television debate and discussion with the Minister, academics were defeated in their argument that the law undermined conditions for their academic freedom. Although state steering theory is based on democratic notions, it is nevertheless important to search for insight about the meaning of autonomy in Vietnam.

Overall, the reasons outlined above explain why I chose state steering theory as a theoretical lens to use in investigating the phenomenon of institutional autonomy in Vietnam. In the past, the Vietnamese government was based on a model of centralized governance borrowed from Eastern European countries—and it worked well for years. A theoretical framework grounded on state steering theory, therefore, can also be applicable in Vietnam. In the following sections, I describe this theoretical framework focusing on the key concept of steering at a distance and on the enactment of this top-down form of governance. I also explain what happens in practice when other actors implement the policy from bottom up.

Steering at a Distance: A Top-Down Vision of University Governance

Steering at a distance presents a top-down vision of university governance based on established laws and institutional power; it is designed by policymakers on high and passed down through a hierarchy of organizations to be applied to people at the bottom of the hierarchy (Shore & Wright, 2011). My focus is on the working mechanism of steering at a distance and on its steering instruments; these include performance-based funding, performance management, and auditing culture.

Steering at a Distance: A New Mode of Governance in Neoliberal Contexts

To increase the efficiency and flexibility of public universities within a neoliberal society, governance increasingly takes place at a distance. Steering at a distance has been called self-regulation (Neave & Vught, 1991), remote control (Goedegebuure, 1993), tight-loose coupling

(Lawton, 1992), governance at a distance (Broome & Quick, 2015; Rose & Miller, 2010), steering not rowing, and the separation of steering and rowing functions (Olssen et al., 2004). Basically, steering at a distance aims to provide more autonomy and self-responsibility for public universities (Kickert, 1995). Public universities are provided with decision-making authority, which is the power to make decisions on matters such as teaching, research, personnel, finance, admission, and enrollment (Enders et al., 2013). Steering at a distance departs from the classical state steering mechanism characterized by hierarchical, direct top-down control through legislation and regulations. As Donina et al. (2015) argue, this mode of governance shifts control from that of a centrally planned model to a more self-regulated one, with the goal of reducing the state's direct control over the university and increasing the university's self-determining capacity. Pointing to the Dutch higher education context, Kickert (1995) noted that the rationale for introducing governing at a distance was that universities needed to be flexible and innovative in response to changing societal demands, initiatives that were inhibited by the existing steering system. Self-steering capacity and self-responsibility are expected to increase adaptability, flexibility, and innovation for public universities.

The use of such terms as self, distance, remote, and loose to describe the steering at a distance governance model, however, does not indicate the lessening of state control over universities, merely a different form of steering which is more covert. As Broome and Quirk (2015) argue, steering at a distance is simply a way to exercise various forms of indirect power, the goal of which is to increase the effectiveness of the steering system (Kickert, 1995). Thus, the state, while delegating decision-making authority, deliberately continues to steer universities through accountability mechanisms (Brown, 2021). Consequently, being governed at a distance

involves ongoing tensions between a degree of independence for universities in making decisions and control measures applied by the state.

In Denmark, the self-ownership model is a central steering concept that identifies the university as both an independent institution with strong leadership and an object of government steering at a distance (Wright, 2019a). With its new legal status as a self-owned institution, the university has its own governing board and a hierarchy of leaders with self-determining capacity who are able to act strategically according to society's demands. Yet, although the university is free to act within the government's control framework, they must meet development targets and performance indicators to secure the funding (Wright & Ørberg, 2008). This means the financial autonomy of Danish universities is very limited—they are tightly bound to the state's priorities in exchange for funding. Self-ownership, then, has become a model of state steering with dual aims—to enhance the university's strategic self-defining capacity and its accountability to the state. The university, in general, has autonomy in the sense of a higher level of status as a self-owned institution but not in the sense of complete independence from the state.

Steering Assemblage and Steering Instruments

The key to state steering theory lies in the control instruments used to steer the autonomous university. Moving to steering at a distance means reworking existing governing techniques to give the university space to make decisions. Of course, concerns over potential gaming practices arise when a university has power (Shore & Wright, 2011; Dougherty & Natow, 2019a). As Shore and Wright (2011) argue, steering at a distance leaves space in which opportunistic individuals can manipulate the state's resources behind the scenes to their personal benefit. Thus, when the university becomes a legal subject with full control over the use of its budget, processes are required to ensure the university is complying with the law and using its

funding as the state expects (Dougherty & Natow, 2019a)—to determine, for example, if the public funding provided for teaching and learning activities is being spent on those purposes or diverted to research to build the university’s reputation. As I explain below through the concepts of steering assemblage and steering instruments, new control measures are therefore justified.

Steering assemblage refers to an array of steering instruments which the state uses to steer universities at a distance, instruments such as performance-based funding, performance management, and auditing (Ørberg & Wright, 2019). The important characteristic of a steering assemblage is that it comprises governing techniques that are not carried out separately or independently; they interact with each other. An assemblage of steering instruments can also be referred to as an accountability system or a steering system (Shaw, 2018; Lane & Kivistö, 2008). The advantage of a steering assemblage is that it articulates governing techniques around one coherent logic, such as the university’s performance, to create a new university identity in society and in the knowledge economy. In addition, a steering assemblage allows for contingency and variation in the use of steering instruments when they are applied in different contexts. Such variation helps to explain why my findings on accountability measures in Vietnam are different from the measures used in other states or that are envisioned in the law. In the following sections, I elaborate on how three steering instruments—performance-based funding, performance management, and auditing—are articulated in an assemblage to steer a university from a distance.

Performance-Based Funding. One of the most widespread accountability measures being applied to steer independently governed universities is performance-based funding. According to Burke and Henrik (2003), a performance-based funding allocation system ties state funding directly to the university’s performance as measured by specific output indicators such as student retention rates, graduation rates, and number of publications. A distinct characteristic

of this steering instrument is its emphasis on outputs (Shin, 2010) as, for example, when a funding agreement is applied to improve education quality by offering one standard payment per student who passes the final exam. The student's performance is directly linked to the university's budget. Such a funding allocation approach is a calculative technique that makes a significant amount of the governmental budget dependent on student completion rates. It holds the university accountable for its teaching commitment and education quality through the evidence of student performance (Dougherty & Natow, 2019b). Performance-based funding, therefore, has become a popular means for distributing the state's budget, a means through which the state can achieve goals using specific indicators.

By allocating funding based on teaching outcomes, the state can steer the university from a distance. On the one hand, the state can shape the university's teaching profile through financial incentives and steer the university towards optimizing its teaching performance. If the university wants to secure more budget, it needs to invest more time and energy in teaching activities and improve student completion rates. The university, on the other hand, is governed at a distance because its teaching activities are not daily monitored, and its institutional decision-making authority has increased. Specifically, while the leaders have freedom to decide how to use funding and plan their activities, academics have more freedom to apply initiatives to improve teaching quality. Performance-based funding, therefore, is believed to improve higher education outcomes.

Despite being widely applied as an accountability measure, funding based on performance is not without its critics. One of its shortfalls is a simplistic reliance on output indicators that prioritize quantity instead of quality, a focus that might encourage universities to manipulate the numbers to meet funding criteria (Nisar, 2015). Sometimes, performance indicators are too generic to bring about diversification in research and teaching portfolios among institutions (Huisman,

2018). Spooner (2021) argues that an ugly side of performance-based funding is a perverse incentivization of competition between higher education institutions rather than collaboration. These critiques notwithstanding, a move towards performance-based funding as an accountability concept seems to be gaining ground and becoming a universal steering mechanism.

Performance Management. Another instrument a state uses to steer universities is performance management, often manifested in the form of performance contracts. In this governing technique, the state specifies performance targets and indicators to measure expected outcomes as defined in a contract that both the state and university sign (Drewry et al., 2005). Performance management is a tool through which the ministry indicates its expectations, makes decisions on resource allocation, and holds the university accountable (Pollitt & Talbot, 2004; Verhoest et al., 2012). Performance management represents changes in the governance of higher education sector which include the delegation of decision-making authority from the state to the university and a shift in control from *ex-ante* control to *ex-post* control through performance-based accountability (Enders et al, 2013). For example, in the Netherlands, a public university signs a performance contract with the ministry specifying what it will do to improve teaching quality and institutional profile (Huisman, 2018). The Dutch higher education sector has thus become a continental European front runner in reform aimed at improving university performance.

In Denmark, a self-owned university signs a development contract with the ministry to indicate performance targets and how it will achieve them over the coming years. On the one hand, the contract is a means for the university to empower leadership capacity and boost its performance (Krejsler, 2019a). It provides space for leaders to discuss the university's development strategies with the ministry and for the voices on both sides to be included, albeit with unequal power. University leaders have freedom in the sense that they are given power to make strategic decisions

and choose approaches to meet performance targets. On the other hand, the contractual relationship provides the ministry with an instrument to steer the university at a distance via commitments stated in the contract (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Carney, 2019). Performance management, therefore, has become a political technology that holds the institution accountable to the ministry.

Overall, under the form of a contract, performance management has been used as an effective strategy for governmental steering at a distance. Although both university leaders and the state are in a dialogue to discuss performance targets, the state holds ultimate power in defining the goals which then become the evidence the state needs to steer the university. In Vietnam, a performance contract looks like Decision 6600, a contract about reforming the governing mechanism of a Vietnamese public university (the university I selected as a case study in the present study) that was approved and signed by the Prime Minister. (To preserve the privacy of the Vietnamese public university, the number of this policy document has been changed.) The policy document specifies the Vietnamese public university's rights and financial responsibilities, and the accountability measures to which it is subject to in exchange for autonomy. The performance contract in the Netherlands, the development contract in Denmark, and Decision 6600 in Vietnam all point to the universal instrument of performance management which the state applies to steer autonomous universities.

Auditing Culture. Together with performance-based funding and performance management, auditing is increasingly employed as a control mechanism to check on whether a university is achieving performance indicators, complying with the law, and using state funding as expected. This is the audit culture that has arisen with neoliberalism and New Public Management (Shore, 2008; Shore & Wright, 1999; Spooner, 2020). Deriving legitimacy from its claims to enhance transparency and accountability, audit culture describes a system that subjects

individual performance to audit by external experts (Welch, 2016b). In higher education, this means core areas such as teaching and research are routinely checked by the state. In addition, the level of government intervention in how research should be done and in what should be taught is rising (Blackmore, 2010). Consequently, the regime of audit has come to be perceived as a new form of power (Strathern, 2000) and is criticized for creating tensions with a university's autonomy. Shore and Wright (1999), for example, argue that audit signals a new form of coercive and authoritarian control; although it is typically framed in terms of empowerment and quality, the defining of performance targets for auditing is not objective because the state holds utmost power. Indeed, the government is reshaping the university in its own image by indicating its priorities in performance contracts that it checks through auditing (Shore & Wright, 2015). Furthermore, auditing culture is criticized as illiberal governance in which universities are held accountable politically to the state (Shore, 2008). Despite these negative effects, auditing continues to be used as an instrument for state steering.

In summary, performance-based funding, performance management, and auditing culture are an articulated assemblage designed to steer a university from a distance. These steering instruments have been organized around a coherent logic—a focus on university performance. While performance-based funding ties funding to performance, performance management specifies targets and indicators in a contract which serves as the base for an audit of achievement of indicators, of compliance with the law, and of the use of state funding. An auditing regime, however, can work in a way that does not violate the university's autonomy. If it follows up on performance targets set out in the contract, the state can help the university improve its performance by making recommendations on what needs to be changed and how. In this way, the state can perform a supervision role, as might be more appropriate for university governance

in neoliberal times, rather than control. Yet, auditing is usually performed in a way that permits ministry intervention—because of suspicion on the ministry’s part that the university will not comply with the law in performing its activities or spend its budget according to the state’s purposes. In this way, steering at a distance might hold an institution even more tightly accountable to the state and fail to achieve its full purpose of improving university performance. Steering at a distance, therefore, has recreated a control relationship between the state and the university which is much more intense than previous relationships.

Self-Responsibility

Steering at a distance signals a move towards not only more institutional autonomy but also self-responsibility for public universities (Kickert, 1995). The concept of self-responsibility means that the university is responsible for its own performance and financial sources, despite any cutoff in the state’s budget. Self-responsibility refers to Foucault’s technology of the self that Yokoyama (2008) identified in Japan where higher education institutions are situated as autonomous, self-reliant, responsible, risk-managing, and performance-focused subjects in a neoliberal context. Self-responsibility is a form of governance in which the spotlight is on individuals and institutions, which are expected to self-manage daily activities through their own self-defining capacity (Shore & Wright, 2011). In Japan, the technology of the self has brought about a shift in financial responsibility and risk management from the ministry to national universities, making institutions self-reliant and responsible subjects.

Drawing on the Danish context, Wright (2019d) indicates that “in the new form of governance, government set the parameters for change and outsources to universities the responsibility for planning and performing them” (p. 311). Wright points out that self-owning institutions are handed responsibility for planning and setting parameters for change, that is, for

meeting the government's policy aims through fulfilling performance targets set out in the development contract. This gives the university responsibility for its own performance; in order to secure state funding based on student completion rates, for example, it must achieve output indicators set out in the development contract. Responsibility for achieving the state's policy is passed down through a chain of contracts, from the state to the ministries and from the ministry to the university's governing board, then to the rector, deans, and individual academics. The model of a continuous chain of contracts seems neat because all is tied to the state's policy aims. While responsibility is passing downward to independent organizations through development contracts, however, each university leader is upwardly accountable to the government for the university's performance and efficient use of resources.

Wright and Ørberg (2008) emphasize that, despite contracts and state funding based on performance, "universities will still be independent and free, in the sense that they alone are responsible for responding to any reduction in the Ministry's performance payments by finding their ways to cut the costs of their operations and avoid bankruptcy" (p. 49). This means universities are autonomous in the sense that they are responsible for their own financial sources if there is any shortfall in the budget the ministry provides. This is the idea of self-responsibility for finance that Yokoyama (2008) described in Japanese universities. As Wright and Ørberg note, "Universities, their leaders, and academics are given freedom in the sense of individual responsibility for their own economic survival, while the sector comes under heavy political control. This is called setting universities free" (p. 53). University leaders are responsible for finding their own ways to reduce operating costs and avoid bankruptcy, and even for finding ways to diversify their funding sources.

In summary, in this section I have presented the working mechanism of steering at a distance. In this governance model, the university is set free and given decision-making authority to become a strategic actor in the market. Yet, steering technologies set out in the law—performance-based funding, performance management, and auditing—form an articulated assemblage which is used to steer the university towards the state’s goals. The state also hands over responsibility for performance and financial sources to the university. This top-down form of governance, however, is far from the whole story. Wright (2019b), for example, noting that it is obvious how steering instruments are intended to work, wonders what will happen in practice. In other words, although the control system is clearly designed to recognize the university as an independent subject and as the object of the state’s steering at a distance, it does not mean the university will enact the state’s vision in the way the state expects. As I outline in the next section, a range of other actors with different perspectives react to top-down changes and enact policies in their own ways. Using theoretical concepts of enactment such as contestation, partial vision, and articulation, I explain what is happening when other actors implement the policy from bottom up.

Enactment of Steering at a Distance: A Process of Contestation on Autonomy and Control

In order to include different perspectives of many actors involved in policy implementation, state steering theory employs a double take approach and two meanings of enactment: top-down versus bottom-up (Wright, 2019b). The enactment of steering at a distance as a new mode of governance is conceptualized as a process that involves contesting the meanings of key concepts such as autonomy. Contestation involves not just policy makers with a top-down vision of enactment but also many other actors such as university leaders and academics who implement the policy from the bottom up. In that process, all actors can use their voices to help create the university, albeit with unequal power.

Keywords such as autonomy and freedom are essentially contested concepts, which means they have no final or closed meaning (Gallie, 1956). No ultimate definition exists for autonomy; instead, through a history of contestation, the concept has accumulated a variety of meanings. During the process of contestation, actors invert, shift, and stretch existing meanings, draw on and reshape old meanings, and propose new ones (Williams, 1976). Sometimes, core concepts are contested over long periods of time until a moment of enactment occurs and a new meaning becomes dominant and translated into new institutional practices. Even when a meaning becomes hegemonic, earlier meanings seldom disappear and new meanings can be unsettled and replaced by still newer ones. Usually, multiple contradictory meanings of key concepts are kept in play. The meaning of autonomy in Denmark, for example, is contested, and ministries and university leaders have contrary understandings (Wright & Ørberg, 2019). While the ministries claim they have set universities free, university leaders debate whether the autonomy policy can really be compatible with the state's tighter control over their activities. Their contestation reflects tensions between university autonomy and state control.

The concept of *partial vision* (Wright, 2019b) can help to explain contestation concerning the concept of autonomy. Partial vision refers to an actor's partial understanding. University leaders, academics, and policymakers contest the meaning of autonomy because they articulate the concept in different ways, each actor interpreting the concept from a partial and incomplete perspective, even though they all believe their perspectives are whole. Partial visions become problematic when a state implements a top-down approach to policy enactment and imposes the perspectives of policymakers without considering the different perspectives of other relevant actors. What, then, happens when the top-down and bottom-up enactment of governance meet? The concept of *articulation* (Ørberg & Wright, 2019) works as an important bridge here,

combining the expression of a state's top-down vision for the university with the vision of other actors working from the bottom up. As a result, the university's transformation is not treated as *a priori* process with fixed regulations in the laws but as a process of continual organization around contested concepts and negotiation amongst actors.

Critique of State Steering Theory and Theoretical Framework

Within an interpretivist perspective, state steering theory helps explain the complexities of autonomy in Vietnam's higher education system. As I have suggested, the theory employs a double take approach that includes the perspectives of all potential actors involved in the policy (Shore & Wright, 2011). The actors are not just the policymakers who implement the law in a top-down, authoritative fashion; they are also the university leaders and academics who enact the policy from the bottom up. The double take approach means everyone can contribute their voices to shaping and enacting change, although the power they have is not evenly distributed. By mapping the presence of multiple people and organizations, all trying to contest the policy problem, state steering theory helps to analyze what is going on. State steering theory, therefore, helps to inform my view of the phenomenon under examination—that is, that steering from a distance sets up particular kinds of relations between the state and higher education institutions that are not wrong but that have political, economic, and social consequences, including reactions from other actors to top-down changes.

As I note in my problem statement, actors in Vietnam are confused about the meaning of autonomy because institutional autonomy has been used in a somewhat misleading way to refer to a new control model. By using the notion of steering at a distance, I can make visible the working mechanism of a governance model in a simpler way so that actors may acquire a more informed understanding of policy and respond in ways that align with the state's aims in enacting

the policy. Steering at a distance also indicates an act of governance that involves the intelligence of the manager; it is not simply a control model that concepts such as the technology of governance and political technology signal. Technology of governance evokes commercialization and the concept of political technology reveals that the state's political aims are embedded in instruments for steering universities. While the nature of steering at a distance is ultimately a model for state control, the words evoke gentleness, and that can make university leaders feel they have some autonomy even though they are being controlled more tightly than before.

Chapter 4

Methodology

In this chapter, I present the research design for a qualitative case study. Specifically, I provide justification for the selection of the design, the bounded system of the case, and the unit of analysis, and describe the Vietnamese institution about which I collected data. I detail my methods of accessing the policy documents and conducting the interviews that comprise my data. I also describe my two methods of data analysis, thematic analysis and interpretive policy analysis. Finally, I describe the procedures I adopted to increase trustworthiness of this study, address ethical issues, and identify potential limitations of my methodology.

Interpretivist Paradigm, Ontological, and Epistemological Assumptions

This qualitative case study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm. As the study focuses on an understanding of a concept (institutional autonomy), the findings almost inevitably rest on how actors make sense of the world (Löfgren et al., 2018). I have, therefore, adopted an interpretivist paradigm that searches for understanding within the participants' frames of reference and within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity (rather than from the perspective of an observer of action) (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The ontological assumption that grounds this project is nominalist, a view which holds that objects of thought are merely words that have no independent existence but that are dependent on the knower (Cohen et al., 2011). The epistemological assumption underlying the study is anti-positivist (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), a view that the social world is essentially relativistic and can only be comprehended from the perspective of people directly involved in the phenomenon being investigated.

The goal of a study situated within an interpretivist paradigm is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such a goal is

consistent with the goal of the present study—to gain an in-depth understanding of institutional autonomy in a Vietnamese public university from the perspectives of the leaders. To gain an understanding of the historical, cultural, and political settings of the university, the study focuses on the specific context in which the leaders live and work. The leaders’ own backgrounds shape their interpretations, and they acknowledge that their interpretations of the phenomenon of institutional autonomy flow from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences.

A Qualitative Case Study Methodology

According to Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), “It is the paradigm and research question which should determine which data collection and analysis methods will be most appropriate for a study” (p. 5). Within an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative instrumental case-study design is most appropriate. A qualitative case study permits investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within the real-life context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in which the behavior of those involved in the study cannot be controlled (Yin, 2003). As Yin (2014) suggests, the case study is a design particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon from its context—and in the present study, it is impossible to separate institutional autonomy not only from Vietnam’s national histories, cultures, and politics but also from local universities’ history, culture, and politics. Given the historical, cultural, and political context of the higher education system in Vietnam, which is characterized by a strongly centralized governance system, a high power-distant culture, and the unified leadership of the Communist Party, a qualitative case study methodology becomes most appropriate for the exploration of institutional autonomy. Indeed, it has been employed in investigations of the concept of institutional autonomy in different educational jurisdictions around the world (Yang et al., 2007; Ordorika, 2003; Enders et al., 2013; Taira, 2004; Yokoyama, 2007, 2008, 2011; Vo, 2018).

Single Instrumental Case Study

Yin (2014) suggests that case study is most appropriate for investigations of *how* and *what* questions, the kinds of questions asked in the present study, which can be more specifically identified as an instrumental case study because its intent is to understand a specific issue or problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An instrumental case study is adopted when researchers have “a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case” (Stake, 1995, p. 3). Given that the intent of my case study is to go deeply into the case to understand a specific problem—a specific puzzlement: the meaning of institutional autonomy in Vietnamese higher education—a single instrumental case study is an appropriate design.

Bounded System of Case Study

An essential feature of a case study is that the phenomenon under investigation is intrinsically bounded; otherwise, it does not qualify as a case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the present study, therefore, institutional autonomy was explored from the viewpoints of those individuals working within the bounded system of one Vietnamese public university. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that one way to evaluate the bounded system is to ask “how finite the data collection would be” (p. 39), that is, to ask about the planned number of participants. I discuss this issue further in the section on data collection where I specify the number of participants in this study.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis—the case to be studied (Yin, 2014)—which can be an entire system or one institution, is selected based on typicality, uniqueness, or success (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The unit of analysis in earlier studies that explored the concept of institutional autonomy

was either the entire higher education system or an entire group of institutions. For example, the unit of analysis in studies by Enders et al. (2013) and Yokoyama (2007, 2008) was the whole higher education system in the Netherlands and Japan, respectively. Harman's (1978) case study included the whole system of Australian colleges of advanced education. Taira (2004) adopted a single state in America as a case in which to discover how stakeholders perceive the concept of institutional autonomy. Most studies of institutional autonomy, however, focus on particular public universities as the unit of analysis for study. Yang et al. (2007), for example, selected two public universities representing the two most common types of public universities in China—one national and one provincial—to shed light on autonomy at Chinese universities. The case in Ordorika's (2003) study was the flagship university of Mexico's public higher education system. Following these scholars (Yang et al., 2007; Ordorika, 2003), I have selected for the present case study a single institution which I call University A.

Yang et al. (2007) and Ordorika (2003) selected their cases based on typicality and uniqueness—a national university, a provincial university, and a flagship of the public higher education system. Their sampling method is known as purposeful sampling. Because the purpose of their studies was to explore, understand, and gain insights about a phenomenon, cases had to be selected from which much could be learned (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Patton (2015) argues that:

The logic and the power of qualitative purposeful sampling derives from the emphasis on in-depth understanding of specific information-rich cases, from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. (p. 53)

Thus, I purposefully chose University A based on typicality, uniqueness, and success—which I explain further in the next section.

Description of the Case Study

I purposefully selected University A for the present study on the basis of its typicality, uniqueness, and success (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). University A is typical and unique for several reasons. It was one of the first ten public universities in Vietnam to be granted autonomy by the Vietnamese government in 2014 (World Bank, 2015). After five years of implementing the autonomy policy, and after many achievements in teaching and research activities, University A was one of the key public universities in Vietnam to be granted further autonomy in 2019. The process of implementing the autonomy policy at University A over the years from 2015 to 2019 has informed the modification of many crucial parts of the latest version of Vietnam's Higher Education Law. Having been granted the privilege and authority to make many decisions, the university has set precedents in the power negotiation process with the government and ministries.

In addition, University A has other characteristics that make it an important case to be studied. It is one of fourteen national key public universities in Vietnam and fully self-financing in terms of its operating and investing expenses. Although as it implements the autonomy policy, University A is still under the direct control of the MOET, which has definitely caused challenges for the university in terms of exercising its delegated decision-making authority, the university has stood out as a successful case of negotiating autonomy with the ministries. As an instrumental case study, then, University A is likely to prove information-rich and lead to discoveries and insights about the principles and mechanisms of institutional autonomy. It will showcase an exemplar of successful reform towards a new governance model that might lead the way for other Vietnamese public universities. As an attempt to explore the meaning, values, beliefs, and concerns held by participants about autonomy in a Vietnamese context, this

instrumental case study of University A may provide further lessons for policymakers and other university leaders about implementing the policy.

Another reason for selecting University A is that it is relevant to the theoretical framework and conceptual framework of the present study (Yin, 2014). University A is located in a region that demonstrates the most dynamic economic development in the country and university leaders there are more open to reform (and innovative policies such as autonomy) and are more flexible than leaders in other areas of the country. In other words, neoliberal trends are observable there. This is why University A has successfully implemented the autonomy policy and used its decision-making authority to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of its performance. In brief, I selected University A as my single case study because its particularity and characteristics are relevant to a framework for institutional autonomy that draws on state steering theory, the theoretical framework I adopted for this study.

Data Collection

Data for the present study were collected from policy documents on institutional autonomy and accountability released by the Vietnamese government; semi-structured interviews with seventeen senior leaders at one Vietnamese public university; and documents internal to the university that concern the university's implementation of autonomy policy.

Documents

The initial source of data for the present study comprises official documents concerning the autonomy policy. My first step was to conduct a systematic search for documents relevant to this topic of inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), documents that might be important in constructing the object of my analysis and the focus of my study, the institutional autonomy of Vietnamese public universities. I employed a purposeful method of text selection to capture the

most important documents containing information relevant to the research question. My inclusion criteria were designed to select official policy documents on autonomy and accountability released by the Vietnamese government as well as documents internal to University A concerning the implementation of the autonomy policy. Most of the policy texts written by government agencies were referenced in prior studies of the autonomy policy, in other policy documents, or in coverage of the policy in media such as national newspapers.

I assessed the authenticity of the documents by verifying the author, place, and date of release (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and reviewed them for background context prior to conducting interviews with participants (Yanow, 2000). After my preliminary review of documents and after my interviews with participants, I created a more selected list of policy texts for closer analysis. Some of the texts I had initially selected were excluded because the information they contained was irrelevant to the case of University A, but other texts were added based on the recommendation of participants, two of whom were working on the ministerial project on autonomy or as a policy advisor for the Vietnamese government. Most of the texts suggested by participants were internal university documents such as exchanges between University A's Rector and the ministries. This refining process helped me to select policies closely connected to the focus of my study and containing local knowledge.

One group of documents analyzed in the present study includes official policy documents on institutional autonomy and the accountability of Vietnamese higher education institutions, document released by government agencies between 1993, when the Vietnamese government first began to delegate autonomy to public universities, and 2019. These documents provide primary data and comprise most of the documents I collected for this study (see Appendix C for a list). They were produced by government agencies such as the Central Government, the National

Assembly, the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Finance, the MOET, and the Central Committee of Vietnam's Communist Party, and are available on the Vietnamese government's official website.

The three most important policies in this group of government documents are the Higher Education Reform Agenda (Central Government, 2005), the Revised Higher Education Law (2018), and Resolution 77 (Prime Minister, 2014b). The Revised Higher Education Law (2018) is referenced in recent studies of Vietnamese university governance reform (Le et al., 2019; Dao & Hayden, 2019) and was mentioned by participants in the present study as the most recent and comprehensive version covering the most important aspects of autonomy policy. In reporting my findings, I analyze and cite extensively the content of these crucial documents. This group of government documents also includes secondary sources of data such as the MOET's Evaluation Report on the implementation of autonomy policy in Vietnam (MOET, 2017) and the World Bank's Report on governance reform in Vietnam's higher education sector (World Bank, 2017). Some media coverage of the autonomy policy is included but, to ensure it is reliable, only that which is available on the government's website or in national newspapers.

A second group of documents analyzed in the present study comprises documents internal to University A that concern the university's implementation of autonomy policy. These are institutional documents, issued either by government agencies or from within the university itself. This group of documents includes documents that were exchanged between University A and the ministries during the policy negotiation and implementation process. I also include secondary sources of data such as Technical Report of University A, documents provided by participants, and media coverage of University A from the university's website and prestigious national newspapers. To protect the confidentiality of University A, I do not provide a list of their internal documents.

It is to be expected that the content concerning autonomy within documents from University A might be different from the content of similar documents from other public universities. While Resolution 77 enacted by the Prime Minister regulates the autonomy of Vietnamese public universities in general, Decision 6600 legally recognizes the individual autonomous status of University A, and that resolution's provisions, such as level of decision-making authority, is tailored specifically to University A—because, as specified in the Higher Education Law, the level of autonomy of a public university is determined by that individual university's accreditation status.

Interviews

A second source of data for the present study is a set of semi-structured interviews with senior leaders at University A. DeMarrais (2004) defines a research interview as a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on the questions related to a study. Of three types of interviews—highly structured, semi-structured, and unstructured—the semi-structured interview is the most popular method of data collection. A semi-structured interview involves a mix of more and less structured interview questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), but those questions have no predetermined wording or order, which allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to a participant's emerging viewpoint, and to new opinions and arguments on the topic. Semi-structured interviews have been used as the main data collection method in prior case studies (Yang et al., 2007; Ordorika, 2003; Taira, 2004) exploring the concept of institutional autonomy.

Data in this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with seventeen senior leaders at University A. I used a purposeful sampling method to select leaders and used email and telephone to contact and invite them to participate in my research. I was looking for information-

rich senior leaders who, since 2015, the year in which University A was officially granted its autonomous status, had had at least one year of experience in a leadership position there. These inclusion criteria would, I hoped, guarantee the selection of participants who had a thorough understanding of the implementation of autonomy policy at University A. I also aimed to recruit participants from different departments, offices, and administrative levels in the university’s organizational structure to sample different voices and perspectives on the issue under study.

As shown in Table 1, participants in the present study included one Rector, one Vice-Rector, eight Deans, and one Deputy Dean representing nine departments, and four Heads and two Deputy Heads representing six offices. These participants included members of the senior administration board and the University Council. The diverse leadership positions in the university’s governance structure allowed me to sample and explore different communities of meaning on autonomy.

Table 1

Leadership Position of Participants

Rector	Vice-Rector	Dean	Deputy Dean	Head	Deputy Head
1	1	8	1	4	2

These seventeen participants included fifteen male and two female leaders, with male senior leaders overrepresented at 88.24% and female senior leaders at 11.76%. Participants’ levels of education ranged from baccalaureate to doctoral degrees. As shown in Table 2, thirteen participants had doctoral degrees—one who had been promoted to the rank of professor and six who had been promoted to the rank of associate professor. One participant reported a bachelor’s degree and three participants reported a master’s degree as their highest level of formal education.

Table 2*Participants' Level of Education/Academic Title*

Professor with Doctorate	Associate Professor with Doctorate	Doctorate	Masters	BA
1	6	6	3	1

All participants reported more than one year of experience in leadership positions at University A since the university had implemented autonomy policy. Several key participants had many years of work experience on the autonomy policy in the role of policy advisor to the Vietnamese government or principal investigator for the ministerial project which informed the modification of the Higher Education Law. One participant had overseen the design and implementation of autonomy policy at University A since 2011. She had been invited by the Vietnamese ministries and by national television to share her experiences of implementing autonomy policy at this leading Vietnamese university. Another key participant was the Dean of one of the first international schools in Vietnam to successfully incorporate the autonomy policy. These key participants provided significant information and insights on the autonomy policy in Vietnamese higher education.

I prepared an interview guide but I allowed the participants to steer our discussions and I permitted my conversations to deviate from the guide. (See Appendix A for the interview guide and questions.) I conducted all interviews in person at participants' offices on the main campus of University A, in Vietnamese and tape-recorded if participants agreed. I then transcribed them and translated them into English. Ten participants consented to my recording their interviews. For the seven participants who declined to be recorded, I wrote notes immediately following our conversations and prepared from memory a transcript. To protect participants' identity, I assigned each a unique ID code such as A01 and B01. With a finite number of participants

identified at University A, the present study fulfills the boundary requirement of a qualitative instrumental case study.

Data Analysis

The data set for this study includes the government's policy documents, transcribed interviews, and University A's internal policy documents—all of which were subject to thematic analysis and interpretive policy analysis in a search for insights about the meaning of autonomy. In the following sections, I present the steps in data analysis separately for clarity. In practice, my data collection and analysis processes were intertwined; data analysis was in fact an iterative process of overlapping steps.

Thematic Analysis

I used thematic analysis to identify the meaning of institutional autonomy. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “All qualitative data analysis is inductive and comparative in the service of developing common themes or patterns or categories that cut cross the data” (p. 297). Through inductive coding methods, themes emerge from data through inductive reasoning (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasize that the researcher codes data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing framework. Thus, thematic analysis is data-driven, with themes being induced from data.

Braun and Clarke (2006) also note, however, that researchers cannot free themselves from their theoretical commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum. My formulation of interview questions and method of data coding were, therefore, unavoidably guided by my theoretical framework (state steering theory). My thematic analysis also followed a deductive logic of inquiry which tended to be driven by my theoretical lens. Overall, data analysis in the present study was followed by an abductive logic of inquiry in which I

simultaneously puzzled over empirical materials and theoretical literature (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Themes emerged as a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis, a back-and-forth movement between inductive and deductive reasoning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I followed the process of thematic coding recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). This process includes open coding—assigning codes to pieces of data—and axial coding—grouping open codes into categories or themes, a process I repeated until I had derived a set of findings. I applied six steps for creating the codes: (1) familiarizing myself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing a report as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). I used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, to facilitate my data management and data analysis because, as Creswell & Poth (2018) indicate, qualitative data analysis is a complex and time-consuming process. Three main themes emerged about the meaning of autonomy: (1) institutional autonomy is the right of a public university to make its own decisions; (2) institutional autonomy means a university is accountable for its decision-making; (3) institutional autonomy means a university is responsible for its decisions and finances.

Interpretive Policy Analysis

Aligning with the interpretivist paradigm in which this study is situated, I employed interpretive policy analysis to my data. Interpretive policy analysis is an approach to making sense of public policies that is built on the ontology and epistemology derived from interpretive philosophy (Yanow, 2007). Its central characteristic is its focus on meaning as situation-specific and highly contextualized. Specifically, interpretive policy analysis focuses on the language and artifacts used in policy documents and debates to understand what is meaningful to those

involved in the policy. According to Yanow (2000), *policy artifacts* are useful as they can be significant carriers of the policy meaning. The policy artifact carries and communicates different meaning held by different people. Specific artifacts are policy objects and metaphors. *Policy objects* are symbolic language used by actors to convey their understanding of policy concepts. For example, participants in my study use the policy object of tuition to communicate their understanding of autonomy. *Metaphor* is defined as the juxtaposition of two different elements in a single context to transfer meaning from a better-known element to a lesser-known element (Yanow, 2000). For example, a Vietnamese public university is referred to as *a bird locked in a cage* to indicate that the university has no freedom.

Yanow (2007) emphasizes that interpretive policy analysis focuses on figuring out policy artifacts, interpretive communities, and communities of meaning. *Interpretive communities* refer to the people that create, use, and do the interpretation of policy objects and metaphors. *Communities of meaning* refer to the meaning themselves being communicated through the policy artifacts. I followed the steps Yanow (2000) recommends: I first identified policy artifacts, including policy objects and metaphors, relevant to the institutional autonomy policy. I then identified the interpretive communities that created or interpreted those policy objects and metaphors and, as a third step, identified the various communities of meaning that were communicated through the artifacts. In the fourth step, I looked for points of conflict amongst different communities of meaning as well as different ways of seeing—different ways of framing that derived from different experiences and backgrounds of interpretive communities. Each frame entailed not only a construction of the autonomy policy but also an anticipation of appropriate governmental actions, which I identified in the final step by identifying the implications of different meanings for policy formulation, interventions, and actions.

Using the steps just outlined, I analyzed four policy objects (tuition fees, program of study, textbook, and recruitment of foreign scholars) and three metaphors (*a bird locked in a cage*, *a Vietnamese parent-children relationship*, and the saying that *when the cat is away, the mice will play*). These policy objects and metaphors were used by university leaders to articulate their interpretation of policy concepts on autonomy. In my analysis of metaphors, I explain the literal meaning of the metaphor, the symbolic meaning, and the value, belief, and feeling of the interpretive community that shares the metaphor. To map the architecture of meaning of autonomy, I accessed the local knowledge of university leaders through interviews and document analysis. My findings are presented in Chapter 7.

Trustworthiness

I used the following strategies to increase trustworthiness of the findings: triangulation, adequate engagement in data collection, reflexivity, member checking, and audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As Denzin suggests (1978, cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), triangulation amongst multiple methods of data collection and multiple sources of data can be utilized to confirm emerging findings. I used two methods to collect data—interviews and documents—and checked interview data against what was written in policy documents for both consistency and possible points of difference between legislation and practice (Cohen et al., 2011). I compared and cross-checked interview data collected from participants working in different departments, offices, and administrative levels of University A's organizational structure to identify different perspectives on the autonomy policy. These triangulations are a powerful strategy that increases the internal validity and credibility of the present study.

I used adequate engagement in data collection as a second strategy to increase the rigor of findings. I tried to get as close as possible to the local knowledge of participants and identify

what was meaningful to them concerning the autonomy policy. I determined the number of university leaders that needed to be interviewed based on the notion of saturation—the point during the interviews at which I began to hear the same information over again and knew that no new data would surface even if I conducted more interviews. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that sufficient time spent collecting data should be combined with a purposeful search for variation in the understandings of the phenomenon. Patton (2015) also notes that trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative study partially hinges on the researcher's integrity, which can be tested by searching for data that supports different explanations. Indeed, I looked for different communities of meaning, for variation in participants' understandings of policy concepts, and for contradictions and shared understandings articulated in the interviews. I also applied the strategy of discrepant case analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in which I looked for data that might disconfirm or challenge my expectations and emerging findings.

My third strategy for increasing trustworthiness is reflexivity. Qualitative research recognizes that a researcher's worldview and experiences can influence the conduct of a study, and that researchers must therefore clarify their positions and potential biases for their readers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used a journal to write memos about decisions I made during data collection, data analysis, and the writing of my findings. I describe my positionality in Chapter 1 so that readers of the present document can better understand why I chose the theoretical lens I use in this study and how I arrived at my particular methods for interpreting data.

I conducted a member checking procedure as a fourth method of ensuring trustworthiness. Also known as respondent validation, this procedure involves inviting participants to read and provide feedback on transcripts of their interviews. Before they were analyzed the raw data were returned to participants to be checked for accuracy and to determine if the contents still resonated

with their experience (Birt et al., 2016). Fifthly and finally, I used an audit trail to record all documentation used throughout the study.

Ethics

All ethical issues related to the execution of the present study—confidentiality requirements, the protection of information, preparation of letters of information and consent forms (see Appendix B), the right of participants to withdraw, and so on—were carefully attended to throughout the study which had been reviewed and approved by Western University’s Research Ethics Board before data collection began. No unforeseen risks existed for participants in this study, even though it was anticipated that they might experience discomfort about sharing their viewpoints on autonomy. Participants’ identities were treated as confidential and all data collected were used for research purposes only. I conducted all interviews in Vietnamese, recorded them, and translated them into English. Transcripts, records, consent forms, and other data were securely stored in my private residence in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed seven years after completion of the study.

All the data collected is considered strictly confidential. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, unique ID codes and pseudonyms are used for all participants and for the university that is the subject of the case study. All research participants were provided with copies of the transcription of their interviews so they could verify them for accuracy and make changes if they wished to do so. Once translated into English, participants had no further opportunity to review transcription, although the final report, written in English, will be disseminated to participants who wish to receive a copy. Participants were required to read an information letter about the project, and sign and return a consent letter in order to confirm their participation. The

consent form indicated they were volunteering to participate in the study and that they were free to withdraw or terminate their participation at any time.

Limitations

The main weakness of a qualitative case study is that findings from a single case cannot be generalized to a larger population or to other cases (Cohen et al., 2011). The findings of the present study, therefore, are limited to the case of University A—one Vietnamese public university. As well, the research design is limited to data that can be collected from available policy documents and willing research participants. The accuracy of qualitative interview data is restricted to the knowledge and viewpoints of leaders from University A that, it must be acknowledged, might contain biases.

In conclusion, I have presented in the present chapter how I conducted this study. To explore the meaning of autonomy in the context of Vietnamese higher education, I adopted a qualitative instrumental case study of one Vietnamese public university. I used thematic analysis and interpretive policy analysis to analyze data which include the Vietnamese government's policy documents, interviews with seventeen university leaders, and University A's internal documents. I also describe the procedures I adopted to increase trustworthiness of the findings, address ethical issues related to the execution of the present study, and identify limitations of a qualitative case study.

Chapter 5

Governance of Higher Education in Vietnam: The Shift to Institutional Autonomy Policy

To understand a policy, one must consider its context. The Vietnamese institutional autonomy policy that I investigate in this study must, therefore, be situated within the historical, political, social, and cultural context of Vietnam. The purpose of the present chapter is to lay out the context in which autonomy policy has been enacted and thereby to facilitate an understanding of the tensions between decision-making authority and accountability which I will present in Chapter 6 and 7. The present chapter is structured in three parts. First, I describe the centralized governance system of higher education in Vietnam—its history, culture, politics, and weaknesses—in order to rationalize the shift to autonomy policy. I then trace the development of autonomy policy and its new governance structure, and I review the accountability measures implemented by the Vietnamese government over autonomous universities.

The Centralized Governance Model in Vietnam’s Higher Education System

In this section, I describe the centralized governance system of higher education in Vietnam, with a focus on its weaknesses, to rationalize the shift to the implementation of autonomy policy. I first briefly outline the old centralized governance model with many levels of control, which is situated in its history, culture, and politics. I then explain the consequence of the centralized model in which the higher education system has been overwhelmed and the government has been under pressure to decentralize its governance system.

An Old Centralized Governance Model with Many Levels of Control

The setting for the present study is Vietnam—a developing country in Southeast Asia. A centralized governance model adopted from Soviet-bloc countries has been embedded in Vietnam’s higher education system since 1954 and continues to exert a strong impact (Harman et

al., 2010). Indeed, Vietnam is one of the few remaining former Soviet-bloc countries that, until recently, has been reluctant to grant autonomy to public higher education institutions (Dao & Hayden, 2010). The centralized model exerts three levels of control in Vietnam's higher education system.

At the highest level, the MOET plays a key role in the education system. The MOET has the power to regulate and approve curriculum frameworks for all training courses and programs including content, structures, number of subjects, and duration of training (Harman et al., 2010). The MOET also manages such important decisions as the number of staff, enrollments, tuition fees, and the appointment of Rectors. Furthermore, expenditure at institutional levels is subject to regulations distributed by the state and other related ministries such as the Ministry of Finance. Apparently, in Vietnam, state control is deeply institutionalized.

On another level, apart from the MOET, most Vietnamese higher education institutions are under line-ministry control—a characteristic of higher education systems in Soviet-bloc countries (Tran et al., 2017; Tran, 2014; Hayden & Lam, 2007). The University of Agriculture, for example, is under the governance of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the University of Health is under the control of the Ministry of Health. Most countries arising out of the Soviet system have abolished this control mechanism—Hungary, for instance, removed it in 1993, and China made the same choice in 1998 (Harman et al., 2010)—but this ascendancy instrument still exists in Vietnam and the line ministries continue to have strong voices in the decision-making process of higher education institutions through the provision of regulations, approvals, and funds.

A third level of control exists within each Vietnamese public university. This level comprises a Committee of the Communist Party, the duty of which is to maintain a socialist direction and Communist ideology, and to guarantee that all institutional activities are consistent

with Marxism, Leninism, and Ho Chi Minh's ideology (Dao, 2015). Resembling the situation in China, the colonizer of Vietnam for more than 1000 years, two power systems exist within a Vietnamese public university—an academic managerial structure and a Party system (Pan, 2006). While the former deals with teaching and research matters, the latter makes decisions on such affairs as the strategic plan, personnel appointment, and ideological direction. The Party Secretary leads the Party system, and the Rector leads the academic administrative system. In many higher education institutions, the Rector is also the Party Secretary with extensive authority (Tran, 2014; Tran et al., 2017). The Party Committee is always the leading force and has absolute power within a public university.

With these three layers of control in place, public universities do not have much room to use their own voices and make their own decisions. Most significantly, the effectiveness and efficiency of university performance are obstructed because any decision, small or big, requires approvals from many authorized ministries and individuals, a process that takes much time to complete. The highly centralized governance system is the result not only of the Vietnamese Communist Party's unified leadership (Hayden & Lam, 2007) but also of a culture in which power is distant and unevenly distributed.

An Overwhelming Higher Education System under the Centralized Model

In 2018, Vietnam had 419 universities and colleges distributed in three regions—North, Central, and South—with different histories, cultures, and politics, and 2.2 million students, a significant number for a small, developing country in Asia (Hoang, 2018). The transition from elite to mass higher education has multiplied the number of universities and student enrolments since 2000 (World Bank, 2019). The centralized educational system has become too large and required excessive expenditures from the national budget. The financial burdens of the

centralized system, subsidized as it is by ministries which are responsible for any financial losses within public universities, are putting a lot of pressure on the government (Tran, 2014). In recent years, the quality of higher education is also a big challenge in Vietnam which by 2016 had an alarming number of unemployed graduates (160,000) (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016). As Dao and Hayden (2019) report, Vietnam's higher education sector has fallen behind and become incapable of meeting emerging social needs. As a consequence, the state is under pressure to decentralize its administrative system and transfer decision-making power to higher education institutions.

In summary, the outstanding problems—inefficiency of university performance, financial burdens, and poor higher education quality—indicate the weaknesses of the existing centralized education governance system in Vietnam and signify the need for a new model. Vietnam's government has realized the old administrative system is no longer appropriate in the new context of market-driven dynamics where public universities are taking new roles as key drivers in the knowledge economy. Remarkably, the last two decades of the twentieth century also witnessed the downfall of the Communist system which privileged a centralized mechanism. The Vietnamese government has, therefore, attempted to decentralize its governance system and enact autonomy policy, as a solution for the challenges it faces.

The Shift to the Autonomy Policy in Vietnam's Higher Education System

In the following section I provide a review of key policy documents on autonomy and of the role of the University Council, a new official structure under the autonomous mechanism.

The Development of Autonomy Policy in Vietnam's Higher Education System

With the implementation of the Innovation policy in 1986, Vietnam's centrally planned economy gave way to a socialist market economy. This move was intended to decentralize

administrative responsibilities and restructure the education system in order to link education to economic development—the key message in recent higher education policies (Madden, 2014). Since 1993, the Vietnamese government has released many policy documents focused on giving autonomy to public universities.

The specific concept of “institutional autonomy” of higher education institutions in Vietnam was used for the first time, in Resolution 04-NQ/HNTW, dated January 14th, 1993. This was an important legal document ratified by the Communist Party of Vietnam that mentioned the need to “increase institutional autonomy of higher education institutions” (Central Committee of Vietnam’s Communist Party, 1993, p. 5). However, no further detail was provided about the meaning of autonomy, or the kind or degree of autonomy that a public university was to be given. Also, in 1993, the Prime Minister released Decree 90 to clearly signal that Vietnam’s higher education system would significantly depart from the centralized model (Le et al., 2019).

The most significant effort to decentralize the whole higher education system and delegate decision-making power to public universities was made in 2005 with the promulgation by the Central Government of the Education Law and the Higher Education Reform Agenda. In particular, Article 14 of Education Law (2005) provided that “the state will decentralize the educational management system, [and] strengthen autonomy and self-responsibility of educational institutions” (p. 5). Dao (2009) argued that with this statement, the state indicated its strong support for the autonomy of public universities. However, the statement was criticized as ambiguous and conflicting with another statement in the Education Law (2005) which said that “the state centrally manages the national education system in terms of objectives, programs, curriculums, education plans, teachers’ standards, examination regulations, degrees, certificates, and the educational quality” (p. 5).

The Higher Education Reform Agenda (Central Government, 2005) was adopted by the government as a fundamental and comprehensive renovation of Vietnam's higher education system during the 2006–2020 period. Specifically, the Higher Education Reform Agenda indicated the government's attempt at and commitment to decentralization by “switching public higher education institutions to operate under the autonomous mechanism whereby they shall have the full legal entity; have the right to decide on and bear responsibility for training, research, organization, human resource management, and finance” (p. 6). These provisions, if fully implemented, would have resulted in a significant transfer of authority from the state to public universities (Dao, 2009). In particular, the government declared that one of its most important tasks was “abolishing the mechanism of line-ministry control over public universities” (Central Government, 2005, p. 6). The elimination of line-ministry control was a bold idea, one which meant public universities would be no longer under the control of ministries, yet, no specific timeline was given for the process.

The Reform Agenda also created a new relationship between the state and higher education institutions by establishing a University Council which would represent the state's ownership of public universities. The new governance structure of the University Council would give higher education institutions more voice and authority in the decision-making process. Most importantly, for the first time, the Reform Agenda proposed the development of a higher education law to legalize the autonomous status of higher education institutions. With these provisions, the Reform Agenda, despite being too ambitious, was evaluated as the most innovative legal document for Vietnam's higher education reform (Dao & Hayden, 2019; Le et al., 2019), with its emphasis on transferring decision-making power from the ministries to universities and developing a new relationship between them.

The next critical juncture in the autonomy policy occurred on June 18th, 2012, when the Higher Education Law was officially passed by the National Assembly after six years of drafting and revising (Dang, 2013). This Law became the most imperative legal document to recognize the autonomy of higher education institutions, clearly stated in Article 32 as follows: “Higher education institutions are institutionally autonomous in their primary activities in areas of organization and human resource management, finance and assets, training, research, and technology, international cooperation, and quality assurance” (Higher Education Law, 2012, p. 16). For the first time, the concept of “institutional autonomy” was emphasized in the law as the right of public universities and was used 16 times (Le, 2019). Other chapters and articles of the Law provided details on the authority of higher education institutions: Chapter IV on training activities, Chapter V on research and technology activities, Chapter VI on international cooperation, and Chapter X on finance and assets (Higher Education Law, 2012). Article 34, Clause 1, states that, “Higher education institutions are institutionally autonomous in determining enrollment numbers, are self-responsible for disclosing enrollments and other conditions that guarantee their education quality” (Higher Education Law, 2012, p. 17). Notably, the term “institutional autonomy” was usually juxtaposed with the term "self-responsibility," which was used eight times in the Higher Education Law (2012) (Le, 2019).

Generally speaking, the establishment of the Higher Education Law was significant for two reasons: It legalized in a separate law the autonomous status of public universities, thereby realizing one of three important goals of the Higher Education Reform Agenda (Dang, 2013). And, it consolidated in one single document a vast number of regulations on the autonomy of public universities that had been incrementally approved since 1993 (Le et al., 2019; Dao & Hayden,

2019). The Higher Education Law was criticized, however, for its lack of an official definition for autonomy and its lack of details on how to achieve stipulated goals (Marklein, 2019).

In 2014, the Central Government released Resolution 77 to push universities to work, during the period from 2014 to 2017, towards the autonomy mechanism. Article 1 of Resolution 77 (2014) clearly stated that “Public universities committing to self-finance all operating and investing expenses are comprehensively autonomous and self-responsible” (p. 1). Dao and Hayden (2019) interpreted “comprehensively autonomous” as meaning that public universities would be given a much higher level of autonomy under the condition that they no longer receive funds from the national budget for operating and investing activities. In other words, a public university’s autonomy could not be taken for granted but would be conditional, and university leaders would be required to consider a trade-off between level of autonomy and level of governmental funding. In essence, Resolution 77 was another step taken by the government to advance the progress of autonomy policy and is evaluated as the second most significant policy document of its kind, just after the Higher Education Law of 2012 (University A, 2017). The policy also provides greater detail about the autonomy of public universities in teaching and research activities, organization and human resource management, finance, and investment and procurement (Prime Minister, 2014b). So far, Resolution 77 is the most specific policy document on autonomy among all Vietnamese public universities (University A, 2017). Together with the required condition on self-financing, Resolution 77 nearly serves as a contract between the state and university.

The years 2018 and 2019 marked other milestones in the evolution of autonomy policy in Vietnam with the release of the Revised Higher Education Law, Resolution 99, and Decree 99. All three of these crucial documents were revised and updated based on the results of the implementation of Resolution 77. Specifically, the Revised Higher Education Law was passed by

the National Assembly on November 11st, 2018. For the first time, a definition of autonomy was provided in Article 4, Clause 11 (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018):

Institutional autonomy is the right of a higher education institution to determine its own objectives and to select the way to implement its objectives, to make decisions on and to be held accountable for its teaching, research, organization, personnel, finance, assets, and other activities on the basis of the law and its capacity. (p. 2)

The revised law has granted more authority than ever to public universities, a move which is said to “untie public universities to the best” that the government can (Hong, 2018). In 2019, the government released Resolution 99 to expand, from 2019 through 2023, autonomy for three key public universities. The rights to recruit foreign scholars without work permits and apply for higher retirement ages for a Chairman of University Council are considered to provide the most exceptional sovereignty a Vietnamese public university can enjoy (Central Government, 2019a). Also, Decree 99 (Central Government, 2019b) was released to provide specific regulations and implementation guidelines for the Revised Higher Education Law.

In summary, between 1993 and 2019, an incremental change in the contents of autonomy policy gave more decision-making authority to higher education institutions. The most significant milestone occurred in 2005 when the Higher Education Reform Agenda was released but it was not until the Higher Education Law was passed in 2012 that the legal autonomy status of public universities was recognized. The year 2014 was also critical with the official renovation in the working mechanism of public universities taking place. Obviously, these legislative and regulatory frameworks officially authorize the autonomy of public universities in Vietnam. I provide an overview of major changes in relation to institutional autonomy policy in Table 3.

Table 3 Overview of Major Changes in Relation to Institutional Autonomy Policy

Number	Name of policy documents	Years	Major changes in relation to autonomy policy
1	Resolution No. 04-NQ/HNTW	1993	The term institutional autonomy was used for the first time to mention the need to increase autonomy of higher education institutions.
2	Decree No. 90/ND-TTg	1993	The policy clearly signaled that Vietnam's higher education system would significantly depart from the centralized model.
3	Education Law No. 38/2005/QH11	2005	The law indicated the most significant effort to decentralize the whole higher education system and delegate decision-making power to public universities.
4	Resolution No. 14/2005/NQ-CP (Higher Education Reform Agenda)	2005	The policy document indicated the government's commitment to decentralization by switching public universities to operate under the autonomous mechanism. It proposed to develop a higher education law to legalize the autonomous status of higher education institutions, abolish line-ministry control, and establish the University Council.
5	Higher Education Law No. 08/2012/QH2013	2012	The law became the most imperative legal document to recognize the autonomy of higher education institutions.
6	Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP	2014	Resolution No. 77 advanced the progress of autonomy policy and was evaluated as the second most significant policy document on autonomy, just after the Higher Education Law. The policy document indicated the inclusion of financial responsibility in the university's autonomy.
7	Revised Higher Education Law No. 34/2018/QH14	2018	The Higher Education Law was amended and for the first time, a definition of institutional autonomy was provided.
8	Resolution No. 99/NQ-CP	2019	The policy document expanded autonomy for three key public universities.
9	Decree No. 99/2019/ND-CP	2019	The policy document provided specific regulations and implementation guidelines for the Revised Higher Education Law.
10	University Charter No. 58/2010/QĐ-TTg	2010	Public universities were officially mandated to establish a University Council.
11	University Charter No. 70/2014/ QĐ-TTg	2014	The University Charter reinforced the roles and authority of the University Council.
12	Resolution No. 89/NQ-CP	2016	The policy document indicated that the University Council should play a similar role to a Board of Directors in the private sector and had a clear

			accountability relationship with the Board of Rectors.
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The Role of University Council

The Higher Education Law (2012) and University Charter (2014) require that autonomous universities establish a University Council at the highest level of a university governance structure and as representative of the owner and stakeholders. The University Council has a tenure of five years and at least fifteen members, from both inside and outside the public university. The Chair of University Council is appointed by the MOET. The University Council meets at least once every three months and meets unpredictably at the request of the Chair, the Rector, or at least one-third of the council members. With the newly emerging official structure since the shift to institutional autonomy policy, decisions within a public university could be made and approved by the University Council instead of being reported to the ministries for approval.

The mechanism of the University Council was introduced to Vietnamese public universities' governance structure in 2003 to signal the delegation of administrative rights from the state's agencies to higher education institutions (MOET, 2017; Dang, 2013). Yet it was not until the University Charter was approved in 2010 that public universities were officially mandated to establish a University Council. Specifically, the University Council would exercise responsibilities on behalf of the state to approve the university's institutional objectives and strategies, guidelines for organizational structures, staff recruitment and training policies, and policies regarding institutional finances, property, facilities, and equipment (University Charter, 2010). The University Council can also approve matters such as tuition fees and conduct an annual performance evaluation of Rectors and Vice-Rectors. As Dao and Hayden (2019) note, this legislation is consistent with the government's commitment to delegating autonomy to public universities. In 2014, the University Charter was amended according to Decision

70/2014/QĐ-TTg to reinforce the roles and authority of the University Council, except with regard to the appointment of Rectors.

The Higher Education Law continued to emphasize the power of the University Council to make important decisions on higher education institutions' development plans and organizational structures, and to supervise the implementation of their own decisions. Article 16 (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018) makes clear that “The University Council is a governance structure that serves as a representative for the owner and stakeholders” (p. 6). In general, the laws specify functions of University Councils as being similar to Western principles of trusteeship (Marklein, 2019); the Councils are responsible for managing the university's resources and monitoring the performance of university leaders.

In addition to the Higher Education Law and University Charter, other important policies such as Resolution 77, Decision 6600, and Resolution 89 have been put in place to reinforce the roles of the University Council. In particular, Resolution 89, issued by the Cabinet in 2016, indicates that the University Council should play a similar role to a Board of Directors in the private sector and have a clear accountability relationship with the Board of Rectors, yet no explanation was provided about how this accountability relationship should function. In addition, all public universities must remain under the absolute leadership of the Communist Party, although the Rector often holds the position of Communist Party Secretary—the most powerful individual within a public university (MOET, 2017). Overall, the legislative framework released over the past ten years has continued to emphasize and reinforce the role and authority of the University Council.

A Discussion on the Move to Autonomy Policy

The legislative framework described above indicates that the Vietnamese government has a strong commitment to conferring autonomy on public universities. Policy documents show an

incremental change in the degree of autonomy of public universities and demonstrate that autonomous public universities are no longer subject to ministerial control and approval as they were in the earlier, centralized governance mechanism. Instead, University Council now approves all requests, and reports to related ministries.

Policy implementation in Vietnam, however, is being carried out tentatively and experimentally because the government wants to see society's reaction (Tran, 2009). This explains the release of many revised policy versions since the autonomy concept was first introduced in 1993 (Dang, 2013). Further, apart from relevant laws, public universities are subject to many other policy artifacts—decrees, resolutions, decisions, guidelines—issued by many ministries and state management agencies (Dao, 2009). Each policy document also has many updated and modified versions: The Higher Education Law (2012), for example, was revised in 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2018. As well, after a law is ratified, policy actors must wait for the release of guidelines such as Resolution 77 or Decree 99 to be clear about how to implement it.

Many years after the release of the Reform Agenda (Central Government, 2005) and Higher Education Law (2012), many important items, such as the removal of line-ministry control over public universities, are still on a wish list. Indeed, since the 1990s when the state attempted to bring all public higher education institutions under the administration of only one ministry, the MOET, there has been intense resistance from many ministries (Dao & Hayden, 2010). Nevertheless, the line-ministry control mechanism is providing related ministries with benefits and privileges in public universities. For example, with the power to introduce staff for leadership positions, including Rectors, ministerial employees can make considerable gains (Dao & Hayden, 2010). Remarkably, “there is a well-established asking-approving mechanism within the budget allocation where universities must ask the MOET and line-ministries for approvals in

matters related to budget, projects, personnel, infrastructure, curriculum; and ministries then approve "privileges" only with extensive lobby, often through beneficial arrangements" (Dao & Hayden, 2010, p. 136-137). Apparently, these privileges will disappear when the line-ministry control is removed, which justifies a strong resistance to this reform policy. In Vietnam, ministries are relatively powerful and they are competing with each other to affect how public funds are allocated in the higher education system (Dao, 2009). Therefore, the effort to eliminate line ministries to increase autonomy for Vietnamese public universities has so far seemed impractical and unfeasible.

The new structure of University Council is also facing many challenges in practice, due to the power struggle with the Communist Party inside a public university. The Revised Higher Education Law (2018) requires each Vietnamese public university has a Committee of Communist Party. This is the leading force with absolute power to maintain a socialist direction and communist ideology for all university activities. With the power of Communist Party, the role and function of the Chair of University Council written in the law is in question (Dao & Hayden, 2010). The MOET (2017) reports that six of 23 autonomous universities do not establish a University Council. The main reason for this resistance is that public universities do not see the value of the Chair of University Council when the Rector, who is also the Chair of the Communist Party, is the most powerful individual in a public university (Tran et al., 2017). Public universities are also reluctant to establish University Councils because they do not want to be burdened with an additional level of accountability (Dao & Hayden, 2019). They are already held accountable to the MOET, line ministries, and other related state instrumentalities—which by no means will disappear in the near future.

The Evolution of Accountability in the Vietnamese Government's Policy on Autonomy

Together with the implementation of the autonomy policy, the Vietnamese government has also released many policy documents on accountability. Here, I review the evolution and features of accountability in Vietnam's higher education system.

Controversial Concepts of Accountability and Self-Responsibility

Accountability of public universities is a relatively new and controversial concept in Vietnam's policies and discourses (Hoang, 2017). Before the concept of accountability was officially used in the Revised Higher Education Law (2018), it was the term self-responsibility that was always written right after the concept of institutional autonomy in legal documents. This term has led to a misunderstanding amongst policy actors that accountability is the same as self-responsibility (Vo, 2018; Hoang, 2017). In fact, these two concepts are very different. According to Article 4 (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018), "Accountability is the responsibility of a higher education institution to report and to make transparent information to learners, society, authorized management agencies, owners, and other stakeholders about its compliance with regulations, laws, and its commitments" (p. 2). In Vietnam, this means that accountability refers to the obligation of an organization or individual to provide information on, and/or justification for, their activities to stakeholders (Brinkerhoff, 2004). Self-responsibility, on the other hand, means that a public university must be responsible for its own decisions in front of the law and authorized management agencies (Central Government, 2006, Article 3). Basically, an organization is responsible for its own performance and any financial loss caused by its own decisions. In the centralized model, the government subsidized all financial aspects and was responsible for any financial loss that a public university experienced (Tran, 2014). While accountability is a concept that is closely related to steering and control, self-responsibility emphasizes who is responsible for

the consequences of a decision made by an organization. Ngo (2006) also argues that the usage of the term self-responsibility caused a misunderstanding that an autonomous entity is free in organizing its activities and is accountable to itself only, not to other stakeholders. Therefore, in the Revised Higher Education Law, the National Assembly replaced "self-responsibility" with "accountability," with an official definition for accountability.

Types of Accountability Measures

There are three main kinds of accountability measures: the state audit, accreditation and quality assurance, and regulations and reporting requirements. Public universities are subject to state audits on financial matters. Specifically, Article 32 (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018) required that public universities must “perform audits of financial statements, annual reports, investment, and procurement” (p. 18). If universities use the public budget, they are responsible for managing and utilizing the budget according to the state’s Budget Law (Higher Education Law, 2012, Article 66). Public universities must also "provide justifications on salary, additional incomes, and other benefits of university leaders at the Conference of staff, state officials, and employees” (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018, Article 32, p. 18).

Accreditation and quality assurance, written in a variety of legal documents including laws, decrees, circulars, and decisions, is a key accountability measure intended to assess the educational quality of Vietnamese public universities. Specifically, Article 17 (Education Law, 2005) states, "Accreditation is the key instrument to evaluate the extent of implementing educational objectives, programs, and contents of educational institutions" (p. 38). Article 17 also specifies that accreditation shall be periodically conducted by MOET, with results being made public (Education Law, 2005). The concept of quality assurance was officially legalized in the Higher Education Law (2012), specifying the linkage between accreditation results and

degree of autonomy of a public university that the university will have a higher level of autonomy which is equivalent to its capacity, ranking results, and accreditation results. The university's capacity includes elements such as infrastructure, learning facilities, the number of professors, lecturers, and its ability to cover its operating and investing expenses.

The Revised Higher Education Law (2018) contained many significant changes by, for example, naming accreditation status as a condition for student recruitment and autonomy in different aspects. Article 32, Clause 6 (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018) required public universities to "explain and justify the implementation of quality standards and policies, regulations, and implementation of regulations of higher education institutions; [and to] bear responsibilities with the law for failing to comply with regulations, committed to ensuring operational quality" (p. 18). Apart from the laws, a variety of policies set out regulations for accreditation and quality assurance activities—Circular 12/2017/TT-BGDDT on institutional accreditation, Circular 04/2016/TT-BGDDT on programmatic accreditation, Circular 60/2012/TT-BGDDT on external reviewers, and Circular 61/2012/TT-BGDDT on the establishment, closure, and operations of accrediting centers—all of which are issued by the MOET.

Areas such as finance, personnel, teaching, research, investment, construction, and international cooperation of public universities are subject to many regulations, and reporting requirements issued by different ministries. For example, the determination of tuition fees is subject to regulations in Decree 86; personnel issues are under the strict control of the Ministry of Home Affairs; the recruitment of foreign scholars is subject to regulations of the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs. The Revised Higher Education Law (2018) also makes public universities responsible for "submitting periodical and/or irregular reports to owners and authorized management agencies" and for "reporting annual financial statements and other

contents publicly and truthfully on the website following MOET's regulations" (p. 18, Article 32, Clause 6).

Levels of Accountability

Among many kinds of accountability measures, public universities are accountable to a number of levels of management, government ministries being the main level. In addition to the MOET—the highest state management agency for the country's education, twelve ministries are engaged in the line-governance of higher education institutions (Dang, 2013). Across the system, MOET provides regulations, but responsibility for ensuring compliance is spread across a range of ministries—some of which independently set their own protocols. The Ministry of Science and Technology, for instance, develops a discrete agenda for determining national research priorities as well as for allocating the budget (Harman et al., 2010). At another level, the Higher Education Law (2012) requires that a Communist Party Committee be established within every public university, which means that key decisions are still subject to the state's approval (Marklein, 2019). As well, public universities are accountable to society and must disclose on their websites the following information: lecturers for each major; criteria for calculating enrollment numbers; enrollment number for each major; and, a list of admitted and graduated students for each of the three most recent academic years.

Generally speaking, accountability as a concept is controversial and has many types of measures and many levels. Yet, to date, the accountability system in Vietnam is evaluated as weak and still in its infancy (Vo, 2018; Vo & Lofgren, 2016). In fact, the system is mostly limited to making regulations and ensuring that reporting requirements to the authorized administrative levels are met, especially to the ministries. While three upper levels of the Vietnamese Government—the National Assembly, the Central Government, and the Prime Minister—enact policy documents on

autonomy, the Ministries, especially MOET, ratify most of the policy documents on accountability. With many levels and types of accountabilities, laws and regulations overlap but are not updated synchronously or in timely fashion (MOET, 2017). As a consequence, any one policy content may be subject to contradictory regulations of different administrative levels, which causes confusion and delay in the implementation process. For example, while public universities are granted the right to set tuition fee levels under the Higher Education Law (2012), Decree 86 (2015) regulates specific tuition frameworks for programs (Hoang, 2017). In another case, public universities are subject to different financial regulations in the Higher Education Law and the State's Budget Law (released by the National Assembly), and in Decree 16 (released by the Central Government), in which public universities are treated in another category as public service delivery units. Furthermore, owing to the limited capacity of accrediting agencies, a large number of regulations on quality assurance raises concerns over the feasibility of implementation.

In sum, I have here provided an overview of accountability in the Vietnamese government's policy documents about institutional autonomy. It can be seen that many accountability measures on activities of public universities exist although they are handed over decision-making authorities. It has, therefore, been argued that autonomy in a Vietnamese context always seems to be conditional and regulatory (Tran, 2014).

Chapter 6

Analysis of Documents

The purpose of the present study is to develop a better understanding of institutional autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education system. In this chapter, I present thematic findings from a document analysis that reveals the meaning of autonomy in that system. The documents include policy texts released by the Vietnamese government and internal documents used during the implementation of the autonomy policy at University A (a Vietnamese public university I selected for the present study). The findings indicate that autonomy is the right of a public university to make its own decisions but that it also means the university is accountable for its decisions and is self-responsible for financial resources. Collectively, three issues—decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility—are bound in a mutually dependent relationship to form the meaning of autonomy.

The Meaning of Institutional Autonomy in Policy Documents

In this section, I present findings concerning the meaning of institutional autonomy as that word is used in policy documents. As described in Chapter 4, Methodology, I used thematic analysis and interpretive policy analysis to analyze policy texts for insights on the meaning of autonomy. These insights are derived from policy documents that represent the interpretive community of legislators and policymakers. Although sub-communities may well exist within among these legislators and policymakers, I assume for the purposes of the present study that they are one interpretive community—because the understandings of autonomy I identified are based on my reading and analysis of their policy documents. In the next chapter, I focus on the analysis of interviews with university actors and present understandings of autonomy from different interpretive communities. Three themes emerged from the policy documents

concerning the meaning of autonomy: (a) autonomy is the right of a public university to make its own decisions on teaching, research, organization, personnel, and finance; (b) autonomy means University A is accountable for its decision-making; and (c) autonomy means University A is responsible for its own financial resources and the consequences of its financial decisions. Three concepts—decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility—are interconnected to define the meaning of autonomy.

Autonomy as the University’s Right to Make Decisions

As stated in the laws, autonomy, is, first and foremost, the right of University A to make its own decisions. The autonomous right of Vietnamese public universities was written into law for the first time in the Education Law (2005) and amended in the Higher Education Law (2012) and the Revised Higher Education Law (2018). Autonomy is officially defined in Article 4 of the Revised Higher Education Law (2018) as follows:

Institutional autonomy is the right of a higher education institution to determine its own objectives and to select the way to implement its objectives, *to make its own decisions on* [emphasis added] and to be held accountable for its teaching, research, organization, personnel, finance, assets, and other activities on the basis of the law and its capacity. (p. 2)

In this definition, the word *right* is used to emphasize autonomy as the power or authority of a public university to make own decisions. The concepts of *authority* and *power* are repeatedly used in the laws and other policy documents concerning university autonomy. For example, Article 13 of Decree 99 (Central Government, 2019b) states that “public universities have the *authority* [emphasis added] to design and implement internal regulations on admission, teaching, science, technology, and collaboration within the legal framework” (p. 17). This means that University A does not need to seek approval from state governing bodies for any of these

activities. Furthermore, strong words such as *have the right to implement*, *be proactive to regulate*, and *be autonomous in* are frequently used in policy texts to describe, emphasize, and clarify the rights of a public university. And this right is the right of the university to *make its own decisions*—to decide what to do on its own and at its own discretion. Article 1 of Resolution 77 (Prime Minister, 2014a), for example, states that “public universities *make their own decisions* [emphasis added] on teaching activities such as training programs, teaching methods, examination and assessment of learning outcomes, textbooks, learning materials, and managing degrees” (p. 2). This means University A, not the MOET, makes decisions about teaching activities. Throughout the documents, the words *making decisions* are repeatedly used—ten times in Resolution 77, for example, and four times in the Higher Education Law (2012)—to signal the public university’s decision-making authority.

In brief, autonomy is about the right of a public university to make decisions; words such as *right*, *power*, and *authority*, accompanied by strong action verbs help to articulate the primary meaning of autonomy as *decision-making* authority. This meaning is significant because it marks a change in the state-university relationship—a new relationship in which University A is empowered as an autonomous entity to decide matters on its own, actively and independently, instead of being subject to state approval as in the former governance system. A University Council replaces government ministries for the performance of such functions as approving expenditures or appointing a Rector. University A has gained more authority to act on its own in its relationship with the ministries.

As the literature suggests, formal decision-making authority is of utmost importance in a governance structure, because it defines the role and function of a university in its relationship with the state (Donina & Paleari, 2019). In addition, the term *right* defines University A’s

autonomy as a legal status enhanced to a high level which, once granted, is not easy to take back. Legally autonomous status also implies that the state's direct control in setting traditional a priori regulations and forcing universities to comply with them must be changed so as not to violate the university's new autonomy. Basically, the meaning of autonomy as decision-making authority is consistent with the literature—autonomy is first about the university's authority to make its own decisions (Verhoest et al., 2005). Policy documents also provide details on the decision-making authority that University A has in the areas of finance, teaching, research, organization, and personnel. I provide a detailed analysis of these decision-making authorities below.

Decision-Making Authority on Finance. University A has gained significant decision-making authority on financial matters, especially on tuition fees and use of revenues.

Specifically, the university can make decisions about tuition—the primary source of revenue of autonomous universities in Vietnam. It also enjoys privileges not enjoyed by Vietnamese public universities that have not gained autonomous status. Concerning revenues, the university has been granted significant authority to use its own capital for its own spending purposes.

Ultimately, University A has gained strong financial autonomy.

Tuition Fees. Tuition fees are paid by students to compensate universities for part or all of the costs of the students' education (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018). My analysis reveals two critical findings concerning tuition fees: (a) University A can define tuition levels without being subject to any limitations by the state; and (b) income from tuition is tax-exempt and can be deposited in commercial banks to earn high interest. My document analysis indicates a major change in University A's decision-making authority on tuition fees—from being strictly restricted to stringent caps set by the state (Higher Education Law, 2012; Central Government, 2015b) to being permitted to determine tuition at its own discretion (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018).

Although autonomy is legalized as a right of public universities, Article 65 of the Higher Education Law (2012) states that “public universities are proactive in defining tuition fees within the stringent caps set by the government” (p. 31). Two points need to be clarified in terms of the language used here. The word *proactive*, not the word *autonomous*, is used to describe the right to determine tuition fees. Autonomous means self-government, indicating more independence and freedom than the word proactive which only means a university can take an active role in controlling a situation (Barber, 2004). While autonomy means universities have more power and higher status (Ørberg & Wright, 2019), proactive signals that the state is not prepared to transfer power. It also means that the right to define tuition must be exercised within the state’s limits, that is, within stringent caps. Furthermore, Clause 2 of Article 65 of the Higher Education Law (2012) emphasizes that “the government regulates the content and approach to define tuition levels and caps on tuition for public universities” (p. 30). The policy language clearly indicates that in 2012 public universities were not autonomous concerning tuition fees.

Strict regulations concerning tuition fees are elaborated in another policy document titled Decree 86 (Central Government, 2015b). According to Article 5, Clause 1, of this document, a ceiling of 17.5 million VND (Vietnamese currency) was set on annual tuition fees per undergraduate student for the academic years between 2015 and 2018. Tuition fees paid by one student at University A for the years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 were 14.5 million VND and 16.5 million VND respectively, both of which totals were lower than the ceiling of 17.5 million VND (Prime Minister, 2014a). Despite University A’s autonomous status, the fee limitation was not lifted, leaving the university with little room to maneuver.

University A’s authority gains momentum, however, with Article 65 of the Revised Higher Education Law (2018), which states that “higher education institutions meeting

conditions regulated at Article 32, Clause 2 of this law and are self-financing for all operating expenditure are *autonomous* [emphasis added] in defining tuition fees” (p. 27). The policy language here contains two significant differences compared to earlier policy language. The concept *autonomous* is used to describe the rights of public universities, replacing the old word *proactive*. Moreover, the cap on tuition levels is removed. This means University A is officially autonomous in terms of tuition fees—and free to set them at any level it desires.

A comparison of the 2012 and 2018 versions of the Higher Education Law reveals that although autonomy was officially granted to public universities in 2012 those universities did not gain decision-making authority on tuition fees until 2018. Still, a number of conditions are attached to this right: establishment of a University Council; implementation of internal expenditure regulations; decentralization of autonomy and accountability to departments and individuals; accreditation results; employment rates of graduates; and self-responsibility for all operating expenses (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018). These conditions are different from the cap applied to tuition fees because they facilitate a new official structure for an autonomous university—and University A has fully gained authority to set tuition fees without any limitation set by the state.

Findings also indicate that University A’s income from tuition is tax-exempt and can be deposited to commercial banks to earn high interest: “Revenues from tuition fees are allowed to be deposited at commercial banks” (Prime Minister, 2014a, p. 4). This legal statement has two implications. On the one hand, by depositing money in commercial banks, University A retains the flexibility to use its funds to facilitate its performance. Deposits earn high interest rates while remaining available to be withdrawn simply and quickly for spending purposes. On the other hand, the authority to deposit money in a commercial bank signifies University A’s independence from

the State Budget Law. Prior to the enactment of autonomy policy, revenues from tuition were regarded as part of the national budget and had to be deposited to the State Treasury; all spending items were strictly controlled by the State Budget Law to limit overspending at public universities (Vo, 2018). The high interest accruing from depositing tuition is also tax-exempt (Ministry of Finance, 2016) but University A is not allowed to add it to its Fund of Additional Income (Central Government, 2015); it must instead be used to offer scholarships for students.

Overall, University A has gained considerable power on managing income from tuition. Indeed, gaining decision-making authority over tuition fees—the primary source of revenue of an autonomous university in Vietnam—is highly significant. Funding for Vietnamese universities derives from two main sources: the state budget and tuition. The Higher Education Law (2012) lists the sources as (1) state’s budget, and (2) tuition fees. The Revised Higher Education Law (2018) lists the sources in a considerably different way—(1) tuition fees, (2) endowment, and (3) state’s budget (if any)—to indicate that tuition is now the most important source of funding. A public university is granted autonomy on the condition that it be responsible for its expenses (Prime Minister, 2014b). Governmental budget is cut off and autonomous universities must turn to tuition as their main source of funding. Gaining autonomy on tuition is therefore highly significant for University A. It helps the university to survive during the first stage of autonomy when other sources such as endowments are not yet available.

Use of Revenues. University A has gained significant authority on the use of its own capital. In terms of operating expenditure, Resolution 77 provides that University A “make its own decisions on using its incomes to pay for operating activities” (Prime Minister, 2014b, p. 3). This means University A can make decisions about payments for operating expenses—such as additional salaries for employees—at its own discretion, without any restriction from the state. In

fact, in Vietnam, public sector salaries are low and strictly regulated by the state. As a consequence, lecturers often “poach” or moonlight in the private sector. Vietnam’s public universities also suffer from a degree of brain drain owing to substantial income disparities with foreign countries (Welch, 2016a). Both moonlighting and the brain-drain have huge negative impacts on teaching and research quality. Gaining the right to increase salaries can help to retain qualified Vietnamese academics—the crucial factor for University A to improve education quality and research profile.

Concerning investing expenses, the Ministry of Finance (2016) notes that “revenues from tuition fees and other sources of University A are considered its own capital that can be used for investing activities at its discretion” (p. 2). As well, Resolution 6600 (Prime Minister, 2014a) states that “University A is autonomous in and self-responsible for planning and making decisions on using its revenues to invest in infrastructure and facilities” (p. 3). This means University A can make decisions about the purchase of long-lived assets, about investments, and about construction projects without seeking approval from related ministries. Although University A is fully self-financing for investment expenses, the state continues to provide funding for construction projects that were begun before the autonomy policy was implemented. Also, University A is permitted to “decide spending items and projects with the value under 15 billion VND” (Ministry of Finance, 2016, p. 2). Compared with other universities that must consult the ministries when purchasing fixed assets worth over one billion VND (Vo, 2018), University A has more discretion.

Decision-Making Authority on Teaching and Research. In terms of teaching, University A has been delegated considerable autonomy over programs and curriculum. Specifically, it “can open bachelor, master, and doctoral programs, as long as the university meets conditions on lecturers, staff, infrastructure, and the society’s demand” (Prime Minister,

2014a, p. 2). This discretion also applies to joint programs between University A and other institutions. For example, an International Joint Degree between University A and a foreign institution used to require from six to twelve months to gain MOET approval because specific procedures concerning foreign cooperation and investment in education were prescribed in the regulations (Central Government, 2018). Since University A has been governed by the autonomy policy, the approving process has taken only two months because all decision-making power now belongs to the Rector. Such discretion provides University A more flexibility to develop programs and expand its international partners, and has implication for revenues. In addition, the university has the authority to design its curriculum with a view towards internationalization, and University A has made a breakthrough in this area: it can now use textbooks imported from Western publishers. This change is significant because it reflects University A's freedom to select learning materials, a type of academic freedom that is expected to improve the quality of higher education. For many years, the poor quality of education in Vietnam has been blamed on old and outdated textbooks, the use of which was a consequence of the state's strict policy requiring use of domestic textbooks reflecting the Vietnamese Communist Party's ideology.

Concerning research, University A has become autonomous in its selection of organizations and individuals to conduct research—and in its selection of research topics, research goals, national and international conferences, and the dissemination of research results (Prime Minister, 2014b). University A's reputation for research has been boosted through its organization of many international conferences and its publications in prestigious scientific journals. These outcomes support the university's aim to increase its overall position as a research-intensive university by 2030.

Decision-Making Authority on Organizational Structure and Personnel. The University Council is the highest level of authority within an autonomous public university. University Council monitors university activities and replaces the ministry in terms of approving requests. Reporting to the University Council is the Rector, who is responsible for carrying out institutional activities that are prescribed by the Higher Education Law and University Charter, once these have been approved by University Council. The Rector is accountable to University Council which, in turn, is accountable to the MOET, to society, and to other stakeholders. Since gaining its autonomy, University A has strengthened the functions of University Council to minimize ministerial approval procedures.

The most significant authority University A possesses in terms of organizational structure is the power to appoint a Rector, the highest position within a Vietnamese public university under the former governance structure. Official Dispatch No. 3000 is an internal policy document released by the Prime Minister to University A: “University Council is in charge of the appointment process for Rector according to regulations set by the MOET, then makes decisions and reports to the MOET” (MOET, 2016, p. 2). This means University Council replaces the MOET in appointing the Rector, even though the Council is still subject to the MOET’s regulations and final decision. The right to appoint the Rector is the most significant power University A has gained; indeed, it demonstrates the public university’s utmost autonomy. The state gradually granted authority in many matters to the University Council but in appointing the Rector MOET retained absolute power. Analysis of internal policy documents exchanged between University A and the ministries shows it took time and effort for University A to negotiate and gain from MOET the right to appoint the Rector

While University A gained authority to appoint the Rector in 2016, it was not legalized in any public policy document that widely recognized this significant change until the release of the Revised Higher Education Law effective from July 1st, 2019. Specifically, Article 20 of that law states that “the Rector is decided by University Council and recognized by the authorized management agency” (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018, p. 15). This means other Vietnamese public universities have been able to appoint their rectors only since 2019, three years after University A gained this autonomy. University A, therefore, is the precedent case in the power negotiation process that informed the amendment of the Higher Education Law.

In terms of personnel, the management and recruitment of employees has been delegated to University A. Decision 6600 provides that University A can “recruit staff based on its Job Position Scheme approved by University Council” (Prime Minister, 2014a, p. 3). Resolution 77 also specifies that “the university can make decisions on the number of lecturers and staff to recruit; sign contracts after being approved by University Council; and manage, use, and terminate contracts in accordance with the law” (Prime Minister, 2014b, p. 2). Taking charge of human resource matters helps University A to quickly recruit personnel suited to its needs, personnel who can facilitate its performance. In particular, University A has gained autonomy on the recruitment of foreign scholars. At this point, University A is one of only three Vietnamese universities to have gained the expanded autonomy specified in Resolution 99. According to this crucial policy document, “Foreign scholars who teach and conduct research at University A are not required to hold work permits” (Central Government, 2019a, p. 8). It is very unusual for University A to have this authority—to have had removed the strict restriction on work permits usually required for foreign laborers from the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs.

Removal of that requirement has created an ideal condition for University A to attract foreign scholars and thereby boost its education quality and research profile.

In summary, in this section, I have presented the meaning of autonomy as written in government policy documents. These documents indicate that autonomy is the right of a public university to make its own decisions in the primary areas of finance, teaching, research, organization, and personnel. Amongst these areas, University A has gained its strongest decision-making authority on financial issues, especially concerning the determination of tuition levels. The university has also been delegated considerable autonomy on teaching activities and research. The findings also indicate that University A, with the establishment of a University Council and the right to appoint the Rector, has acquired significant authority over its organizational structure and personnel. The findings presented in this chapter, however, are derived only from document analysis; they must be triangulated with findings from interviews with university actors (Chapter 7) in order to clarify what happens in practice when the policy is enacted at University A.

Autonomy as the University's Accountability for its Activities

Institutional autonomy means not only that decision-making authority has been granted to University A, it means University A is accountable for its activities and decisions, as provided by the Revised Higher Education Law (2018):

Institutional autonomy is the right of a higher education institution to determine its own objectives and to select the way to implement its objectives, to make decisions on and *to be held accountable for* [emphasis added] its teaching, research, organization, personnel, finance, assets, and other activities on the basis of the law and its capacity. (p. 2)

The Revised Higher Education Law (2018) also provides an official definition of accountability: “Accountability is the responsibility of a higher education institution to report and make

transparent information to students, society, authorized management agencies, owners, and other stakeholders about its compliance with regulations, laws, and commitments” (p. 2). This definition specifies that accountability is the obligation of an institution to provide information on and justification for its activities to stakeholders. It also emphasizes transparency concerning compliance with laws, indicating the existence of a compliance-oriented accountability system in Vietnam’s public sector. Obviously, University A is accountable for all the activities for which it has been delegated decision-making authority—including finance, teaching, research, organization, and personnel. As indicated in policy texts, however, every authority University A has been granted is accompanied by control measures set by the state. Indeed, authority is always accompanied by regulations, conditions, or restrictions which precede in policy texts any statement of authority. For example, authority on tuition fees is stated in Revised Higher Education Law (2018) as follows: “Higher education institutions *meeting conditions regulated at Article 32, Clause 2 of this law and self-financing for all operating expenses* [emphasis added] are autonomous in determining tuition fees” (p. 27). Conditions are stated first, for emphasis.

Accountability as a concept is closely related to steering and control, and accountability measures are used to monitor and evaluate a university’s activities. My document analysis shows that University A is subject to many accountability measures implemented by the state, including regulations, reporting requirements, and ministerial approvals as well as quality assurances, state audits, and performance indicators. Every decision-making authority that has been granted to University A is subject to regulations and reporting requirements set by the ministries—to ensure the University follows the legal framework in its operation. Details of these regulations and reporting requirements are analyzed in the next chapter on actors’ understandings of decision-making authority and accountability. Indeed, despite the autonomy it has been granted,

University A continues in some ways to operate under the MOET's direct control, with most of its decisions still subject to ministerial approval.

The MOET implements quality assurance to monitor University A's education quality and determine accreditation status. According to Article 17 of the Education Law (2005), quality assurance is the key mechanism for assessing education quality provided by Vietnam's higher education institutions. Quality assurance emphasizes University A's compliance with regulations articulated in the laws governing accreditation procedures (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018). Quality assurance is implemented periodically, and its results are publicized. The results are used to determine accreditation and the level of autonomy to be granted to an institution, as stated in the Higher Education Law (2012): "Higher education institutions have higher levels of autonomy appropriate with their capacity, ranking results, and accreditation results" (p. 16). Together with University A's capacity on infrastructure, human, and financial resources, accreditation results serve as a condition for the granting of autonomy.

In terms of financial matters, University A is subject to state audit of its financial statements, annual reports, tax, investments, and procurement of assets. This control measure ensures that University A is complying with laws and regulations that govern accounting and financial practices. The state also uses performance-based accountability measures to monitor performance in terms of indicators such as number of lecturers, enrollment in majors, and admissions and graduations, all of which must be annually disclosed on University A's website (MOET, 2016).

Overall, autonomy means University A is held accountable for its decisions. Different areas of university performance are subject to various kinds of control measures, which mainly emphasize compliance with regulations. (I present details of these accountability measures in

Chapter 7.) Amongst the aforementioned accountability measures, quality assurance and performance indicators have been recently added to existing regulations, reporting requirements, and state audit, reflecting changes in steering technologies under an autonomy regime. The change means there are more control instruments over public universities in the new governance mechanism than in the old model. Regulations and ministerial approvals in particular show up as the most common control measures that were well-established in the former system. Furthermore, a mixture of old (regulations, reporting requirements, and state audit) and new steering instruments (quality assurance and performance indicators) raises questions about how they are articulated to steer a public university so as not to violate university autonomy. Findings from interviews with university leaders, presented in the next chapter, offer insights on this question.

Autonomy as the University's Responsibility for its Decisions and Finance

To be autonomous University A must be self-responsible for its decisions and expenses. Article 3 of Decree 43 states that “University A’s autonomy must be accompanied by self-responsibility for its own decisions to the state management agencies and the law” (Central Government, 2006, p. 1). This means University A rather than the government is responsible for any consequence of University A’s decisions—for inefficient performance or financial loss, for example. In this sense, self-responsibility emphasizes who is responsible for consequences of decisions made by University A. Article 16 of Decree 16 provides a clear example for the concept of self-responsibility. Given University A’s autonomy in making decisions to borrow capital for investment, University A must itself be responsible for payment of loans and interest. If University A cannot pay a loan it has acquired, it must itself bear legal responsibility. In addition, the university is responsible for efficiency in its borrowing decisions, such as the performance of investing activities, and for handling any risk or consequence (Central

Government, 2015a). Ultimately, autonomy incorporates risk management into the decision-making process on the side of University A, which creates pressure for and requires precautions from decision-makers as they exert their autonomy.

Importantly, autonomy means University A is responsible for covering its own expenses, as Resolution 77 clearly states: “Public universities committing to self-finance all operating and investing expenses are comprehensively autonomous” (Prime Minister, 2014b, p. 1). In this sense, University A is financially independent from the government. Given that one of the overarching goals of the Vietnamese government in implementing autonomy policy is to reduce the financial burden on the state’s budget (Prime Minister, 2014a), the inclusion of financial obligations in the meaning of autonomy is not surprising. Autonomy imposes financial responsibility on the university and gradually reduces the financial burden on the national budget.

Relationship between Decision-Making Authority, Self-Responsibility, and Accountability

A conditional relationship exists between autonomy and responsibility. University A must bear financial responsibility in order to have autonomy. On the one hand, the financial obligation serves as a condition to check if University A is strong enough to operate autonomously and independently from the government. If University A is capable of covering expenses by itself, without the government’s support, then it would seem qualified for autonomous status. On the other hand, state funding becomes the price University A must pay for autonomy. In other words, in implementing autonomy policy, University A accepts a trade-off between freedom and governmental funding. This is what state steering is about, with the university holding the risk.

Autonomy and responsibility are also bound in a mutual relationship similar to the mutual relationship that binds rights and obligations. In 2005, the concept of self-responsibility was legalized in Vietnamese Education Law. In this legal document, the word self-responsibility

is written immediately following the word autonomy—the two words are linked together almost like co-existing terms to emphasize that autonomy is bound by obligations. Since that law was written in 2005, self-responsibility has been repeatedly used in every statement on autonomy written in policy documents such as Decree 43, Decree 16, Higher Education Law, and Resolution 77. Article 36 (Higher Education Law, 2012), for example, states that “higher education institutions are *autonomous in and self-responsible for* [emphasis added] developing, accrediting, and opening programs at undergraduate, master, and doctoral levels” (p. 18). The mutual relationship between autonomy and responsibility is reminiscent of Victor Hugo’s famous saying, “Everything that increases freedom should also increase responsibility. Nothing is so weighty and serious as being free” (Actes et paroles, 1870-1876). Freedom actually increases pressure on institutions and individuals because they must bear more responsibility.

Three aspects of autonomy—decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility—are also bound in a mutually dependent relationship. While decision-making authority represents the rights of University A to make decisions, accountability and self-responsibility represent its obligations. The policy indicates that decision-making authority is accompanied by and compatible with accountability, and emphasizes the university’s self-responsibility for finance and risk management. Indeed, any time the concept of autonomy appears in a policy document, it is accompanied by either *self-responsibility* or *accountability*, both of which involve obligations for University A in its use of authority. Ultimately, decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility are bounded in a mutual relationship of rights and obligations.

In this chapter, I have presented findings concerning the meaning of autonomy, accountability, and university responsibility. As written in policy documents, autonomy means

University A has authority to make decisions but that, at the same time, it must be held accountable for its decisions and must be responsible for its financial resources and any consequences of its decisions. Three aspects of autonomy—decision-making authority, accountability, and self-responsibility—are bound together to form the meaning of autonomy. This meaning is discursively constructed against the background in which autonomy policy is implemented in Vietnam—poor higher education quality and budget constraints. These conditions put the state under pressure to decentralize the administrative system. As a result, a contingent relationship between autonomy and financial responsibility has been constructed in which University A must bear financial responsibility in order to be granted autonomy. The transfer of autonomy can both enhance the university’s performance and reduce financial burdens for the government. However, the state must take precautions in handing over power because doing so is in stark contrast to the legacy of the country’s centralized governance system. Given this concern, accountability becomes the state’s primary focus in implementing autonomy policy—a focus which creates tensions with the policy itself.

Chapter 7

Participants' Understanding of Institutional Autonomy in Vietnamese Higher Education

In the present chapter, I present findings concerning participants' understanding of decision-making authority and accountability within the institutional autonomy policy, findings based on my analysis of policy objects and metaphors. These artifacts are significant carriers of meaning that participants at University A used to articulate their interpretations of policy concepts on autonomy. The findings indicate that different communities of meaning exist concerning decision-making authority and accountability. Although the state has delegated decision-making authority to University A, that authority is subject to conditions and limitations. Two conflicting communities of meaning on accountability are apparent. One sees accountability as a constraint on autonomy; the other argues that accountability should be implemented by the state to limit the ways in which universities can game the system.

To present the findings, I frequently use the terms of interpretive policy analysis such as *policy artifacts, policy objects, metaphors, interpretive communities, and communities of meaning* (Yanow, 2000, 2007). Policy artifacts are useful as they can be significant carriers of the policy meaning, which include policy objects and metaphors. Policy objects are symbolic language used by actors to convey their understanding of policy concepts. Metaphor is the juxtaposition of two different elements in a single context to transfer meaning from a better-known element to a lesser-known element. Interpretive communities refer to the people that do the interpretation of policy objects and metaphors. Communities of meaning refer to the meaning themselves being communicated through the policy artifacts.

Participants' Understanding of Decision-Making Authority

To understand how participants at University A interpreted the concept of decision-making authority, I analyzed four policy objects through which the policy meaning is communicated: tuition fees, programs, textbooks, and recruitment of foreign scholars. Tuition stands out as the most important symbolic object for conveying meaning—that decision-making authority delegated to University A is always accompanied by restrictions set by the state.

Tuition as a Symbol of Decision-Making Authority

I selected tuition as a symbol of autonomy in this analysis because it was frequently mentioned by participants as they shared their perspectives on decision-making authority. It stands out as meaningful to participants and conveys many meanings about autonomy at University A. Specifically, the policy object of tuition conveys five communities of meaning: (a) decision-making authority is conditional and strictly constrained by the state's regulations; (b) decision-making authority is the right of University A to make strategic decisions on tuition without requiring ministerial approvals; (c) decision-making authority is bounded by responsibility; (d) tuition is a symbol of self-financing, a condition to be granted autonomy; and (e) decision-making authority is associated with the sharing of costs for higher education with the society.

Conditional Decision-Making Authority on Tuition. A majority of participants share the understanding that University A's decision-making authority is strictly constrained by conditions set by the state. Participants repeatedly referred to the right to determine tuition fees as a typical example of conditional authority. One participant said:

Well, they named the policy “autonomy”, but it is conditions that are catching my eyes. Honestly, I only see conditions in the policy, not the right at all. I am overwhelmed by conditions. I am not feeling authority that we can own and enjoy. To exercise the right to

define our own tuition rates, we must meet so many conditions, such as covering daily expenses by ourselves, achieving quality assurance certificates from the MOET, establishing the University Council, and decentralizing our organizational structure at departmental and individual levels. In addition, we must satisfy detailed conditions on reporting such as providing tuition levels for each academic year, with clear justifications on the calculation of costs, in the report submitted to the Prime Minister. These conditions to gain autonomy on tuition fees are repeatedly stated in various important policy documents such as the Law No. 34, Resolution 77, or Decision 6600. (D01)

This participant highlights the contingent authority of University A—that the university must meet many conditions set by the state to secure the right to autonomy. For this participant, authority is limited because it is contingent on conditions. Another leader asked, “If they have decided to give us autonomy to determine our tuition fees, why don’t they relax those conditions?” (D03). This leader questions the existence of conditions and suggests they ought to be removed if the state has decided to grant autonomy. Another participant commented:

I feel that the price of autonomy is too high. It is not only about many conditions that we must meet, but also about the state’s funding that we must give up when we cover expenses on our own to gain autonomy on tuition. In other words, in implementing the autonomy policy, we are accepting a trade-off between freedom and governmental funding. (C07)

The metaphor *price of autonomy* suggests that autonomy is expensive and that University A must pay a high price for it. That price is the part of state funding that University A must give up to gain autonomy. Ultimately, having autonomy means University A accepts trade-offs in terms of finance, that is, a budget cut-off, and must strive to meet new standards in many areas such as the establishment of a University Council and a guarantee of employability for graduates. One

participant commented on how difficult it would be for many university institutions to achieve these conditions:

I am curious about the number of universities in Vietnam that can meet such many conditions of autonomy, especially the employment rates of graduates—which is almost unanticipated—and the capacity to be self-financing for operating expenses—which poses a challenge for universities that have difficulty in navigating funding sources beyond the state budget. (C06)

As this comment indicates, the state's conditions are difficult to meet; they create challenges for public universities in gaining authority to make decisions on tuition rates. My finding that conditional authority at University A is linked to tuition is consistent with findings of prior studies which also report that any autonomy granted by the MOET seems to be conditional (Vo, 2018; Dao, 2015). Vo (2018), for example, cited a condition that requires the purchase of blank certificate templates from the MOET, arguing that it is a way for the ministry to hold back power and benefits.

In summary, through the policy object of tuition, one interpretive community of leaders identified challenges and barriers to their use of decision-making authority—conditions that are not easy for universities to meet. The paradox of delegating authority while also creating constraints means the autonomy granted by the state to University A is very limited. University leaders expressed the idea that autonomy means some distance or freedom from state conditions concerning tuition and thus, for some participants, a community of meaning formed around the notion of conditional autonomy—around the notion that University A's decision-making authority is strictly constrained by the state's conditions. Conditional autonomy seems conflicting with the meaning communicated in policy documents that autonomy, is, first and foremost, the right of

University A to make its own decisions. Conflict of meanings could be owing to the different ways in which the interpretive community of policymakers and the interpretive community of leaders at University A frame conditions of autonomy. As I demonstrated in Chapter 6 through analysis of the government's position as articulated in the document, these conditions are intended to facilitate the new official structure of an autonomous university. They are different from the strict caps set by the state on tuition. Even with flexibility in the setting of tuition fees, however, participants at University A see such conditions as constraints on their self-determining capacity. These conflicting meanings in how participants interpret a policy have important implications for the implementation of the autonomy policy (Chapter 9).

Decision-Making Authority as the Right to Make Decisions. Many participants describe decision-making authority as their ability to determine tuition rates—as the ability to make strategic decisions on tuition rates on their own, without being subject to stringent caps set by the Central Government. A stringent cap on tuition fees is different from the conditions set by the state as understood by the community of meaning described above. Stringent caps specify the state's strict limits on tuition rates—University A cannot charge students more than that limit. In Vietnam, however, the state's limits have been evaluated as too low because revenues from tuition are not enough to compensate for the operating costs of a public university (Ha, 2011; Vietnam Television, 2020). One participant explained:

Our university is autonomous, and tuition is no longer subject to the caps set by the government. The caps on tuition used to be our main concern. Yet, now we can self-determine tuition levels for all programs—either normal or high-quality, and we have significantly increased tuition rates over the past few years. Definitely, our tuition has been increased based on an appropriate plan, not 1 VND today and 10 VND tomorrow. (D06)

This comment points out the limit on tuition as the main concern of this interpretive community of leaders. To them, the biggest barrier to gaining autonomy is the tuition cap, not other factors such as conditions articulated by the interpretive community of leaders described above. The state's tuition cap restrains their autonomy so much that when it is removed, they can sense their decision-making authority. This comment is consistent with the findings of document analysis—University A is autonomous in defining tuition levels and considerably increased fees in recent years. This comment also suggests that participants enjoy their self-determining capacity and ability to act on financial matters.

In fact, thanks to the power of the University Council, which replaces government ministries to approve requests, leaders can receive quick approvals for spending decisions. As one participant confirmed, “University Council is now authorized by the ministries to approve our expenditure requests, which makes the approving process very quick. Thus, we can make strategic decisions to our capacity and the society's demand” (D06). This comment is important because it refers to a neoliberal process which provides University A with the right to act strategically based on its capacity and society's demands. The university's capacity is affected by elements such as infrastructure, learning facilities, and number of professors and lecturers. Because institutional leaders know better than anyone else the institution's capacity and strengths, they can make better informed decisions about what their tuition rates should be. The term society here is meant to denote students as consumers in the market who want education services and are willing to pay the fees set by the university. Overall, participants in this interpretive community view autonomy as the right to act strategically within the supply-demand rules of the market:

Tuition rates are now determined at our discretion, with no regulated caps. Yet, this does not mean we can set tuition at any rate, because it is definitely contingent on the payment

capacity of customers and moderated by the supply-demand rules of the market. Given our university's prestige, we could set our tuition at higher rates to earn more revenues, but we need to be aware of the market signals. If our tuition is too high, no one will choose us. And I think that's the main idea of autonomy, the state removes restrictions to leave the market moderate how much students should be charged. (D06)

The idea expressed by this participant shows that these leaders acknowledge the supply-demand rule of the market as part of the working mechanism of autonomy. As a moderator, the supply-demand rules will help University A define tuition levels appropriate to the capacity of students to pay. If University A charges tuition at high levels, which it could do given its autonomy, students may not be able to afford their education services and will turn to other universities. Such a development occurred at a typical medical university in South Vietnam which, when it gained autonomy, increased tuition from 13 million VND per year to 70 million per year (Le, 2020). As a consequence, in the 2020 admission season, students moved from South Vietnam to North Vietnam to pursue medical qualifications, reinforcing the point that public universities, because of moderation by the supply-demand rules of the market, cannot set tuition at their own discretion, even when the state imposes no restrictions.

Several leaders who participated in the present study argued that within the Vietnamese socialist-oriented market economy, a certain intervention of the state occurs to ensure equity. In other words, tuition rates are not left to be totally moderated by supply-demand rules. As Yang et al. (2007) have said, the market can be deaf and blind; thus, the state has a necessary role in ensuring equity. In fact, in enacting the autonomy policy the Vietnamese government has always emphasized the benefits of access to higher education for disadvantaged, minority, and low-income students (Prime Minister, 2014a, b; MOET, 2016). The Official Dispatch (MOET, 2016),

for example, states that “autonomy must be connected to the university’s responsibility to guarantee access to higher education for low-income students” (p.1). This means that in implementing its autonomy, University A must ensure that students from low-income families have opportunities to access higher education services.

The state’s intervention in the market mechanism on this aspect has created two sub-communities of meaning. Taking the side of the state, one group of leaders acknowledges the state’s intervention as a necessary part of an autonomy mechanism to ensure equity in education. Realistically, leaders enjoy their ability to act strategically within market-driven dynamics, given the Vietnamese government’s orientation towards a socialist-oriented market economy:

I think the state’s consistent ideology expressed in Resolution 77 is to liberate public universities from rigid and bureaucratic regulations of state management agencies, and to ensure universities operate under the market mechanism, with a certain level of intervention from the state. (C04)

As evidenced in this comment, these leaders argue that the state’s intervention should be expected in a socialist society. In contrast, other leaders view the supply-demand rules of the market and the state’s emphasis on access to higher education for low-income students as a limit to their authority. As one participant said, “We need to keep in mind the Vietnamese people’s living standards in defining tuition levels, so I don’t think we are quite autonomous in this aspect” (D04). In fact, Vietnam is still a developing country with a low GDP per capita (World Bank, 2018). Therefore, participants insist, although University A can charge tuition fees at its discretion—even at high rates given its reputation and high-quality education—a limit always exists. By creating a policy in support of low-income students, the government is intervening and limiting the university’s self-determining capacity.

Bounded Responsibility in Decision-Making Authority. For most participants from University A, having decision-making authority on tuition means they are charged with, or bounded by, more responsibilities, and they are willing to accept those responsibilities in exchange for decision-making authority. One leader expressed his acceptance of those additional obligations:

If a public university is allowed to act independently, self-responsibility for its performance and financial aspects should be expected. Simply speaking, university leaders should be prepared to hold more responsibility if they have more power. There ain't no such thing as a free lunch. (C04)

The comparison evoked in this comment expresses the participant's willingness to accept obligations in return for the autonomy he enjoys. The metaphoric meaning of *no free lunch* indicates that there seems to be a kind of exchange happening here, in which the leaders enjoy the freedom of autonomy paid for through the price of obligations. Another senior leader was also in favor of accepting more responsibility in exchange for more power:

I think it is fair to be both autonomous and self-responsible. Now that our university is autonomous, so there are more burdens on the Rectorate's shoulders. The more authority they have, the more responsibility they must bear for, including financial loss. (C06)

Again, this comment emphasizes that, in acquiring delegated power, the Rector and Vice-Rectors accept more responsibility to the state. These responsibilities are significant; the Rector and Vice-Rectors, in performing these duties, become more powerful. The change here is in the transfer of responsibilities together with decision-making authority from the ministries to the Rectorate. The Rector and Vice-Rectors also have responsibility, to parents and students, to provide good education services equivalent to the tuition they charge. In a broad sense, this is an

important recognition of the social responsibility of public universities to provide qualified human resources for the labor market.

These leaders understand that the authority they are granted is bounded by the financial obligations of the university itself; University A must be self-financing in its operating and investing expenses, without access to governmental budgets. One participant commented, “As part of the autonomy concept, we accept the financial obligation to have autonomy. What does it mean by autonomy if you are still financially dependent on your parents?” (A01). In fact, the trade-off between authority and the government’s funding for University A means that University A accepts financial responsibility in exchange for autonomy.

Another participant said, “Yet, before being cut off from the state’s budget, we need time to prepare. In other words, the state must have an appropriate plan for the budget cutoff so that we can prepare for it” (C06). Talking about the process of budget cutoff and gaining financial autonomy, another participant said, “Initially, we only have autonomy in operating activities” (C05). This means University A was, first, self-financing for operating expenses, such as the payment of salary for employees, and still used governmental budget to cover investing expenditure. This point was elaborated by another participant:

Our university has been autonomous in spending for operating activities since 2018. We have survived, which means our revenues, mainly from tuition fees, are enough to cover our operating expenses. Therefore, the government has expanded our autonomy to other activities such as the investment and purchase of long-term assets. (A01)

University A is self-financing and has gained authority over the spending of its own capital and over its investing activities. The power to make decisions in these matters reflects a shared understanding amongst the leaders: “We enjoy making our own decisions on the usage of our

revenues on teaching, research, and many other activities” (D02). Respondents also commented that University A’s level of authority concerning operating expenses was particularly high because the university no longer uses the state’s budget to cover these expenses. This argument especially rang true for the payment of additional incomes. As one Dean said:

Since our university was granted autonomy, we have been very proactive and flexible in paying additional incomes for our employees. This is because we do not use the public money for operating activities, hence we do not have to follow the government’s regulations. (D06)

Thanks to its strong financial autonomy, University A has gained more independence in research activities. It established its own fund for international publications and increased funding for projects. A university-level project funded by the state, for example, receives 10 to 15 million VND. With its financial autonomy and own budget, University A provides up to 50 million VND. Individuals who can publish papers in ISI journals with an impact factor of 4.0 are rewarded 200 million VND (equivalent to 11,500 CAD), a very high reward given the annual salary of a lecturer (approximately 70 million VND, equivalent to 3,000 CAD). These reward strategies are being used by University A to encourage lecturers to conduct research.

Tuition as a Symbol of Self-Financing. Many leaders said they were not under great pressure to be self-financing for operating expenditures—one of the six conditions for the granting of autonomy—because University A has a large source of revenue from tuition fees. One participant confidently said, “We are not afraid of this financial obligation because the demand for higher education in Vietnam is very high. If the state cuts off the budget, we still survive thanks to incomes from tuition fees” (D06). Tuition fees, the most important source of funding under the new mechanism of autonomy (Revised Higher Education Law, 2018), are helping University A

cover daily expenses which formerly were covered by the national budget. In other words, tuition fees now ensure the financial survival of University A.

One participant indicated his understanding of the market and students when he pointed out that “the Vietnamese have a longstanding respect for learning and a strong belief in the importance of higher education for personal future. Therefore, for their future to be realized, families often make considerable investment on tertiary education for their children” (D05). Another university leader shared the same viewpoint: “As you already know, in Vietnam people love to study, and families always aim for their children to go to college. They only see tertiary education as the brightest path for the future of their kids” (D02). Because of this belief, most Vietnamese families are willing to invest their assets in their children’s higher education. Another leader commented:

This is not to mention our university’s reputation on offering the most popular programs, for which the learners’ demand is very high. The citizens in this city also have high income and they are willing to pay for their education. (C06)

Overall, University A is experiencing advantages arising from a large potential market of students who are willing to pay for its products and help to cover its cost. Self-financing of operating expenses, such as monthly salaries for academic staff, is not, therefore, “a big deal,” as one leader said: “Many universities really want to be autonomous, especially strong ones, with a large number of students enrolling every year like this university. That is because they can benefit from a very good source of tuition fees” (C02). In fact, tuition plays a crucial role in the life of this autonomous Vietnamese public university because the state’s budget has been cut off and other funding sources such as endowments are not yet accessible. Thus, University A has turned to tuition as its main source of funding. As Buckner and Zapp (2020) argue, public universities in neoliberal times resemble private counterparts in their dependence on tuition. Accordingly, tuition has become a

symbol for the financial status as well as the autonomy status of University A, because whether the university can gain autonomy or not depends on its acquiring revenue from tuition.

Tuition as a Symbol of Cost-Sharing. Other interviews with participants revealed that tuition fees represent, symbolically, the socialization of higher education in Vietnam. The following comment shared by a participant illuminates this argument:

I don't think University A is entirely self-responsible for its expenditure. If the university's cost is shared by the students and parents because it has the advantage of offering highly socialized majors which have very high demand from the society, it is the socialization of education, or cost-sharing. In a broad sense, this is a typical example of socialization of public services. In this case, the financial burden is not entirely on University A's shoulder—it is shared with the society. (D07)

This participant, arguing that costs are shared with students, parents, and society in general, counters the understanding expressed by the interpretive community of leaders that sees University A as self-financing. The concept of socialization of education is consistent with the findings of Tran et al. (2017) that “the education cost is partly shifted from the government to the society, especially families” (p. 1902) instead of resting fully on the university. Vo (2018), however, debates the notion that taking advantage of tuition revenues in order to gain autonomy is a shift of financial burden from the state to students. Pham and Vu (2019) argue that autonomy implicates the meaning of generating alternative non-budgetary sources of revenue—tuition, under the label of socialization but at the cost paid by the student. Therefore, the term *cost-sharing* rather than *self-financing* better reflects the current financial status of Vietnamese public universities that have switched from being wholly government-subsidized to using a cost-sharing mechanism. However, the comment quoted above also indicates the limited role of socialization

of education as a strategy for public universities to use in navigating funding sources.

Socialization only works for universities that can offer majors that are in high demand, such as business in the case of University A.

In summary, the policy object of tuition carries five communities of meaning for participants from University A, as revealed in the language they used to talk about autonomy. Through the policy object of tuition, leaders interpreted decision-making authority as their right to make their own decisions within the rules of the market, without seeking ministerial approvals. To many participants, tuition stands out amongst other matters as affecting the financial status as well as the autonomy status of University A. However, limitations exist on their decision-making authority in the form of conditions that must be met if they are to be granted autonomy, the supply-demand rules of the market, and the state's intervention to ensure equity in education. In addition, authority is accompanied by financial obligations as well as responsibility to the state, students, parents, and society at large.

There are two points of conflict in these five communities of meaning. While a majority of participants say their decision-making authority is strictly constrained by the state's conditions, others emphasize authority as their right to make strategic decisions without any restrictions being set by the state. These conflicting opinions can be explained by the different ways in which participants understand the conditions set by the state. While participants in the first interpretive community remember their experience with the former, centralized governance system as they think about how to interpret conditions governing autonomy, participants in the second interpretive community look at those conditions from a neoliberal perspective which supports the policy. The two interpretive communities also hold different expectations, with the

former expecting conditions to be removed and the latter thinking an escape from the ministry's control already means autonomy.

University A's main source of income from tuition has created a hot debate about financial self-responsibility and the socialization of education. Again, this can be explained by differences in understanding. On the one hand, participants looking at tuition from the viewpoint of University A wonder how to navigate funding once the state's budget is cut off. On the other hand, participants concerned with the socialization of education view tuition from the perspectives of students and express concern about consequences for students. However, both financial self-responsibility and socialization convey the same meaning for autonomy: gaining decision-making authority means University A must be financially independent from the state.

Decision-Making Authority as the Right to act versus Being Control

Along with tuition, participants used other policy objects to communicate their understanding of decision-making authority: program of study, textbook, and the process for recruiting foreign scholars. These policy objects indicate two contrary communities of meaning: (a) decision-making authority as the right of University A to make strategic decisions based on its capacity and the rules of the market; and (b) the state always applies restrictions through the mechanism of ministerial control.

Program of Study. The policy object that I call program of study—the academic or vocational education a student receives and which is intended to lead to a degree, diploma, or certificate—involves two communities of meaning. While some participants understand decision-making authority as their right to make decisions on programs of study based on the rules of the market, others suggested that all authority was accompanied by state restrictions. In particular, one interpretive community of participants said they enjoyed the right to act

strategically on teaching matters, as evidenced by the comment, “Authority means we can open, change, or adjust our programs, including international cooperative ones, to provide the best education quality for learners” (D06). Another participant said:

We are not limited to what program to open or the number of students to admit. We can define strategically the programs and enrollment numbers appropriate with our strengths and capacity, that is, the number of professors and lecturers that we have, our infrastructure, spearheading majors, as well as the society’s demand. (D07)

In other words, leaders emphasized they are free to define what to offer based on program capacity and the demands of society. Such a belief is highlighted further by other participants who said, “If we want to open any program, we should prove our capacity for it, instead of adhering to the MOET’s decision” (D02), and, “In this neoliberal time, programs have to be elastic to the learners’ demand and follow the signals from the market. I think this is a global trend” (C02). These comments point to the implications of the supply-demand rules of the market. Accordingly, the opening of any training program will be moderated by the demand of students and the capacity of the university to provide appropriate services. The significance of having this self-determining capacity was also shared: “Authority to open programs enhanced University A’s flexibility in updating and developing programs as well as expanding partners” (D06). Overall, the capacity to act strategically based on capacity and market rules, without seeking approvals from the ministries on teaching matters, illustrates how these university leaders make sense of decision-making authority.

Given the significance of teaching in Vietnam’s higher education sector, gaining authority over programs is important if University A is to survive as an autonomous entity. Most Vietnamese public universities are teaching-oriented; teaching rather than research is their

primary activity. Therefore, autonomy in teaching means a university can do many things that formerly were restricted in Vietnam—change learning materials, select teaching approaches, or move towards internationalization. Although University A aims to become a research-oriented university, teaching remains its strength and key revenue generating activity. One participant spoke of the financial benefits that accrue from teaching, and why gaining decision-making authority in teaching is crucial:

As I emphasize, the current strength of Vietnamese universities is teaching. Therefore, autonomy in teaching means a lot to them. Everyone debates a lot more about autonomy in teaching than in research because gaining autonomy over teaching brings more benefits than research. (D07)

Other participants, however, said that any authority University A has been granted is accompanied by restrictions. One leader elaborated this point, referring to restrictions on the opening of new programs as an example:

If you read the policy carefully enough, you will see that any autonomous right delegated to our university has a limit. For example, to open a new program, we must meet many conditions such as the number of doctors, facilities, and infrastructure which are normal. Yet, the point is, our university's discretion only applies to the programs in the MOET's prescribed list! This means the opening of new programs beyond the list must gain the ministerial approval. (C04)

In other words, state control still exists through the mechanism of ministerial approval.

Textbook. The findings from interviews with leaders at University A indicate that there are two communities of meaning on textbooks. While some participants said they saw their authority to use foreign textbooks as a symbol of their academic freedom, others said their power

was limited because they were required to use only Vietnamese textbooks for political courses. In other parts of the curriculum, however, University A can move towards internationalization by importing and using textbooks from Western publishers. This right helps University A make breakthroughs in curriculum by changing all its former textbooks. As the Dean of one department proudly said, “We are very strong in using foreign textbooks” (D03). In Vietnam, learning materials are strictly controlled to ensure the following of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s ideology. However, recent studies have pointed out weaknesses in those textbooks—that, for example, the contents are outdated and suitable only for traditional teacher-centered approaches to education (Tran et al., 2017). These old textbooks and teaching methods have been criticized for limiting the creativity and self-learning capacity of students (Nguyen et al., 2016). Therefore, gaining the right to use foreign textbooks is significant because it not only helps University A to modernize its curriculum, it sends a strong signal about academic freedom.

University A is not, however, allowed to abolish political courses which reflect the Vietnamese Communist Party’s ideology. One Dean said it is compulsory for University A to include these courses in its curriculum even though the contents are not required for many majors. Furthermore, the university must in these courses use textbooks written by Vietnamese authors. As the University Rector said, “We have significantly gained our academic freedom through the right to use foreign textbooks. Yet, the MOET still intervenes by setting a limit on which courses we can’t remove out of our curriculum” (A01). For this reason, two other participants contend they do not really have academic autonomy. Overall, conflict concerning the kinds of textbooks University A convey the meaning that the state is still trying to control University A’s decision-making authority; which makes the university’s academic freedom somewhat limited.

Recruitment of Foreign Scholars. Many participants described decision-making authority as their right to resolve important issues quickly, without seeking approvals from the ministries. Specifically, one Vice-Rector, who was primarily in charge of the implementation of autonomy policy at University A, said:

In terms of the nature of autonomy, if rightly understood, the state must allow universities to make their own decisions on important issues such as teaching, research, financial, and personnel without being subject to the ministries' regulations, reporting requirements, and approving procedures. For example, the state has granted us the right to recruit foreign scholars without gaining work permits from the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs. (B01)

This comment acknowledges the important right University A has gained concerning the recruitment of international scholars, that is, the right to do so without asking for ministerial approval. This participant went on:

Realizing the role of internationalization of higher education, we have made effort to attract foreign scholars to work with us. However, we face the restriction from the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs in getting work permits for foreigners. Thus, gaining this authority creates ideal conditions for us to strengthen our internationalization strategy. (B01)

The head of the International Cooperation and Research Office also commented on the significance of this power to the process of internationalization at University A:

As stated in Resolution 99, we can recruit foreign scholars without gaining work permits. This process is time-consuming and sometimes prevents foreigners from working with us. With this privilege, things are opened for us! We can strategically recruit foreigners

without any barrier, which will help our university to integrate into the international education market. (C06)

This special right was also emphasized by other leaders during their interviews (A01, C04). Thus, it seems that participants understand their authority as in relationship with ministries. Concerning University A's overall level of authority, one Vice-Rector proudly said, "I can tell you that, in general, my university is 95% autonomous, which means 95% of what we are doing now are no longer subject to the MOET's approval" (B01). Why are leaders so obsessed with ministerial approvals? As participants said, "Our biggest challenge in implementing autonomy policy is seeking approval from many ministerial levels. The process is very slow, cumbersome, bureaucratic, but not always approved," (C06) and "sometimes the process takes up to two years, [during which time] other universities might steal our ideas because the ministries shared with them" (B01). Therefore, as one leader said, "Removing the ministerial control make us feel like we [have] untied the shackles [of] the operating process" (C04). Overall, participants could sense their authority when the ministerial approval procedure on recruiting foreign scholars was abolished; they appreciate this privilege which has been granted to only three universities in Vietnam. In fact, the Vietnamese government has set very strict policies at other universities on the process of recruiting foreign scholars. The history of fighting against foreign countries to gain independence has made the government very cautious about working with foreigners. In general, this policy object again tells us that the nature of autonomy in Vietnam exists within the relationship with ministries. Therefore, when University A has the power to recruit foreigners without seeking the ministry's approval, leaders become conscious of their autonomy.

In brief, an analysis of four policy objects—tuition fees, programs, textbooks, and recruitment of foreign scholars—helps to decipher the meaning of decision-making authority as

understood by university leaders. My overall findings indicate that the decision-making authority delegated from the state to University A is always restricted. Across the four different policy artifacts, participants articulate a recurring paradox between the delegation of decision-making authority and restriction on the use of that authority. Underlying this paradox is a struggle, an interaction between the former centralized governance system and the new governance mechanism of autonomy. In the next section I describe how accountability is understood by participants at University A, and offer further insights on how and why decision-making authority is viewed as conditional and restricted.

Meaning of Accountability Measures to Participants from University A

Here I analyze three metaphors used by participants, metaphors that carry the policy meaning about accountability: *a bird locked in a cage*, *a Vietnamese parent-children relationship*, and *when the cat is away, the mice will play*. For each of these metaphors, I explain its literal meaning: What, for example, does *a bird locked in a cage* mean, and what are characteristics of a cage? I then explain the metaphor's symbolic meaning and apply it to the notion of accountability in the institutional and policy context of University A and Vietnam's higher education sector: In what way is accountability like a cage? When and where do the features of a cage appear when we think of accountability? What in accountability is reminiscent of the attributes of a cage? By uncovering the metaphoric roots of policy language, I discover the architecture of policy arguments and offer an overall picture of what accountability means to participants. Two communities of meaning exist concerning accountability. One community views accountability as exerting constraints on autonomy; the other community insists that accountability should be implemented by the state to limit gaming practices, although it should not be overused.

A Bird Locked in a Cage

The metaphor of *a bird locked in a cage* indicates a life without freedom; a bird has no capacity or freedom to explore and try new things. The cage represents strict controls applied to the bird. University A is like the bird—under the strict control of the state’s accountability measures which act like the bird’s cage. As evidenced from interviews, most participants insist University A is subject to many accountability measures—primarily in the form of regulations, reporting requirements, and approving procedures which put constraints on their decision-making authority. The following comments highlight their point that decisions are contingent on meeting many conditions set by the state: “Basically, we must be accountable for everything we did to the state management agencies and ministries” (B01); “Our university has lots of accountability to the MOET, including the state’s audit and the submission of reports every 6-month, at the end of the year, or even irregular reports as requested” (C07); and, “Our challenge is being granted autonomy but also having too many regulations and reporting requirements to comply with” (D01). These participants point out a range of control measures that are being applied to University A—auditing, reporting, and regulations which, in general, mean the university must be accountable for every aspect of its operation. Thus, university leaders feel they are still being strictly controlled in spite of their legal autonomous status:

We must be accountable for everything to the ministries. I can say that in spite of autonomy, we are still being controlled in terms of state administration, so we cannot escape from them. We are just like a bird dancing in their cage. (C02)

This comment introduced the *locked cage* metaphor for the first time in my interviews.

Subsequently, other participants also mentioned it as a way to communicate and summarize their understanding of accountability. Through the image of a bird locked in a cage, the participants

expressed their view that the university has very limited autonomy because the ministries are still monitoring everything. The locked cage is a metaphoric constraint on their authority to act. This is a recurring meaning that has been already shared by one interpretive community of leaders on the policy object of tuition fees—that decision-making authority is strictly constrained by the state’s conditions. The only difference between participants’ views lies in the policy concepts they used to communicate their understanding of autonomy: *decision-making authority* in the previous section and *accountability* in this section. While *decision-making authority* lists conditions that University A must meet to be granted autonomy, *accountability* emphasizes strict control measures—with specific procedures applied to the university. Some examples of such control measures are the state’s auditing of University A’s financial statements; the MOET’s quality assurance measures for teaching and learning activities; and ministerial approval procedures for any request from the university. In general, conditions required for the granting of decision-making authority and controls specified in accountability measures are complementary. They signal University A’s limited autonomy, and that the autonomy policy does not set the university free from state control.

In-depth interviews with participants revealed many accountability measures to which University A is subject, its autonomy notwithstanding:

Although our university is autonomous, we are still subject to the inspection and supervision of the ministries, state audit, quality assurance, and accreditation procedures.

We must also get approvals for construction projects. I don’t feel like our university is actually autonomous. (D04)

This comment points to a paradox: an autonomous university is governed by a variety of measures that limit its authority so much that the participant does not believe it is there at all. Several leaders emphasized that amongst many accountability measures, the biggest barrier is receiving ministerial

approvals; University A must not only comply with many regulations but also follow very bureaucratic procedures. First and foremost, University A is under the MOET's direct control; most of its decisions, therefore, must be submitted to that ministry: "We must report to and get approval from the MOET to open a new study program" (D03). This comment reinforces my findings on the policy object of study program which indicate that University A's authority is limited to the MOET's prescribed list of programs. In addition, depending on activities, University A is subject to the approval procedures of many related ministries which have different, even contradictory, regulations and requirements, as one example given by a participant demonstrated:

It took two years to get the construction project of our new campus approved. We need to get approvals from the MOET, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Construction, the Ministry of Planning and Investment, and the Ministry of Home Affairs, with different regulations. (C04)

This participant points out the legacy of the former centralized organizational structure and its many ministries and administrative levels. The system has been strongly criticized for its inefficiency for many years but nothing has changed (Dao, 2015). Consequently, it is commonly known that administrative procedures in Vietnam's public sector are cumbersome and that the process of seeking approval at many ministerial levels is slow, bureaucratic, and not always successful. Approval processes can take two years—long enough to obstruct the efficiency of university performance and to raise questions about why the process exists and what purpose it serves (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Dao, 2015). Even though administrative approval procedures represent the strong legacy of the former centralized governance system and are, in fact, no longer necessary, removing them is, for many reasons, not easy. They are connected to the power structures of related ministries (Dao & Hayden, 2010) or to other ministries that are simply

unwilling to change (Tran, 2014). Many participants expressed their frustration with the monitoring mechanism:

The administrative procedures [that require us] to [seek] ministerial approvals are too lengthy and cumbersome, which make us so discouraged and hesitant in making any plans. We sometimes even lost our ideas and opportunities to other universities because of the long waiting time for approvals. (B01)

This comment indicates the consequences of lengthy approval procedures—reduced working morale and loss of ideas and opportunities. The metaphorical cage of ministerial approval creates a mental cage that restrains University A’s morale and capacity to work. One participant criticized the approval procedure by pointing out the barrier it creates to working with international scholars:

Before the Resolution 99 was released, we have been really concerned with how to invite foreign scholars to work with us, without having any approving barrier from the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs. The approving procedure was so time-consuming, cumbersome, and bureaucratic. (A01)

Indeed, the procedure of asking for and getting approval is so common that it has created a culture of *asking-approving* in Vietnam’s public sector. Many Vietnamese people refer to it as a social norm in daily conversation. Clearly, it restrains University A’s capacity to act, as one leader noted: “We are granted the rights to make own decisions. However, we are trapped in many regulations and conditions to use those authority. This, in my opinion, means that the state even controls us more tightly” (D01). This comment illustrates the paradox between being delegated authority and being constrained in using it.

Leaders also point out weaknesses in Vietnam’s accountability system—that it is outdated, trivial, and inconsistent:

This is not to mention accountability system in Vietnam has been outdated and too detailed. For example, we are required to submit every receipt for printing materials, instead of reporting a lump sum for miscellaneous cost. This makes the reporting process very complicated and annoying. (D05)

This comment illustrates a very inefficient kind of reporting—a requirement to submit every receipt for miscellaneous expenses rather than report a lump sum, a cumbersome procedure that not only wastes time and resources but that also limits a participant’s motivation to work. Here, the weakness of an accountability measure has created a mental cage that limits working morale. Other interviews also recounted the weaknesses of accountability measures. As one participant said, “The reporting requirements and evaluation set by the ministries are too detailed, and when we submit our report, not everything is accepted for the first time” (C03). Again, the participant recounts a reporting process that is not only trivial but time-consuming in requiring participants to resubmit many times. An additional problem of accountability was shared by another leader:

The legal frameworks for accountability in the initial phase of autonomy have not been updated and standardized to facilitate the new governance mechanism of autonomy. For examples, while doctoral programs have been internationalized with the presence of foreign professors on thesis committees, work permits were not widely granted for foreigners, until recently, or a PhD by publications is not accepted by the MOET. (D01)

The main issue this leader identifies is the incomparability of policy documents, which causes conflicts in implementing internationalization initiatives at University A. Specifically, while the MOET approved the recruitment of foreign professors, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and

Social Affairs did not, until recently. In a report published by the MOET (2017), reporting requirements have been criticized for being outdated, overlapping, asynchronous, and not updated in a timely way. Consequently, some content in policy documents may be subject to contradictory regulations at different administrative levels, causing confusion and delay in implementation. The number of staff that University A can recruit serves as an example. One leader said, “Resolution 77 and Decision 6600 released by the Central Government stated we are autonomous in recruiting staff to optimize our performance. In reality, University A is still subject to the quota set by the Ministry of Home Affairs” (C01). The Technical Report of University A (2017) also confirms the university is still subject to the number of staff and to labor contracts approved by the ministries. Moreover, the university’s authority is not extended to organizing and managing the examinations used to upgrade the rank of senior lecturers. These personnel matters are still under the ministries’ strict control.

Although inconsistencies in policy content cause confusion, such inconsistencies are not new in Vietnam, as one participant observed:

They removed conditions here and control there. They set it free, and then they squeeze it out. Every time a new minister is appointed, we have new policies. I personally think policymakers must be consistent and strategic in designing public policy. They should look at the whole picture and have a long-term vision, instead of continuously change according to each minister’s tenure. (C06)

This comment suggests a lack of overview amongst policymakers in making policies. It also indicates that the implementation of autonomy policy as not an ongoing and coherent project of university governance reform. This opinion, however, is debatable; some leaders argue that it is difficult for policymakers to have a long-term vision over many tenures. As Ørberg and Wright

(2019) suggest, nobody has a *helicopter eye view* of how governing instruments should work; reform policy, therefore, is usually formulated within a leader's own limited understanding, position, and context, and within a limited time period. Ørberg and Wright (2019) also point out that changes in policy content sometimes happen simply because the minister must complete initiatives during his tenure, even if these are contradictory to contemporary policy. Vu (2016) suggests that frequent amendments to Vietnam's policy documents are primarily owing to a top-down authoritarian approach: the state releases a policy without considering the voices of other actors, then strong reactions from those actors require the state to amend the content of the policies.

When asked about reasons for the weakness of accountability measures, university leaders commented on the ministries' unwillingness to give up power, on a gap between policy and practice, and on the lack of capacity required to design new frameworks:

Given an asking-approving mechanism, accountability—through regulations and approvals—is a good way that the ministries can hold back their power and respective benefits. They are not willing to hand over power and lose any accompanying benefit, so they must keep those approving procedures. (B01)

This comment points out that accountability measures are not simply designed to uphold the rule of law but to strengthen the ministry's power and to secure the benefits that accompany their authority to approve. The ministries try to hold back their power, creating yet more challenges for the implementation of autonomy policy. Other participants contend that the obsolescence of accountability measures is due to the gap between policy and practice:

There is a discrepancy in the implementation process of autonomy policy. Although the autonomy policy was ratified by the Prime Minister and the Central Government, other

regulations at ministerial levels have not been updated, which led to the inconsistency between policy documents, as well as the gap between policy and practice. (D05)

That gap is reflected in the difference between the content of policy documents and participants' observations of the implementation of those policies. For example, while it is written in the Revised Higher Education Law (2018) that the state uses performance-based accountability measures to monitor University A's performance, participants said the state primarily monitors university compliance to various regulations and requirements. The difference here could be blamed on the timeline of the policy implementation process, which is currently in the first phase. This means there is lots of work for policymakers, especially at ministerial levels, in amending and updating policy documents. Still other participants point to limits in the state's capacity to design new accountability frameworks, and to the challenge of designing a set of appropriate performance indicators. One leader said:

I personally think that the ministries are still confused in implementing the new policy. They are not capable of designing appropriate performance indicators. Therefore, the accountability system is kept intact in the forms of existing regulations, reporting requirements, and approving procedures. (C06)

This comment points to one of the essential conditions required to implement decentralization successfully—the ability to make the necessary changes (McGinn and Welsh, 1999). Ministries might, in fact, need help from the state to, for example, set up a committee to design performance indicators. Three issues then—ministries' unwillingness to release their power, an existing gap between policy and practice, and the lack of capacity to design new frameworks—contribute to weaknesses in the government's accountability system and create challenges for University A in implementing the autonomy policy.

In summary, complaints persist about excessive intervention and the many regulations, reporting requirements, and ministerial approvals that impede participants' capacity to use their delegated authority. These issues make accountability equivalent to a cage—much like the metaphor Ørberg and Wright (2019) used in describing autonomy in Danish universities: “Like a Gulliver, universities were held back in their efforts to use their strategizing power by the multiple strings attached to them by government” (p. 147). Strings and cages—both evoke a tight control mechanism which leaves universities with very limited decision-making power.

A Vietnamese Parent-Children Relationship

In Vietnam, parents have lots of power and control over their children. Children must listen to their parents unconditionally, even when they are 18 years old. In using the Vietnamese parent-children relationship to metaphorize the relationship between the state and a public university, participants indicate that the state's control over University A is inescapable and inevitable. Accepting University A's position as a public university born of the state and financed by the national budget, many university leaders take accountability and the monitoring of university operations as a given. As one leader said:

We must acknowledge our status as a public university in Vietnam. As a public institution, we are delegated decision-making authority and provided funding by the state. Hence, we must be held accountable to the state management agencies by reporting our activities upon requested. (C04)

This participant acknowledges the identity of a Vietnamese public university and its dependence on the state in terms of allocated budget and delegated power. Using those public resources requires the university to be held accountable for its operation. Another leader shares that view:

I think accountability is the responsibility of a public institution. It's not unusual to be accountable to the state, if we are granted authorities by them. Accountability is just part of the process, in which we make own decisions, and then report what we did accordingly. It is something very normal. (C06)

These comments indicate that leaders see accountability as normal and just part of an expected process. In a vertical accountability relationship, University A is held accountable for its behavior and performance to the ministries. Being situated in a compliance-oriented accountability system means that University A is responsible for providing evidence of its compliance with state regulations—and that accountability continues even after it has gained autonomous status. Some participants perceive the accountability of an autonomous public university to the state as similar to the relationship between parents and adult children:

Similar to a parent-children relationship, even though adults can live independently from the parents when they are 18 years old, this does not mean that the parents will no longer have any control over them. They still have a parent-children relationship, and they still have the family rules to follow, right? (D07)

Basically, the state and public university are tied as though in a parent and child relationship, and the state's control over the university does not disappear despite the institution achieving maturity. Participants therefore continued to emphasize the accountability of a public university to the state: "In spite of gaining our autonomy, I don't think a public university can escape from the state's control. Autonomy will always go with accountability" (D01).

Accountability in the life of an autonomous institution is defined not only by its identity as a public university but also by the nature of the service it offers. Given the nature of higher

education as an essential public service, accountability should receive more attention as one participant argued:

Tertiary education is an essential public service. It is crucial to monitor its quality to make sure the labor market is provided with qualified human resources. Thus, autonomy does not set public universities free from governing instruments. You make your own decisions, you are self-responsible, but the state will monitor the outcomes, such as graduates who will join the job market. Did the university equip them with enough working skills? (D07)

Higher education has been identified as one of the most essential services for citizens in a knowledge-based economy, and for the development of a country such as Vietnam (Higher Education Reform Agenda, 2005). One participant expressed his acceptance of accountability as a given: “We should make it clear that *autonomy* is different from *freedom*. Therefore, it is critical to have monitoring mechanisms over public universities” (A01). Obviously, there is a huge difference in the meaning of *autonomy* and *freedom*. Freedom indicates that universities are free, without being subject to control; autonomy, on the other hand, as argued by Ørberg and Wright (2019), means that a university must always negotiate its status or power with the state; it can acquire more power or a higher level of status, but not complete independence from the state. Accountability, therefore, will always be present and should be expected.

Furthermore, to illustrate that accountability is normal, some participants connect accountability to their decision-making authority and self-responsibility: “I think all aspects of authority, accountability, and self-responsibility are connected to each other, just like you have the rights to act and the accompanying obligations” (C04). This comment identifies what Ørberg and Wright (2019) call a *semantic cluster*—a group of words, in this case words of academic discourse such as authority, accountability, and responsibility—that together help to clarify

meaning. In this case, the meaning of autonomy is a set of rights that University A has gained and that will always contain obligations to the state.

Some leaders suggest that accountability is necessary for any organization regardless of its identity. In support of this position, they made comments such as these: “Not to mention *public* or *private*, any university must comply with and justify things related to the law” (D07); “I think in spite of autonomy, everything must be within the legal framework. The ministry is the legal representative, so the university must be accountable to the ministry” (C07); and, “This is just a matter of administration. We cannot leave public universities act freely without controlling education quality” (B01). These comments emphasize the point that any organization, as a legal entity, should be held accountable for its performance. In summary, by metaphorizing the relationship between the state and University A as a *Vietnamese parent-children relationship*, this interpretive community of leaders supports the use of accountability measures in implementing autonomy policy.

When the Cat is away, the Mice will play

Many participants at University A argue that, given information asymmetry between the state and public universities, accountability is all about transparency. In other words, because the state does not know what university leaders are doing, given their autonomy to make their own decisions, accountability mechanisms must therefore be employed to increase the state’s confidence in university performance. As one leader argued, “Accountability is the responsibility of a public university to report and to make transparent information to stakeholders about its compliance with regulations and laws. The point is we must convince the ministries what we did was within the legal frameworks” (D05). This participant refers to the value of accountability in enhancing trust between the state and University A, to the notion that by reporting and publicizing

information about what they do university leaders can convince stakeholders of their transparency. Therefore, one participant said, “We must try our best to create a culture of transparency and publicity through implementing accountability measures” (D05). Accountability is a way to increase transparency, and most participants agreed that the state should apply control mechanisms to limit gaming practices on the part of higher education institutions. One leader said:

There are many concerns around transparency when public universities gain more power to make their own decisions. The Vietnamese has an old saying that *when the cat is away, the mice will play*. If they know that no one will check their work, there is a high chance that they will manipulate, for example, their enrolment numbers, or incomes. My opinion is that if the state does not have a good control mechanism over autonomous universities, they will game the system for their own benefits. (D03)

The saying that *when the cat is away, the mice will play* is often used to suggest that if the person in charge of a group of people is absent, the group will misbehave, or “play.” In the case of public universities, they might manipulate enrolment numbers if no one checks their work. The saying does not simply describe a situation but suggests possible actions. This participant is suggesting that governmental interventions in the form of accountability measures are needed to limit gaming practices on the part of universities. In using this metaphor to convey their understanding of accountability, participants expressed their concerns about the potential uncertainty of a neoliberal policy and showed their support for accountability mechanisms. The scandal of Dong Do University in Vietnam was given by many leaders as an example of gaming practices:

Accountability is all about transparency in what you did. Without accountability, it is likely that organizations will engage in gaming practices. Therefore, I think

accountability must be applied to prevent institutions from fraud and malpractices, such as the case of Dong Do University. (D03)

Dong Do University's fraud, selling fake degrees to many students, created a scandal in 2019. The MOET discovered Dong Do had over-enrolled its quota by 280 percent (4,205 students instead of the 1,500 students permitted by the MOET) (Welch, 2016a). Some senior leaders had accepted bribes to boost enrollments and revenues. Many students were enrolled in spite of not having high school certificates. Overall, 80 percent of Dong Do students had scores lower than reported by the University Council. An investigation also revealed that the university had built no facilities, offices, or classrooms in seven years of operation (Welch, 2016a). Because of this example of institutional corruption, most participants agree that a state audit must be regularly implemented to prevent unethical practices. Participants consider auditing to be the strongest monitoring measure applied by the Central Government. A Deputy Dean said:

Annually, a group of state auditors will come to check our work. We have to justify many issues such as financial activities, recruitment of employees, the number of admitted and enrolled students for all degrees . . . They try to check if we comply with the laws and regulations such as the Labor Law, the Budget Law, or the Education Law. (D01)

This comment specifies those activities and aspects that are annually audited by the state at University A; the focus is on checking compliance with the laws. Another university leader emphasized:

Auditing the financial management of higher education institutions is getting more important given the nature of education as an essential public service. It is very tempting for institutions to engage in bribe practices, given the society's high demand on qualifications. Therefore, strict control measures must be used. (B01)

This participant, again, emphasizes the role of auditing in limiting bribery, which has become more common because of high demand for qualifications. Generally speaking, all leaders agree that accountability measures are necessary to limit opportunistic behavior and increase transparency—as long as they are not overused. One leader cautioned:

Well, I agree malpractices are not unusual in the higher education sector. Accountability is necessary, but the point is to what extent that accountability should be implemented? I don't think I agree if it is overused, because it will ruin the meaning of autonomy. (D07)

Still taking the state's side, many participants suggested that before granting autonomy the state should check a university's capacity to support autonomy. Conditions will help to ensure a university is strong enough to live independently and fraud, thus, will be limited. Participants understand that the state identifies conditions for the granting of autonomy as a way to ensure the university is qualified to hold autonomous status, and that these conditions are not intended to be a barrier to autonomy. The metaphor used in the following comment illustrates this point:

In Vietnam, a university must meet conditions to be granted autonomy. Basically, these conditions are just like we only encourage adults to live independently at the age of 18, to make sure they are mature enough to be self-responsible for their lives. Children under the age of 18 must have a guardian, that is to say, because they are not ready to live on their own. (D06)

Overall, the institution of conditions makes it clear the state is taking precautions before granting autonomy as a way to prevent undesired consequence. Participants indicated their support for accountability as a vital governing tool needed to limit the university's gaming practices. If public universities game the system, the government might not achieve its goal of improving the efficiency and competitiveness of public universities in developing the nation's human resources

and in advancing knowledge in support of Vietnam's increasingly market-driven society. In this sense, accountability is experienced by participants as a sign of mistrust.

In conclusion, an analysis of three metaphors—*a bird locked in a cage*, *a Vietnamese parent-children relationship*, and the saying that *when the cat is away, the mice will play*—offers an overall picture of what accountability means to university participants. Two communities of meaning are revealed: (a) accountability set constraints on autonomy; and (b) accountability should be implemented by the state to limit gaming practices, although it should not be overused. In the second community of meaning, participants demonstrate agreement with the principle of accountability by metaphorizing the state-university relationship as *a Vietnamese parent-children relationship* and specifying reasons for supporting accountability mechanisms. They are concerned about potential uncertainty caused by the neoliberal condition and the possibility that universities, if they are granted power, might game the system and serve their own interests. These two interpretive communities use different frames to interpret the concept of accountability. One interpretive community sees only regulations, reporting requirements, and approving procedures that restrain their autonomy. These are all features of the former centralized system of governance which characterize the experience these participants had with accountability in the past. In contrast, the other interpretive community includes participants who work internationally and have a different perspective on why accountability should be expected in a neoliberal context. Overall, participants are situated knowers arguing from different standpoints and contributing significant policy arguments to the concept of accountability. Their understandings have implications for policymakers in the implementation of the autonomy policy.

Chapter 8

Discussion

The purpose of the present study is to develop a better understanding of institutional autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education sector. In Chapters 6 and 7, I presented findings from my analysis of documents and of semi-structured interviews with senior leaders at University A. In the present chapter, I discuss these findings and answer the questions that have guided this study beginning with four research sub-questions:

- How are institutional autonomy, accountability, and university responsibility presented in the policy documents?
- How do actors in a Vietnamese public university understand decision-making authority within the new policy?
- What do accountability measures in the Vietnamese government's discourses about institutional autonomy mean to university actors?
- How is institutional autonomy enacted through the relationship between actors' understandings of decision-making authority and accountability in this one institution?

I then address the primary overarching research question that guided this study: What does institutional autonomy mean in the context of Vietnamese higher education given the legacy of centralized governance system? I argue that institutional autonomy means a higher status for a public university and more power to make decisions, rather than independence from the state. To make sense of the meaning of autonomy in the context of Vietnam's centralized governance system, I discuss my findings in light of state steering theory and relevant literature on university governance. I draw mainly on state steering theory to gain insights concerning the tensions between autonomy and control that emerge together in Vietnam's autonomy policy.

The Steering of Vietnamese Higher Education

How are institutional autonomy, accountability, and university responsibility presented in the Vietnamese government's policy documents on autonomy, and what do these concepts mean? I argue that steering at a distance (Wright & Ørberg, 2008) emerges as a characteristic of the governance in Vietnamese higher education sector. Steering at a distance means that university leaders have authority to make strategic decisions in the market-driven dynamic, but that their autonomy is always accompanied by conditions, financial responsibility, state intervention, and accountability measures.

Conditional Autonomy of a Vietnamese Public University

Tuition fees are a classic example of state steering: University A is allowed to set its own tuition rates if it agrees to the ministry's conditions. Such conditional autonomy essentially defines autonomy in the Vietnamese context: The state steers universities from a distance through conditions. I follow Ørberg and Wright (2019) in claiming that the state, through the conditions it sets, steers the university towards a new identity and thereby achieves state goals for university reform. Accordingly, conditions necessary for autonomy to be granted—conditions such as establishing a University Council, meeting accreditation standards, and implementing internal expenditure regulations—are intended to establish a new official structure for an autonomous university within the shifting context of the global knowledge economy. Conditional autonomy is also used in Vietnam to determine whether or not a university is ready for autonomous status. Conditional autonomy helps to ensure that a university is strong enough to live independently, without state support. Such a test of viability is important for the future survival of autonomous institutions in the market-driven dynamic. Hence, it is important to emphasize that, in the context of Vietnamese higher education, state steering and autonomy emerge together.

As Kickert (1995) highlights, steering at a distance is not a whole or partial abolition of the government's steering capacity nor is it a form of government withdrawal. Because of a lack of effectiveness in the existing steering system, the government has simply changed its method of steering (Capano, 2011). In fact, the rationale for implementing autonomy policy in Vietnam is not about the need to reduce state power that is too strong. The Vietnamese government based its autonomy policy proposal on the ineffectiveness of Vietnam's existing centralized governance model which was seen as obstructing efficiency, flexibility, and innovation in higher education institutions (HERA, 2005). It was, therefore, necessary to change the steering method. The expectation was that autonomy, alongside steering at a distance, would be more effective in optimizing public university performance and increasing efficiency and competitiveness in Vietnam's increasingly market-driven society. With increasing effectiveness rather than the reduction of state power as the goal of university reform, a university's autonomy will always remain within the state's control; in the present case, this control exists in the form of conditions.

The meaning of autonomy as being contingent on meeting the state's conditions has been reported in the literature under the concepts of conditional autonomy (Neave, 1988), contractual autonomy (Yokoyama, 2007), and contingency (Wright & Ørberg, 2019). My findings concerning conditional autonomy on tuition are consistent with results reported by Dao (2015). Indeed, any autonomy provided by the Vietnam's MOET seems to be conditional. Public universities are allowed to confer degrees for undergraduate students but with the condition that they purchase and use certificate templates from the MOET. This requirement has also been reported in scholarly works (Vo & Laking, 2020; Vo, 2018) and in media coverage of the autonomy policy (in national newspapers, for example) (Minh, 2019) as a typical example of conditional autonomy; the ministry holds back its power and respective benefits through setting this condition. Yokoyama (2007)

indicated that the autonomy of English universities is conditional on meeting government objectives as provided in a contract; hence, it is called contractual autonomy. In Denmark, autonomy in such cases is defined as contingency (Wright & Ørberg, 2019), which means the university is subject to the state's conditions to be granted autonomy. These examples have confirmed the practice of steering at a distance through the use of conditions.

Autonomy as the University's Self-Financing Capacity

Amongst many conditions set by the state, financial responsibilities which require universities to be self-responsible for their expenses stand out as particularly challenging. This is the meaning of autonomy for Vietnamese universities: because governance reform partially originated to relieve financial burdens on the national budget (Tran, 2014), autonomy is accompanied by financial responsibilities. In a study of the boundaries on autonomy at Vietnamese universities, George (2011) found that a university's ability to find its own funding is important in negotiating its power with the state. Le et al. (2017) discovered a connection between a university's high level of autonomy and self-financing capacity, and its ability to use its financial autonomy to increase income and negotiate more power with the state. Education policy in Vietnam since 1998 has confirmed a distinct trend toward progressively greater financial autonomy, but only for universities that have large sources of revenues (George, 2011). My findings at University A—including its use of such strategies as increasing tuition rates or depositing revenues to commercial banks to earn high interest—are consistent with the findings of prior studies conducted in Vietnam and other national contexts, and with the notion that an institution achieves an enormous level of autonomy if it can diversify its funding sources (George, 2011; Le et al., 2017; Sirat, 2010). These findings support the high degree of autonomy that University A is enjoying thanks to its self-financing capacity.

According to Wright and Ørberg (2008), self-financing is what state steering is about, with the university holding the risk. The university is set free to bear responsibility for its economic survival and respond to any cut-off in the state's budget. Drawing on the context of in Japanese higher education, Yokoyama (2008) argues that the meaning of autonomy incorporates this shift of financial responsibility from the state to national universities—a shift that makes universities responsible for their performance and for responding efficiently to the market. This finding is consistent with prior studies that explain the transfer of financial responsibilities from the state to universities—that the transfer is intended to create incentives for universities to work efficiently (Verhoest et al, 2004). In Vietnam, the egalitarian norms and values of a centralized governance system discourage universities from working efficiently to advance knowledge and the quality of education (Madden, 2014). Transferring financial responsibilities, therefore, can help to move institutions away from egalitarian ideals and push them to thrive in the competitive market while taking responsibility for their own survival (Dougherty & Natow, 2019a). This is the implication of including financial responsibility in the meaning of autonomy in the Vietnamese context.

The consequences of attaching financial responsibility to autonomy for Vietnamese public universities is an important issue for the state. Tying autonomy to a university's self-financing capacity will be a double-edged sword. Strong universities with good sources of revenues from tuition fees will be strengthened and will thrive in the market-driven dynamic. Small universities and universities that do not have many students from whom to earn tuition revenues will be disadvantaged. Autonomy may thus be a possibility only for universities with a strong financial status. How small universities can survive under an autonomous mechanism is a crucial issue the Vietnamese government will need to consider in transferring financial responsibilities.

In Denmark, small universities have had to merge with each other to become bigger and stronger. In Vietnam, with the addition of content to the Revised Higher Education Law (2018) concerning the merger of public universities, the government seems to be envisioning this scenario. Implementing the merger process, however, given its political sensitivity, will not be an easy task, notwithstanding its feasibility as evidenced in the experiences of other countries. Governance reform in Vietnam has evoked strong protests from provincial governments, local municipalities, rectors, or staffs during the imposed mergers of small public universities (Dao, 2015). Therefore, the state will need to convince relevant actors that autonomy is not affordable for small universities; it will need to create the conditions in which autonomy comes to mean strength for institutions. Small universities then will have no choice but to seek merger with other universities to achieve a scale large enough to take risks on the market.

Autonomy as a Neoliberal Process Involving State Intervention

Under the autonomy policy, Vietnamese universities have authority to make strategic decisions based on the demands of society and the rules of the market, albeit with a certain level of state intervention. This meaning of autonomy signals a neoliberal process driven by the market in which the state permits the supply-demand rule to moderate tuition rates and intervenes only when necessary to limit some of the potential consequences of market mechanisms. One feature of autonomy in this sense is the use in higher education contexts of business language—such as referring to university degrees as commodities (Shore, 2010). In Vietnam, the transition from a communist-style planned economy to a socialist market economy and the inclusion of economic development concerns in education policies has meant that the market has taken a central role in the governance of higher education (Pham, 2011). Accordingly, public universities have embraced neoliberal practices that foster competition for tuition, enrollment, and funding. Autonomy has thus

become characterized as a neoliberal process in which universities are strategic actors within a market-driven dynamic. These findings are consistent with those of prior studies on marketization as characteristic of the management of education in neoliberal times in other national contexts (Marginson, 1997; Krejsler, 2019a; Enders et al., 2013).

It would be misleading to perceive steering through market mechanisms as constituting government withdrawal. State intervention continues in a socialist-oriented market economy to deal with unexpected impacts of neoliberalism such as inequity in access to higher education or fraud practices at universities (Vo & Laking, 2020). In Marginson's (1997) terms, higher education is a quasi-market—something less than a full economic market because of the extent to which it is state-controlled. In a quasi-market, although the state remains the most influential actor, its role changes from that of coordinator to that of market engineer (Donina et al., 2015). Even if a quasi-market seems to transition to become a fully developed market, state control is not relaxed. In spite of marketization, therefore, state centralism in, for example, Malaysia is still strong, owing to concerns about inequity and the quality of education (Sirat, 2010). Similarly, the Vietnamese higher education system walks a line between state centralism and neoliberalism, even though market rules have become part of the working mechanism of autonomy (Madden, 2014).

Universities are harnessed to marketization in order to become more effective and responsive in the new context, but state intervention remains possible in order to limit unexpected impacts.

To close this section on how policy concepts are presented in the Vietnamese government's policy documents, I restate my finding that autonomy is presented as a steering-at-a-distance mechanism. In this meaning of autonomy, the university is given authority to make strategic decisions, yet it is not free from state steering which exists in the form of conditions, financial responsibility, and state intervention. Steering at a distance, however, presents only the

top-down vision of enactment contained in those policy documents. In an analysis of the reasons for abandoning one of the Ministry's former policies, Vietnam's Minister of Education and Training concluded that perhaps the biggest problem was that the policy had been implemented in a top-down manner; policymakers had not asked widely enough for opinions from relevant actors and had paid limited attention to and even ignored suggestions from universities. Consequently, university leaders and academics protested the imposition of new regulations. In the next section, I discuss university leaders' understandings of policy concepts and reveal tensions in their understanding of autonomy.

Enactment of the Policy: A Process of Contestation over the Meaning of Autonomy

How do actors in a Vietnamese public university understand decision-making authority within the new policy? What do accountability measures in the Vietnamese government's discourses about autonomy mean to university actors? Both of these questions concern the meaning of policy concepts as understood by university leaders. I have discerned two strands among the perspectives held by university leaders: One group shares the view with policymakers that steering at a distance has emerged with the autonomy policy; the other group argues that their freedom is severely restricted. Given the focus of the present study on tensions between decision-making authority and accountability, I discuss here how university leaders understand and contest the meaning of autonomy. I also address the research sub-question concerning how institutional autonomy is enacted through the relationship between actors' understanding of decision-making authority and accountability at University A. In answering this question, I discuss the enactment of autonomy through a process of contestation and negotiation amongst actors.

Contestation Concerning the Meaning of Autonomy

A majority of university leaders articulate their understanding of decision-making authority as always accompanied by conditions, financial responsibility, and state intervention, and as restricting their freedom. Indeed, the autonomy policy has enacted a steering-at-a-distance relationship between the state and the university in Vietnam that it has political, economic, and social consequences, and that has produced reactions from other actors. Contestation over the meaning of autonomy has been reported in prior studies (George, 2011; Brown, 2021; Sirat, 2010). George (2011), for example, found that the ministry and the university in Vietnam differ in their opinions about how autonomy should play out in practice and who should make decisions on individual issues to ensure that both education quality and national development needs are met. Brown (2021) contends that various policy responses articulated by university leaders represent contested spaces in which their agency as policy interpreters and enactors is discursively positioned. Wright (2019d) calls contestation a moment of friction in which people contest their different views of the university, with some gaining some solidity or closure by mobilizing particular figures and eclipsing others.

Contestation, in general, reflects an ongoing tension between autonomy and control, a tension which is often seen as a restriction of autonomy and which produces strong reactions from actors. In Malaysia, for example, academics believe an important implication of the government's higher education law is the erosion of their academic freedom (Sirat, 2010). In Australia, university leaders have expressed frustration with the restrictions imposed by some accountability measures (Brown, 2021). These studies are consistent with my findings concerning tensions between decision-making authority and control in the Vietnamese context. As I reported in Chapter 7, participants expressed their disagreement with the mechanism of

ministerial controls that seriously limit their autonomy in daily decision making. However, owing to its strong legacy of centralized organizational structures, ministry control still exists and continues to generate power struggles with the university.

Accountability was also understood by most university leaders as exerting constraints on the use of their decision-making authority. University A is subject to many accountability measures, primarily in the form of regulations, reporting requirements, and ministerial approval procedures, and these can have weaknesses—they may be outdated, trivial, and inconsistent. I argue here that accountability constrains decision-making authority through the measures the state applies and their accompanying weaknesses. Accountability measures applied under the autonomy policy—regulations, reporting requirements, and ministerial approvals—carry all characteristics of the former centralized governance model. They can be described as *new wine in old wineskins*, an apt metaphor for the implementation of autonomy policy in Vietnam where a compatible accountability framework does not yet exist. A traditional compliance-based accountability system in which the state monitors the university's compliance through its approval function (Verhoet et al., 2004) still exists, but it is inconsistent with the autonomy policy which should use a performance-based accountability system.

As suggested in the literature on autonomy reform, the delegation of autonomy to universities should be accompanied by a shift from a traditional compliance-based control model to a performance-based form of control (Shaw, 2018; Lane & Kivistö, 2008; Verhoet et al., 2004). Performance-based steering, for example, is used to limit direct intervention of the state in Polish universities under that country's autonomous regime (Shaw, 2018). Although policy documents say that the state uses performance indicators to monitor University A's performance (MOET, 2016; Revised Higher Education Law, 2018), participants claimed such was not the

case. Current control measures in Vietnam are intended to ensure public universities' compliance with imposed rules, regulations, and procedures, regardless of whether such compliance will increase efficiency of university performance (Vo, 2018). The traditional mode of control does not create a facilitating institutional environment in which employees can take initiatives. As a consequence, university operation is generally limited to adhering to rules.

Ministerial approval is the biggest barrier amongst accountability measures. Vo (2018) argues that approval processes are so cumbersome, slow, bureaucratic, and intrusive in university life that seeking approvals is no longer appropriate in the governance of autonomous university. Haque (2007) agrees that ministerial control, while still vital, is less of a priority under an autonomy regime. Such arguments suggest that ministerial control should be removed from Vietnamese higher education. I follow Dao and Hayden (2010), however, in arguing that accountability measures are not designed simply to uphold the rule of law but to strengthen the ministry's power and secure accompanying privileges. The mechanism of line-ministry control, for example, provides privileges for ministries such as the power to recommend personnel for senior positions and the capacity to influence budget allocations. If the line-ministry control mechanism is abolished, these privileges will disappear. Dao and Hayden (2010), therefore, argue that decentralizing the Vietnamese higher education sector is challenging because the ministries want to retain their privileges. Given that ministerial approval is the biggest barrier that university leaders face, the ministry's unwillingness to release power adds more challenges than ever to the implementation of autonomy policy.

The Vietnamese higher education sector is embarking on an autonomy journey even though a compatible performance-based accountability system is not yet present. Ørberg and Wright (2019) highlight that the new governance model sets the university free to act within the

government's control framework, and that this means both the university and the control framework must begin a process of transformation. The Vietnamese government's accountability framework, however, has not been adapted or changed, and the autonomy policy has been unfolded against an old and strict regulatory system that contrasts starkly with the new policy's aim to delegate autonomy to public universities.

Confusing Concept and Partial Vision During the Contestation Process

The continual contestation concerning the meaning of autonomy might be due to confusion between the common sense meaning of the word and its meaning as used in the new governance model. The common sense meaning of autonomy is that it refers to self-government, to the ability to act without being subject to any condition and control. It is not surprising, therefore, that university leaders contest the meaning of autonomy when it is accompanied by conditions and state intervention. As Teichler comments (1989, cited in Kickert, 1995), autonomy as used in Vietnamese government documents is a misleading term. In Resolution 77 (a policy document on autonomy released by the Vietnamese government), the concept of working mechanism rather than institutional autonomy is used to name the governance model at play. The concept of working mechanism better describes how a university is governed than does the concept of autonomy; the process is clearer and better articulated, and avoids problems created by the common sense meaning of autonomy.

Ørberg and Wright's (2019) concept of partial vision also helps to understand the continual contestation of the word autonomy. Partial vision means that actors articulate policy concepts only partially and incompletely, and do not recognize that their vision is partial. University leaders and policymakers emphasize and interpret different elements of the concept in diverse ways, so that they understand autonomy in different, even conflicting, ways. As my

findings indicate, policymakers, who represent the government's position as articulated in the policy documents, see the imposition of conditions as being for the university's good—as facilitating the new organizational structure of an autonomous university and helping to create a new university identity in the global knowledge economy. In contrast, university leaders see conditions as restrictions and barriers to their autonomy. Interpretive policy analysis suggests that points of conflict such as these between communities of meaning might derive from different experiences and backgrounds. While legislators and policymakers interpret conditions of autonomy from a neoliberal perspective which supports the policy, university leaders think about them in terms of their experience with the former centralized governance system. A neoliberal system does not find sympathizers amongst these university leaders, who are so familiar with the centralized governance model.

Enactment of Institutional Autonomy Through Contestation and Negotiation

How is institutional autonomy enacted through the relationship between actors' understanding of decision-making authority and accountability at University A? Autonomy has been enacted in the context of Vietnamese higher education through a process of contestation and negotiation between university leaders and policymakers around the concept of autonomy. In implementing the autonomy policy, leaders at University A have engaged in a negotiation process with the ministries. As a result, University A has been given more decision-making authority, as I report in Chapter 6 and 7. Some of University A's arguments have been won and set precedents that have informed policy amendments through which authorities gained by University A have been incorporated into the nationwide autonomy policy. During the negotiation process, however, the ministries have retained ultimate authority, and many of University A's positions have been rejected. The process of negotiation continues until a moment

of enactment is reached—a moment when the meaning of autonomy as steering at a distance becomes dominant and is translated into new institutional practices.

With the amendment of the Higher Education Law without any change in its concept of autonomy, the meaning of institutional autonomy as steering at a distance has become dominant in the Vietnamese context, and some university leaders have been defeated in their argument that the new form of university governance undermines their autonomy. As Wright (2016) argues, university leaders have failed to understand, expose, or effectively contest the quite different meaning of autonomy as that concept is employed in the global knowledge economy and in the state steering model for public service provision. By revealing tensions surrounding the notion of autonomy, the present study may help to clarify how different understandings of such a pressing policy initiative in Vietnamese universities leads to tensions in relations and practices. That is, by understanding tensions surrounding the meaning of the word, space is opened in which to interrogate how such meanings change and how they shift what higher education is about in the Vietnamese university. Understanding the contestation process might also help university actors to understand the complexity of autonomy. As Brown (2021) suggests, by encouraging further conversations, actors may engender a more informed policy understanding and response, one which aligns with the state's aims in enacting the policy.

The Meaning of Institutional Autonomy in Vietnam's Centralized Governance Context

I now address my primary research question: What does institutional autonomy mean in the context of Vietnamese higher education given the legacy of centralized governance system? A new meaning of institutional autonomy has emerged in Vietnamese higher education, a meaning which relates autonomy to status. With the autonomy policy, the Vietnamese public

university achieves a higher level of status than other universities in the country, with more power to make decisions, rather than gaining independence from the state.

Tensions in Policy Enactment

The 2012 Higher Education Law and amendments to the law over almost a decade have enacted a new legal framework for the relationship between the state and Vietnamese public universities. The present study explores university governance reform in Vietnam within the particular experience of the move towards autonomy and accountability. This move has been widely referred to in the international literature on higher education as consistent with neoliberalism and New Public Management. The present study focuses not only on a top-down approach to policy enactment through passage of laws but also on the way in which other actors such as university leaders enact the policy through initiatives and reactions to top-down changes. University leaders in the present study are situated within the dynamism of policy enactment which typically is not uniform or neat in order to invite a nuanced understanding of the process and experiences.

As the findings from my analysis of policy documents and interviews with university leaders suggest, the enactment of autonomy policy highlights tensions between the top-down, authoritarian enactment of laws and policies through the state's rules and the ways in which policies enter into institutions and become meaningful to actors. Tensions are manifested because the state's policy might express a desired or ideal state of affairs rather than the values experienced on the ground (Yanow, 2015). However, a policy can have an objectified presence and very tangible effects (Shore & Wright, 2011), which means it is enacted by those closest to the ground—those who carry out the policy in the local context of university life. By holding

tensions between desires and experiences in place, I can explore the emerging meaning of autonomy in the Vietnamese context, which does not seem to be predetermined or inevitable.

More State Steering From the Legacy of Centralized Governance

While steering at a distance has emerged in the Vietnamese context, the legacy of centralized governance adds yet more state steering. Specifically, the enactment of autonomy policy has resulted in a patchwork of old and new steering instruments which exert even tighter control over universities. The legacy of centralized governance under the Vietnamese Communist Party's leadership is very strong and ensures that the mechanism of ministerial control is still present in University A's decision-making processes. In other words, the ministry has added one more layer of control to the state steering system.

A Patchwork of Accountability Measures. According to state steering theory, accountability measures such as performance indicators, performance-based funding, and auditing are organized around a coherent logic as an assemblage that can be used to steer universities. I argue that the autonomy policy in Vietnam has resulted in a patchwork of accountability measures rather than an assemblage, a patchwork that makes universities even more tightly controlled. This patchwork includes control measures from both old and new governance systems—regulations, ministerial approvals, state audit, and performance indicators—which means the autonomy regime includes even more control instruments than did the previous centralized governance model. A mixture of old and new steering instruments raises questions about how they can be articulated so as not to violate university autonomy. I follow Carter (2018) and Allen (2011) in arguing that governing at a distance and governing at close range may occur simultaneously and may even be entwined. Governing at a distance involves conditions or market mechanisms while governing at close range takes place through such

traditional steering techniques as ministerial approvals. As Rose and Miller (2010) and Newman (2014) claim, government and governance are not distinct.

A patchwork of accountability measures reflects the audit culture of higher education (Spooner, 2020; Shore & Wright, 2015). Audit culture is evident in the expansion of state intervention in what to teach and how to conduct research (Blackmore, 2010). In Malaysia, for example, the state has introduced a kind of academic audit over the work of public universities (Sirat, 2010). The intensive use of control measures is described in the literature as a web of oversight (Lane & Kivistö, 2008) or as multiple strings (Ørberg & Wright, 2019) that cause tensions with the university's decision-making authority. In an earlier study on steering at a distance as a new paradigm of university governance in the Netherlands, OECD examiners question whether an increase in decision-making authority can outweigh the effect of accountability measures (Kickert, 1995). If not, state steering would in fact grow rather than diminish. In Vietnamese, accountability measures have perhaps outweighed the granted authority, because while new control measures such as performance indicators have been added, old steering instruments still exist.

Why has the Vietnamese government created such a strong yet mixed steering system? As Shore and Wright (2011) argue, accountability measures are implemented to monitor University A's compliance with the law—because given its decision-making authority, the university might act for its own benefit. In other words, the government does not trust University A; thus, control mechanisms must be put in place to limit gaming practices such as the opportunistic pursuit of prestige and revenues or manipulation of performance indicators (Enders et al., 2013; Dougherty & Natow, 2019a). This logic follows Blackmore's (2010) argument that the rise of audit culture indicates distrust in management.

Concerns about fraud and corruption in Vietnamese higher education can serve as strong reasons for implementing a strong steering system. Indeed, gaming practices have been identified in recent studies as among the unexpected results of the autonomy policy. Gift giving, for example, is frequently used to mask corrupt practices in Vietnamese universities (McCormac, 2012). Some higher education institutions, in the face of budget cutoffs, manage to increase incomes through increasing the number of enrolments in programs that have high demand (Pham, 2012). One Vietnamese university was found to have navigated through the autonomy regime after government funding was withdrawn by introducing a new bachelor program which set low requirements for recruiting students and did not satisfy many conditions (Nguyen et al., 2016). Indeed, good reasons exist for the state to apply strong accountability measures to deal with the potential uncertainties of the neoliberal context.

Ministerial Interference as part of Autonomy. The accountability system described above includes ministerial approval procedures. The policy of autonomy notwithstanding, this means that Vietnamese public universities are not free from ministry control—a surprise or disappointment, or both, for some participants in the present study. This finding supports and expands Kickert’s (1995) notion that steering at a distance is not free of ministerial interference—that, indeed, it is not the Ministry’s intention to withdraw from steering. Kickert (1995) comments on the wishful thinking of some actors who hope to be freed from ministerial control, but steering at a distance continues to exist. Indeed, ministerial interference not only exists; it is the most common accountability measure, it adds more state steering, and it makes universities even more tightly controlled.

Given the strong legacy of Vietnam’s former centralized governance model that cannot be ignored or removed in the first phase of implementing the autonomy policy, it is not clear if

university reform leads to any level of autonomy for universities or simply creates a policy from which the state benefits. These benefits include reduction of the financial burden on the state budget as financial responsibility is transferred to the university, and more control over the university. The continued involvement of the ministry in university affairs might be good news for some politicians who fear that they will lose power in the steering-at-a-distance mechanism (Kickert, 1995). If ministerial approvals remain in place, however, the danger of an insidious slide back to the old days is always present. Given their unwillingness to release power to the universities, the possibility cannot be ignored that some politicians who are losing their power are waiting for an opportunity to reinstate the former centralized governance model.

The Meaning of Autonomy in a Centralized Governance Context

Since the moment of enactment when the Higher Education Law was amended and released in 2018, the state's vision of steering at a distance has become dominant in Vietnam. The autonomy policy has given University A a higher level of status than other universities in the country with more power to make decisions albeit without independence from the state. This is the meaning of autonomy in the Vietnamese context. It is consistent with literature in which it is argued that universities always have to negotiate status and power with the state, and that, accordingly, they can have more power or higher status but not complete independence (Ørberg & Wright, 2019).

Findings concerning autonomy in the present study differ somewhat from those of Vo and Laking (2020) who found that although the autonomy of public universities in Vietnam appears to be growing, that growth does not indicate a transfer of power from the central state to universities. My findings do indicate a transfer of power, but together with financial responsibilities and an increase in accountability measures to control the use of that power. Differences in findings between these studies may be related to the different universities that

served as case studies. While the university selected for the present study is one of the first higher education institutions to implement the autonomy policy in Vietnam, three universities in the study by Vo and Laking (2020) are not. The meaning of autonomy in Vietnam, therefore, should be read with a view to the limitations and boundaries of the studies.

Although the present study indicates that autonomy conveys a higher level of status on an institution and gives it more power to make decisions, the level of status and power that other Vietnamese public universities might gain from the autonomy policy will not necessarily be the same. Outcomes for any particular university will likely be impacted by factors such as the university's fields of study, financing capacity, leadership, and ability to negotiate power with the state. The Higher Education Law (2012) specifies that a university will achieve a level of autonomy that is equivalent to its financing capacity, ranking results, and accreditation results. As Krejsler (2019b) emphasizes, it would be wrong to conclude that the global knowledge economy and its associated steering technologies will lead to uniformity and standardization among universities.

The State-University Relationship Under the Autonomy Policy

With a new meaning for autonomy in Vietnam as steering at a distance, the state-university relationship in Vietnam needs to be reconsidered. Changes are happening; the university is gaining more authority, but not much has changed in terms of the state-university relationship because the MOET is still the legal governing body with full control over universities. What, then, is the state-university relationship in Vietnam under the autonomy policy? It is not a strict command-and-control relationship (Donina et al., 2015) in which the state retains power and plays the role of controller rather than supervisor. On a positive note, however, a shift towards a more conducive state-university relationship (Sirat, 2010) might be

taking place as the reform agenda moves from state centralism to neoliberalism and more autonomy is given to the university.

With Decision 6600 serving as a performance contract between the university and the ministry, the state-university relationship in Vietnam might best be described as resembling a contractual relationship (Ørberg & Wright, 2019). It is also somewhat similar to a bureaucratic relationship (Yokoyama, 2008) because the mechanism of ministerial control still legally exists. Regardless of the terms used to describe it, the control relationship has become more intensive, and the university is being controlled more tightly. Is this intense state-university relationship successful in achieving the goals of the autonomy policy? It seems the state has achieved its goal to reduce financial burdens by transferring funding responsibility to the university. On the part of the universities, leaders have gained more power to make strategic decisions in a market-driven dynamic and become more efficient and competitive in the global knowledge economy, as the autonomy policy expects. Inequity of access to higher education, however, and gaming practices in public universities are amongst many consequences as the state enacts the autonomy policy.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Overview of the Thesis

In 2012, the Vietnamese government enacted the Higher Education Law to officially mark the granting of institutional autonomy to public universities. After the passage of the law, the term institutional autonomy itself became contested; different actors involved with the policy developed different understandings of its meaning. The purpose of the present study is to develop a better understanding of institutional autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education context, given the legacy of Vietnam's centralized governance system. I have attempted to answer the following primary research question:

- What does institutional autonomy mean in the context of Vietnamese higher education given the legacy of centralized governance system?

To answer this, the present study is guided by the following sub-questions:

- How are institutional autonomy, accountability, and university responsibility presented in the policy documents?
- How do actors in a Vietnamese public university understand decision-making authority within the new policy?
- What do accountability measures in the Vietnamese government's discourses about institutional autonomy mean to university actors?
- How is institutional autonomy enacted through the relationship between actors' understandings of decision-making authority and accountability in this one institution?

The present study is an attempt to fill a gap in the fields of university governance and higher education policy research. The study offers unique insights on the complexities of

institutional autonomy in Vietnam's higher education context by drawing on state steering theory (Wright, 2019) as a theoretical lens. By using an interpretive policy analysis approach in combination with thematic analysis, the study offers a unique approach to exploring the meaning of autonomy at one Vietnamese public university. The primary data sources for the present study are policy documents released by the Vietnamese government, semi-structured interviews with seventeen senior leaders from one Vietnamese public university which I call University A, and University A's internal policy documents on autonomy policy.

My exploration of the meaning of institutional autonomy in Vietnam's higher education context includes a focus on tensions between decision-making authority and accountability. The findings of the study provide a better understanding of tensions between autonomy and control as these concepts emerge together through the enactment of institutional autonomy policy. The findings indicate that the state has delegated decision-making authority to university leaders in order that they may make strategic decisions in a market-driven dynamic. Yet, their autonomy is always accompanied by conditions which include financial responsibility, direct state intervention, ministerial control, and other accountability measures. The findings of the present study support the findings of earlier studies that found that, because of tensions between state-centric values and neoliberal principles, the institutional autonomy of Vietnamese public universities is very limited (Vo & Laking, 2020; Tran, 2014; Vo, 2018; Dang, 2013).

The enactment of autonomy policy in the Vietnamese context highlights tensions between the top-down authoritarian way in which the law and policy are enacted through the state's centralized governance model and the way in which policies enter into institutions and become meaningful to actors. A new meaning of autonomy as steering at a distance (Ørberg & Wright, 2019) has emerged in Vietnam's higher education context, but the legacy of Vietnam's

centralized governance system adds state control which means the university is controlled even more tightly than before. I conclude that the autonomy policy has given public universities in Vietnam a higher status than other universities in the country, with more power to make decisions, but that these universities have not gained independence from the state. This is the meaning of autonomy in the Vietnamese context.

Research Contributions

The present study has made theoretical and methodological contributions to the existing literature on university governance and higher education policy. In terms of theoretical contributions, the key theoretical concept of steering at a distance helps to clarify the meaning of autonomy in the Vietnamese context. Using the concept of steering at a distance, I make visible the working mechanism of a control model that is called institutional autonomy. Through a case study of one Vietnamese public university, the present study clarifies the meaning of institutional autonomy in a country with a legacy of centralized governance. The study is relevant not only to Vietnam but also to other post-Soviet countries as they undergo reform processes in response to the influences of the global knowledge economy.

The present study makes a methodological contribution to the field of higher education policy in Vietnam through use of an interpretive policy approach to the analysis of different communities of meaning related to autonomy (Yanow, 2007). I analyzed four policy objects and three metaphors that participants used in interviews to articulate their understandings of policy concepts. Participants frequently mentioned four policy objects—tuition fees, program of study, textbook, and authority to recruit international scholars—as they shared their perspectives on decision-making authority. They used three metaphors that carried policy meanings about accountability: *a bird locked in a cage*, *a Vietnamese parent-children relationship*, and the saying

that *when the cat is away, the mice will play*. With an interpretive policy analysis approach, I brought the viewpoints of multiple actors into the policy enactment process, albeit at unequal power levels, to address the gap in the literature which largely focuses on the top-down vision of policymakers.

Research Implications for Policy and Practice

The present study has implications and offers direction for future policy and practice. Policy enactment requires consideration of how different actors interpret policy concepts. Including actors' diverse perspectives can help to achieve consensus, and actors may develop a more informed understanding of and become more responsive to how the policy is actually taken up in the institutions. As well, given different self-financing capacities amongst public universities, policymakers need to consider the consequences for universities of including financial responsibility in the meaning of autonomy. Furthermore, an accountability system needs to be put in place that will fit well and be compatible with the autonomy policy. Accountability measures should be tailored towards measuring outcomes and performance rather than focusing on the monitoring of behaviors and processes, and should be consistent with the greater flexibility and authority to which public universities are entitled.

Finally, because of challenges in implementing autonomy as a new policy initiative, many participants raised an urgent need for leadership development and for training in the leading of organizational change. Several leaders decried their lack of support and sense of isolation as they navigated the policy enactment process, especially when not all the leaders at University A were on the same page in implementing the policy. While innovative forces—reformers—were making efforts to implement the autonomy policy, conservative forces who were familiar with the former centralized governance system resisted the changes and new

initiatives. Leadership training concerning how to deal with the mindsets and attitudes of conservative leaders is needed.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

The findings of the present study are limited to the perspectives of university leaders at one Vietnamese public university. Their insights, like those of all participants in qualitative research studies, might contain biases, perhaps particularly because of the history and characteristics of University A. As well, strategies used to implement autonomy policy at University A—such as negotiations between senior leaders and the ministries concerning the right to recruit foreign scholars without acquiring work permits—cannot be expected to proceed in the same way at other universities.

My own experiences and observations over many years in Vietnam's higher education setting has inevitably created biases in how I, a novice researcher, view the phenomenon under investigation. This bias may be reflected in my selection of state steering theory, which is pessimistic about control, as a theoretical lens to use in investigating the concept of institutional autonomy. I have tried to mitigate these potential biases by keeping a journal and writing memos during the processes of data collection and analysis, and during the writing of the final report (this thesis).

Despite my intention and efforts to include in the present study diverse perspectives on institutional autonomy from different actors involved with the policy, I could not gain access to or interview policymakers or officers working within the ministries. Insights from direct conversations with policymakers would have been helpful, especially in clarifying the rationales, ideas, and theories behind the design of the institutional autonomy policy. I had to rely, however,

on the analysis of policy documents released by the Vietnamese government and on internal documents shared by University A to gain insight into how policymakers view concepts related to institutional autonomy.

Future Study

Future research on institutional autonomy should attempt to acquire the perspectives of more actors concerned with institutional autonomy, actors such as professors, academics, and students, and should expand the scope of study to examine how steering at a distance plays out in different contexts. A multiple case study of three public universities in three regions of Vietnam with different social, political, and cultural profiles, for example, could be informative about different perspectives on autonomy. A comparative study on autonomy at public universities in China and Vietnam, two Southeast Asian countries with similar historical, cultural, and political features, could be informative about trends or patterns in the growth of autonomy in post-Soviet countries. A comparative study of university autonomy in the contexts of a Western country such as Canada and an Eastern country such as Vietnam might yield insights about how different cultures and geo-political conditions shape the meaning of autonomy. Following recent studies conducted by the European University Association in which a system of indicators was developed to measure the degree of autonomy of public universities in Europe, I am excited about developing a similar system for public universities in South East Asian countries. While the implementation of autonomy policy is proliferating in Asia, a benchmark system would serve as a useful guideline and reference for the governments.

Finally, a research project investigating the enactment of autonomy policy in Southeast Asian post-Soviet countries under the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic might also make a significant contribution to knowledge. The public higher education sector in Southeast Asia is in

turbulence—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Dealing with turbulence requires robust governance systems that allow room for decentralization, flexibility, innovation, and adaptation, and that provide decision-makers with the freedom and power to manage crises and make agile responses to emergencies (Ansell et al., 2021; Fraher & Grint, 2018; Bentzen, 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia has been a game changer for public administration and created an urgent need for robust governance responses to deal with the crisis, especially in the face of massive public debt and national budget deficit. A focused study could highlight the importance of decentralization in coping with crisis and support the transition to decentralization in post-Soviet Asian countries through policy recommendations. While the present study is limited to the perspectives of university leaders in Vietnam, a wider-ranging study could reveal the international perspectives of actors in other countries and possibly strengthen my findings on autonomy in communist contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide: University Leaders

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

I would like to start by reading then having you sign a consent form to participate in this study.

We will now begin the interview. It will last about 45-60 minutes. Remember that you are free to refuse to answer any question, to take a break, or to stop the interview at any time. Just let me know.

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your role as a senior leader? (*Probe: How long have you been in it? What is your specific area?*)
2. How do you understand the concept of institutional autonomy of a Vietnamese public university?
3. Your university was completely granted institutional autonomy in 2014. What has changed in terms of how your university operates since it was granted the autonomous status? (*Probe: Are you finding your university's autonomy a different experience from what you expect?*)
4. In your specific area, what kinds of decision-making authorities does your university have? (*Probe: Give me an example of when your university can make its own decision, and to what extent?*)
5. In your specific area, what kinds of accountability does your institution have with the Vietnamese government? (*Probe: Is that accountability related to any specific autonomy that your institution has? Is there any consequence if your institution does not meet the accountability requirement?*)
6. The government is both granting autonomy and implementing accountability measures. What do you think about this?

7. How do you balance between decision-making authority and accountability to implement institutional autonomy? (*Probe: What makes your university special and successful in implementing the autonomy policy in a centralized governance context of Vietnam?*)
8. What do you think influences the way that institutional autonomy function at your institution? (*Probe: How is the cultural influence? How is the historical influence? How is the political influence?*)
9. What are the challenges that your university face in implementing the autonomy policy?
10. How do you understand two concepts “accountability” and “self-responsibility”? (*Probe: Are they similar or different?*)
11. In your perspective, why does the Vietnamese government implement the autonomy policy? (*Probe: Many people would say that the government confers autonomy to public universities because the government wants to transfer the financial responsibility to public universities. What do you think about this viewpoint? What steps, if any, did the government take to clarify the policy or to help your university understand the policy?*)
12. Is there anything else you can tell me that would be helpful to understand how institutional autonomy functions at your university?

Thank you very much for participating in this interview.

Appendix B: Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title: Steering at a Distance: A Qualitative Case Study of Institutional Autonomy at a Vietnamese Public University

Document Title: Letter of Information and Consent

Principal Investigator: Dr. Melody Viczko, PhD, Faculty of Education

Co-Investigator: Anh Thi Hoai Le, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Education

Conflict of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest

1. Invitation to Participate

We would like to thank you for considering our invitation to participate in this study, which explores the perspectives of university leaders on the meaning of institutional autonomy at a Vietnamese public university.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a university leader at the selected university with at least one year of experience in your leadership position and with the implementation of the autonomy policy in Vietnam.

2. Purpose of the Study

Institutional autonomy is a fundamental reform policy in Vietnam's higher education system. This policy officially marks the transfer of decision-making authority from the government to public universities. The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning of institutional autonomy at a Vietnamese public university, given the legacy of centralized governance model—in which the ministries having control over all decision-making authorities within public universities.

3. Length of Participation

It is expected that the participant will take part in one interview session with the Co-Investigator. The interview will take approximately 45 – 60 minutes. If you agree, we will contact you for future member checking to ensure the accuracy of data.

4. Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be invited to take part in one interview session in which you will respond to 12 interview questions. The interview questions are open-ended questions asking your views as a university leader about institutional autonomy of a Vietnamese public university based on your experience with the policy implementation. The interview may be audio-recorded according to your consent to do so. You can still participate in this study if you do not agree to be recorded. Face-to-face interviews can be conducted during September and October, 2019 at a place and time that is convenient to you. In case you are not available for a face-to-face interview, the interview will be conducted by telephone or via Skype during these months up until December 31st 2019.

5. Risks and Harms of Participation

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

6. Possible Benefits

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study but information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole. This study will help to develop a better understanding of institutional autonomy in Vietnam's higher education system. The study is the first to investigate the principles and working mechanisms of institutional autonomy, to showcase an exemplar of successful reform, which might lead the way for other Vietnamese public universities. The findings are also expected to support the Vietnamese government and

policymakers in identifying appropriate solutions to increase the responsiveness of public universities to this key reform policy.

7. Participants' Right

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request (e.g., by phone, email, etc.) withdrawal of information collected from you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the researcher know and your information will be destroyed from our records. Once the study has been published, we will not be able to withdraw your information.

8. Confidentiality

The data collected in this study will be used for research purposes only. All identifiable information and data collected will be kept confidential and accessible only to the investigators of this study. We will do our best to protect your identifiable information. All identifiable information, including your name, professional role, and institution and contact information (e.g., email address, phone number, Skype name), will be collected separately from the study data (e.g., transcripts) and linked only by a unique ID code. The master list linking your ID code with your identifiers will be encrypted and kept by the investigators in a password-protected file, separate from the dataset, in Western University's server. Any personal information about you in a form of a hard copy will be kept in a locked cabinet at the investigator's locked office. As per Western Research Ethics guidelines, the electronic data of audio files and transcripts will be encrypted and password-protected and will be stored on Western University's server. Representatives of Western University's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to the study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. Other people/groups/organizations outside the study team will not have access to information collected.

If the results of this study are published, only de-identified information will be made available. Participants will not be named in any reports, publications, or presentations that may come from this study. Your identity as a research participant in this project will not be released without your prior consent. Unidentifiable direct quotes may be used in the reporting of the findings/dissemination of the results. Dissemination of title and role will be at the discretion of the participant. The investigators will keep all your identifiable information for seven years, as per Western University's Faculty Collective Agreement. All the data will be securely destroyed using industry-standard shredders and data-deletion software after the retention period of 7 years.

9. Compensation

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

10. Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. You do not waive any legal right by consenting to this study. We will give you any new information that may affect your decision to stay in the study.

11. Contact for Further Information

If you require any further information about this research or your participation in the study, you may contact Dr. Melody Viczko or Anh Thi Hoai Le. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics. This office oversees the ethical conduct of research studies and is not part of the study team. Everything that you discuss will be kept confidential.

12. Consent

You are kindly requested to sign the following written consent form that you understand your participation in this research study is voluntary.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Consent Form

Project Title: Steering at a Distance: A Qualitative Case Study of Institutional Autonomy at a Vietnamese Public University

Principal Investigator: Dr. Melody Viczko, PhD, Faculty of Education

Co-Investigator: Anh Thi Hoai Le, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Education

Do you confirm that you have read the Letter of Information and Consent, have had all questions answered to your satisfaction, and you agree to participate in this study?

YES NO

Do you agree to be audio-recorded in this research?

YES NO

Do you consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research?

YES NO

Do you agree to have your professional title publicly disclosed within the dissemination of the results? If no, you can still participate in the study without professional title being disseminated.

YES NO

Do you agree to be contacted to verify the data accuracy for future member checking?

YES NO

Print Name of Participant

Signature

Date

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

Print Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Appendix C: Key Policy Documents on Institutional Autonomy and Accountability of Vietnamese Public Universities released by the Vietnamese Government

Number	Name of policy documents	Years
1	Decree No. 99/2019/NĐ-CP (Detailed regulations and guides on implementing some articles of the Revised Higher Education Law)	2019
2	Resolution No. 99/NQ-CP	2019
3	Revised Higher Education Law, Publ. L. No. 34/2018/QH14	2018
4	Decree No. 86/2018/NĐ-CP (Regulations on the foreign cooperation and investment in education)	2018
5	Circular 12/2017/TT-BGDĐT (Institutional accreditation)	2017
6	Circular 04/2016/TT-BGDĐT (Program accreditation)	2016
7	Decree No.16/2015/NĐ-CP (Regulations on institutional autonomy of public service delivery units)	2015
8	Decree No. 86/2015/NĐ-CP (Regulations on the determination and management of tuition fees for public education units and the policy of waiving, decreasing, and supporting tuition fees from the academic year of 2015-2016 to 2020-2021)	2015
9	Resolution No.77/NQ-CP (Resolution on the piloting working mechanisms of public higher education institutions during the period of 2014-2017)	2014
10	University Charter No. 70/2014/ QĐ-TTg	2014
11	Higher Education Law No. 08/2012/QH2013	2012
12	Circular 60/2012/TT-BGDĐT (External reviewers)	2012
13	Circular 61/2012/TT-BGDĐT (The establishment, closure, and operations of accrediting centers)	2012
14	Circular 10/2012/TT-BGDĐT (Curriculum framework for defense and security programs)	2012
15	Circular 04/2012/TT-BGDĐT (List of educational and training programs at master and doctoral levels allowed to teach at colleges and universities)	2012
16	Circular 10/2011/TT-BGDĐT (Guidelines for master programs)	2011
17	Circular 57/2011/TT-BGDĐT (Student enrollment quota at undergraduate, master, and doctoral levels)	2011
18	University Charter No. 58/2010/QĐ-TTg	2010
19	Decision No. 05/2008/QĐ-BGDĐT (Procedures for admission for colleges and universities)	2008
20	Decision No. 76/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT (Accreditation procedures and process for colleges and universities)	2007
21	Decree No. 43/2006/NĐ-CP (Regulations on institutional autonomy and self-responsibility of public service delivery units on performance, organization, and finance)	2006
22	Education Law No. 38/2005/QH11	2005
23	Resolution No. 14/2005/NQ-CP (Higher Education Reform Agenda)	2005
24	Resolution No. 04-NQ/HNTW (Resolution on continuing the renovation of education and training)	1993

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Anh Thi Hoai Le

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: University of Economics, Hue University
Hue City, Vietnam
2004 - 2008, Bachelor of Accounting

University of South Australia
Adelaide City, South Australia, Australia
2011 - 2012, Master of Professional Accounting

Maastricht School of Management
Maastricht, The Netherlands
2014, Postgraduate Diploma in Research Methods and Skills

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2017 - 2021 Ph.D. in Education Studies

Honors and Awards: Western University - Vietnam's Government Doctoral Scholarship
2017 - 2021

Erasmus+ Scholarship Programme - European Commission
2016

Award for Lower Mekong Initiative: Education Pillar English Project
The Embassy of United States of America in Vietnam
2015

Netherlands Fellowship Programmes
2014

Vietnam's Government Master Scholarship
2011 - 2012

Related Work Experience: Lecturer
University of Economics, Hue University, Vietnam

September 2008 - August 2017

Part-time Lecturer
Western University, Canada
May 2021 - April 2022

Western Summer 2021 Student Internship
Western University, Canada
May 2021 - August 2021

Publications

Refereed Journal Articles

Le, A. T. H. (2022). The influence of institutional autonomy policy on internationalization of higher education: A case study in Vietnam. *Journal of Comparative and International Higher Education*, 13(5S), 55-63. [https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v13i5\(S\)](https://doi.org/10.32674/jcihe.v13i5(S))

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Faubert, B., **Le, A. T. H.**, Wakim, G., Swapp, D., & Watson, K. (2019). “Calibrating the Evidence-Based Adequacy Model across educational contexts: Policy and leadership as powerful influences”, *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, 14(4), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.22230/ijepl.2019v14n4a865>

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Do, S. H., Nguyen, H., & **Le, A. T. H.** (2015). “Motives, expectations, and preparedness: A study of students of accounting and auditing at College of Economics, Hue University, Vietnam”, *The University of Danang Journal of Science and Technology*, 4(89), 113-117.

Book Review

Le, A. T. H. (forthcoming). [Review of the book *Higher education for democracy: The role of the university in civil society*, by William G Tierney, Albany, NY: SUNY Press] Canadian Journal of Higher Education.