

# Improving Effectiveness of Implementing the Accountability of Public Universities in Vietnam

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**Abstract** Vietnamese higher education is undergoing radical and comprehensive reform in line with the general trend of higher education in the world. In innovated aspects of the Vietnamese higher education, innovating the governance model towards university autonomy and accountability is seen as a key step. On the basis of clarifying the theoretical issues of accountability, the article proposes some solutions to improve the efficiency of accountability of public universities in Vietnam: Review, supplement and readjust the legal documents on accountability of the university; Carry out accountability in various forms; Form the accountability culture in universities.

**Keywords:** *university autonomy, accountability, public university*

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, our country's higher education system has undergone fundamental changes, especially the diversification of university ownership, the types of training and the demands of employers, etc. These changes have caused the effect that the old ways of university administration are no longer appropriate. There must be fundamental changes to meet the increasing demands of society and the trend of the time. Higher education in Vietnam and the world is becoming more diversified in an unprecedented way. With the same problems, but universities must have different solutions. This depends on the capacity of leaders and managers that also leads to differences in the development of each university. What the universities of Vietnam are owing is the result of current operation. Only when universities change that, can a new result be created. The ability to innovate themselves becomes the survival of every university and the most important thing of which is the renewal of university governance [1,2]. However, public universities in Vietnam are currently having difficulty in solving the problems of scale, revenue and investment for quality. This problem can only be resolved by granting autonomy associated with accountability as well as creating favorable conditions for public universities to implement autonomy and accountability.

University autonomy is the most important feature of modern higher education, as it promotes the development of a natural rule system in a globally competitive education environment which is oriented by the State and is strictly controlled in terms of quality [3,4]. Autonomy and accountability are the keys to innovate university administration, helping to solve a range of issues in the

current and future tertiary education system. Implementing autonomy, self-responsibility of universities will maximize human resources and facilities, attract social resources better, and use State budget more effectively, expand the technology transfer activities and other services in order to raise the financial capacity for sustainable development, ensure conditions for the effective implementation of measures to raise the quality of training, research and scientific consultancy.

The autonomy of tertiary institutions must be linked with accountability [5]. Higher education institutions must be public and transparent to the State, learners and users of educational products and the university's activities. They have to take responsibility for the results of their activities. Accountability of higher institutions is the responsibility of ensuring the quality of training, the quality of outputs and the efficient use of resources as well as transparent information.

In this article, on the basis of clarifying some theoretical issues of accountability, we will propose solutions to enhance the accountability of Vietnamese universities in the context of university autonomy.

## 2. Content

### 2.1. Some issues of Accountability of the University

#### 2.1.1. The Concept of Accountability and Accountability of the University

##### 2.1.1.1. Accountability

According to the Vietnamese dictionary, the responsibility is "the part assigned to or deemed to be assigned to complete, if the result is not good, the doer must bear a

part of the responsibility" [[1]; P.1020]. The explanation is "presentation and interpretation" [[1]; P.388].

From there, accountability is understood as the acknowledgment of responsibility for all actions, products, decisions or policies in leadership, management and performance of the work. Accountability is known as the ability to fulfill the sufficient information obligation, the capacity to justify the past or future actions, and to be punished if these actions violate the ethical and legal rules.

In the operation of the public administration, accountability is the responsibility of public officials and employees to carry out their assigned work and bear the consequences when they have not fulfilled their duties. In our country nowadays, the concept of accountability seems to be primarily composed of the first content, i.e., the responsibility to explain the performance of their duties, public duties or matters related to their management responsibilities when asked.

Thus, accountability is a term that is both moral and legal. Morality is responsible for the work assigned and trying to do it to get the best results. Legality is responsible for the consequences when not completing the work assigned.

#### 2.1.1.2. Accountability of the university

Accountability is the indispensable duty of the university as well as of all individuals and organizations as members of a group. University accountability is an obligation to communicate fully with all stakeholders about the activities and commit to implement them qualitatively, otherwise they will be punished by the law and the parties involved. Thus, university accountability not only limits in reporting to the governing body and to State institutions which are responsible for university management but also has "Public accountability to those who pay taxes to support the university".

It is important to distinguish accountability from the "self-responsibility" of the university. These are two different notions, but in Vietnam and even in the United States, many higher education researchers understand "accountability" as "self-responsibility." According to the author Pham Thi Ly, self-responsibility is the natural obligation of any university, in any country, under any government, in any age because the university is a legal entity and a social organization, it is naturally obliged to take responsibility for all its decisions and actions. Accountability is the core of work relationships among individuals, as well as the relationship of an organization with the governing body and the public. It is particularly important in relation to benefits of the public, such as public policy or the use of public funds. From there, the author Pham Thi Ly said: "University autonomy must be accompanied by accountability, not with self-responsibility" [6].

#### 2.1.2. The Purpose of University Accountability

Universities perform accountability for the following purposes:

##### 2.1.2.1. Guarantee that the university is performing its mission, vision and strategic goals

Mission is very important to a university. Through the mission, it is also possible to see the responsibility of the university for the stakeholders. Therefore, when

universities define their missions, it also means defining their social responsibility, and the first responsibility is to bring the best education to the learner. The university's mission is not only aimed at lecturers and students, but also toward the subjects they serve, including parents, businesses, and the social community. Along with the mission, the vision points to the maturity of the university, the values that it builds and honors, what the school can contribute to society, to the country. Vision shows the confidence of a university as well as the long-term goal of that one. Therefore, the vision also reflects the responsibility of the university in the future. Performing accountability, the university must ensure that it is operating its mission, vision and strategic goals.

##### 2.1.2.2. Ensure that the quality of the university's training is being maintained, improved and enhanced

Training quality is a top concern of universities. Without quality training, the products of universities will not be used by the labor market. Learners will not go to higher education institutions because after graduating, they will increase the unemployment for the society. Specially, in the present context, to survive and develop, universities are not only competing with each other nationally but also competing with one another in regional and international scopes. Training quality has become a "competitive advantage" for all universities. Therefore, universities, on the one hand, must promote activities "for quality"; On the other hand, there must be explanations which can help learners and the society understand and believe in quality of the training that is being maintained, improved and enhanced.

##### 2.1.2.3. Confirm that the resources of the university are being used properly and effectively

The higher education system needs a great deal of resources to develop, from human resources to the physical and financial resources. For public universities, most of these resources, especially physical and financial resources are from the state budget. Another part of the university revenue is from tuition and training services, scientific research, transferring technology. Universities not only are responsible for using resources rightly and effectively, but also publicize and make transparent the use of resources; demonstrate the use of resources for the right purposes and bring efficiency to the university's activities, the first is all activities to ensure and improve the quality of training, services for learners.

#### 2.1.3. The Need to Strengthen Accountability of the University

##### 2.1.3.1. Meet the requirements of fundamental and comprehensive renovation in higher education

To meet the requirements of industrialization and modernization, Vietnam's higher education must be reformed strongly, fundamentally and comprehensively following the guiding point: "Higher education reform must be practical, efficient and synchronous, select the breakthrough, priority area and main base to focus resources makes a clear move. The expansion of the scale must be along with improving quality; Implementing social justice in parallel with ensuring training effectiveness; Renovating from the objectives, processes and contents to the teaching and

learning method as well as the mode of learning evaluation; Linking sectors, forms and training levels; Connecting closely and motivating to continue innovation in general education and vocational education" [7].

The request for a radical and comprehensive reform of higher education requires that universities must also renew their management mechanism in which the nucleus is exercising their autonomy and accountability. Universities must demonstrate to the state management agency for higher education and other stakeholders that the university is implementing innovative activities in accordance with the direction of the Government.

#### 2.1.3.2. Meet the requirements of university autonomy

University autonomy is an indispensable development trend of higher education in the world. In our country, university autonomy has begun to "enter the lives of universities" for more than a decade and is considered a breakthrough solution to tackle the problem and enable higher education to develop. University autonomy has a close relationship with accountability. Some authors argue that university autonomy is like a "gas pedal", which can make a "university carriage" go faster while accountability is like a "brake pedal" helping the "university carriage" not go out on the side of the road and crash down. If university autonomy is considered the right of the university, accountability is the university's obligation to the State, the society, and the parties involved. Rights and duties always "go together", are "each other's friends." Thus, universities promote both autonomous activity and the implementation of accountability. University autonomy is the basis for university accountability, and accountability guarantees university autonomy a "safe and legal guideline."

#### 2.1.3.3. Satisfy the need for a link between the university and its stakeholders

Increasingly, universities are more closely linked to the stakeholders within and outside them. University stakeholders include staff, lecturers, learners. Off-campus stakeholders include the State, social organizations, businesses, employers, parents, etc. These stakeholders are both subjects served by the university and the resources for the university's development. At the same time, stakeholders also always expect on what the university has shown in its mission, vision and strategic goals. When implementing accountability, universities need to assure stakeholders that university has been upholding fundamental ethical principles in the performance of its work. These are the principles set out to protect public benefits, protect public resources that are used for the right purpose, ensure that the university performs what is promised to the learner and society.

#### 2.1.4. The Content of the University Accountability

The determination of the content of university accountability can be based on the following grounds:

##### 2.1.4.1. Rely on university autonomy

In principle, which areas the university is autonomous it must take accountability in those ones. Understanding this, the content of the university's accountability will include: explanation of the organization and management; explanation of financial activities; explanation of academic performance.

##### - The explanation of the organization and management

The university must explain to the stakeholders to understand the reasonableness and efficiency in the organizational structure and the university machinery. The establishment, restructuring or dissolution of affiliated units, etc. in accordance with the functions, tasks and development at each time / stage of the university. The recruitment, appointment and preferential treatment of officials, lecturers and specialists in the position of employment must be open, transparent, objective, and have competitive factors.

##### - The explanation of financial activities

Finance is a very important resource to promote the development of higher education. Because thanks to financial resource, there is a foundation for the development of other resources such as people, facilities, etc., which determine the quality of higher education. In university autonomy, financial autonomy is the most difficult and complex area. It is difficult because universities have to decide themselves in exploiting and searching for financial sources; the way of using available financial resources; balance of revenue and expenditure, etc. It is complicated because all financial activities of the university must comply with the law, not to cause negative and waste. Hence, explanations of financial performance must be undertaken regularly by universities. As a result, their financial operations are controlled not only by the State administration of higher education, but also by the stakeholders. The most important element of the financial accountability of the university is the State budget and other sources of funds used by the university effectively and correctly.

##### - The explanation of academic activities

Teaching and scientific research are the major academic activities of the university. Teaching activities are associated with the development of training programs such as renewing the method, form of training and evaluation of training results; compiling documents and syllabus; developing knowledge and learning resources; Applying information technology to training and management of training, etc. Scientific research is in association with research, application and transfer of technologies in order to commercialize research results; encourage researchers to apply and transfer technology, etc. In addition to teaching and scientific research, academic activities also involve academic freedom. Setting a true university education and enlivening it is a prerequisite for bringing prosperous and civilized nations. There can be no real university without academic freedom. As other freedoms, academic freedom is always accompanied by academic responsibility, in which the most important factors are objectivity and allegiance to truth, compliance with ethical standards, expertise and intellectual property, respect for the academic freedom of other members in the academic community and fair treatment of different academic perspectives.

##### 2.1.4.2. Rely on the subjects to which the university is accountable

The subjects that the university is accountable to are the State, society, learners, and its staff, lecturers. Hence, the accountability of the university will include: the accountability to the State; the accountability to society and learners; the accountability to the staff, lecturers.

### - *The accountability to the State*

For the State, the university must be accountable for its activities in pursuit of national objectives, mission, vision and within the framework of the law; using the investment budget of the State effectively and transparently; reporting and being supervised by the state management agencies on training quality, scientific research or not?

### - *The accountability to the society and learners*

For the society and learners, the university must be accountable for ensuring the quality of training as committed to learners and society; the quality of training is commensurate with the tuition fees and social needs or not; which policies are available to attract good students through scholarship programs, financial aid, employment advice, etc. Even in the normal activities that serve the interests of the learner, for example, the awarding of scholarships, the university must also explain to the students and parents about the source of the scholarship, how to determine the scholarship, the selection criteria to be received scholarships, etc.

Through the publicity mechanism, learners as well as employers monitor the implementation of university engagements on training objectives, output standards, training programs, and quality assurance resources. A university that gives false publicity information or fails to adhere to the publicly-available commitments will not attract students into it, undermining the trust of employers and investors.

### - *The accountability to the staff and lecturers*

In the university, the direct and strong impact on staff and lecturers is the policy system in the university's the main fields of activity. Carrying out accountability with staff, lecturers, and university administrators must convincingly demonstrate the need to issue this policy or other policy, for this or that field, how these policies affect the development of the university, the staff, the lecturers. Actually, any policy cannot meet the needs of all members, therefore, managers must persuade those who may not be "benefited" from one or the other, for the common good of the university community.

## 2.2. Solutions to Improve the Efficiency of University Accountability

### 2.2.1. Reviewing, Supplementing and Adjusting the Legal Documents on Accountability of the University

In the legal documents on university accountability, the Law on Higher Education and the Charter of Universities are the two most authoritative documents. Therefore, it is first necessary to review, supplement and adjust these documents to ensure the accountability of the university.

#### - *For Higher Education Law*

The Higher Education Law was promulgated in 2012 and took effect from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. After 5 years of implementation, the Law on Higher Education has revealed shortcomings, such as many policies are no longer suitable to reality, not clear about university autonomy and accountability; financial regulations and assets are not fully in line with the policy of implementing university autonomy; autonomy in professional activities (training, science and technology, international cooperation, etc.) of higher education institutions is limited. The new amendment to the Law on Higher Education has the

fundamental advantage that emphasizes and enhances the autonomy of tertiary education institutions. Besides, it supplements the regulation on accountability in Clause 3, Article 32 as follows: "Higher education institutions are accountable to learners, society, management agencies and involved parties as follows: a / Explaining the implementation of criteria and quality standards of higher education prescribed by the competent State agency and the criteria and quality standards promulgated by the tertiary education institution; taking responsibility for law if failing to comply with regulations and commitments on quality activity; b / Fully implementing the regulations on regular and irregular reporting regimes of competent state management agencies regarding activities of tertiary education institutions; c/ Carrying out independent audits to audit the annual financial report and settlement report, audit investment and procurement; taking responsibility for presenting and explaining to the management agency, inspection and examination agency; d/ Publicizing fully on the website of the tertiary education institution as regulations; e/ Performing other contents and forms of explanation by law" [3].

However, understanding the implication of the term "accountability" in the Vietnamese sense is a matter to be clarified in the draft. Accountability not only reports, presents and lectures on the university's activities but more importantly assumes legal responsibility and independent liability by law.

#### - *For the Charter of Universities*

In the University Charter, university accountability is shown in Article 5, Clause 3: "The social responsibility of the university is reflected in the following activities: Reporting, publicizing and explaining to State management agencies and concerned parties on its activities according to the provisions of law; Committing to State management agencies and being responsible for all activities to achieve commitments; Not allowing any individual or organization to use the university's name and facilities to conduct activities contrary to the provisions of the law and this Charter" [8]. According to the author Pham Thi Ly, When mentioning university accountability, the new Charter stresses the responsibility for political security and only requires universities to report, publicize and explain "in accordance with the provisions of the law", a phrase commonly used to narrow the outline of concepts [9]. Therefore, the Charter should specify the university's accountability for both the content (explain what) and the object (account to whom). As a result, universities will have an obligation to account.

With the addition of accountability in the Higher Education Law and the Charter of the University, the Government should issue a Decree on university accountability to better the legal framework for this activity on the fundamental: publicity, transparency, completeness, timeliness, protection for benefits of stakeholders.

### 2.2.2. Carrying out Accountability in Various Forms

Subjects of the university accountability are diverse, from the State, society and learners to the staff and lecturers. Obviously, the form of accountability must also be diverse so that all people can approach the university's information and participate in monitoring its activities. Higher education institutions can take accountability

through mission statements and visions, core values, output standards, "three publicities", annual report, etc. These forms of explanation contribute to "publicize", "make transparency" and "clean up" the university's activities. Presently, explanatory model which are commonly used by universities is "three publicities". To implement "three publicities", universities must publicize on its web portal and other media about the following three issues: 1) the ongoing activities (including detailed curriculum framework, research activities, process of quality inspection); 2) the capital source and human resource of the university (including faculty members, facilities for teaching and accommodation for students); 3) the revenue sources (including tuition fees and revenues from training activities, scientific research, etc.) and the expenditure activities (including salaries, training costs, and construction costs, repairing and purchase equipment).

The "Three Publicities" is a right policy of the Ministry of Education and Training on the roadmap to promote accountability for universities. However, many institutions of higher education do the "Three Publicities" with coping form. This has led to the loss of opportunities for higher education institutions to justify their policies and decisions; losing the opportunity to build trust with the public and stakeholders. Therefore, in order for universities to voluntarily implement "three publicities", in addition to regulation and guidance, the Ministry of Education and Training should impose penalties on higher education institutions that do not disclose information on the website or posting sketchy information that does not reflect accurately their activities.

Apart from the "three publicities", higher education institutions should use *Annual report* to fulfill their accountability. Through the annual report, the State management agencies for higher education and other stakeholders are provided with information on the university's activities.

### 2.2.3. Establishing the Culture of Accountability in Universities

In the university, it is necessary to build both quality culture and culture of accountability, especially in the context of greater autonomy being transferred to the university.

At present, there is hardly any author who mentions the concept of "accountability culture". Understanding generally, the culture of accountability in the university is a particular cultural form of university culture that includes a system of philosophies, views, norms, values, traditions, mechanisms and policies on accountability. These are accepted by the members of the university and reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of the members in the best way to meet the needs of customers in order to create competitive advantage which assures the sustainable development of the university in the context of the globalization of higher education.

Accountability culture requires that every organization or individual in the university be regularly involved in the performance of their daily work and self - evaluate basing on ethical and legal criteria which are defined. Accountability culture also requires to form *the public*

*opinion on accountability* in the university, in which all acts that ensure the publicity and transparency of the university are supported and encouraged. All actions that affect the publicity and transparency of the university are condemned.

To develop the culture of accountability, the most important thing is to shape the core values of the university such as responsibility, publicity, transparency, dedication, etc. Furthermore, there is a mechanism for the units, organizations and individuals in the university to fulfill their accountability on the assigned tasks.

## 3. Conclusion

Vietnamese higher education is undergoing radical and comprehensive reform in line with the general development trend of higher education in the world. In the innovative aspects of higher education in Vietnam, reforming the governance model towards university autonomy and accountability is seen as key stage. For many institutions of higher education in Vietnam, university autonomy and accountability, especially accountability, are relatively new. Hence, to enhance accountability, universities must not only understand the nature of this concept, but more importantly, implement effectively accountability in order to create a balance between "the brake pedal" and "the gas pedal" of the Vietnamese university carriage which needs accelerating, breakthrough to integrate into higher education in the world.

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