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**UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY IN VIETNAM:
FRAGMENTS BENEATH THE CONSENSUS**

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract:

Being inspired by the trend of education reform around the world, the attempt to expand school autonomy has been one of the most remarkable orientations for higher education reform in Vietnam in recent years.

There seems to be a consensus, at first glance, among the locals toward the necessity of the university autonomy and a common expectation that the university autonomy reform will be the most holistic reform to create necessary transitions to improve the whole (higher) education system. However, university autonomy in Vietnam is still a new foreign concept so that there has not been a fixed common understanding for it among the locals in Vietnam. Beneath the facial agreements on the normative principles of university autonomy, local perceptions keep being constructed and reconstructed during the implementation process, and their expectations were also differently prioritized accordingly.

This is a data-driven interpretive research to show how different actors in Vietnam are co-constructing their understanding and expectations toward university autonomy to fit with the specific context of the country on the base of the imported idea of school autonomy. By looking beneath the on-the-surface consensus, the research reveals variances in perceptions and different priorities for what the actors support the university autonomy reform.

The initial findings show that there are indeed fragmented expectations and heterogeneity in the discussion of university autonomy. Despite the general support and common expectations toward the university autonomy, what happening is

far from a holistic reform that fit all purposes – as many locals expected. In the current situation in Vietnam, there is a possibility that the discourse of university autonomy will be diverted to adapt mainly to economics expectations. Dramatic changes in political issues are hindered for facing tensions, struggles, and oppression. Meanwhile, the partial participatory approach is preventing an inclusive co-constructive understanding of university autonomy and leading to the overlooking of some social matters.

Keywords:

School autonomy/university autonomy¹, school governance, education reform
Policy-making, political engagement/participation, participatory voice, mutual learning, co-constructive perception
Power structure, authoritarianism, democratization

¹ In the context of this thesis, the term “school autonomy” and “university autonomy” are used interchangeably. Except for the part of literature review, the researcher will use the term accordingly to the original English articles.

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ABBREVIATION

BOM: Board Of Management
CPV: The Communist Party of Vietnam
HE: Higher Education
MoET: The Ministry of Education and Training
NMP: New Public Management

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and problematization

1.1.1 Vietnam higher education system

Vietnam is a single-party nation which has been ruled by the Communist Party since 1975. After the Doi Moi reform began in 1986, the dramatic changes have been generated to rescue the country from the stagnant and isolated situation and gradually integrated into the development flows of the world. However, until now, Doi Moi is still an incomplete reform that mainly focuses on the economic sector but likely avoids decisive changes in the political system and therefore left many core issues unsolvable.

With the principle of “*the Communist Party having absolute, overall and direct leadership in all areas*” enshrined in the Constitution, the whole higher education system in Vietnam is strictly controlled from the top with very little autonomy for schools² (World Bank, 2005). The centralized controlling of the Communist Party and the State on the whole society and the higher education sector was exercised not only from top to down through a set of the hierarchical system including central, regional, local branches but also from inside through the school-level Communist party cells. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), therefore, can influence the whole higher education system from education policies to daily practices in schools (London, 2011).

In addition to the total leading role of the Party, the higher education system in Vietnam should also operate under strict State control and depend heavily on central planning, which further affirms the centralization in education governance.

Secondly, a significant part of State authority is exercised through the intermediate administrative ministries, firstly the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). MoET has the roles of managing the national examinations and deciding student quotas for schools; designing common curriculum structure for the education system and approving curriculum frameworks for all programs as well as approving the appointment processes for chair positions in institutions. In addition to MoET, higher education governance also has the participation of the other

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12 ministries - 4 of which have system regulatory responsibilities while the others administer some specific universities and colleges (Hayden and Thiep, 2007).

1.1.2. University autonomy in Vietnam

In align with the neo-liberal trend of education reform around the world, the attempt of decentralization and expand university autonomy has also become one of the most significant orientations for (higher) education reform in Vietnam (Bui, 2014).

Regarding terminology, the term "university autonomy," although appearing a lot in mass media, has rarely been used officially in the educational policies and legal documents in Vietnam from 1979 to 2005. In the Higher Education Law (2012), the "*autonomy of higher education institutions*" was first officially mentioned in Article 32, which emphasized that schools have autonomy in organizations, personnel, finance, education, science activities, quality assurance, and international cooperation³.

A review of the policies of Vietnam in the field of higher education revealed a tendency of expanding university autonomy even before the official uses of the term "university autonomy." The current rules have already been more flexible, which recognize almost every component of university autonomy, which has been more and more obviously expressed in various legal documents as followed (List of relevant legal documents with links in Appendix):

- According to Article 10 of Decision No. 153/2003/QĐ-TTĐ promulgating the Charter of Universities, "*University has autonomy and self-responsibility in school development planning and various aspects of training, science, technology, finance, international relations, organization, and personnel.*"
- Article 14 of Education Law (July 2005) gave instructions for the implementation of decentralization in education governance and strengthening the autonomy and self-responsibility of education institutions.
- Government Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP on "Substantial and comprehensive renewal of Vietnam's tertiary education in the 2006-2020 period" affirmed the importance of improving higher education policy to ensure autonomy and social responsibility of higher education institutions as

³ <http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/Nghiencuu-Traodoi/2019/54388/Tu-chu-dai-hoc-Khai-niem-va-chinh-sach-giao-duc-o.aspx>

well as to guarantee State administration and the social monitoring and evaluation on higher education. According to this resolution, management of public higher education institution should shift into the autonomous mechanism so that institutions have the right to decide and take responsibility for the issues of training, doing research, organization, human resources, and finance. The resolution also encourages to eliminate the mechanism of governance ministries.

- Joint Circular of the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Home Affairs 07/2009/TTLT BGDĐT-BNV on “Autonomy, self-responsibility on mission implementation, organization and staff structure for public education and training units” guided to promote autonomy in mission planning and implementation, in organizational structure as well as in recruitment and management.
- According to Resolution 05-NQ/BCSD on “Higher education innovation in the period 2010-2012” of the Ministry of Education and Training, management activities should promote autonomy and self-responsibility of schools based on State regulation, strengthen supervision and inspection role of the State, the society and the schools themselves. The resolution also emphasized that strengthening university autonomy should be promoted by other State regulations.
- Directive 296/CT-TTG of the Prime Minister on “Educational management reform in the period of 2010-2012” required to recheck, supplement and adjust previous legal documents while building new legal materials on the establishment and operation of schools. The directive clearly defined the responsibilities of teachers in training and scientific research, clarify the relationship between school administrators, university councils, Party committee, and unions in schools. On such a base, universities can expand autonomy and self-responsibility.
- The Higher Education Law (2012), as mentioned above, also paid attention to the issue of university autonomy with highlights articles regarding university autonomy, university councils, and non-profit private schools. University autonomy is recognized, going along with many provisions on the University Council, Board of Directors, Principals, duties, and powers of education institutions, admissions, educational programs, diplomas, school fees, etc.

- Law No. 34/2018/QH14 (2018) on amendments to the Higher Education Law had considerable adjustments with more clear regulations on autonomy and accountability. The amendment was positively assessed by many education/policy experts as a step to remove barriers and to create a relatively appropriate legal corridor for university autonomy implementation.

No matter the changes in policies, the process of making this orientation real and applying it in practice happened slowly for years. The very first experiment of university autonomy in Vietnam was in the 1990s when the two national universities in Hanoi and Hochiminh City with particular autonomy governance were established. However, the specific autonomy mechanism was only applied to these two schools and did not create significant influences on the other institutions in the higher education system. Most schools still considered university autonomy a far-fetched policy on paper without any explicit instruction for implementation and the acknowledgment from the public was very limited. In 2014, the Vietnamese Government launched the Resolution No.77/NQ-CP for piloting financial autonomy in the public sector of the higher education system. The implementation, however, was still rather slow. According to statistics of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), in the academic year 2015 - 2016, among 233 universities in Vietnam, there were 163 public universities. However, until the end of 2017, there were only 23 public higher education institutions piloting university autonomy under Resolution No.77/NQ-CP⁴.

In spite of the limited number of piloting schools, Resolution No.77/NQ-CP marked an attempt to encourage practically applying university autonomy on a larger scale as well as to collect different perspectives on how to improve university autonomy. The piloting program under Resolution No.77/NQ-CP signaled a strong determination to expand university autonomy and involve schools into the process. As a result, open discussions of university autonomy policies were encouraged, which attracted more attention in society to this reform orientation in Vietnam. No matter all of these attempts, until the first data collecting for this thesis in 2017, university autonomy was still a new concept in Vietnam – as being affirmed by the local interviewees. The debates on how to understand university autonomy and what influences to be expected from applying university

⁴ <http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/Van-hoa-xa-hoi/2019/54083/Tu-chu-trong-cac-truong-dai-hoc-cong-lap-o-Viet-Nam.aspx>

autonomy were still popular. While relevant stakeholders generally accepted the ideas and the core principles of university autonomy as adopted from the advanced education systems in the West, the implemented university autonomy in Vietnam was far from any pre-designed or standardized model of university autonomy. The locals were still struggling to reach a common understanding of university autonomy and co-constructing a version of university autonomy that can adapt to the concrete context of Vietnam.

In such an on-going process, actors would have various expectations toward the university autonomy – so much that it sounds like a “holistic” or “all-purpose reform” that all support. However, beneath the facial consensus, these actors may have various priorities and different perspectives and the promise of a reform that fits all may end up fits none or only some expectations.

1.2 Research objectives

This data-driven qualitative research will supply a thorough view of the locals’ perceptions and expectation toward the university autonomy in the particular context of Vietnam.

The study firstly identifies the shared understandings of the normative principles of university autonomy, the general expectations embedded in the agenda of university autonomy in Vietnam as well as the logic behind such embedding. Next, the researcher conducts an in-depth inquiry to clarify the heterogeneity of perceptions and the diversification of priorities in the discourse of university autonomy in Vietnam. The combination of these two parts allows the researcher to see the main tendencies and identify the main sectors where the discourse is diverted to.

1.3 Research questions

The first group of research question: Questions regarding general understanding and expectations toward the university autonomy reform:

- For what reasons do different actors support the university autonomy reform? What are the problems that they expect university autonomy to help? How do they come to such problematization?
- Why do stakeholders think that university autonomy can play a role in solving those identified problems? How do they perceive the university

autonomy concept? How do expectations are embedded in their understanding of university autonomy in Vietnam?

The second group of research question: Questions regarding the division of viewpoints

- Are different stakeholder's perceptions and expectations toward the university autonomy reform homogenous? If not, what are the controversial issues and why there exist such controversies?

The third group of research question: Questions regarding the interaction and the tendencies in the university autonomy discourse:

- During the process in which the local perceptions of university autonomy are co-constructed, with all of the agreements and separation as being analyzed, whether all expectations are adequately considered? Where's the discourse of university autonomy diverted?

1.4 The significance of the research

This interpretivism study helps to clarify how far stakeholders agree or disagree with each other in perceiving of university autonomy and what kinds of expectations are embedded or prioritized. In the situation when there are not many studies of university autonomy perception in the concrete context of Vietnam, the paper can be useful for any further step of policymaking and policy assessment for the country.

This study also contributes to the academic resources of university autonomy by exploring different nuances and adaptations of the concept of university autonomy under the influence of specific contextual elements of Vietnam's higher education system, which can be useful also for comparative inquiries in wider international education policy discourses. Researching the conceptualization and transformations going along with the university autonomy reform in Vietnam will also be relevant to various social and public policies issues, such as the education governance reform, the participatory approach in policy-making or the democracy transitioning in authoritarianism societies.

1.5 Research scope

Since the university autonomy is an on-going reform tendency in Vietnam, it is necessary to mention that this thesis only focuses on a certain period of the reform from the Resolution No.77/NQ-CP (2014) to the Higher Education Law Amendment (2018), which is also the period with the most considerable achievement in the university autonomy reform in Vietnam.

In this thesis, by mentioning schools, the researcher wants to talk about the university/higher education institutions. It is worth noticing that the research focuses mainly on the schools piloting university autonomy in the public sector - which are directly and significantly impacted the university autonomy reform in Vietnam.

Although the researcher collected data from different actor groups, the focus is still the active group who support, have considerable understandings and meaningful voices contributing to the university autonomy policy-making. (The categorization of actor groups will be explained further in chapter 4 (Research methodology)).

Also, while acknowledging that university autonomy is a multi-level concept, this thesis emphasizes the higher education system level analyses, which means the analyses in this paper will focus on the interaction between the schools, the State and other stakeholders in the system. The researcher will not go deeply into the lower analytic level, although some relevant issues can be discussed when necessary.

2. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Qualitative research perspective

To reach an in-depth interpretation of local understanding of university autonomy in the context of Vietnam, this paper applies the qualitative methods to study the research problems.

Quantitative tradition is mainly built on assumptions that are consistent with the positivist paradigm. It includes empirical research which has more strengths in testing a theory consisting of variables to examine whether the theory validly explains or predicts phenomena (Yilmaz, 2013). Meanwhile, the qualitative perspective includes much more diverse approaches which are built on different paradigms. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), qualitative research includes all types of research that “produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (pp. 10–11). Qualitative research views the reality as “so complex and interwoven that cannot be reduced to isolated variables.” Therefore, instead of testing theory, qualitative research has more strengths in descriptively revealing “the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world” (Yilmaz, 2013)⁵.

2.2. Constructivism research philosophies

Qualitative research does not belong to a single discipline or methodology but an umbrella term covering different approaches and methods (Yilmaz, 2013). Therefore, a brief explanation of the research philosophies, which inevitably requires to answer the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological questions, is possibly an effective way to clarify further choices of empirical research techniques and open an in-depth discussion of methodology in the next part. The term “research philosophies” in this paper mentions the specific pre-theoretical philosophical foundations and “conceptual networks” which implicitly or explicitly direct and explain for the choices of what to study, how to study, as well as how the criteria for evaluating the study – similar to the term scientific paradigm used by Kuhn (1962).

There are four ideal models of philosophical research perspectives, which are positivism, constructivism, critical theory, and pragmatism (Easterbrook et al.,

⁵ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/ejed.12014>

2008). It is not easy, however, for novice researchers to identify their pre-theoretical perspectives – not only because of the sophisticated philosophical nature of the topic but also because different research philosophies do not entirely exclude each other (Corbetta, 2011) and there are not clear-cut separations between them. Since there is no base to guarantee that researchers will be loyal to only one paradigm in researching through time, it will be more practical to identify just the research philosophies that most influences the researcher in a period of his or her academic career or the one that most suitable for his or her specific study.

In the case of this thesis, the researcher recognizes the impacts of the postmodern constructivism/interpretivism, interactionism and pragmatism. Adopting the postmodern constructivism/interpretivism paradigm means having relativist ontology in combination with a subjectivist epistemology stand. Most constructivists affirm that "knowledge is not passively received but actively built up" (von Glasersfeld, 1989), but various variants regarding paradigm differentiating them into modernism-influenced and postmodernism-influenced. According to (Prawat, 1996), the traditional modernism variants focus mainly on the individual level in analyzing the knowledge constructing process and require "a foolproof inferential system" for knowledge generation. Meanwhile, postmodernism constructivism theories pay more attention to social factors. Furthermore, this postmodernism variant of constructivism does not look for a single and purely objective reality but acknowledge the multiplicity of reality according to the interpretations of people. Because the knowledge we have about reality is relative to circumstances and context (Lever, 2013), the goal of postmodernists is not to build or to test "grand narratives" about the society but generate more basic, temporary and context-sensitive descriptions or theories to explain reality. Epistemologically, this paradigm accepts that "it is not possible to be completely free of bias" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Throughout the research process, the pure form of objectivity becomes impossible – as soon as the author decides what specific topic to focus on as well as when he or she scans through the data and renders what is relevant or irrelevant. It is even more impossible when he or she extracts the meaning from such data as well as when he or she arranges pieces of data and analyses to form significant findings, etc. Constructivism acknowledges the guiding role of the researcher's beliefs (Lever, 2013) and highly values the sensitivity of the researchers in doing research. It recognizes the meaning of human experiences and highlights the interrelation between the researcher and the

participants in co-constructing the knowledge of the world (Mill, Bonner & Francis, 2006).

The statement to recognize the impacts from pragmatism further affirms anti-metaphysical stand and the belief in contextual and temporal nature of knowledge as well as the subjectivism epistemological philosophy. The pragmatists, as Corbin and Strauss (2008) explained, refuse the separation between common sense thinking and the systematically controlled scientific knowledge, which can erode the relevance and usefulness of knowledge in practical affairs. Instead, they highlight the role of “experiences of whoever is engaged in an inquiry,” “personal experience” and “self-reflection” in acquiring knowledge of the reality. Meanwhile, the imprints of Interactionism result in the focus on how meaning is created and recreated through interaction. Interactionists believe that people respond to each other based on their interpretation or the meanings they attach to other’s action (Blumer, 1969). The combination of pragmatism and interactionism imprints lead to the focus on the meaning people embed to things depending on social interactions and experiences as well as how those constructed perceptions influence society in their turn. “Knowledge is created through action and interaction” in response to “problematic situations” when the current habits and solutions do not work - requiring new processes and knowledge (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

The process of doing this thesis challenged the concept of a single truth and objectivity but instead, enforcing acknowledgment of the multiplicity of reality depending on the interpretations of people. It is not the ideal or standardized form of university autonomy but the heterogeneous perceptions and their interaction in the process of co-constructing understandings of university autonomy in the specific contextual setting of Vietnam that this paper focuses on. To produce thorough analyses of expectations embedded in people’s perceptions of the university autonomy reform in Vietnam, the researcher should work carefully with various stakeholders and diverse data to explore different layers and aspects of the university autonomy reform discussion. The process of dipping into data and then give out interpretation from them makes the researcher becomes an un-detachable part of what is studied.

2.3. Previous studies on the school autonomy perception

Although school autonomy/university is not a new research topic around the world, most researches focus more on empirical practices and impacts rather than the perception of the concept. For examples, Wößmann (2007) studied the influences of school autonomy and affirmed the positive impacts of autonomy (in different analytic level) on the performance of students. Similarly, Honig and Rainey (2012) focused on the implementation of school autonomy as a strategy for school improvement in the US. Their results revealed better but limited results in school improvement, which can be rooted in the solutions to support the implementation process rather than the autonomy itself.

Enders et al. (2012) combined the conceptual and empirical approach analyzes the concept and related expectations of organizational autonomy. The authors also compared the formal and real school autonomy in the context of Netherland. While the research problems in Enders, Boer, and Weyer (2012) is very close to this thesis, there were two significant differences to notice. Firstly, while this thesis is a data-driven interpretivism study to understand how the locals perceive of the school autonomy concept, in Enders, Boer, and Weyer (2012), the concept of school autonomy was discussed from a theoretical view. The authors reviewed relevant studies and theories to build a framework to apply to further analyses. Secondly, in comparison to Netherland and other western higher education system, there can be significant differences in contextual elements, especially regarding the political system and the hierarchical socio-cultural traditions in Vietnam.

Wermke and Salokangas (2015) was an attempt to dig into the complication of the school autonomy both in conceptualization and implementation. The authors cited different previous studies of autonomy in education to review different theoretical and empirical approaches in school autonomy. Wermke and Salokangas (2015) revealed the complexity of the concept which is multidimensional and can be interpreted differently depending on different actors and contexts. In spite of supplying a vibrant analysis of various approaches to perceive school autonomy, most of the papers being reviewed and analyzed in Wermke and Salokangas (2015) were focused on the individual, professional and organization internal analytic level (the theoretical perception analyzing part) and mainly put in the context of Nordic and EU countries (the empirical implementation explanation part).

Although school autonomy - both in term of perception and practices - has been discussed in the western academic community from the latter half of the twentieth century, the inquiries of school autonomy in the specific context of Vietnam are limited in number. In aligning with the reform policies, there were some author studies of university autonomy in the country recently. However, the researches on the local perception and the adaptation to implement university autonomy in the actual condition of Vietnam is quite rare. Most studies mainly focus on analyzing university autonomy policies and the possible impacts in implementation but not the conceptualization of the concept. In analyzing promising practice in school governing in Vietnam, McAleavy et al. (2018) mention autonomy without any detailed definition. In comparing the school governing in Vietnam and Western systems, the concept, however, was paired with the right in “decision-making” and was put in contrast to the close supervision. The term can be used to mention the autonomy of the teachers in the school in some cases and the autonomy of the principal as the representative of the school in the relation with the central authorities in other cases.

Similarly, Hayden and Thiep (2015) mentioned school autonomy among the four main content of the reform agenda in Vietnam until 2020. “Autonomy,” therefore, was discussed simply by citing the policy document without other definition. In most studies, the authors adopted the pre-existed definitions instead of going in-depth to explore the construction (and reconstruction) of the local perception of university autonomy through the interaction between people to people and people to reality.

Hayden and Thiep (2007) analyzed the “Institutional autonomy for higher education in Vietnam” but mainly focused on the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA). While acknowledged the necessity to understand the construct of institutional autonomy in the context of Vietnam, the paper focused more on policy analysis but not the perception construction. Hayden and Thiep (2007), therefore, based their analyses on some previous definitions from Berdahl (1990) - which emphasized the determination power of schools and Tight (1992) - which conceptualized school autonomy by the freedom of schools in different areas. However, the authors also noticed that school autonomy includes in itself many facets, which can come in different forms and templates around the world (Hayden & Thiep, 2007). Therefore, even the most popularly accepted definition may supply

only a relative and normative understanding of the concept, which may be inadequate to understand the dynamic in perception and practicing of university autonomy in Vietnam.

Hallinger and Truong (2016) also noticed the inadequacy of the adopted definitions as being applied for Vietnam. In comparison with “*the advanced higher education systems*” which are regularly mentioned as successful examples of school autonomy, the higher education system in Vietnam – which is based on and influenced by Confucian philosophy and Soviet model of governance – is very different. Because of the opposite premises, it is reasonable to predict that beneath the superficial consensus of the normative principles or ideas of university autonomy, there will be peculiar understandings and implementation practices when the concept of school autonomy is imported to Vietnam.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Sampling strategy

For this qualitative research, the final goal is not generalizability but to generate a thorough view of local perceptions of university autonomy in Vietnam. The sampling strategy and sample size, therefore, are not selected accordingly to the criteria of quantitative research – which usually require randomization and adequate sample size that enable representativeness (Coyne, 1997). Instead of using statistical sampling, this qualitative interpretive research emphasizes the “informativity,” and therefore, the sampling strategy and the sample size should be designed to help the researcher to have in-depth information to answer the research question (Marshall, 1996).

To be noticed, in this thesis, there was a shift in the research design, which required the adjustment in the sampling strategy.

3.1.1. Judgment sampling and snowball sampling in the first research design

The researcher initially focused only on the first two research questions (part 1.3) of “For what reasons do relevant actors support the university autonomy reform?” and “What are the problems that they expect university autonomy to help?”. The original research design was also more simple, in which the thematic analysis was applied as the single method to explore different expectations of participants toward the university autonomy reform.

Accordingly, the first data collection was collected using a combination of judgment sampling (or purposeful sampling) and snowball sampling (or chain referral sampling). According to Patton (1990), purposeful sampling aims at looking for cases that can supply rich information for the in-depth study. Meanwhile, snowball sampling is used because of the difficulty in identifying and accessing the people that have adequate understandings of the university autonomy in Vietnam. While using snowball sampling, the researcher was still involved in developing and managing the progress of the sample to guarantee that the chain of referrals remains relevant to the study (Etikan et al., 2016). This sampling strategy serves to identify and include participants having roles in the university autonomy reform with different backgrounds to see different expectations they have towards the university autonomy - as much as possible.

With the initial assumptions that different stakeholders would likely to have different viewpoints and expectations regarding university autonomy, the researcher began with a list of the stakeholder groups that – in the understanding of the researcher – may be relevant to the university autonomy reform and then tried to look for at least one participant in each group to interview. This stakeholder list was created based on some preliminary readings which included: The federal administration (government, the judiciary, ministry of education); The actors in institution (institutional managers, academic and administrative staff); The civil society (the professions entities); Students, potential students; The end users: families/parents, companies employers/enterprises) (Cho & Palmer, 2013; Schwartzman, 1998; De Wit and Verhoeven, 2000). With this initial list, the researcher looked for the first interviewees. In the interviews with these seeder interviewees, there was an interview question about the stakeholders that may be relevant to the university autonomy (in the opinions of the interviewees). The answers to this question were considered to adjust the stakeholder list. The interviewees were also asked to introduce the researcher to other interviewees if possible.

In using this sampling strategy, there were two criteria to decide the sample size. Firstly, there should be enough participants to represent different stakeholder groups. Secondly, there should be enough interviews to reach data saturation (in the first research design, this only means until there are no new expectations arise from data). These criteria were met quite soon after the 15th interviews. However, the data collecting continued because of some of the following reasons/conditions:

- The researcher wanted to have more data to re-affirm the saturation
- At that time, the researcher simultaneously worked in a research team in Vietnam, which also studied school governance. Thank to the relation network of the group, there were favorable conditions for the researcher to collect more data. These data not only served this study but in many cases, also served different but relevant research themes in the group.
- Some initial data analyses during the data collecting process (to check for data saturation and to serve other research topics in the group) resulted in information accumulation. The focus on solely the expectations of participants toward the university autonomy, therefore, seems to be “not enough”

anymore and the researcher felt the inner urge to add more complexity into the analyses.

3.1.2. Theoretical sampling in the final research design

For both subjective and objective reasons, the availability and richness of data as well as the rising of many meaningful themes in some initial data analysis, at last, led to significant changes in the study orientation. The researcher decided to adjust the research objectives as well as add some other research question (as being listed in part 1.3). Accordingly, there was also significant adjustment in the research design from simple thematic analysis to a more ambitious qualitative research approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008) and thematic analysis became only a primary analysis tool within that approach. Along with these decisions, the study was continued with theoretical sampling strategy to elaborate concepts and explore the relations between them.

The shift in sampling strategy, luckily, did not create serious contradiction because, in nature, all qualitative sampling (including theoretical sampling) are purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) and the combination between them is possible and sometimes necessary for different stages of the studies (Coyne, 1997). It is possible in the early stage of Grounded Theory that the research begins with a sample to examine the phenomenon where it happens, then theoretical sampling comes after (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986; Coyne, 1997).

The most significant factor to be noticed, however, is what leads the sampling process when the strategy is changed. Theoretical sampling is a strategy of concept-driven data gathering “to collect data from places, people, and events that will maximize opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations and identify relationships between concepts.” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, Ch.7, pg.2). While the researcher should still identify “a target population” to begins, further data collecting steps are not pre-determined but will be led by the concepts and the theory building process. In theoretical sampling strategy, the data collecting, and data analysis processes are flexibly intertwined. The researcher repeatedly returned to data to review the identified themes and concepts, the questions regarding those concepts will guide the researcher to other data pieces that are useful to further develop concepts and the relations between concepts. The process continues until the researcher has

confidence that the concepts and their associations have adequately developed – which means the research reaches the theoretical saturation.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), ideally, careful data analyzing and coding should be conducted after the first piece of data so that the concepts from data analyzing can instruct the data collecting. The data collecting only ended at the final stage of the research, when the codes, the categories, and the model have been elaborated and refined. However, such ideal conditions were not met in this study because of various practical problems. Firstly, because of the limitation in times between interviews, the researcher could not conduct a thorough data analysis side by side with data collecting. Secondly, the research began with a different sampling strategy and the decision to expand research questions and shift research approach happened quite late in the last month of the fieldwork period in Vietnam. At that time, most of the interviews already been conducted and there was very little chance for further primary data collecting. Luckily, theoretical sampling does not eliminate the use of secondary data or the data that already been collected before the data analysis process. Therefore, no matter the fact that the ideal process was not guaranteed, after the decision of adjusting research method, the researcher can still use theoretical sampling on the previously collected data.

In addition to the previously collected data, during the data analysis process, the researcher kept looking for new data from other alternative sources when it is needed to reach theoretical saturation. The additional data gathering was possible thanks to the close contact of the researcher with some participants, which enables further interviews and the prevalent existence of alternative data sources about the university autonomy in Vietnam, (which includes online news, online group discussions, academic articles, experts analyses, legal documents, etc.) The researcher also participated in various conferences on university autonomy and relevant policies during the internship period, which supplied additional data for theoretical sampling.

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1. The first stage of data collecting

As being explained above, the first data collection was collected using a combination of judgment sampling and snowball sampling. This stage happened in Vietnam from the beginning of 09/2017 to the end of 12/2017.

To have the best look into the reform, the focus was on the group of schools participating in the pilot program of university autonomy reform (There were 15/26 interviews belong to this group). There are some reasons to explain to this focus. Firstly, being directly affected by the change, the piloting schools can supply a better insight into the university autonomy reform. The piloting schools have the presence of various stakeholders that are relevant to the university autonomy reform. Therefore, interviewing actors in the piloting schools may help to unravel different expectations and perceptions of the locals regarding university autonomy. It may also supply insights into the process of co-constructing the understandings of university autonomy.

Stakeholder group	Number of interviews
Central authorities	0
MoET/policy-making specialist	1
Administrative ministries/entities managing schools	2
Schools piloting university autonomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CPV institutional Committee • Principal Board • University Council (Internal Member) • University Council (External Member) • Non-academic Staffs • Academic Staffs • Students 	15 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 • 1 • 3 • 3 • 3 • 1 • 2
Other public schools	1
Private schools	0
Consultants/Education or policy experts	3
Civil Society Organizations	1
Media	3
Potential students	0
Parents	1
Total	26

Table 1: Number of interviewees for each stakeholder group

In addition to the school, interviews were also conducted with some other relevant stakeholders to have more rich interpretations of local understandings of

the university autonomy from various viewpoints. (Table 1 shows the number of interviewees for each stakeholder group.)

Among the total 26 interviews, there was 23 face to face interviews, one via email, two via phone. 18/26 interviews were recorded. The reasons for the unrecorded ones were because of the unexpected situations (interview via phone, sudden interview in unplanned situations) but mainly because of the request of the participants since they psychologically felt uncomfortable or unsafe when being recorded. For these unrecorded discussions, the researcher tried to note down essential contents immediately or as soon as possible. Indeed, even with the recorded interviews, the researcher still has observation notes right after each discussion. These notes help the researcher in noticing pieces of information that are not expressed by words but by gestures or attitudes or reactions, etc. which cannot be caught in recordings. Corbin and Strauss (2008) also recommend taking observatory notes as a source for additional information as well as a tool to maximize the sensitivity of the researcher in data analyzing.

Except for the interview via email, in align with the interpretive approach, all of the others are qualitative semi-structured interviews aims at deriving interpretations of individuals. The interviews used open-ended questions around some main issues/categories as the following:

- Participants' understandings of university autonomy
- Participants' expectations toward the university autonomy reform or the reasons for which people support the university autonomy reform
- Participants' assessments toward the university autonomy reform as it is currently implemented
- Participants' identification of important issues and possible/necessary solutions/amendments during the implementation of university autonomy in Vietnam
- Participants' participation and their influences on the university autonomy reform.

Depend on the responses of the interviewees; more interview questions may arise which allow the interviews to develop flexibly around these issues. After 2-3 first interviews, there were some themes that emerged and identified in the step of

initial data analysis. Those emerging themes were used as clues for developing later discussions to further clarify essential topics and arguments.

The interviews were from 10-110 minutes in duration. The considerable variation in the length of interviews is because the level in which participants in different stakeholder groups understand or acknowledge the university autonomy were significantly different. However, even the short interviews from participants who do not know much about university autonomy still revealed meaningful information on how they understand of university autonomy and how the local perceptions are co-constructed. In total, the recorded interview duration is 761 minutes, and the whole interview transcription was 176 A4 pages. Since all the interviews were in Vietnamese, the transcriptions and coding process were also conducted in Vietnamese to minimize the possibility of meaning erosion and distortion during the translation process. Only the final quotes and codes are translated into English for the report purpose.

3.2.2. The second stage of data collecting

During the theoretical sampling process in the second stage of the research, while the interviews were still the primary data for data analyzing, some further data was collected when it was necessary to clarify and develop concepts.

In addition to the interviews, the researcher also participated in 4 conferences and noted down relevant contents as additional data. These conferences include:

- Conference to assess the Resolution 77 implementation in Hanoi (By the Ministry of Education and Training) on 20/10/2017 (C1)
- Conference to collecting feedbacks for the draft of Higher Education Law Amendment in Hanoi (By the Ministry of Education and Training) on 05/12/2017 (C2)
- Conference to collecting feedbacks for the draft of Higher Education Law Amendment in Hochiminh City (By the Ministry of Education and Training) on 12/12/2017 (C3)
- Conference on university autonomy reform by the National Assembly Committee for Culture, Education, Youth, Adolescents, and Children in Hochiminh City on 25/12/2017 (C4)

Because the possibility of conducting more interviews with people in Vietnam and collecting new primary data at the later stage of the study was limited, the research used other types of relevant data from alternative data sources that are publicly available in Vietnamese as followed:

- Legal documents (including Laws by National Assembly, decrees by Government, circulars by ministries, etc.)
- Final report of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) on assessing the impact of Resolution 77 (Le et al., 2017))
- The online posts (including online newspaper stories, online published articles/papers, online analysis posts, etc.)

These kinds of secondary data were used to (1) clarify some legal/context issues of the university autonomy, (2) verify information from the interviewees, (3) clarify the concepts/themes the interviewees mentioned. (4) analyze the progression and the tendencies in the university autonomy discourse through its legalization process.

3.3. Positionality and reflexivity

According to Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), as discussed of “positionality,” we talk about the researcher’s stance in the study, which is crucial in (qualitative) research because the positioning of “insider” or “outsider” can impact the whole research process.

Each paradigm and qualitative research approach are already embedded with certain ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions about the nature of the world, the nature of knowledge, the position of the knower in the process of knowing and the values of knowledge. As adopting the postmodern constructivism paradigm in this paper, the researcher acknowledges a combination of relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology that this research philosophy implies. In such implication, the researcher is not an “outsider” but an inseparable part of the research. In a co-construction process, as “concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, Ch.1, pg.10), the existence of subjective elements in the inquiry, such as the researcher’s and also the participants’ experiences, education, interest, morality, etc. is inevitable. The researcher’s background influences even the very first step of research questions or problems

construction (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014) as well as all other aspects of the research process - from the “field” accessibility, the information that can be collected from participants, the data analysis to even the final findings (Berger, 2015).

A positioning as “insider” and a certain level of subjectivity is not only inevitable but also necessary because it enables “sensitivity” to play its role. “Immersion in data” helps the researcher to understand the perceptions of the participants. However, even such immersion will not guarantee rich understandings. It is the “sensitivity” of the researcher that decides what concepts he/she can identify from the data as well as how those concepts can be connected. That sensitivity, in its turn, strongly depends on subjective elements like the backgrounds and experiences of the researcher (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

It is agreeable that there is no absolute objectivity, and we can find the imprints of the “me” in addition to the “society” and the “science” elements in all studies - no matter it is qualitative or quantitative. However, with this qualitative approach, we should be especially cautious with the “me” part because while the researcher has more flexibility to dip into what he/she studies, there will always be “bias” traps waiting for whom forgetting of his/her positioning in doing research. There should be a differentiation between “bringing ourselves to the research” and “forcing the researcher’s ideas on data” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, Ch.2, pg.15).

Reflexivity is an essential mean helping the researcher to recognize and self-monitor the possible affects from his/her positionality continuously and critically. Reflexivity requires the researcher to considers seriously and keep track of how his/her background elements and the research process interact, then find the balance point of being involved or detached (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). With a clear awareness of the possible subjectivity, the researcher can be more cautious in his/her interpretations and have solutions to utilize its strength but at the same time minimize the biases. Reflexivity, therefore, plays a crucial role in supervising the credibility, sensitivity, and ethical issues - which are vital to assess the quality of the research (Berger, 2013).

For this paper, in general, the researcher took the position of an “insider” who shares similar experiences and backgrounds with the participants.

It was 2016 when the researcher first discussed the university autonomy reform in Vietnam with her father, who was an experienced educator working at a public university in Vietnam for decades. His descriptions of “*an honorable reform in public higher education sector*” which “*signal a change in the mindset of leaders*” and “*a proper change with the whole system is now possible*” quickly caught her attention. In the years working as a journalist in Vietnam, the researcher should write about various issues of the country and have particular concerns on the system faults as the core problem for the failures of the nation. In thinking about possible solutions, because of the educational tradition and pro-democracy orientation in her family, the researcher tends to highly value knowledge, critical thinking, and the liberation of mind and consider them as the initial conditions for sustainable individual and social development. The positioning of an insider and the influences of subjective elements, therefore, was undeniable in the reasoning process to explain for her choice of what to study.

In the other steps of the research process, the researcher’s positioning of an insider brought her some advantages, firstly, in “field” accessibility. It worths noticing that usually in Vietnam, people are not ready for interviews. They may feel shy, stressed or even unsafe in official discussions, especially when the discussed topic is serious, requiring them to think deeply and have responsibilities with their answers. The situation is even more difficult in this research when the targeted participant group includes people in the positions that are difficult to contact, such as people in ministries, heads of schools or education/policy experts. The researcher acknowledges that many of the participants were only accessible thanks to the researcher’s previous connections and the relationship network of her father (who worked in the higher education sector in Vietnam for decades) as well as thanks to the snowball strategy. The relationships helped to put the researcher in the position of someone the participants knew (directly or indirectly), or someone inside the higher education sector and therefore, the participants were more willing to join in the interviews. Furthermore, the researcher could easily access alternative or secondary data sources about university autonomy in Vietnam, which are mainly in Vietnamese.

Secondly, as an insider, the researcher also had advantages in exploring in-depth data. Because some interviewees saw her as someone in the same boat, they were

more open, revealed more information, accepted detailed questions and allowed additional interviews if needed. Sometimes, the participant also shared unpopular or unpublished materials, which also allowed the researcher to have thorough understandings of what they discussed. Thirdly, regarding sensitivity, being a Vietnamese, the researcher has fundamental perceptions of the political-cultural-social system of the nation. Education is not a strange topic for her either since the researcher had accessed various discussions in this field for a long time in her own family. That enables her to catch the perceptions of the local better as well as to see the problems and connects the concepts more effectively.

However, being an insider also led to some challenges. Firstly, the interviewees, in some cases, tended to scan out relevant information or did not further explain their viewpoints, possibly because they assumed that the researcher already knows and understands those points. Secondly, there is a very high risk of being biased in doing research. The previous perceptions and beliefs about the situation in Vietnam can create prejudices, limit the researcher in the old path of thinking, cover her eyes from other possible interpretations and even lead her to the dead end. Because of the close contact or having similar viewpoints, the researcher can be influenced by some participants while overlooking the counter-arguments from the others. The snowball strategy can magnify this problem because the interviewees introduced other interviewees that, most likely, also had similar standpoints with them.

During the data collecting process, the researcher also noticed multiplicity, and relativity of her positioning, as the “insider-outsider” boundary was not stable (Teye, 2012). Depending on the position of the interviewees and how she was introduced to them, the interviewees might have their interpretations of the researcher’s position as an insider or outsider.

There was a similar dynamism in the power relation between the researcher and the participants. There was a more “powerful” group, including the education/policy experts, the MoET specialist, the school leaders, the expert in the civil society organizations. Participants in this group have the expertise or thorough practical knowledge of the discussed topic (the university autonomy). They are also usually people in high positions in their fields, and it was quite challenging in contacting them. In working with these people, the researcher felt more

pressures because they tended to be in the more powered position. While the researcher was still the one keeping the conversations on track, there were times when the interviewees actively gave out significant information or opinions which diverted the discussions into other directions and helped to open new themes and new ways to look into such topics. However, besides this powerful group, there were also cases when the interviewees were more passive, especially when they were unconfident about their understandings of university autonomy and considered the researcher as “an expert” who has more knowledge than them. In such cases, the challenge was how to maintain meaningful and relaxed conversations and encourage the interviewees sharing their opinions while staying neutral but not manipulating or dominating the discussions.

In both cases, a psychology trick was used (and it was helpful), when the researcher usually re-played the role of a journalist (as she used to be) so that she had more confidence. The researcher also applied some old techniques in doing interviews, such as preparing the material/information, knowing the people, getting familiar with the site, acting professional and confident, flexibly mimic/adapt to the communication standards, having warm-up conversations before interviews, having adapting questions to maintain and divert the conversations, etc. These attempts helped to create the most relaxed atmosphere for the interviews, reduce the power gaps, keep the conversations in balance and allowed her to remain relatively neutral and avoid unnecessary interventions in the interviews.

In attempting to utilize the benefits and at the same time minimize possible limitations of the subjectivity from the researcher’s insider positioning, some solutions were implemented in the study:

- The researcher had interviews with participants from the different groups and even participated in some conferences to guarantee the existence of diverse viewpoints in data collected
- At the end of each interview, after the participants already expressed all of their viewpoints, if there is still time, the researcher may discuss with them about some different views (from me/from other interviewees/or from other sources) anonymously (without revealing the source). This helped to enrich the interviews, further clarify the standpoint of the

participants and it enabled the participants to reconsider and give out a more holistic response.

- When it is possible, the researcher worked with some participants not only once but several times so that she can clarify some points from their previous answers and discuss with them about her interpretation. By so doing, the researcher could reduce the gap between what the participants perceive and what she understood of their perceptions, which further kept the biases in interpretations at the minimum.
- The constant comparison between different data pieces helps to develop concepts, which means uncover their properties and dimensions. This tool requires careful thinking of both the similarities and differences in data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) and the researcher found it helps limit the risk of overlooking variances of perceptions.
- Sometimes, the conferences the researcher participated, the class presentations or simple discussions with professors and other friends during the time in Finland helped to introduce new ways of interpretations for the old data. These activities are especially helpful in forcing the researcher to think about university autonomy in the broader context and limiting the subjectivity rooted from my previous understanding of the local context of Vietnam.
- Acknowledging the possible negative impacts of subjectivity, the researcher was more careful in data analysis and had self-reflexive memos during the research process. Memos were created whenever the researcher noticed that there could be different interpretation and possible biases, especially when there were points that were inferred but not directly mentioned in data. The researcher also used self-reflexive memos to note down when there are “gaps” or “conflicts” between the data and her previous understandings or interpretations. It was an effective way to track the interactions between the researcher’s mind and the data.

3.4. Ethical issues

There are two important ethical issues in social science research. The first one is about the ethical way to collect, process, and report research data and the second one is about the ethical standards in the relation between the scientists and the research subjects (Kitchener and Kitchener, 2009). The authors suggested that a thorough analysis of ethical principles in social sciences requires a five-level

discussion of meta-ethics, ethical theory, ethical principles, ethical rules and immediate level of moral reasoning. However, since this is not a thesis to study ethical issues, the researcher does not go too far in-depth but only explain the general ethical principles and rules directing the practical conducting in this research.

In accordance to the ethical principles introduced in (Kitchener and Kitchener, 2009), the research was conducted to benefit people by increasing knowledge, under the condition of fidelity and causing no harm to participants and. The researcher also respected participants' freedom in their actions and choices as well as guarantee their privacy and confidentiality. Specifically, the Codes of Ethics of ASA (American Sociological Association) (2018)⁶ were used as the main reference sources guiding the research. This code affirms six general principles of Professional competence; Integrity; Professional and scientific responsibility, Respect for people's rights, dignity, and diversity; Social responsibility and Human rights.

During conducting the research, the researcher considered and took into account some ethical issues as followed:

Issues regarding **Confidentiality** was managed accordingly to the ASA Code of Ethics (Article 10.1). Because some issues discussed in this topic can be considered as political touchy in Vietnam, many interviewees were cautious and concerned about how their identity information was treated in the study. Therefore, to guarantee ethical criteria as well as to fulfill the commitment with the participants, the necessary steps were conducted to guarantee that the participants' information will not be identifiable. All of the primary data were cited anonymously in this paper, using codes/series to replace the participants' names or identities. Each stakeholder group has its code, and the ending number is to mention the order in which the interviews were analyzed in each group⁷. Since the codes/series is only linked to the stakeholder group, the readers cannot trace back to the real identity of the participants. This untraceability is even more assured because this study focuses more on system-level analyses (rather than individual/personal elements) and there was very few information relating to the personal background of the participants revealed.

⁶ http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa_code_of_ethics-june2018.pdf

The issue of **informed consent** was also managed accordingly to the ASA Code of Ethics (Article 11). According to the Codes, informed consent is necessary to guarantee the right of the participants and minimize the pressures on participants as a consequence of the unbalanced power relationship with the researcher. For this thesis, the researcher adequately informed and guaranteed the willingness of the participants during the research process. With all planned interviews, the researcher sent interview invitations through emails to the participants asking them to participate in the interviews. These emails were attached with a form to explain the purposes of the discussions, the content of the interviews with basic structure/questions, the information on how the data would be used and the explanation on confidentiality. The participants could voluntarily decide whether to participate in the interview as well as when and where to interview. The researcher also informed and asked for permission when the interviews were recorded (Article 11.5). The final draft of data analysis was sent to the participant so that they can recheck and give more insights into the interpretation if necessary.

With **sudden interviews** in which the researcher did not have time for sending requests and contents by email, these issues (with the same contents as the emails) were discussed directly right before the interviews. The ethical principles relating to confidentiality and informed consent were, therefore, still guaranteed. (Article 12.2)

It worth noticing again that the data collecting for this thesis was conducted simultaneously and even intertwiningly with data collecting for some other papers in the researcher's team in Vietnam. This put out the issue of **sharing data**, which was managed accordingly to the ASA Code of Ethics. The issue of confidentiality and the right to use shared data was discussed and agreed among the researchers in the team. The researcher also informed and had the permission of the participants for using data from the interviews for other researches. (Article 11f and 12.5e)

For this thesis, the researcher also used some **other types of data**. Similar to the data from the interviews, the data from the conferences were cited anonymously using the codes/series of (C1, C2, C3, C4) without mentioning real names or

identities of the participants. Since all of the alternative data used for this thesis (conference, Legal documents, reports, online posts, etc.) were from public sources, informed consent was not required (Reference: ASA Code of Ethics, Article 11.1b, and 11.1d).

3.5. Data analysis procedure

3.5.1. Inductive thematic analysis and discourse analysis as research methods or as a tool within the Grounded Theory approach

3.5.1.1. Inductive thematic analysis

This thesis initiated by analyzing the interviews with various actors to discover the general understandings and expectations that people attach to the university autonomy. For this early stage, the paper was designed to be more simple, which used inductive thematic analysis as the single method to discover repeated theme (or patterns) throughout the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Because thematic analysis may go in various versions, some methodological choices should be clearly stated. Firstly, this thesis applied the inductive or data-driven approach, which means there is no pre-existing coding frames or conceptual frameworks inherited from previous theories guiding the coding process. Secondly, in align with the constructivism paradigm, the paper conducts latent-level thematic analysis. The researcher, therefore, did not stop at the semantic meaning but try to catch also the underlying assumptions implied in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The process of thematic analysis was conducted according to the guide introduced in (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which ideally includes data familiarising, coding, identify themes, reviewing themes, defining and label themes and report.

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing with data:	Transcribing data, reading and rereading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking in the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic “map” of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, the final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Table 2: Phases of Thematic analysis method

However, in phase 4 of this thematic analysis, with an ambition to take more complexity into account to understand the logic beneath the locals’ expectations and the embedding of expectations into people’s perceptions of university autonomy, the approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008) was adopted. Inductive thematic analysis, therefore, became only an important technique used within this approach.

This decision to change the research design was possible because of the flexibility of thematic analysis, which can be considered as a method in its own to reflect reality and the construction of that reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or only as an analytic tool within other analytic traditions (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). The inductive thematic analysis, as an analyzing tool/technique, does not conflict with

the qualitative research approach of (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) and the constructivism paradigm as mentioned. Various author, such as Boyatzis (1998) or Ryan and Bernard (2000), even affirmed that thematic analysis a fundamental tool which is applicable within different methods or theoretical frameworks.

3.5.1.2. *Discourse analysis*

In several parts of this thesis, the researcher applied discourse analysis to analyze some language elements or “the use of language in social contexts” (Widdowson, 1995). However, to be noticed, discourse analysis in this thesis is not used as an independent method but just an additional analytic tool/technique within the qualitative research approach of (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) when necessary.

Because language constructs people’s understanding of reality, some discourse analysis techniques would help to clarify the negotiation of social and political interaction in which the perceptions are formed (Starks and Brown Trinidad, 2007). The researcher realized that, because school autonomy is an imported idea from the West to Vietnam, there were mismatchings and challenging in the process of receiving the idea by different local actors. In many cases, different translations and expressions were applied to the same concepts, sometimes intentionally, to help actors reach their communication purposes. The aim of using discourse analytic tools is to see how language elements (in this case, the translations and term using) were used to produce, shape and promulgate local perceptions of university autonomy as well as the reasons and motives beneath such language use. By looking into “the game of language” in which people used different lingual expressions in the interaction process to influence the perception co-constructing, the study reveals not only the possible meaning distortion but also the touchy political issues explain for such language tricks.

3.5.1.3. *The Grounded Theory approach*

In the second stage of the research, to bring contextual elements and more complexity into account, the later stage of the research was inspired by the approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008). In addition to the discussion on philosophical perspectives and research principles in Grounded Theory, Corbin and Strauss introduced well-organized method instructions for doing qualitative research, which using main techniques of theoretical sampling, constant comparison and questioning to condition concept building, model generation and theory development.

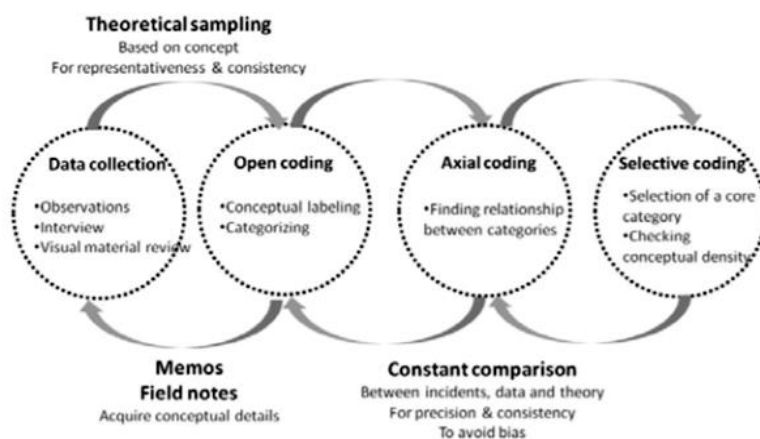
It is important to notice that while being inspired by the approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008), the aim of this study is not building a new theory. Instead, the researcher only wants to apply the techniques, procedures, logic and philosophical perspectives of this approach to enable more vibrant descriptions and analyses of the concepts and their connections in a more dynamic way – which is acceptable, according to the notice of Corbin and Strauss regarding the applicability of their approach. The expected result of this thesis, therefore, is just elaborating a model to analyze the construction of the local perspectives of university autonomy in the context of Vietnam.

There were some advantages inherited from the first stage of thematic analysis, including (1) the researcher already was more familiarized with the data, (2) an original concept list was created and (3) many concepts were developed after the first stage. To be noticed, the approach of (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) does not encourage the pre-existence of any concept list or pre-developed concepts. However, the original concept list and relevant concepts were not the products of any previous theoretical frameworks but were developed in the previous stage of the same study. Therefore, they still fit with the requirement of the data-driven approach.

However, the shift in research design required some changes accordingly. With the decision to turn to the approach of (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), the research progress was not anymore a linear process as suggested by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Instead, inductive thematic analysis became a tool, and the first five phases of this tool are repeatedly applied within the new approach during the coding process to help researcher realize patterns for coding and conceptualization.

With the qualitative research approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008), data analyzing became an interrelating process with many loops back and forth between data collecting (using **theoretical sampling**), open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, in which concepts are built, connect and elaborated using the main tool of questioning and constant comparison until the final theory or final model was completed. The data analysis process can be the most effective with the support of memos and diagram, which help the researcher to track and better organize his or her thinking. All of these tools are combined throughout the inquiry to refine the interpretations and going to creditable findings gradually.

In a more detailed explanation, **coding** is the process to go from data to the concepts. The goal of this process is deriving concepts that can represent the data and fully developing the properties and dimensions of those concepts (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The coding process requires a combination of 3 steps, which are open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In open coding, the researcher explores the raw data to figure out all possible meanings, then compares, categorizes and label them to build concepts. With the concepts from open coding, axial coding helps to restructure data to consider the connections between two or more concepts. Open coding and axial coding go together during the data analysis process (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). At last, selective coding refine the relations and integrates categories around the core category to form the theory and complete all relevant categories.



Source: Cho & Lee (2014)

Figure 1: Data analysis procedure in the Grounded Theory approach

For theory-building, the approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008) requires to bring the **context** elements into account. To serve this purpose, the authors suggest using the conditional and consequential matrix as an analytic strategy to consider the involvement of various layers of conditions and consequences (from micro to macro) that can be meaningful in context analysis.

The whole data analysis process in this approach is facilitated by various analytic tools, in which **questioning** and **making comparisons** are the “signature” tools that are crucial in all stages of doing analysis, according to Corbin and Strauss (2008).

Regarding questioning, there are various types of question that the researcher can use. The sensitizing questions help to initiate thinking and enable the researcher to go deeper into the data. Theoretical questions are useful in discovering variations and connections between concepts. Meanwhile, practical nature questions can facilitate theoretical sampling and theoretical structure development.

Making comparisons is another powerful tool in the qualitative analysis approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008). The authors introduced two main types of comparison. The first type is the constant comparison in which incidents are compared with each other, and conceptually similar incidents are grouped under a concept. This type of comparison is a very typical tool in the qualitative research approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008), which helps to classify data and develop concepts or category. The other type is the theoretical comparison, in which incidents from data is compared to incidents in the real experience of the researcher in term properties and dimensions to generate further ideas of new ways to view the data.

The decision of turning to the qualitative research approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008) is made in consideration of some strengths/advantages as followed:

Firstly, the approach – which is designed to serve building theory from data – acknowledges the fluidity and complexity of the social reality, where multiple factors transform and interact with each other. While including all elements is impossible, this approach tries to “obtain multiple perspectives” and “build variation into the analytic schemes” to depict as much complexity as possible (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). This characteristic fits with the ambition of the paper. After the preliminary step of inductive thematic analysis to explore locals’ expectations toward the reform, the paper aimed to include more complexity into the studies to further explain the logic behind such expectations as well as the way people embedded those expectations into their perceptions of university autonomy.

Secondly, it is predictable that applying a foreign concept like “school autonomy” to the authoritarianism society of Vietnam requires dramatic modification and

adaptation in which local contextual conditions should be considered. The approach of Corbin and Strauss (2008) well serves this requirement since it is developed to take into account the diverse interpretation of individuals under the influences from context elements - such as social, political, cultural factors.

Thirdly, to uncover deep insights, Corbin and Strauss (2008) encouraged self-reflection as well as the involvement of the participants during the research. Researchers are encouraged to connect with participants and “bring the whole self into the (research) process” to understand the experience of participants and the construction of meanings. This approach, therefore, affirmed the roles of both the researcher and the participants in co-constructed knowledge and accepted the relative and subjective natures of what we know about social reality. Being a Vietnamese, the researcher can utilize understandings of the country and good contacts with some participants to maximize sensitivity for self-reflection and optimize the power of this method.

At last, the considerable fieldwork time of 4 months as well as the accessibility of various alternative data sources that relevant to university autonomy reform in Vietnam (including interviews, policy conferences, assessment report, media posts, etc.) is another reason for the selection of this approach. The technique of theoretical sampling, while being challenging, does not limit the choice of data genre as well as do not require all data to be collected before data analyzing. Instead, the approach allows combining and utilizing diverse data sources and calls for the continuing and intertwining between data collecting and data analysis. For such flexibility, this qualitative research enables the researcher to develop the study in a more dynamic way for more opened and novel findings.

3.5.2. Data analysis process and significant changes in the problematization

3.5.2.1. From stakeholder analysis to agenda and viewpoints analysis

This study was conducted with an initial assumption that there would be different stakeholders with different interests and different viewpoints regarding the university autonomy reform. With such an assumption, the researcher began the data collecting according to a gradually modified list of the relevant stakeholder groups (Explained in part 3.1.1). Brief analyses of stakeholders in the university autonomy reform in Vietnam will be introduced in **part 4.1**.

However, for this study, the stakeholder analysis approach showed various limitations. The data analysis revealed that the participation of various stakeholders in Vietnam was much more limited than expected. There were indeed only a few “active” actors that have thorough understandings and important voices in the public discussion of the university autonomy reform. It was tough to identify "the viewpoint" of each group of stakeholders because of some reasons. Firstly, even in the group of interviewees who understand and pay attention to the university autonomy reform, the division between the viewpoints of the stakeholders in most of the issues was unclear. Secondly, many participants can be fit in more than one stakeholder group. Because of the multi-identity of the participants, the identities that they took were versatile during the interviews, and it was challenging to tell under which identity that they have a certain viewpoint. Thirdly, since most interviewees are not the official representatives for their stakeholder groups and the number of interviewees was small, it would be inconclusive to match or to generalize someone’s answers as stakeholder group’s viewpoint.

Therefore, after part 4.1, the researcher shifted the analysis focus from “stakeholders’ viewpoints” to the arguments, the issues that form the general agenda. What the participants with different backgrounds gave the researcher was not the representative voice for each stakeholder group but instead the diverse viewpoints. With this shift of focus, the researcher can identify and analyze the key agenda of university autonomy - the prevalent issues that the participants concern in the university autonomy reform - without going too deeply into the standpoints of each stakeholder group.

3.5.2.2. From analyzing consensus to analyzing disagreement

After the brief analysis of stakeholders in the university autonomy reform in Vietnam, **part 4.2** will explore the general expectations of participants toward the reform in Vietnam and their perceptions of the normative principles of university autonomy. The primary data for this part is from the interview and relevant pieces of data answering interviewing questions regarding Participants’ expectations and concept perception. This part aims to answer the first group of research questions (part 1.3), including:

- What are the problems that relevant stakeholders expect the university autonomy reform to help?

- How do they come to such problematization?
- How do they perceive the university autonomy concept?
- Why do they think that university autonomy can play a role in solving those problems?

To adequately identify problems in Vietnam higher education system that actors expect university autonomy to fix, this research part should include fundamental analyses of the contextual conditions to understand participants' acknowledging of the current problems hindering the development prospect of the higher education system. After that, the study should also explore their perceptions of university autonomy to explain how university autonomy is expected to help in these problems.

It is worth noticing that in this data-driven study, the researcher did not strictly follow any pre-existing framework for the concept of university autonomy but should discover how this idea is adapted and applied in Vietnam. Because the participants' perceptions are constructed under the interaction between people to people and between people with the reality in the specific context of Vietnam, the ways that some issues are framed and discussed would be controversial. There could be important matters that the participants overlook while other issues are over-emphasized.



Figure 2: The logic beneath expectations

Part 4.2 resulted in a detailed exploration of the normative perception and general expectations of local people toward the university autonomy and the reasoning behind those expectations. However, what the researcher looks for is not a plain list of expectations. Even the explanations for why the locals have those expectations did not make the researcher “feel right” but only created doubts that what was found is only a half of the truth.

The skeptical feelings urged the researcher to go further in data analysis with a more sophisticated approach in part 4.3 to rechecked and enriched the

interpretation of the participants' perceptions of university autonomy to answer research questions in the second group, which are:

- Are stakeholders' perceptions and expectations toward the university autonomy reform homogenous?
- If not, what are the controversial issues and why there exist such controversies?

Using questioning, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling, the researcher turned back to dig deeper into the data with more careful noticing both the homogeneity and heterogeneity as well as both the negative and positive assessments to see the complication in the participants' perceptions. The researcher also went further than the analyzing of only normative statement to pay more attention to the descriptive statements (how people view the university autonomy as it is happening in Vietnam) and prescriptive statements (the way people give out solutions for the problems in the university autonomy implementation). In such a way, part 4.3 may supply more detailed analyses of what is implemented in the university autonomy in Vietnam and how the locals' perceptions are re-considered and differentiated. Different from part 4.2, part 4.3 focus more on the problems where the participant found controversial. As a result, **part 4.3** supplied a more comprehensive interpretation of the disagreement in participants' attitudes, viewpoints, and priorities.

3.5.2.3. Analyzing interaction and tendencies in the university autonomy discourse

To sum up the data analysis, in **part 4.4**, the researcher will put together the analyses of the stakeholders as well as the consensus and fragmentation in the discussion of university autonomy in Vietnam to see the big picture. Since the university autonomy reform in Vietnam is still in process, the goal of part 4.4 is not to go to any conclusions or predictions of the result of the reform itself. Instead, the researcher only wants to explore the interaction between stakeholders as well as the point of convergence, problems, and gaps in the current discourse. This final data analysis part will answer the third group of research questions (part 1.3) regarding the interaction and the tendencies in the university autonomy discourse in Vietnam, which includes:

- During the process in which the locals' perceptions of university autonomy are co-constructed, with all of the agreements and separation as being

analyzed, whether all expectations are adequately considered? Where's the discourse of university autonomy diverted?

3.6. Quality evaluation: Validity and credibility of findings

In aligning with the main qualitative research approach adopted, this thesis discusses the issue of quality evaluation, validity and credibility accordingly to the viewpoint of Corbin and Strauss (2008). Different from quantitative research, qualitative research requires both the quality of a "science" and an "art," and there is not a fixed set of criteria for quality evaluation to strictly apply for all genre of qualitative researches. Corbin and Strauss (2008) argued that quality in their approach is not equivalent to "validity" but should also include the virtues of creative, of innovative and thoughtful. High-quality qualitative researches, in the perception of Corbin and Strauss (2008) should fit/resonate with life experiences, supply in-depth and sensitive insights with rich variations, go from concrete data to creative concepts, take context elements into account, guarantee logical flows of ideas, lead to useful/applicable findings, and inspire further studies.

Instead of the criteria of "validity," Corbin and Strauss (2008) more support the criteria of "credibility" - which means "believability." To guarantee the research findings are believable, it is important that the researchers supply adequate descriptive details and keep the transparency in the information of the research process, from data collecting to data analysis so that the reader can make their evaluate the credibility of the data and assess the ways the findings were generated. In this thesis, the researcher already explained the issues of sampling strategy and data collection in other parts of the Research Method. The issue of data analysis was partially explained in this part, and other details in the process of data analyzing will be explained in the later part. To guarantee that the research findings "fit" with the reality the researcher also maintained contact with participants and referenced them to recheck the "resonance" of the interpretations.

While doing the best to reach the most credible interpretation of participants perception, the researcher always acknowledges the limitations of the study and the methods. The findings from this research, while being useful and reliable, is not the single valid reflections but only one of the possible interpretations of reality, which is aligned with the epistemology foundation of the constructivist paradigm.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1. Relevant stakeholders in the university autonomy reform in Vietnam

4.1.1. The four group of stakeholders

Beginning with an initial list and then adjusted the list accordingly to the answers of the participants, the researcher at last identified the stakeholders that relevant to the university autonomy reform in Vietnam include:

- The central authorities (The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), the State): The highest level leaders.
- The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET)
- The administrative ministries/entities managing schools
- Autonomy piloting schools which are directly influenced by the university autonomy reform. Under this umbrella term are indeed various stakeholders, including CPV institutional committee, principal board, university council (internal members and external members), academic staffs, non-academic staffs, students, etc.
- Other public schools in the higher education system: While have not applied university autonomy, these public schools should also pay attention to the university autonomy reform because according to the orientation from the State, after piloting period, all public higher education institution should be autonomous from 2020⁸.
- Private schools, which are going to be indirectly influenced by the changes in the whole higher education system along with the university autonomy reform
- Consultants/Education or policy experts
- Civil Society Organizations
- Media play the roles of the channel to inform of the university autonomy to the wider public
- Potential students
- Parents

All of these stakeholders are directly or indirectly relevant to the university autonomy reform (in the meaning that they have roles and directly or indirectly have interests in the reform). However, the data analysis revealed that

⁸ <https://vov.vn/xa-hoi/giao-duc/pho-thu-tuong-100-cac-truong-dh-cd-se-tu-chu-vao-nam-2020-627555.vov>

participation in the university autonomy discourse in Vietnam was much more limited than expected. Most participants did not feel familiar with the participatory approach and they needed time to think before they can identify relevant stakeholders. Even then, most interviewees could only mention the central authorities, MoET, the administrative ministries/entities managing schools, schools and experts. The reason is *“in Vietnam, the culture of participation is underdeveloped and there are just a few actors actively involved”* in the university autonomy discussions (CS1). Basing on their participatory roles in the university autonomy discourse, the researcher categorized these stakeholders into four groups of (1) Active, (2) Less active, (3) Inactive, (4) Bridge group:

(1) The “active” group includes the central authorities, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), the administrative ministries/entities managing schools, the leading figures in the schools piloting university autonomy (CPV institutional committee, Principal board, University council internal members), the education or policy experts, the civil society organizations. Participants in this group, in general, have thorough understandings and important voices in the public discussion of the university autonomy reform.

(2) The “less active” group includes some actors in lower positions in the schools piloting university autonomy (University council external members), academic and non-academic staffs, other public schools in the higher education system, private schools. While having some understanding of university autonomy, participants in this group did not involve deeply and actively into the discussion of university autonomy in Vietnam. Many of them were unconfident in the interview and seemed to have no dependent voices but just repeated what they are informed in from their leaders.

(3) The “inactive” group includes students, potential students, parents. This group is very passive and nearly have no considerable role in the university autonomy discourse in Vietnam. While the participants in this group still said that they support the ideas of the university autonomy reform, they did not have independent voices in the discussion of university autonomy. Worse, in most of the cases, the participant in this group even had no idea of what university autonomy is and they were not interested in knowing, which also explained why most filtered and eliminated interviews were belong to peoples in this group. Since the

participants in this group had a very limited understanding of university autonomy, their “support” was very questionable. Their further answers revealed that such supporting attitude was based solely on ambiguous ideas that university autonomy is “a progressive orientation” and the belief that “the school should have known what is the best for us” (S2), as a student said.

(4) The “bridge” group: Media. In most of the cases, they generate their ideas of university autonomy from the active groups but then filter, pick out the issues that they think the public (includes people in the inactive group) will pay attention. While they may actively choose to focus on different aspects in the discussion of university autonomy, in most of the cases, they are unable to bring new in-depth perceptions of university autonomy.

4.1.2. Analyses of the influential stakeholders

To supply a more detailed understanding of the stakeholders, this part will analyze the roles and the standpoints of some influential stakeholders, who are usually involved in the official channels for public discussions of university autonomy in Vietnam. All of these stakeholders are in the active group and the bridge group.

4.1.2.1. The central authorities

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the State, are currently the most powerful actors who have total control of the whole higher education in Vietnam. The researcher was unable to have direct interviews with people in the high-level central bodies. However, the representatives of CPV and the State were presented in the conferences that the researcher participated. There were media posts cited their speeches. Their viewpoint can also be identified through the official documents, such as the Party documents or Resolutions of Government. With all of these data sources, the researcher played a passive role without any possibility to intervene or to orient the conversation (similar to a kind of secondary data). Besides, the researcher also paid attention to the interpretation of other actors toward the stand of the State and the Party. There were gaps between the official standpoint of the central authorities (what the central authorities expressed in the official channels) and the interpretation of other stakeholders when there were participants in the active group doubted the officially announced standpoint of the central authorities are not their real standpoint.

“If we just look at the Party documents or the Resolutions of Government or what our leaders said, then everything sounds so beautiful and progressive. But if those rhetorics are true, then how can our education system become that bad? They just say that, but they do not mean that.” (S.SCI2)

“It’s a comedy! In the official events, the leaders usually give out speeches as if they are the real progressive experts, and then sometimes we can see also the experts who supposed to be the progressive voices but then talk as if they are from the State.” (OS1)

While it is quite tricky to affirm the real motives of the central authority (even when we assume that authorities have a single and coherent viewpoint), there were a few things can be implied from the data. Firstly, at least in the official viewpoints, the central authorities support the university autonomy orientation and even take the leading role in the reform. Secondly, at least in the assumption of many participants, the central authorities do not completely support university autonomy but just looking for some benefits that the reform can bring. According to PM1, S.SCI2, OS1, CE3, CS1 (most of them are participants in the active group), financial issues can be the most/the first reason that the central authorities support the university autonomy reform. These participants also doubt that other political changes that university autonomy may create can go against the will of the State and the Party and therefore, can be slow down or keep in limit.

4.1.2.2. The Ministry of Education and Training

In the interview, the participant from MoET (PM1) supported the university autonomy reform and paid much attention to the administrative issues of the reform. However, being a specialist but not an official representative of MoET, this participant, in many cases, answered more like a policy/education expert rather than standing on behalf of MoET.

MoET plays multiple roles in the university autonomy reform. Firstly, it is the intermediate administrative body that has the most direct administrative power on the higher education system in Vietnam. Different from other intermediate administrative ministries, the current university autonomy agenda in Vietnam still accept the administrative role of MoET with only a few voices calling for eliminating the administrative role of this ministry. Therefore, the position of MoET is not seriously or directly threaten by this university autonomy reform and the ministry, in general, support university autonomy. MoET is also the unit

directly draft the amendment of higher education law and many other legal documents in the education sector before they are submitted to the National Assembly and therefore, they also play the policy-making role.

However, similar to the case of the central authorities, there were also negative interpretations from other actors of the role of MoET. The participants in leading positions in piloting schools sometimes equated MoET with the State control (just in a lower level) and doubted that MoET is not willing to loosen their administrative powers to give more freedom to schools.

4.1.2.3. The administrative ministries/entities managing schools

Different from MoET, the position of other administrative ministries can be threatened in the university autonomy reform when there were popular calling to reduce or even eliminate the role of administrating schools of these ministries. They are also asked for feedbacks towards the higher education law amendment and many other legal documents in the education sector

It's worth noticing that the participants from these administrative ministries (AB1, AB2) still supported the idea of university autonomy, even in the issue of eliminating their roles in administration schools. However, they tended to push all of the necessary changes to the future tense. Also, in the conferences, the people from administrative ministries did not oppose the university autonomy reform, but they did not strongly support either.

4.1.2.4. The leaders in the schools piloting university autonomy

To pilot university autonomy accordingly to Resolution 77, the schools should submit their proposal and ask for government approval. Therefore, the piloting schools had a positive attitude toward university autonomy, at least normatively. Being directly impacted by the university autonomy policies, these school also actively participate and contribute to the discussion of university autonomy in Vietnam with various recommendations, especially regarding practical issues of policy implementation and legal barriers. Their participation helped to actualize the university autonomy orientation. They are also considered themselves as the "pioneers" in the reform, who helped to identify the mismatching between the theory, the policy, and the practical implementation.

The supporting attitude toward the university autonomy, in general, were shared among the participants who are in leading positions in piloting school (including people from CPV institutional committee and Principal board or the University council internal members) (S.PC1, S.PB1, S.SCI1, S.SSI2, S.SCI3). However, their viewpoints were split in discussing of some institutional internal administration issues, especially the power divergence between the power triangle in school (further discuss in part 4.3)

There were some participants who are policy/education expert, and a participant from other public schools (OS1) pointed out that it could be misleading to generalize the active participation and supportive attitude of these piloting schools as the common attitude of all schools in Vietnam.

“Among over 150 public schools in Vietnam, there are just 23 schools piloting university autonomy. Most of these schools have strength in the training areas that require low unit costs, such as economics or languages. Other schools are still very cautious, and they are not ready for university autonomy.” (CE2)

Even with the participants from piloting schools, while supporting the normative idea of university autonomy, their assessments were much less positive in discussion the actual university autonomy that is implemented in reality. Among the main concerns of these schools were the shortcomings in legal frame and policies, the system administrative inefficiency and the pressure of financial resources.

4.1.2.5. The education or policy experts

According to the assessment of many interviewees, the policy/education experts are the very important voices in the university autonomy discussion in Vietnam from the very beginning of the reform until now. They are sometimes considered *“the pioneers,”* the first voices to *“introduce and fight for university autonomy in Vietnam”* (PM1).

The experts have the expertise power or the influential voices coming from their in-depth knowledge of university autonomy, at least in comparison to most other people. Because university autonomy is still a new imported idea, even the schools who practicing autonomy do not have much practical knowledge. The

experts, therefore, become the main reference/consultant source that considerably shaping the basic understanding of university autonomy.

The participant who is a specialist of MoET said: *“To tell the truth, most people in Vietnam currently do not know much about university autonomy. Even the policymakers, they do not know a thing! They should listen to the experts or the consultants”* (PM1)

Different from other stakeholders, the experts did not solely focus on any single aspects of the university autonomy but have critical voices in generating new perspective, introducing new ideas, questioning the current practices, initiating new discussion/controversies and giving out recommendations for policymakers. Expert (as a stakeholder group) is also expected to have a more balanced/neutral/objective viewpoints that other actors can consult. Through their articles, experts are also the ones who study of different theoretical issues of university autonomy and the practices of autonomy around the world to introduce into the discourse in Vietnam. However, according to the data from the interviews and conferences, while the experts acknowledge the different practices, models, and views regarding university autonomy, they tended to supply synthetic analyses which focus more on the common standards and overview understandings of university autonomy rather than going deeply into any specific stand. For example, in an interview with CE2, he noticed that there are *“different models of university autonomy implemented in America and Europe.”* But then, he stopped at briefly mentioning some common principles but did not explain which model is more suitable for Vietnam.

Although their communication and influential range can be narrower than the media, experts may have more substantial influences on policymaking. Many experts have articles or posts that create considerable impacts in the academics community and on the people who are involved in public discussion of university autonomy. The participants in the expert group were quite confident in affirming their influences on the university autonomy reform because they are usually among the people who are invited to policy-discussions and asked for feedback.

However, the influential ability of the expert on the policy is not decided solely by their knowledge but more often by their relation network or their connection with the central authorities and the policymaker, just as a participant from a

piloting school said *"It's not that all reasonable recommendations are heard. The important condition is whether the expert can work with the leaders or not"*(S.SCI3). All three participants in the expert group (CE1, CE2, CE3) are the ones who have the previous/current backgrounds of working in high-level State or Party agencies. In their answers, the researcher realized that while they can contribute to the general discourse of university autonomy with knowledge of an expert, the way they created more concrete impacts on the university autonomy policies were usually through unofficial channels thanks to their connection with the leaders and the policymakers.

4.1.2.6. The civil society organizations

Basing on the interview with a participant (CS1) from an association representing the universities and colleges in Vietnam, as well as the speeches of this association's representatives in the conferences, the association also support the idea of university autonomy. They were also involved and actively participated in the public discussion of university autonomy in Vietnam.

In the interview, the participant in the civil society organizations group explained the roles of his association as *"connecting schools, informing the schools of relevant policies and collecting the feedback from schools to present to the State"* (CS1). With this description, the role of this association (which is the most popular or even the only association in the tertiary education sector) is more like a mediator rather than an independent entity with more challenging advocacy role.

However, Vietnam has not had a strong tradition for civil society activities. The roles of the so-called civil society organizations are limited and all organizations, in principle, should work under the total control from the Party and the State. No matter various attempts from the association, their roles were not highly-prized by the participants from the public schools (S.SCI1, S.SCI2, S.PC1, OS1)

"The association does not have any considerable roles. Their opinion is just for reference. They cannot represent the interests of the schools. I think that the people in the association are very old-fashioned. Their leaders are usually old former public officials from MoET who have retired. That association also live on the State funding but do not autonomous." (S.SCI2)

From the data collected, it was also very difficult to identify the independent views of the civil society group. Most of the cases, the people from the association analyze issues in university autonomy similarly to policy/education experts - with the wide range and macro-level analysis. Indeed, the interviewee from the association (CS1) was initially introduced to the researcher as an expert. Many of other associate members have in-depth or even theoretical understandings of the university autonomy, and they tend to keep neutral standpoints also. In some cases, the association was also considered "a State messenger," as what the researcher saw when following the association in a business visit to some schools. Such blurred borderline or unclear standpoint can be, partially, because of the multi-identity of the participant. It can also be because of the weak advocacy role of the civil society organizations in the country, so that they try to keep themselves in a "neutral" position between the central authorities and the community they represent for, in such a way that they cannot play the distinct role of an independent "third sector" anymore.

4.1.2.7. The media

The conferences to gather feedback for the policies are usually involved only the people in the active group and the media but not the people in the less active and inactive groups. As a result, there was a disconnection between the active group and the wider population and the media become the main bridge to connect and inform the people of the policy.

However, according to the data, there were also problems with the bridging role of the media. Firstly, according to the assessment of most participants in the active group, most journalists in Vietnam currently do not thoroughly understand the university autonomy and the education system. Secondly, according to the admission of participants in the media group, the news about the university autonomy, in general, are not "hot topic" and therefore, to attract readers/audiences they may over-focus on only some "catchy" aspects of the topics.

"In normal condition, people do not pay attention and do not even know about the university autonomy reform. However, when there is news that relevant directly to their interests, such as the higher tuition fee, then people's reaction can be very intense. This fact leads to a pitiful consequence that sometimes the journalists can become "people pleasers" who run after trendy topics." (M2)

Sometimes, this approach can help to open new controversies to attract the attention of the whole society, in which the relevant actors should reconsider their viewpoints more inclusively, especially when the media usually prioritized the needs of *"the majority"* (M2). However, in many other cases, the media does not help to make people understand more of the university autonomy reform but promote a sided view in which their audience only know a piece of the puzzle but cannot connect it to the wide picture. This approach can push different actors into opposite sides instead of connecting them, which put the media in the role of provoking rather than bridging. For examples, in many cases, people from schools and the experts even considered the counter-arguments concerning social considerations as a barrier for reform because *"the normal people do not understand anything of education"* (CS1), *"they (the people) negatively and noisily react, they just want to keep tuition fee low"* (S.SCI2).

An interviewee from the schools even upset and assess the role of the media as *"destroyers"*: *"The media currently do not help but destroy our reform of university autonomy. They do not have in-depth knowledge but just run after touchy issues to provoke the people; they do not stay in the stand of school to see things."* (S.SCI2)

4.1.3. Summary

Although the university autonomy reform is a massive reform that can create critical impacts on the whole higher education system and influenced a long list of stakeholders, in reality, there were just a few actors actively involved and have considerable influential voices in the discussion of university autonomy in Vietnam. Basing on their participatory roles in the university autonomy discourse, the researcher categorized these stakeholders into four groups of Active group, Less active group, Inactive group, and Bridge group.

In the official avenues to publicly discuss the university autonomy, usually, there were not the participation of the people in less active and inactive stakeholder groups. Therefore, the active group played the main role in shaping the agenda and co-constructing the mutual understandings of the university autonomy. Meanwhile, the media is supposed to play the role of connecting and informing the wider community of the policy, but they were not always successful in this mission.

The active group includes the central authorities, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), the administrative ministries/entities managing schools, the leading figures in the schools piloting university autonomy, the education or policy experts and the civil society organizations.

The detailed analysis in the roles and viewpoints of each actor in this groups affirmed the crucial influences of the experts (with expertise power) and the piloting schools (with practical experienced) in university autonomy agenda in Vietnam. The initial analyses on the stakeholders also revealed a general homogeneity among the participants in the active group, when all participants supported the idea of the university autonomy with very little evidence for the independent and particular standpoints of each stakeholder group. As a participant from MoET said, *“people have not fully seen the relevancy, they have not understood their relevant stakes in this reform”* (PM1). Because the university autonomy is a newly imported idea under piloting, the practical issues have not been fully disclosed and the understanding of the concept is still at the beginning of construction under the strong influenced of the experts. This can be a reason explains for the relatively unified views among the participants in this stage, which required to be further studied and analyzed in the later parts.

4.2. General expectations toward university autonomy reform in Vietnam

4.2.1. Current problems hindering the development prospect of the higher education system

4.2.1.1. Problems in higher education improvement

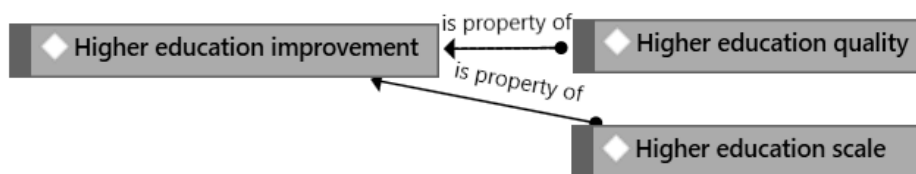


Figure 3: The concept of Higher education improvement

At the first look, **higher education improvement** was the overall goal repeated in all interviews and conferences. This is not surprising, because all education reforms should serve the development of education at last. Regrettably, most participants in all stakeholder group believed that in comparing to the other countries, there were various problems in the development of the higher education system in Vietnam that make it unsatisfactory.

One of the most vital issues that the interviewees identified was the disappointing **higher education quality**, reflected in poor performance in both training and researching activities.

“Our education system is too backward even in comparison with other countries in the same region. With bad performance in training and researching, now maybe we are just a little bit better than Cambodia and Laos in ASEAN, but even that position is challenged.” (CE1)

There was people concern that the training activities of the higher education institutions are mismatching with the requirements on the market [1]. The reason for this issue, according to the participants from schools, is because *“the heavily centralized higher education system prevented the dynamic development”* (S.SCI2) and led to *“incompatibility between the training in the higher education institutions and the practical requirements on the labor market”* (S.SCE1). Also, the curricula are usually backward without updating new trends to prepare for the students with the necessary skills and knowledge.

Secondly, in mentioning that research activities and international publishing are always considered one of the essential elements in assessing the education quality and the prestige of schools according to various university ranking systems in the world, participants who are education/policy experts also disappointed with the poor research capacity of the higher education system in Vietnam [2].

“You can check on the popular ranking system to see our poor performance in researching. This is one of the weakest points in our higher education system when most institutions only supply training services but do not develop into researching orientation” (CE1).

Among the reasons, according to experienced educators, is the failure in attracting talented people. Another reason is the lacking of academic freedom – which limits the space for critical thinking and creativity especially in social science.

In addition to education quality, education/policy experts and policy-making specialist also concerned that *“the demand for higher education is still much higher than the supplying capability”* (CE2). This means there are still needs to further **expand the scale of the higher education system** [3].

While “higher education improvement” is the final destination, there was no direct causal way from university autonomy to education development explained. Instead, people expected that university autonomy would be the solution for various problems in the higher education system in Vietnam before it can help to reach the development goal.

“Education cannot be improved right away, it will take time, but university autonomy is the necessary condition for improvement. There are so many problems that should be fixed first. University autonomy is the necessary conditions to bring those fundamental changes which in the long term will result in education development” (S.SCI1).

MEMO⁹:

The concepts of higher education improvement and higher education quality are still under-developed. The way the participants discuss these two concepts is too ambiguous.

The reason is possible because of the lacking of serious and in-depth discussion of the mission/purposes of higher education and education philosophy?

4.2.1.2. The issue of resource for higher education

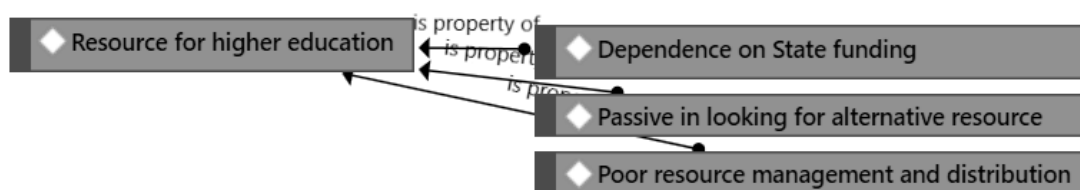


Figure 4: The concept of Resource for higher education

In the discussion of resource for higher education, the participants tended to focus more on financial resource and consider it as the primary condition to have other kinds of resources for education improvement. While all participants in the active and the bridge group said that finance is not the only issue to concern, many of them still emphasized it as one of the most obvious challenges for higher education development.

⁹ In this thesis, the first personal pronoun is only used in the memos.

The active participants were aware that with the current mechanism, the country does not have enough financial resources for higher education. Many participants from MoET, the civil society organizations and education/policy experts concerned about the lack of resource.

“Vietnam university education cost per unit and average expenditure for education in Vietnam are too low - compared with international standards. The whole system is in a thirst for financial resources. But the government has no more ability to expand funding for higher education. I think that even in the best attempt, State funding for higher education in Vietnam can only be slightly increased or remained unchanged. If the finance resource issue is not solved, the higher education system cannot develop but just become worse and worse.” (CE2)

The first problem is the public sector of higher education in Vietnam is heavily **depending on the limited financial resource from State funding** – which is unlikely to rise further since public debt rose continuously and State budget revenue is unstable in recent years [4], [5]. In such a context, funding for higher education becomes a burden for the State budget but still unable to meet the development needs of the schools.

For many years, public higher education institutions in Vietnam depend mostly on State funds for operation. Schools are passive and do not have autonomy rights to **access additional and alternative financial resources**.

According to an education expert (CE2), *“The financial resources from the State funding have always accounted for a large proportion in the financial structure of the universities in Vietnam. The institutions are very slow in diversifying revenue sources. In addition to State funding, their main revenues are from tuition fees. Other revenue sources from the service activities are limited. Fundraising activities to call for donations from individuals, organizations and businesses face difficulties because there is no tradition for philanthropic donation for education in Vietnam.”*

Poor resource management and distribution is another problem that worsens the lacking in financial resources for higher education. Many interviewees complained that central planning is not an effective way to distribute funding for institutions and the bureaucratic mechanism conditions corruption and resources leaking (S.SCI2, OS1, PM1).

Data revealed that participants from piloting school supported university autonomy partially because it is expected to go along with necessary shifts to solve the finance resource issue.

“The schools can only improve if we have autonomy. Without autonomy, we do not have enough resources. No resources also mean no development.” (S.SCI1)

Not only the piloting schools, most interviewees in all stakeholder groups believed that the government should loosen their controlling hand and enable more autonomy so that the schools can manage by themselves to access other (financial) resources. University autonomy also encourages social participation in education as a cost-sharing policy to enhance social investment, which helps to redistribute a part of the financial burden of sponsoring higher education from the State to other actors. This step of reform is expected to enhance budget efficiency and can be seen (at least by the State) as salvation for financial difficulties.

4.2.1.3. System administrative efficiency

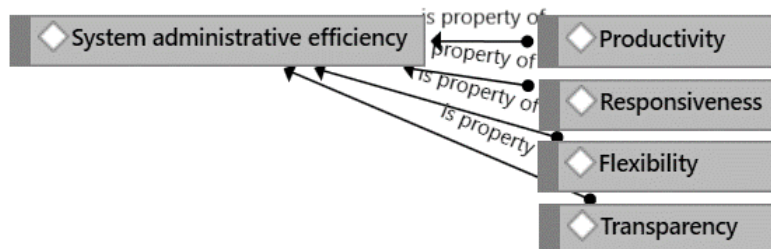


Figure 5: The concept of System administrative efficiency

The resource scarcity was worsened because of the deficient system administrative efficiency, which is also one of the issues that most interviewees concerned. For being heavily constrained by the central government, the schools cannot decide their businesses and cannot respond adaptively to the diverse requirements of the practical reality. Also, because the schools are sponsored and protected by the State, they may lack the motivation to improve their performances but accept the status quo. Meanwhile, the over-bureaucratic system, in most cases, prevents the central authorities to regulate flexibly. The result is poor **flexibility, responsiveness, transparency, and productivity**, which prevent the most effective use of the resource and hinder the improvement of higher education in the whole system.

4.2.1.4. Problems in higher education governance

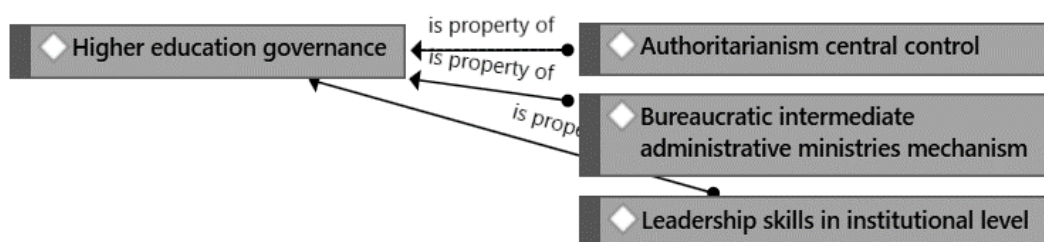


Figure 6: The concept of Higher education governance

Many participants – not only in the active group but even in the less active and inactive groups - criticized that the root of various shortcomings of the higher education in Vietnam is bad governance. In the system level, they complained that the **authoritarianism central control** in higher education governance in Vietnam suppress productivity, transparency, flexibility, and responsiveness of the whole system and erode positive motives for sustainable development.

Additionally, according to most interviewees in the active group, the **bureaucratic intermediate administrative ministries mechanism** with the participation of too many administrative ministries created a burdensome bureaucratic system, which is too complicated and ineffective.

Thirdly, partially because of the governance mechanism with all decisive power centralized on the Party and the State, the schools traditionally have very little authority to decide on their own. Through time, this led to **poor leadership skills at the institutional level**.

The interview data showed an ideology view, in which most interviewees, at least in the active group, considered university autonomy reform as an education governance reform that in the long term could create changes in higher education governance in both system and institution level to decentralize the system and empower other actors, including the institutions.

4.2.1.5. Social considerations

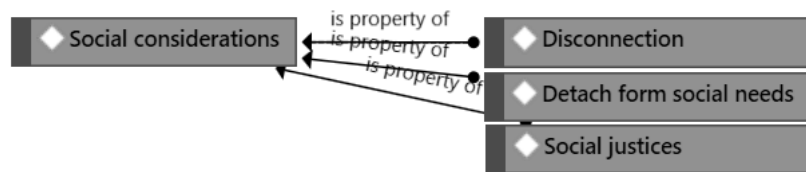


Figure 7: The concept of Social considerations

A problem that some participants from the school, the civil society organizations and education expert group (CS1, CE2, S.SCI3) pointed out is the **disconnection** between the higher education system with the broader society when there are just a few stakeholders involved in higher education. There has not been an educational ecosystem for the cycling of resources, knowledge, innovation (as defined by Pearce and McCoy, (2007)) where all stakeholders contribute, interact, and benefit from the mutual development of the whole system. In such a situation, it is impossible for the country to mobilize and utilize the collective strengths of various parties for the development of the higher education system.

Also because of such social disconnection, higher education in Vietnam is very slow in detecting urgent **social issues** and adapting various requirements in society. The higher education sector in Vietnam, in many cases, is still an ivory tower of knowledge which is “*detached from the real needs of the community*” (S.SCI1).

Another issue that some participants, especially the journalists, mentioned was the goals of inclusion and social justice. In this issues, they affirmed the need to expand the higher education system further to meet the very high demand for people who want to pursue tertiary education, especially the disadvantaged people from rural areas and poor families (CE1, S.SCI1, M1, M2) [3].

Although usually being overlooked, some interviewees, especially the participants in the media group (M1, M2, M3) still mentioned these social considerations in discussion regarding university autonomy in Vietnam. However, it worth noticing that the attitude and predictions of people regarding the possible influences of university autonomy on these social considerations were unclear and heterogeneous. While people have a more positive view of the possibility that university autonomy can connect more stakeholders into the higher

education system, there is a risk that this reform can further dampen the opportunity of the poor and the students in adversity to participate in higher education.

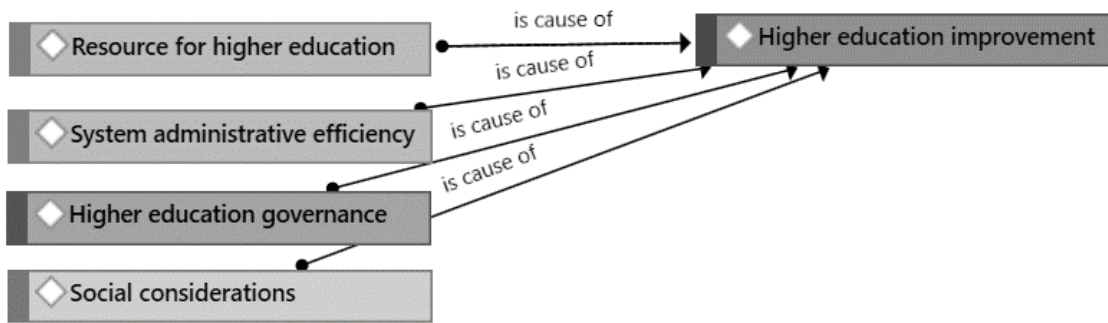


Figure 8: General expectations: Relation between problems in HE

4.2.2. The local understanding of university autonomy (A focus on normative Statements)

To understand local people’s expectations toward university autonomy, the next step of this study required the researcher to go deeply into the current agenda for university autonomy discussion in Vietnam to explore how the participants perceive university autonomy. The main data for this part were the answers or pieces of data in conferences answering the questions regarding people’s understandings of the concept of university autonomy.

As a result of this step of data analysis, the researcher realized that of university autonomy is a complex concept that can be explained with an analytical frame including three properties of “Principles of university autonomy,” “Level of autonomy” and “Sector of autonomy,” as being visualized in the following diagram:

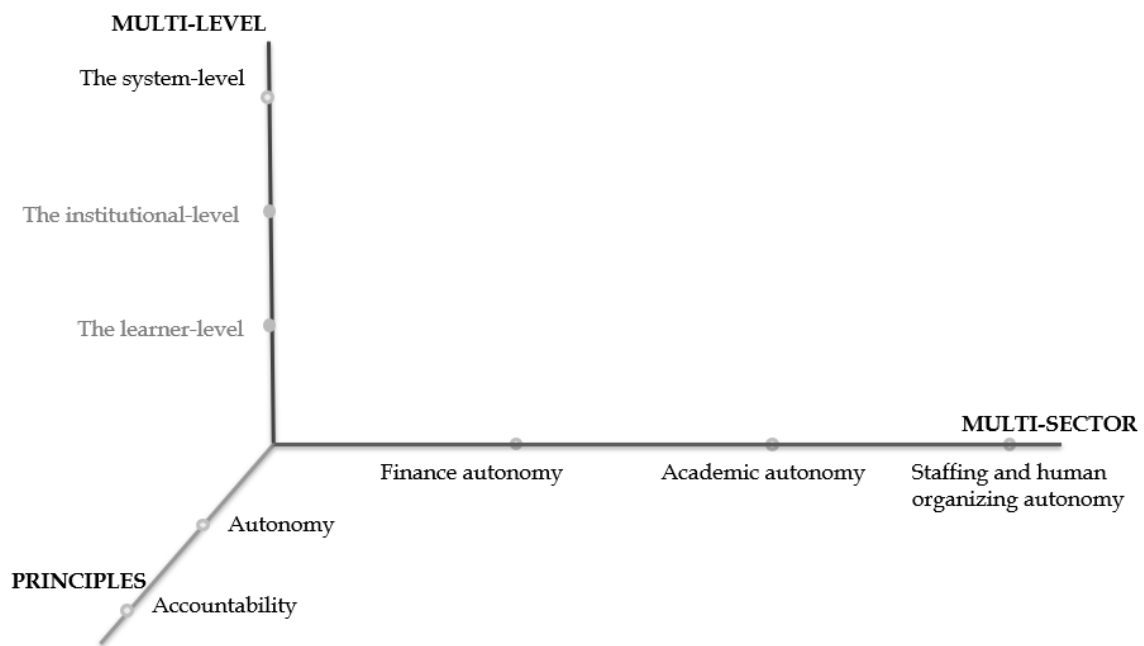


Figure 9: The category of University autonomy perception

4.2.2.1. Understandings of the general principles of autonomy and accountability

Results from data analyzing revealed the multiplicity of university autonomy, in which the concept can be perceived in different levels/layers and different sectors/aspects. However, in the most general sense of the core principles of university autonomy, all interviewees in the active/less active and bridge groups acknowledged the two sides of (1) autonomy and (2) accountability and affirmed that *“autonomy should go along with accountability.”*

(1) Autonomy is understood, firstly, as a right to be independent or freedom – using the language of *“The right to decide,”* (S.SCI1) *“The separation/independence of the education sector”* (OS1) *“Free from the intervention and controlling from other forces”* (S.SCI2). Secondly, *“university autonomy”* may also mean a liability of self-effort or self-empowerment – using the languages of *“self-manage our businesses,”* *“take care of ourselves,”* (S.SCI2) *“whether we can develop or not is depending on our own.”* (S.SCI1). In some cases, *“autonomy”* was also explained in the language of capacity or competency, when the policy-making specialist, some experts, and some schools required that *“the schools should be able to stand on their feet”* (PM1). These understandings implied the expectation of **liberation** and **power structure transition** (through school **empowerment** and promoting the institution’s **sense of responsibility and ownership**).

(2) Accountability is understood, firstly, as the responsibility - using the terms like “self-responsibility” or “self-commitment” - which highlighted the role or the awareness of the institutions in defining their missions. Besides, an expert (CE1) and some people in the conferences used the expressions of “social responsibility” or “social commitment” to highlight that the responsibility of schools is to serve society. In addition to “responsibility”, many participants, include the one from MoET and some experts in the conferences more emphasized that accountability also requires “the ability to prove that responsibility” (PM1), “the reports as proofs for that commitments” (S.PC1), “the involvement of the State and all parties in the society to supervise those responsibilities” (S.SCI2). (Further analyses of different understandings in part 4.3.1). Such a way to understand “accountability” implied expectation toward some **senses of responsibility and ownership** - which is relevant to a **power structure transition**. The concept also has connections with the **social supervision** and **participatory approach in school governance** - which are properties of the concept of **social connection**.

In the discussion of university autonomy reform in Vietnam, accountability, and autonomy, while being different concepts, are considered the two sides of the coin. Accountability is necessary to balance and keep autonomy in harmonization while autonomy is the reason in which accountability becomes necessary.

“University autonomy does not mean arbitrary. It does not mean the school can do whatever they want without any limits or regulations”...“That will lead to chaotic and irresponsibility. Therefore, university autonomy should go along with accountability so that schools should have commitments and the State and the society will supervise schools in proving those commitments. The independence and freedom of schools should be implemented within certain liability frames.” (CS1)

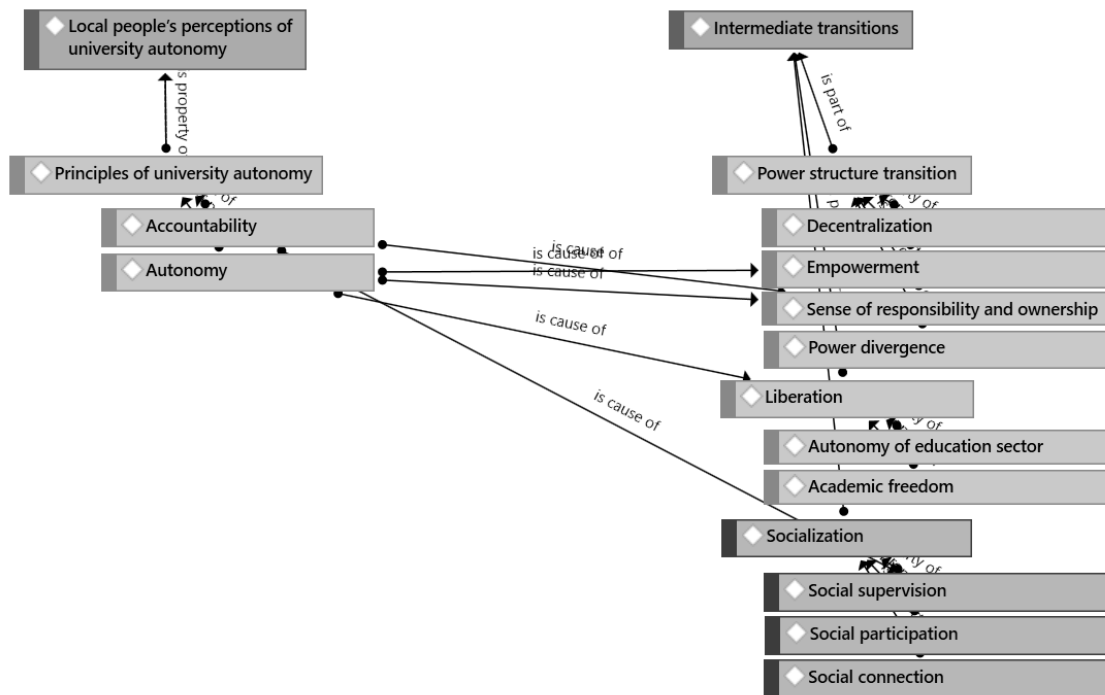


Figure 10: Principles of university autonomy and its relation with the intermediate transitions

4.2.2.2. Multi-level autonomy

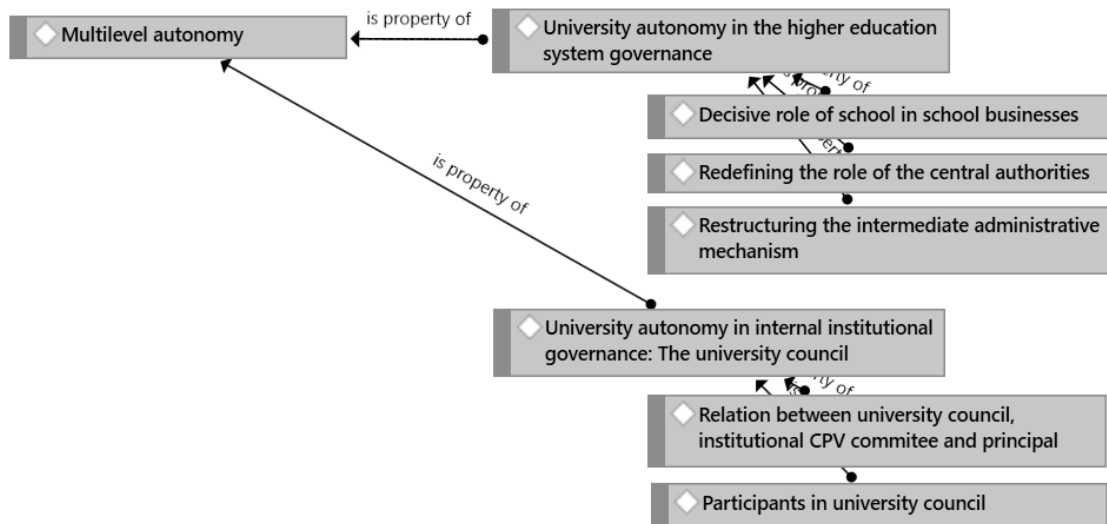


Figure 11: Different levels of autonomy

There were various participants, including policy/education experts, schools and people from the civil society organization looked at the university autonomy reform as a massive step to re-allocation of power and roles in education governance (CE1, CS1, OS1). However, such re-structuring can happen at various level.

In a conference on university autonomy reform in 12/2017, there were a few participants noticed that people could discuss university autonomy with analyses focusing on different levels of governance, depending on the context of the discussions. For examples, people may talk about autonomy in the relation between the learners and the teacher, which means the autonomy of the learner in educational environments. People may also focus on the institutional level to analyze the autonomy of units within schools.

In the current context of the university autonomy reform in Vietnam, the researcher realized that most discussions are system-level relevant, which aim to consider the relations between the different actors in the higher education system, especially the relation between the central authorities with the schools. According to the interview data, when being asked about university autonomy without any further noticing, all the interviewees in the active group naturally discussed the autonomy in the system level. There were only one education/policy experts (CE2) briefly mentioned the multi-layers of the concept, but he still came back to focus on the system-level. Also, in the conferences with more participants, there were only a few experts mentioned the other layers of the university autonomy concepts. Even the interviewees from schools also discussed more of the autonomy of schools in the relationship with the State but very rarely explained the autonomy of the internal units in schools or the autonomy of teacher or students.

The reason for such focus on the system-level is, possibly, because the university autonomy in Vietnam is a newly adopted reform. As a result, the ideas of university autonomy has not been popularized into all levels, but there are just a few actors actively involved and have a thorough understanding of the concept. These actors include the central authorities, the education/policy experts, the policy-making specialists, the people from civil society organizations and the school administrators – who tended to pay more attention to issues in system level. Also, the application of university autonomy in Vietnam is conducted with more top-down than grassroots approach – which means it began with the policies from the central more than the initiatives from the lower level actors. Therefore, the discussions of university autonomy, at least in this early period of the reform, focus more on the macro-level policies. The third reason is that “*the traditional hierarchical culture in the higher education system*” (CS1) has not been changed so that while school leaders required more autonomy for schools, they

usually remained the old approach in their internal school administration. This means, there were very little changes in the autonomy of internal units or individuals in schools.

In align with the main tendency in data as well as the researcher's interest in policy making and system governance, this study also focuses on system-level autonomy. The research, therefore, pays attention to the relationship between the schools with the central powers (The Communist Party and the State), the intermediate administrative bodies and other actors. While acknowledging that autonomy of students and internal units in schools are also meaningful topics, the other layers of autonomy are only discussed briefly in some parts where it is necessary and relevant. In the following parts, the researcher will analyze (1) the university autonomy in the higher education system governance and after that go deeper into (2) the topic of the university council.

MEMO:

Whether this can also lead to stereotyped understanding?

The over-focusing on the system-level autonomy may lead to further limitations in participatory approach? There is a risk that university autonomy will remain to be the "macro-issue of the VIPs" while the other actors in lower level find it is "irrelevant" to them?

(1) The university autonomy in the higher education system governance

Many interviewees, especially the participants from schools argued that there should be more power returned to school so that schools have **decisive roles in deciding school businesses**, including deciding development strategy and planning, their management and operational issues as well as their administrative, procedures problems. It is expected that with these steps, university autonomy will allow the **autonomy of education sector, empower** schools and lead to a **power structure transition** in the whole higher education system.

"The roles of the State is system-managing. I think that intervention in schools and over-parenting schools is no longer suitable anymore. The schools should have the rights to decide our businesses. Only in such a way, the schools in Vietnam can stand on our own feet." (S.SCI3)

In the perceptions of some interviewees, university autonomy also means **redefining the role of the central authorities** (the Communist Party and the State). Except for the interviewees in the inactive group (who were unable to follow the in-depth discussion of university autonomy), almost all participants affirmed that even after the university autonomy reform, the State should still have crucial roles in governing the higher education system. These roles include “orientation”; “regulating through issuing legal frame, standards, and other institutional elements”; “inspecting to guarantee quality and effectiveness”; “sponsoring and support the development of higher education system,” etc. However, according to the participants, there should be necessary adjustments in the way the central bodies implementing their authorities, as explained by an expert as followed:

“There should be a shift from total control to only macro-level governance and from input-focused to output-focused. Instead of direct intervention in every step, the State should only inspect the final results and effectiveness. The State should loosen their control on the higher education sector, respect the autonomy of the institutions and intervene only when there are violations to prevent the schools develop in wrong directions.” (CE1)

These adjustments are expected to be positive signs of **decentralization** and **liberation** in the higher education system. In another hand, with the university autonomy reform, some interviewees, especially leaders of piloting schools, expected that the State would be no longer the highest authority controlling the higher education system but become only a special actor on the education market. With such a view, these people looked forward to a shift **from central planning mechanism to the market-driven approach**.

“This mechanism in which the State controls everything, and all the activities of schools should depend on central planning is non-sense. How can the State effectively decide what programs schools should open or how many students the schools should recruit? Which programs are necessary or unnecessary can only be determined by the market. The State is just a party on the labor market. If the State needs more trained human resource for some specific sectors, the State should order and pay the schools for training. If it is not the State, but the businesses require human resources in some areas, the school should train accordingly to meet the requirements on the market. The State cannot effectively plan that.” (S.SCI2)

There were also opinions that university autonomy should go along with **restructuring the intermediate administrative mechanism** so that the participation of too many ministries in managing the higher education institution school be eliminated. There were repeated calls on various analytic writings and media posts to remove the education administrative role of the ministries except for MoET, and all interviewees (Excepts the participants in the inactive group) agreed with this elimination. The main reason for such requirement is “to cut unnecessary intermediate administration to increase efficiency and flexibility so that the schools can adapt better to the quick-changing labor market” (PM1), “simplify and utilize the bureaucracy apparatus” (AB1), “better use financial resources for higher education” (OS1), “give school real determination power” (S.SCI2). By perceiving that university autonomy should go with necessary restructuring the intermediate administrative mechanism, people embedded in university autonomy the expectations of **power structure transitioning** by **decentralization and empowering schools** as well as **marketization** by **shifting from central planning to the market-driven mechanism**.

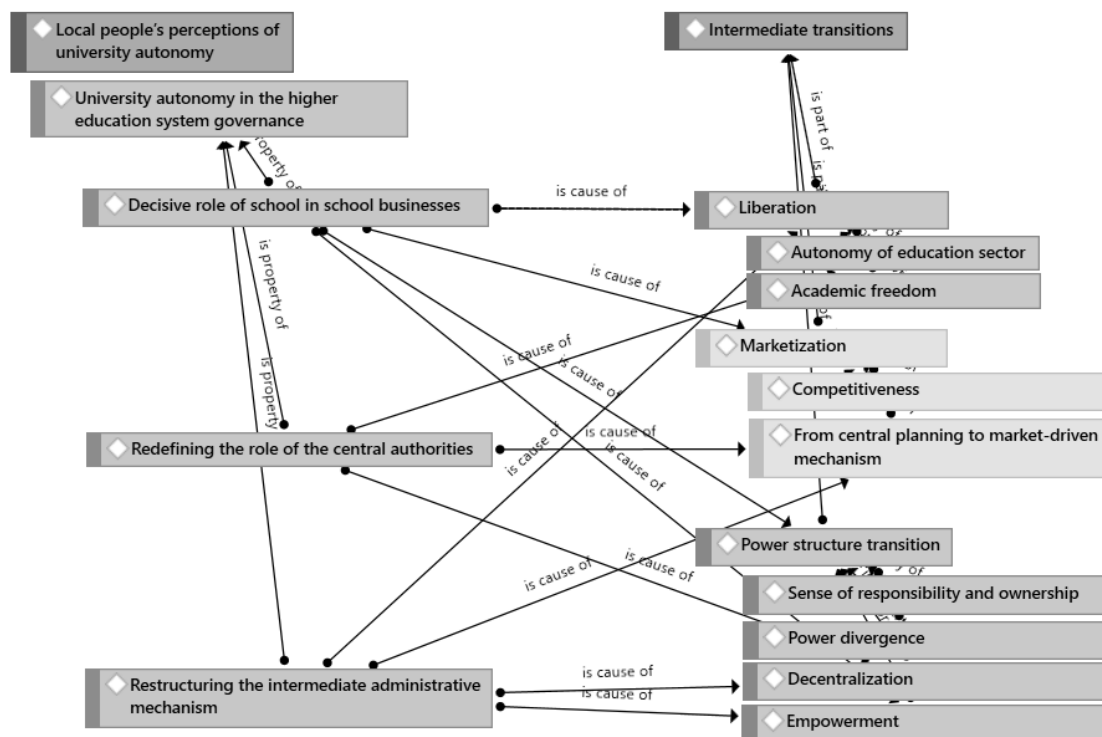


Figure 12: Autonomy in the system level and its relations with the intermediate transitions

(2) University autonomy in internal institutional governance: The university council

Because the university council is an entity within schools, there can be arguments that it is not a system-level issue – which is partially true. However, the researcher believes that a part of analyzing the issue of university councils within higher education institutions is necessary. The first reason is that the topic of university council is nearly unavoidable in all current discussions of university autonomy in Vietnam and therefore this topic should be included in the analyzing of people's perceptions of university autonomy. Through discussions about university councils that many problems were revealed, enabling the researcher to see various controversies around the reform in Vietnam. Secondly, the researcher views the topic of university council as an issue lying in the transitory zone between the system-level and the institutional level. The focus of the analyses in the part of university autonomy is on how the system-level problems are replicated and create the contradiction in the institutional governance level and therefore, it is an institutional-level issue that is system-level relevant. For example, as once mentioned above in part 1.1.1, the Communist Party and the State in Vietnam also exercise their centralized controlling authority on the higher education sector from inside through the school-level Communist party cells (London, 2011)¹⁰. The establishments of the university councils in education institutes can challenge this authority, and some governance problems that university councils should face indeed reflects the issues in system-level governance rather than merely internal institutional level.

In general, participants in the active/bridge group agreed in principle that the establishment of the university council is “a must,” a vital condition for the university autonomy reform in Vietnam. Some even affirmed that university autonomy would be impossible without the establishment of the university councils.

Regarding the role and power of the university council, participants who care about governance/political aspect of the reform expected that the university council could help to **empower** school and at the same time prevent internal authoritarianism. Because of such necessity, many interviewees, especially the ones

¹⁰ London, J. D. (2011). Contemporary Vietnam's education system: Historical roots, current trends. In J. D. London (Ed.), *Education in Vietnam* (pp. 1-56). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

from university councils required that the council should be a powered entity and the highest representative of the school.

“With university autonomy, the power to decide school businesses is returned to school. However, that power cannot be put in the hand of the principal individually since that may lead to even more serious totalitarian. That is why university autonomy should go along with the creation of the university council to empower schools. The power is now returned to school through a council of plurality.” (CS1)

At the time of data collecting, one of the most usually discussed issues regarding the operation of the university council is how to redefine **the power relationship between the university council, the institutional party committee, and the principal** within each school. There was a consensus, at least in principle, that university council should be the most important body in school. Typically, people adapted the corporation-model to explain that the university council should play a similar role to the board of management (BOM); meanwhile, the principal performs the functions of the director in a company. The topic of this triangle power relationship partially showed the expectation of **power divergence** (so that the university council, the institutional party committee, and the principal should have their distinct roles), **empowerment** (so that university council should become the highest powered entity to represent the schools and have the right to decide the strategy for school development), and **decentralization**.

Some participants (mostly in the conferences) discussed the **participants and membership in the university council** while interviewees just briefly or accidentally mentioned this topic. Although the issue did not attract great attention, it still signaled an essential shift in school governance. Notably, there were recommendations from some education/policy experts and policy-making specialists that in addition to the “compulsory members”, the university council should include the representatives of the staffs, the students and even the external actors (such as the representatives for the parents, the enterprise, etc.) as relevant stakeholders in school governance. According to these experts, this would be a turn from authoritarianism into pluralism and **social participation**, so that not only the Party and the State but different stakeholders also have voices in the highest entity of school to decide the development orientation of the higher education institution. The participation of external members representing various sides in the society was also expected to enhance **social inspections**, urging schools to

consider their social commitments more seriously. With the presence of external members from different sectors in society, more stakeholders may have roles and interests in the development of the schools. Therefore, it is expected to bring more motivations and favorable conditions for the **social connection** in the whole higher education system in the long term.

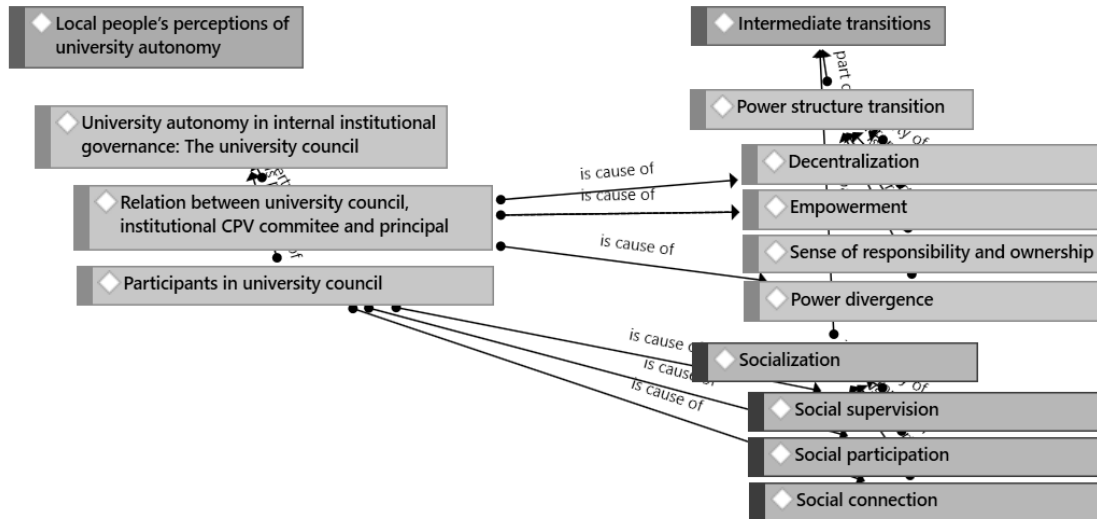


Figure 13: Autonomy in internal institutional governance and its relations with the intermediate transitions

4.2.2.3. *Multisector university autonomy*

The data from interviews and conferences also revealed another property of the concept of university autonomy, which is the “comprehensiveness” or the “multi-sector” where autonomy should be exercised. There was a consensus, at least in principles, that autonomy should be applied to all operation sectors of schools. There were some literature sources were usually cited in research/analytic papers to discuss the relevant sectors or components of the concept. However, in the interviews or the conferences, these lists of components of university autonomy are usually restructured with some elements are merged to simplify the frames. Instead of using the frameworks from previous studies, in the following part, this study will analyze three sectors in the university autonomy as it was usually discussed in Vietnam, which are (1) Financial autonomy, (2) Academic autonomy, and (3) Staffing and Organizing autonomy. This categorization is used because it better reflects the real agenda of university autonomy in Vietnam and suitable for the data-driven approach of this paper.

(1) In the university autonomy discourse in Vietnam, *financial autonomy* attracted considerable attention from people in various stakeholder group. The interviewees usually discussed this autonomy component together with the issue of financial resources for higher education.

“Financial autonomy is one of the first and the most important area in university autonomy. Although it is not the only thing to care about in university autonomy, no matter what we want to change, we should have money or finance resources as the first condition for those changes.” (S.SCI1)

With some education expert and the participant from MoET, financial autonomy was defined as “*the responsibility*” of schools to be “*not depend on the money from the State anymore*” (PM1). Meanwhile, some people from schools also used the language of rights or capacities in mentioning university autonomy. For example, “*School should have the right to look for other financial resources so that they have money on their own*” (S.SCE1), “*to decide how to earn financial resources and how to use those resource*” (S.PB1) “*to be able to self-manage their financial issues*” (S.SCI1). While some different aspects of the topic were briefly mentioned, which includes “*mobilizing,*” “*distributing*” and “*using*” the financial resources, most interviewees focused mainly on resource mobilization to expand the input finance resources for higher education institutes. There used to be various controversies around the issue of finance resource mobilization. However, at the time of data collecting, most interviewees in the active group already reached the consensus that finance resource for higher education should rise to the level that is enough to cover the unit cost, which is the essential condition for the sustainable development of higher education development. All interviewees in the active group also agreed that financial autonomy is the necessary solution for the finance resource issue.

To explain for the necessity of the financial autonomy, some experts argued that in the context when the State cannot guarantee the adequate financial resources for the higher education system anymore, financial autonomy is necessary to **marketize** or “socialize” the higher education sector. Most interviewees in the active group tended to turn away **from the rigid central-planing** and, instead, supported the dynamic **market-driven mechanism**, in which schools would have the right to decide the reasonable tuition fee to cover their costs. Certainly, marketization also means the school should face more **competition**. However, with these people - who sometimes considered themselves and people sharing their

view as “*progressive ones*” in oppose to “*the conservative people in the society*” - “*competition*” seemed to be perceived as a good thing that “*inspires schools to invest in quality*” (S.SCI2) and improve their performances.

With some interviewees, financial autonomy means **decentralization** in the funding mechanism and less dependence on State fund also promises more **empowerment** for schools:

“As long as we should still beg for money from the State, we should also be dependent and cannot decide by ourselves, just like a child who still lives on his parents. Only when we have financial autonomy... when we dare to live on our own... that we can have the right to decide.” (S.SCI1)

Meanwhile, the participants in the expert group also expected that university autonomy would help to expand financial resources for higher education in the long term (at least in theory) by motivating school to “*connect with other parties in the society*” (S.SCE3) (**social connection**) to access other financial resources and that, in turn, enable schools to “*decrease their dependence on State funding*” (PM1).

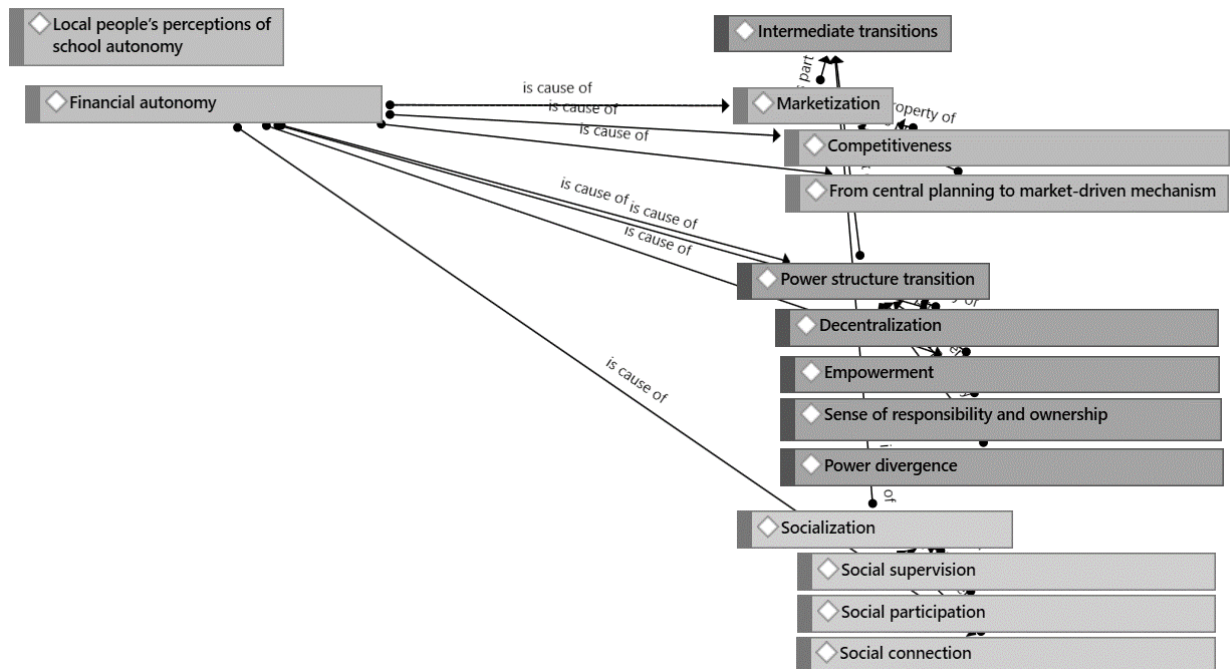


Figure 14: Financial autonomy and its relations with intermediate transitions

(2) *Academic autonomy* is another component of university autonomy. In defining academic autonomy, most interviewees focused mainly on the technical, administrative and procedural aspects of this concept. According to them, academic autonomy means “the right of the schools to decide on the professional issues that they encounter in operation” (PM1) such as “student recruitment,” “student administration,” “changing on curriculum,” “training programs” and “changing on teaching method,” etc. More autonomy right in these issues was expected to enable the schools to develop dynamically and “enhance their competence to **compete** in the education markets” (S.SCI1). Instead of being passive and wait for the order from the State, schools are now “independent service suppliers that can actively adjust their programs and recruitment strategy to survive on the market” (S.SCI2). Similar to financial autonomy, this implied expectations toward **decentralization, empowerment and a shift from central-planning to the market-driven mechanism.**

In addition to the technical contents mentioned above, there was a participant from a public school perceives academic autonomy with more substantial meaning.

“Academic autonomy is the final goal of the university autonomy. All other components are just the means supporting this ultimate goal. Academic autonomy means the school should have the freedom to become a “university” in its truest meaning. University should be the place to liberate people mind and enlighten learners with the light of knowledge, of the truths. For that highest mission, the university should have academic autonomy, which means they should be detached, be free from the political or religious or any similar interventions from other forces.” (OS1)

With this more ideological way of understanding “academic autonomy,” the interviewee (and a few education/policy experts, school leaders and teachers sharing similar views) indeed already embedded in the concept of academic autonomy their expectation toward **academic freedom** or the freedom of thoughts. The university (and the higher education system in general), according to these participants, should have relative independence or autonomy that **liberate** them, at least in a certain level, from the political constraints or the intervention from other sectors.

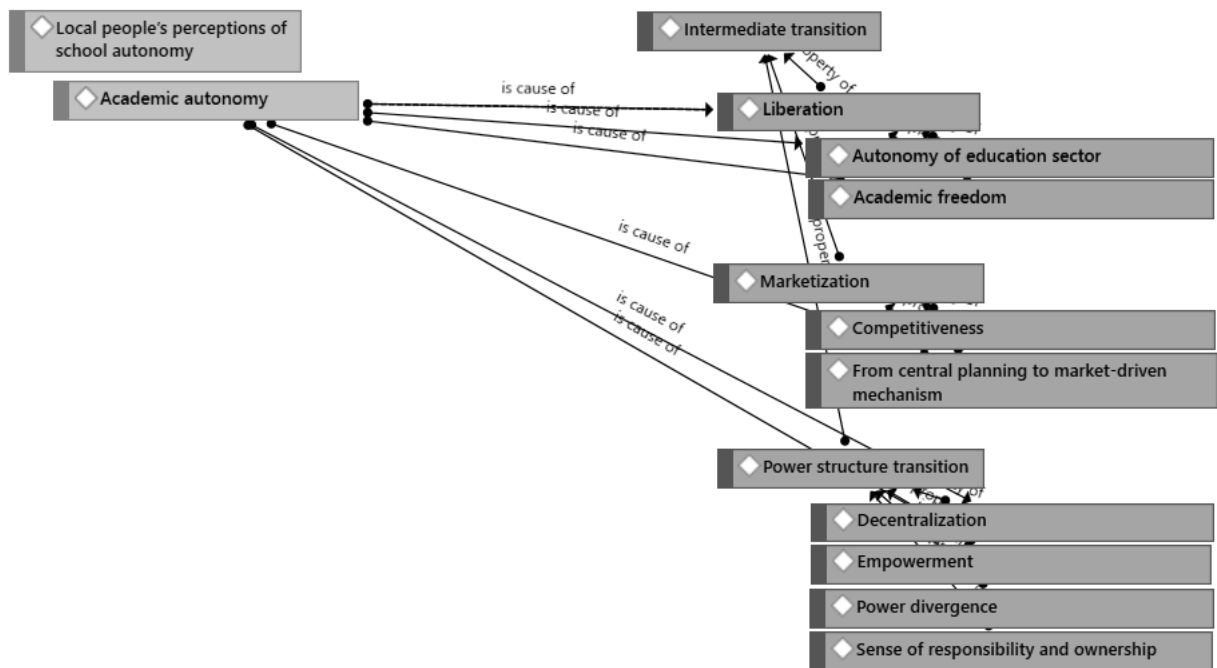


Figure 15: Academic autonomy and its relations with intermediate transitions

(3) *Staffing and organizing autonomy* was another component that the participants usually mentioned. As the interviewees in the active and less active group explained, with this autonomy, the schools have the right to determine in issues like recruitment, contract, payroll, appointment, assignment or deciding different personnel positions in school, separating or merging school's entities, etc.

This staffing and organizing attracted attention from the active participants from school piloting university autonomy.

"The school can now pay people accordingly to their performance. We can raise the salary to attract talented people and thanks to better human resource, we have more advantages in competition." (S.SCI1)

In the previous mechanism, schools need approval from MoET in their organizing and human resource planning, designation people for important positions. The salary for staffs should also follow the payroll obligations which are stipulated by the Government. With such fixed and bureaucracy staffing mechanism, the schools, in many cases, cannot attract the best people for various positions and even firing ineffective staffs was not easy. Autonomy in staffing and organizing issues was expected to return the right to decide to schools, enabling them

to employ or excommunicate accordingly to their real needs. Again, this turn can be a step of **decentralization** and school **empowerment**. It is also a **shift from central-planning to the market-driven mechanism** and a way to **improve the sense of responsibility and ownership**.

“Now when we cannot depend on the State anymore, we decide our destiny. The more school succeed, the better the school can pay us. If the school failed, we lost our jobs. Therefore, we have reasons to do our best. Our staffs feel that the school business is also our own business, we have more benefits from what we do for school. I think that in such a way, university autonomy can improve staff’s working spirit and responsibility.”
(S.NS1)

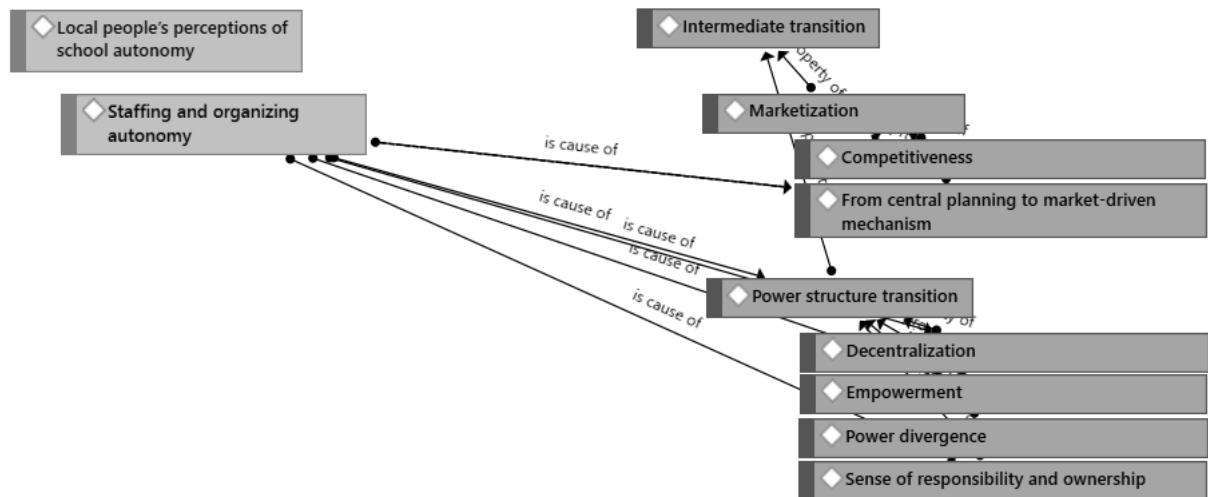


Figure 16: Staffing and organizing autonomy and its relations with intermediate transitions

4.2.3. The logic beneath participants' expectations: How can university autonomy help to solve problems in the higher education system?

Part 4.2.1 explained some specific context elements in Vietnam and the problematization process through which the participants identified troubles with the higher education system. Since all of these contextual elements and problems were mentioned when the interviewees answered why they support the university autonomy or in what issues that they think university autonomy can help, it is safe to infer that the participants expected university autonomy to contribute to solve or at least to improve those problems. Then, the part 4.2.2 analyzed the current agenda of university autonomy in Vietnam to explained how participants perceived the university autonomy. In this part of 4.2.3, the researcher will examine the logic connecting these two parts to tell how do participants expect the

university autonomy (as it is perceived in 4.2.2) to be a potentially helpful solution for the problems with the higher education system in Vietnam (as being identified in 4.2.1)

The data analysis revealed that in most cases, the participants did not expect the university autonomy to directly or immediately lead to changes in the identified problems. Instead, university autonomy is predicted to firstly change how the higher education system works as an intermediate step and then these changes, in their turns, will help to improve the results. As a result of data analysis, these expected medium changes include marketization, liberation, power structure transition, and socialization. Their relations with the concept of university autonomy have been mentioned in the part of 4.2.2. However, this part will gather and re-organize them to introduce a better categorization and to explain their connection with the identified problems in the higher education system in Vietnam.

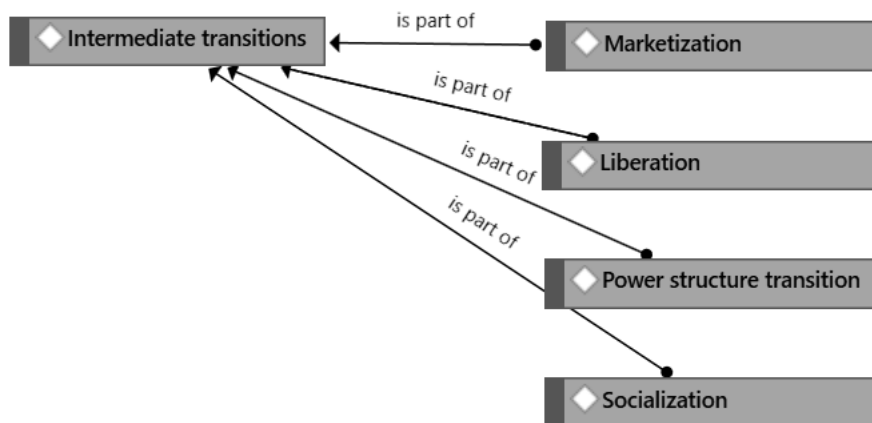


Figure 17: The category of Intermediate transitions

4.2.3.1. Marketization

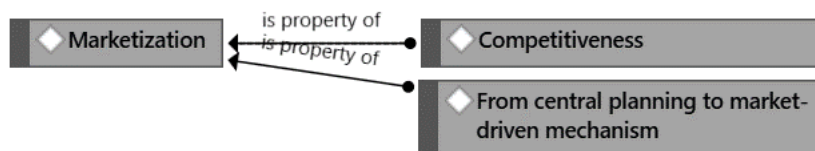


Figure 18: The concept of Marketization

An expected result of university autonomy was the **marketization** of the higher education sector, in which the **market-driven mechanism** should replace the **central planning mechanism**.

The context of authoritarianism in Vietnam explains why marketizations become something desirable. Instead of being sponsored, protected but also controlled by the central government, “schools with the low unit cost expected that piloting university autonomy can bring more benefits than harm. With the autonomy rights, they can introduce new programs, recruit more students and increase their revenues thanks to greater opportunities in the education market” (CE2). With school piloting university autonomy, the trading off is worthy. Although they should face more **competition** to survive, if schools can adapt to the market, they will have more resources and more advantages to further development.

While there are both opportunities and challenges, most interviewees agreed that this turn of marketization would be a solution, firstly, to improve **system administrative efficiency** and **resource** issues.

4.2.3.2. Power structure transition

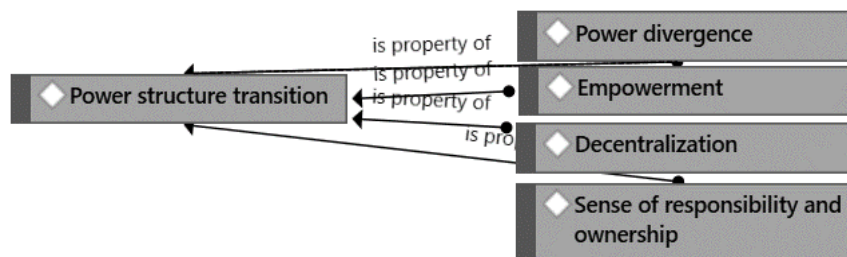


Figure 19: The concept of Power structure transition

With various participants in the education experts, the school leaders and the civil society organization groups, university autonomy marks a governance reform that will possibly lead to the power structure transition in the higher education system. First, a critical transition is the **power separation** in which the authority is separated and then assigned to different actors. An example is the separation of roles and power between the university council, the board of principal and the institutional Party Committee in schools which attracted the attention among the participants in the conferences. The second transition is the **decentralization** in which the Party and the State should give up a part of their total controlling power and then transfer that power to schools and other actors. By such a way, the schools and other actors (such as the students, the staffs, the parents, the enterprises, and others) should be **empowered** to have more significant roles in higher education governance. At the same times, this transition also means these actors should develop a **sense of responsibility and ownership** to become

more active stakeholders. Institutions have active roles in determining their development prospects.

Such power structure transition was expected to be the answer, firstly, for the problems in **higher education governance**, in term of the **authoritarianism central control, the bureaucratic intermediate administrative ministries mechanism, and leadership skills in the institutional level.**

An indirect impact on the **resource for higher education** was also mentioned by some interviewees. When institutions have more authority to decide their businesses, schools will likely to be more **active in looking for alternative resources, using and distribute those resources** more effectively and **less dependant on State funding**. Such transitions in power structure are necessary to improve **system administrative efficiency** when the school has more motives for improving their performance.

4.2.3.3. Liberation

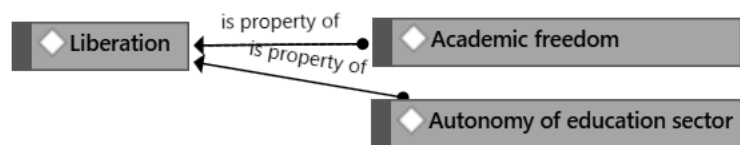


Figure 20: The concept of Liberation

University autonomy is expected by some participants to condition **liberation** in the higher education system. Firstly, by mentioning liberation, these participants mean higher education should be a relatively **independent sector** with its own set of values and principles in operation. Accordingly, the education system in general and education institutions in specific should be relatively liberated from the central controlling of the political forces, similar to the movement to separate academic area from the religious forces in the West previously. Secondly, in the discussion of liberation, some interviewees also emphasized the importance of **academic freedom**, which means the freedom of thought, independence in thinking, doing research, training, and teaching. This idea, while not often being mentioned, can be essential. Some interviewees (OS1, S.SCI1) expected the university autonomy reform to be a progressive step, opening the way to academic freedom and enabling the schools to fulfill their mission of enlightenment and improve education quality in the whole education system. This perception was close to

the classical thoughts of the role of education, the liberation mission of education. To these interviewees, academic freedom is a vital condition to improve **training** and **researching capacity**.

A transition to more liberation means the relief from too much constraint, controlling and intervention that prevents the free and independent development in the higher education system. With more liberation, it is expected that problems of higher education governance in Vietnam, such as **authoritarianism central control, bureaucratic intermediate administrative ministries mechanism** and **low leadership skills in institutional level** can be improved.

4.2.3.4. Socialization

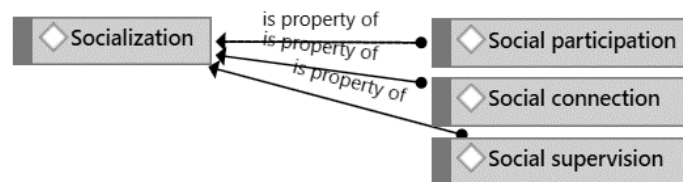


Figure 21: The concept of Socialization

Last but not least, university autonomy was viewed as a new step of socialization in the higher education system in Vietnam. In the language of the participants, socialization can be understood with some different properties. Firstly, as an education/policy expert explained, “socialization means the **participation** and contribution of different actors in the whole society for the development of the higher education system so that they will be more involved and have more active roles, even in school governance” (CE1). Secondly, university autonomy with the requirement of accountability will make **social supervision** necessary and the participation of new stakeholders in the university council condition such oversight. Toward a few other interviewees, the idea of socialization also means that different stakeholders in the whole higher education system will **connect** more firmly into an “ecosystem” (PM1, S.SCI3). Ecosystem for higher education should be a network with the participation of relevant actors for interaction and mutual benefits. In this network, actors are the supplier, but also the clients of each other and all actors share their views, their knowledge, their resources, their needs to enable the dynamic development of the higher education system. In such an ecosystem, there is interdependence between actors, so that they should work together actively for

their interests, for the development of higher education, and for their social responsibility – the responsibility of contributing to the development of the whole society.

As some education/ policy experts and policy-making specialist pointed out, the steps of social inspection, connection and the participatory approach in school governance will firstly help the system to identify and dealing better with **social considerations**. Socialization can also make an alternative for the issue of **resources for higher education** possible because it is going along with the connection with different sides in society. Furthermore, socialization may also influence **higher education system governance**, when pluralism participation is expected to balance the dominated power of the State and the Communist Party, supervise the intermediate administrative bodies and introduce new experiences and new approaches in leadership to school leaders.

The relations between the three categories of “University autonomy perception,” “Result of university autonomy (Intermediate transition)” and “Problems in the higher education system” are put together and simplify it by keeping only the big concepts without listing the properties under each concepts. The researcher also groups the expectations into four groups of economic expectations, administrative expectations, politic expectation and social expectations as followed.

MEMO:

In the interview with OS1, the interviewees had a remarkable evaluation that “The current university autonomy discourse in Vietnam is over-dominated by economics issues, but I think that the core of all troubles that this reform should solve is not the economics but the political matter.” This evaluation inspired the researcher to re-categorize the university autonomy agenda into four sectors of economic, administrative, politic and social.

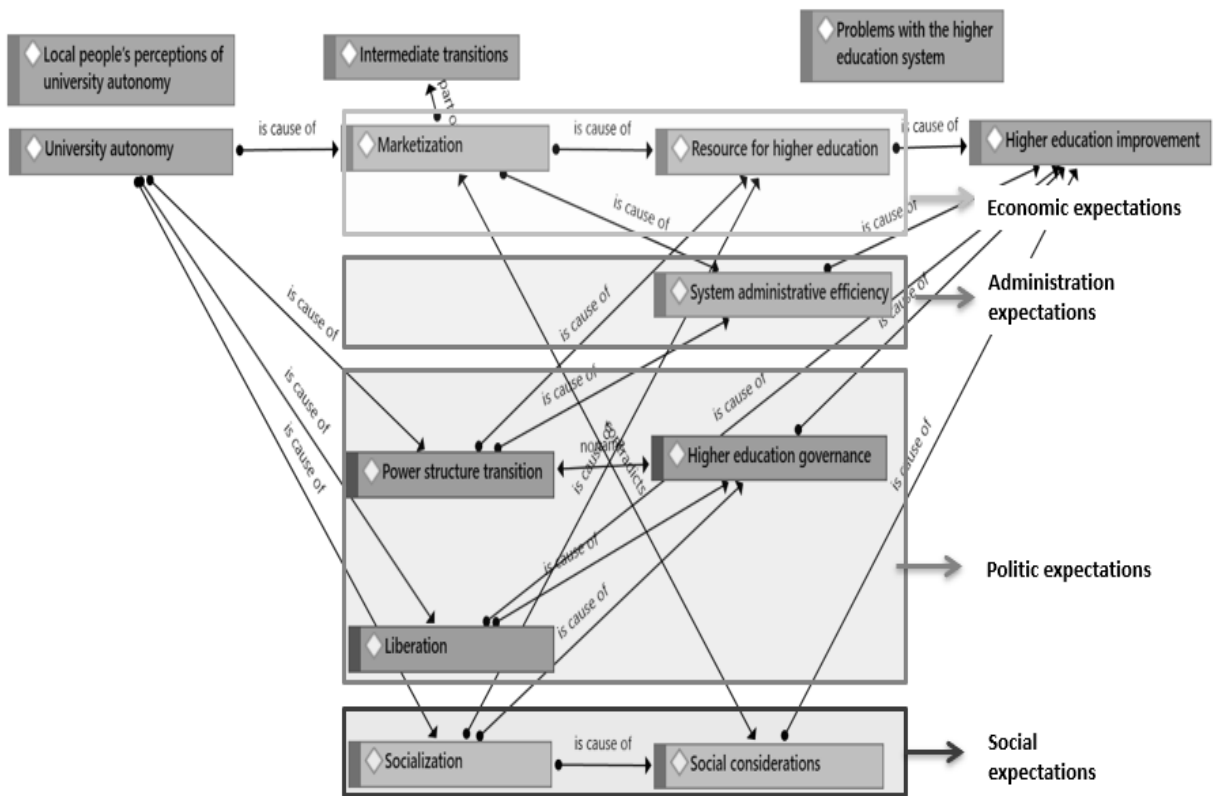


Figure 22: From Perception to Expectation and four main goal sectors

4.2.4. Summary: General expectations of a holistic university autonomy reform

The analyses above explored some remarkable contextual elements and the problems of the higher education system in Vietnam that the participants mentioned when they explained their expectations toward university autonomy, the issues that they think university autonomy may help and the reasons for which they support the university autonomy reform.

It is worth noticing that Vietnam has indeed already implemented different kinds of education reforms year after year, but those reforms usually resulted in disappointment.

"I have the feeling that there is nowhere in the world that has so much education reform like in our country, but then nothing changes. This can be an important step when we, at last, accepted to look at the core problem in the system. Do not expect a proper improvement with the higher education system with only minor fixes or temporary amendment. It's time to look straightforwardly in the system faults and make some more fundamental changes." (OS1)

After various education reform that usually ends in dissatisfaction of people, this university autonomy reform, is expected to be a different kind of education reform, in term of the scale and the influence, that enables more substantial changes in the whole education system.

This part of data analysis supplied an in-depth exploration of the general expectations for which people support the university autonomy reform as well as explains the reasoning that connects people's normative understanding of university autonomy and their expectations. According to this part, the participants in all stakeholder groups shared common normative perceptions of university autonomy. In general, they supported the idea of university autonomy with the expectation that the reform will bring influential transitioning turn toward marketization, liberation, power structure transition, and socialization. These intermediate transitions, in their turns, may help to solve or at least improve various issues, in social (social considerations), economic (resource for higher education) and political (higher education governance) matters.

4.3. Fragments beneath the consensus

Although part 4.2 supplied detailed analyses of participant's perceptions and expectations toward the university autonomy reform, the impression that there was a consensus among the participant in perceiving of university autonomy should be rechecked. By questioning and comparing pieces of data, the researcher notified at least three limitations with the analyses in part 4.2 that might lead to oversimplified interpretation and therefore, should be improved.

The first limitation is the fact that in attempts to understand the possible expectations and the general perceptions of the locals of the university autonomy, the researcher over-emphasized the similarities while sometimes overlooked the differences in data.

Secondly, because all participants supported the university autonomy reform, at least in principle, the afterward interview questions regarding their perception and expectations would lead to partial answers that focusing more on the positive sides of university autonomy but neglecting the negative aspects.

Thirdly, the researcher also realized that the analyses in the previous part over-focused on normative statements and did not take into account the meaningful differences between the normative, descriptive and prescriptive statements. In this early stage of the university autonomy reform, there is a possibility that the normative assessments of people in Vietnam were significantly influenced by some assumed standards from the advanced education systems, which in many cases, was introduced into society by some education/policy experts. The expertise power and the “halo” effect from “*the success countries’ practices*” may direct the discourse and limit the diversification of possible opinions among people. The analysis basing on such normative statements, therefore, can lead to partial results that fail in depicting the real diverse viewpoints of people and ignore the involvement in people’s perceptions – which inevitably happens when the theories and ideologies clash with the practice.

MEMO:

Expectations in the list relate to not only one but different aspects, which sounds like a cure for all problems. I have trouble to believe in such a promise of “a cure for all problems.” “Holistic,” “Comprehensive,” “Systematic,” “Substantial”? Is it true?

MEMO:

All interviewees said that they support the university autonomy. Even in the conferences, there was no one directly opposed. But then, if it is the truth that university autonomy may bring all kind of positive changes as the participants mentioned, and they all support the university autonomy, then why after years of piloting, just a few schools joined in the university autonomy reform? Why there are still complaints from the policy-making specialist and experts that “even the schools do not understand thoroughly of the university autonomy” or “most schools are not passionate with university autonomy.”

This part will re-examine the data accordingly to the analytic frame of people’s perception of university autonomy that was built in part 4.2 to explore the heterogeneity in people’s opinions. To elaborate analyses and supply a more comprehensive interpretation of people’s perceptions, this part will shift the analytic

focus points into descriptive statements to identify controversial issues in the actual implementation process of university autonomy as well as to analyze the differentiating and evolvement in the perception of participants in facing practical matters. In some cases, the researcher will also investigate the prescriptive data, which may reveal the participants' real priorities, or what they truly want to achieve in the university autonomy reform.

4.3.1. Autonomy and Accountability: Debatable equilibria between rights and responsibilities

At first glance, there were not many controversies around the necessity of autonomy and accountability and nearly all participants in the active/bridge group mentioned these principles in their answers. No matter the "consensus" toward the normative principle of autonomy and accountability among the participants, when the researcher turned attention to the descriptive and prescriptive statements of how interviewees view the "autonomy" as it is being implemented in Vietnam, they indeed had very different attitudes. Participants described and perceived the "autonomy" and "accountability" in different nuances, and their expectations might change also.

"It is said that university autonomy would give the schools more independence, but according to how it is applied in Vietnam, I'm afraid that we should describe it in another way. It's not independent or self-determine, it is self-survive, self-struggle. I guess the State does not want to support the schools anymore." (S.SCI2)

This opinion and the similar concern that *"the State just passes the financial burden to the schools,"* (C3) *"schools should now take care of ourselves"* was popular among the participants from schools. These opinions showed that schools want *"more independence"* but concern about the withdrawal of the State from their responsibilities, especially in funding school.

Meanwhile, a policy-making specialist said that *"Schools cannot live on the funding from the State as currently, they should improve their ability to self-manage. As I see, schools are still too dependent. They do not want to lose State funding and do not want to change. If the State keeps sponsoring schools, how can the schools "grown up" and become independent? That's why university autonomy is necessary"* (PM1).

In comparison, the researcher realized that both (SSCI2) and (PM1) understood and supported the principle of “autonomy.” However, they had different views/interpretation on the application of autonomy in practice. While S.SCI2 prioritized the language of the right, PM1 more focus on the expression of responsibility and capacity. Similar controversies were found regarding the requirement of accountability when between the active participants from schools who tended to perceive accountability as a self-identify and self-commit responsibilities and some experts and the policy-making specialist who more emphasized the answerability and provability of responsibilities.

To further explain the confusing understanding of “university autonomy” in practice, the researcher finds it is necessary to have some analyze about the double-edged “language game” in the reform.

In Vietnamese, the term “university autonomy” can be translated in several different ways. The translation that is closest to the original English term (word by word) is “tự trị đại học.” According to the explanation of some participants from the schools and some experts (OS1, S.SCI2, CE1, CE3, CS1,) at the beginning of the reform, that translated term of “tự trị đại học” sometimes was used. However, in Vietnamese, the word “tự trị” is also used for some sensitive political issues (e.g., for autonomous territories or separatist movements). The translation of “tự trị đại học,” therefore, can be considered political touchy, which can trigger political concerns and reservation in the central authorities so that in many cases, people should be careful in discussing.

“The leaders may interpret that translation as a separation tendency of schools from the governing power of the State. It is possibly unacceptable according to the old-fashioned authoritarianism thinking of the Party and the State, especially at the beginning of the autonomy process.” (OS1)

Currently, the Vietnamese term of “tự chủ đại học” is usually and officially used as a softened translation. “Tự chủ” (“self-manage”) has a similar meaning to “tự trị” but less intensive.

“Tự trị” means you can decide the things you should do as well as how to do those things. “Tự chủ” means you are allowed to do something. You need approval to do those things, but you can choose your ways of how to implement such approved things.” (OS1)

With the current translation of “tự chủ đại học,” while the schools have more right to decide on their businesses, schools are still under the administrative power of the central authorities. Certainly, a chosen translation cannot decide everything, the new translation can be used in the future, and the different perspectives can still be constructed and reconstructed even under this current translation. However, analyses on the slight differences between “tự chủ” and “tự trị” and the way people select between the two translations are interesting because it revealed the dynamic understandings and the possible areas of controversy. For example, after explaining the two translation of “university autonomy,” interviewees usually said that *“By anyway, translation is not important. No matter it is translated as “tự chủ” or “tự trị,” the most important thing is that at least we also go to the point when reform is made to change this desperate current mechanism” (S.SCI2).* But if it is not important, then what is the point of intentional mentioning it?

Similar to “autonomy,” “accountability” is also a principle that inherited from the West. According to an expert (CE1), there was a change in the way Vietnamese people translate the word “Accountability.” At the early years of the reform, it used to be translated in many policies and propaganda documents as “tự chịu trách nhiệm” (“self-responsible”). This term was still popularly used by participants from schools.

However, because the language of “*self-responsibility*” was unclear, which can create misunderstanding regarding the objects, the principals or the beneficiaries of such responsibility, the expert prefers a later and less usually used translation, which is “Trách nhiệm xã hội” (“social responsibility”). This way of translation clarifies the property of “responsibility,” extends it over the internal and self-decided responsibility that schools set for themselves to connect that responsibility with the contribution to the society.

However, according to the participant from MoET, this translation is still imperfect since it overlooks another property of “accountability,” which is the “explainability”/“answerability.” Currently, the more usually mentioned and the official translation of the term in education policy documents of Vietnam is “trách nhiệm giải trình” (which can be translated word by word as “responsibility (of) explanation.”)

However, this translation, especially in the context of Vietnam, has both strength and weakness. Regarding the good side, the translation of “trách nhiệm giải trình” highlighted the needs of transparency, which means the schools cannot self-identify beautiful goals but should prove that they are doing what they committed. However, on the bad side, the concept of accountability can be over technicalized to serve only the administrative requirements and overlook the core, the spirit of Accountability, which is “the responsibility.” By translating accountability as “the responsibility (of) explanation,” people can be misled to emphasize “explanation” over “responsibility.” Or, the “responsibility” (of school, for example) is limited to the responsibility of explanation. Furthermore, in many cases, explainability can be narrowly understood as the possibility to supplying/having adequate data (figures/information, etc.) to prove the school operation results or, further narrowed, to report to the central government. As pointed out by a participant from a school, it can be understood poorly as “*the one-sided responsibility of the school to report to the administrative bodies*” (S.SCI2), which further worsening the hierarchy and bureaucracy approach in Vietnam.

The discussion of the supposed-to-be translation and the current translation partially revealed viewpoints and expectations of the ones who opened the topic. It also showed the negotiation between different perspectives of different stakeholders. The language game, in which, an original concept can be translated/expressed in slightly different ways is sometimes used by the progressive experts in the university autonomy reform as a trick to escape from the oppression of the central government and therefore, enable the reform. However, there are also side effects, when this translation/expression trick can sometimes mislead people, divert them far away from the core political debatable issues and their protesting motivation can be partially impeded at least in short-term.

The analyses above revealed some conflict, which is most obvious between the schools and the policymakers from the central bodies but also between the experts and other actors with different viewpoints and different priorities. While the schools tend to ask for more “rights” of self-determination but still want to be supported by the State; the State may expect the schools to take their responsibilities and capacities of being independent and self-manage but still, want to keep schools in control. University autonomy, in practice, goes along with both

opportunities and challenges as well as both rights and responsibilities. Behind the general agreement on the principle of autonomy and accountability, participants are still struggling in confusion to find an acceptable equilibrium point to practicalize such principles.

4.3.2. Controversies regarding the university autonomy in system governance

Normatively, all participants accepted that university autonomy should go with redefining the roles of the central authorities. However, the comparison between the interviewees showed that they might focus on different issues and have different levels of determination.

There were differences in the discussion of the role of the Party between a group of participants who saw no problem with the total control of the Party and another group who **questioned the position of the CPV** in the higher education system. While still accepted the status quo, these participants gave out some implicit comments on the abnormality of the mechanism, for example: *"The controlling of the Communist Party is our specific mechanism. Other countries do not like this"* (CE2) or *"the dominating influence of a political party on a whole education system is only possible in Vietnam."* (OS1).

As mentioned in part 4.2, participants generally agreed, in principles, that the intermediate administrative mechanism should be restructured and the participation of too many ministries into higher education governance should be eliminated. Even the interviewees who are working for the administrative ministries (AB1, AB2) also accepted that *"in the long term this mechanism should be eliminated."* But then, the expressions like *"in the long term," "in futures," "not right now"* that some interviewees used signaled a red flag. There was a tendency of **indetermination and procrastinating changes in the intermediate administrative mechanism**.

However, there were counter-evidences against such consensus. In 2 conferences to collecting feedbacks for the draft of the Higher Education Law Amendment in Hanoi and Hochiminh City in 12/2017, the participants were asked to vote to choose between two amendment options for Article 16. In the first option, the university council of a public university has the entitlements to decide and propose to recognize or dismiss the principal and then this decision should be *"approved by MoET."* In the second options, this decision should be *"approved by the*

relevant administrative bodies." The first option was considered a step to cut the roles of other ministries in administration schools. Meanwhile, the second option remained an "open" approach, which did not require other administrative ministries to give up the authority of approving schools' decisions. Although in public discussions, the people generally agreed with the orientation of eliminating the intermediate administrative ministries mechanism in higher education governance, in reality, most voters chose the second option, which left the role of the administrative ministries unchallenged.

There were some explanations for this result. Firstly, the "convenience" won, the first option required to have additional legal instructions and synchronization for implementation, which may take time and during that transition, schools may be confused by procedural and legal issues. Secondly, some interviewees (PM1, CS1) explained that among the voters are people from the administrative ministries, who do not want to give up their roles (which brought them various advantages and benefits). Thirdly, it was possible that even the conference participants who come from schools were not determined in eliminating the administrative ministry mechanism. There was an interesting fact that some schools which are considered successful examples for university autonomy piloting thought that their success in university autonomy was thank to the support from the progressive people in the administrative ministries (S.SCI2, M2). Therefore, while agreeing that the mechanism should be eliminated "*in the long term,*" they preferred to stay under the administration of the current administrative ministry rather than MoET, at least for now.

There were indeed also **different viewpoints toward the role of MoET**. The calling of eliminating the administrative role of the administrative bodies did not apply to MoET, which means while the administrative power will be taken away from other administrative bodies, the power of MoET remains. Regarding this issue, the participants from the expert group still supported the existence of MoET and the concentration of all administrative authorities in regulating the education sector into this single ministry. According to these people, the purpose is to guarantee consistency and reduce the authority overlapping to enhance administrative efficiency. Meanwhile, there were opinions from some school leaders concerning that the step of removing the higher education administrative roles of other ministries would serve to concentrate more power on the hand of

MoET. Therefore, they recommend that *“in principle, if we want to implement university autonomy, that means the role of even MoET should be limited to give school more rights to decide”* (S.SCI2). This opinion showed a priority on liberation, decentralization, and empowerment. But again, there were participants who kept a skeptical view with this solution of eliminating the administrative role of all administrative ministries including MoET. *“I’m afraid that such a solution is too risky and will not fit with the context of Vietnam. When the administrative skill of schools in the institutional level is still bad, too much autonomy for schools without the administrative role of MoET may lead to chaotic and the disorientation in the higher education system”* (CS1). With this response, this interviewee from the civil society organization more emphasized the requirement of administrative efficiency.

4.3.3. Arguments regarding the university council

In all of the interviews and conferences, participants generally agreed that the establishment of the university councils is necessary or, at least, they did not oppose the idea. But in reality, at the time of data collecting, many schools in Vietnam (even some schools piloting university autonomy) did not have university councils, and there existed a hidden **disagreement of the necessity of the university council**.

In looking for the explanation for this phenomenon, the researcher realized that most experts and policy-making specialist strongly emphasized the significant meaning for the university council, but their arguments mainly based on the theoretical or ideological view, which means their normative understanding of the principle of university autonomy and the lessons from other countries. Meanwhile, the responses from the schools – the “doers” who should implement that orientation of establishing university councils for real – were much more cautious and complex. Because of their own experiences in establishing and operating the university councils, they were not very optimistic but instead concerned about the real effectiveness of this idea of the university council in school governance. While the university councils brought some positive influences, according to interviewees from schools, the most significant contribution of the university council is mainly in procedural effectiveness, *“university council helps school to save time in some procedural issues because the school does not need the approval of the administrative body anymore but just need the approval of the university council instead”* (S.SCI1). Regretfully, this contribution of the university council was far from

being satisfactory. All interviewees from schools assessed that in general, these councils currently operate ineffectively.

Facing the ineffectiveness of the university council in real practices, participants' viewpoints began to split. Most experts, policymaking specialist, people from the civil society organization and some schools still believe in the necessary of the university council.

"It's true that most university councils were ineffective right now. It's true that with the current mechanism in Vietnam, the university council cannot work properly to play its expected roles. However, I still think that the establishment of the university council is a necessary orientation because it can be the first step, the push to motivate further changes in the mechanism. A new step into a new direction may not bring the expected results right away, but it is not the reason to turn back to the old direction." (OS1)

However, there was another group, which includes mostly the people from schools that have difficulties in establishing and operating the university council, questioned the necessity of the university council since they highlighted the efficiency in school administration and because the university council did not bring the expected result. A participant, who is the vice-principal of a school piloting university autonomy explained the reason why his school abandons their attempts to establish the university council.

"We used to establish the university council, but then we realized that such entities played no proper roles. It was not effective at all but just took time and required so much efforts to remain. I know that there was regulation require the schools to establish the university councils, but I think that it is not suitable for now." (S.PB1)

The observation throughout the interviews and conferences also revealed that there was a possibility that many principals of schools were not enthusiastic with establishing university council because of the interest conflict. In the current mechanism, the principal board holds high authorities in school (as long as it is not the cases where the CPV institutional committee wants to intervene). The founding of the university council can challenge such position of the principal board. Therefore, while they did not openly oppose the idea of the university council, they tend to support to remain the status quo and postpones necessary

changes in to “long-term future.” They also usually questioned the effectiveness and necessity of the university council.

The hesitation in establishing university council was affirmed by a specialist from MoET: *“In the formal discussions or on official channels, no one dares to directly say against the regulation of establishing university council. But as you see, many schools did not have any step to establish the council. They did not even have their university councils. Even with the schools that founded the council, they just did that to adapt to the regulation, but they did not do anything to guarantee that the council can work well and have power. I told you, the principals of schools do not want the change, especially when that change threatens their power”*(PM1)

The analysis of the role of the university council requires the researcher to return to the discussion of the power relation between university council, school party committee, and principal. In principle, it was repeated in most interviews and conferences that the university council *“should be the most powerful body in school.”* However, there were big gaps between such “principle” that all participants said they support with their determination in implementation and the solutions they recommend for the issue.

The issues that most interviewees can identify is that the schools do not have real influential voices in schools. In contrast to the expectations of the university autonomy advocates, the university council is the weakest side in the triangle power relations with the principal board and the CPV institutional committee.

“I think that there are just a few schools like us, where the university council plays an active role. In most schools, the university council is only a servant or consultant entity working under the principal.” (S.SCI2)

Interviewees gave some explanations for the failures of the university council in Vietnam.

Firstly, there has not been concrete bases for the power of the university council. Even when the power of the university council has been recognized in law, it’s just a general orientation which does not work effectively in reality. There were still loopholes in laws, which failed to guarantee the power of the university council strongly. *“The laws encourage schools to establish the university councils, but*

then there were no concrete instructions regulating the operation of the university councils and no punishment if schools do not have the council.” (S.SCI3)

For example, during the conferences, there was a controversial topic related to a point in Article 16 of the Higher Education Law (2012), which is *“The standards of the President of the University Council are similar to that of the principal as prescribed in Clause 2 Article 20 of this Law.”* The expression in this regulation created the perception that the university council president is inferior to the principal because the standards for the President was defined based on the criteria for the principal.

The participants from the principal board usually kept silence regarding this issue. However, participants from university councils and many educator experts strongly criticized this way of expression in law as *“illogic”* and *“goes against the orientation in which the university council should be the entity with the highest power in school”* (CE1). An interviewee even affirmed that *“if such faults still exist in the law, people will keep perceiving that the university council is just a nominal entity without real power. Without the stronger role of the university council, the whole university autonomy reform is just a farce”* (S.SCI2).

Secondly, some people mentioned the relation between *“interest”* and *“power.”*

“Vietnam society is not a society of law but the hierarchical society of interests. In which people attach “power” with firstly “benefits/advantages” but not “responsibility.” the powerlessness of the university councils is because it holds very little “interest” to deliver or control.” (OS1)

The similar argument includes *“As long as the university council should still ask for money from the principal for their operation then the council cannot be more powerful than the principal.”* (S.SCI1) or *“the position in the university council do not bring considerable money or proper interests for members so that no one wants to be in university council and university council has no power”* (S.PC1).

Thirdly, the unchanged power mechanism is also among the reasons. The university council is considered to belong to a different governance system with a separate power structure, so that it is challenging for such a new school

governance idea to work effectively in Vietnam, *“we cannot apply a new mechanism but still stubbornly want to maintain the core part of the old mechanism unchanged”* (OS1).

Last but not least, there were also cultural/social elements to explain for the powerlessness of the university council. For examples, the university council has not received the recognition from the leaders at the higher levels in practical communication situations, and therefore, the power of the council was not validated toward everyone in the schools. Or, the member in university councils is, at the same time, the subordinate staffs who usually work under the principal (in the normal operation mechanism) and therefore, they are perceived as inferior in the power relationship with the principal.

No matter what the reason is, the university council has no real power. The principal still over-powered in the comparison to the university council while the CPV institutional committee is still the “silent superpower.”

Most participants in the active group saw that the operation of university council in Vietnam currently has various shortcomings and they could identify the causes behind that limitation, but then, their attitude and the solutions they recommended were different, which further revealing the dissent in the participants' views.

In thinking about how to give university council power, the most agreed solution is law amendment so that the authority of the university council is more clearly confirmed in law. In addition to the legal amendment, there was the idea of using pre-existed power to ensure the authorities of the university council. For example, some interviewees recommended the CPV institutional committee secretary to be concurrently assigned as the university council chairman and support the solution of unifying the two positions of CPV institutional committee secretary and chairman of the university council. This was the idea that regularly mentioned in some interviews and the conferences.

“It would be the best solution if the CPV institutional committee secretary is co-assigned to be the chairman of the university council. We all know that the CPV has the total authority on the whole society in Vietnam. In schools, the CPV institutional committee also has the greatest power. Such power is the thing that the university council does not

possess. Without real power, the university council can only give out uninfluential decisions. If we want the school to have real decisive power, then we should have the CPV institutional committee secretary to participate in the university council. It will be best if he is also the council chairman." (S.SCI1)

What can be inferred from this answer?

Firstly, for the influence of the CPV institutional committee secretary can help to ensure a greater voice for the university council so that the council can balance or even overshadow the power of the principal, this means the CPV should usually have very powerful impacts in school. Usually, the school Party committee only plays the role of macro-orientation through the Party resolution on important matters, and in regular situations, the activities of schools are not considered political-touching. Therefore, at first sight, the power of the CPV institutional committee is not too intrusive and obvious. However, the committee is indeed the most powerful voice in school because *"as soon as they want to intervene, they are always the final-decisive voice" (OS1). "Their decisions are nearly unquestionable, and they can even decide the leading human positions in the school." (S.SCI2).*

Secondly, this participant seems not to prioritize the goal of power structure transition because it is predictable that such a step of unifying will help to gather power into the hand of the CPV institutional committee and leave the totalitarian power of this entity unchallenged. Such a recommendation may help to guarantee the university council can work and have a more important voice, but it is going against the principle of separation of power. The participants that supported such a solution only focus on the technical requirements to guarantee that the university council works and only paid attention to some benefits of efficiency and flexibility when the university council is established.

MEMO:

Regarding the ones who support the idea of unifying: Did they forget the normative reasoning, in which, one of the goals for the existence of the university council is to condition decentralization, empowering school and separating powers to avoid the dominating control from the State and the CPV? Or this decentralization goal is simply not their priority?

The suggestion of unifying the two positions of CPV institutional committee secretary and chairman of the university council seemed to go against the will of some interviewees:

“Unifying for what? So the university council will become just a mini-version of the CPV institutional committee? Then what is the point to create such a thing called university council?”(S.SCI2).

The analyses above partially reveal **the struggling and resistances in shifting the power relation** between the university council, the principal and the institutional CPV committee. While there was still no agreeable solution, only the rising of the question regarding the power triangle between the university council, the principal and the institutional CPV committee was a significant sign in the context of Vietnam, when the Party controls every aspect of the social life. At least, that means some people publicly questioned the position of the Party and challenged the current power structure.

There were also various arguments around the membership and participation of external members in the university council. Some interviewees raised questions regarding the regulation of the **inherent or “compulsory stakeholders.”**

“Currently, there are regulations requiring that the university council should have the presence of some “compulsory” actors. The requirement to include these must-have actors is a way to maintain the controlling power of the Party, and these actors will be over-powered. I think that they will have the leading voices that can over-shadowed other voices, which disable the pluralism participation of other actors” (OS1)

These voices, however, seemed to be too weak to create any change.

An issue that triggered more obvious debates was around the **participation of the external members**. In the formal channel of discussion, such as in the conferences, when being asked, participants in general still accept that there should be the participation of external members in the university council. However, while many education/policy experts required that the proportion of the external member should be increased and there should include the participation of student representatives, many schools were not enthusiastic with this recommendation.

To explain for the cold response, some participants from schools assessed that the participation of the external members was ineffective and impractical. They had difficulties in finding external members for the university council and even when these external members participated, their participation was limited. *"They were too busy and did not contribute effectively"* (S.SCI2), *"in the current situation in Vietnam, students do not know anything to participate in school businesses"* (C3). With people who did not welcome the ideas of increasing the percentage of the external members, their priority was the effectiveness and convenience in administration. Some of them still understand that the participation of external members is necessary, but they saw too many barriers in involving these members and therefore, they gave up.

The difficulty in involving new stakeholders (including student) in school governance was also because of cultural/tradition elements. Schools do not have the tradition of listening and involving other actors but only subjectively assume the needs of the students and parents. Usually, schools self-decide what to commit to society; the people in society give out feedback basing on the information the school supplies them, and then the schools decide how they respond to those feedbacks. In some cases, schools only do feedback survey as a procedural step (OS1). With such an approach, many schools did not consider external stakeholder participation as necessary and argued that it is *"a rigid principle."* They only wanted to make sure that the operation of the university council can go easily and smoothly. Therefore, they wanted to remain the required percentage of external members unchanged or even lower.

Meanwhile, the group supporting to increase the proportion of external members and the participation of students were not very successful. The most popular reasons they gave out were *"because the international accreditation requires to have student participation"* (S.SCI3) *"in studies the regulation of other countries, the ratio is much higher..."* (CE1)- citing the successful practices in many advanced education systems. There were just a few interviewees argued for the necessity to include external members and students with clear reasons, such as: *"the participation of people who have relevant interests is necessary to guarantee a democratic environment in the university council"* (CS1), *"the school serve the community and therefore require the participation of various stakeholders to represent the community"*(CE1), *"to have*

more diverse views in decision-making” (S.SCE2). These arguments showed that they prioritized more substantial changes in power transition and socialization.

In brief, since the university council is a newly introduced model in Vietnam, there were various problems in its practical operation, and the influence of the external members in the university council was still questionable. In facing practical issues, participants’ responses were mixed, and different viewpoints were revealed.

4.3.4. Arguments around the financial autonomy

According to part 4.2, all participants agree that financial autonomy is important in Vietnam. However, more careful analyses showed that participants indeed disagreed on how important it is in comparison with other sectors of autonomy, or say, they may have very **different priorities in discussing the sectors of university autonomy**. There was a group considering financial autonomy as the top priority in the discussion of university autonomy.

*“With the serious finance resource scarcity in Vietnam currently, we cannot improve anything, so stop discussing of the unrealistic dreams but focus on the first thing first.”
(C4)*

The thirst for financial resources for higher education in Vietnam, which all interviewees saw, partially explains why the topic of financial autonomy dominated the discussion on university autonomy.

However, there was another group that disagreed with this viewpoint. In their opinion, financial autonomy is only the mean but not the final goal of university autonomy. In 2016-2017, just before and during the data collecting for the thesis, there were various media, and online analytic posts criticized that the discussion of university autonomy in Vietnam over emphasized financial autonomy and focused too much on finance issues but overlooking other sectors.

“Financial autonomy is surely very important, it is an important condition enabling us to do other things, but we should not consider finance resource the most important goal for university autonomy reform.” (S.SCI2)

To be noticed, when some participants complained of the overly focusing on financial autonomy, they did not mean that financial autonomy is not important or all of the matters relating to financial autonomy have been adequately discussed. Such complaints, however, revealed that they pay attention to other issues, other goals that, in their opinions, have not been adequately discussed.

There was a tough **debate around the State funding for higher education institutions** or the role of the State in sponsoring schools. Some interviewees pointed out that the prioritize of financial autonomy was also expressed in the language of the policy documents (CE1, S.SCI2). For example, in Resolution 77/NQ-CP on the pilot renovation of the operation mechanism of public tertiary education institutions during 2014-2017, the government regulated in Article 1 that *"A public tertiary education institution, when committing to covering all expenses for its regular operation and investment, may enjoy autonomy and take comprehensive accountability."* Such regulation attached the right of autonomy with the first condition that school should manage their expenses themselves and therefore, put financial autonomy in the core of university autonomy.

There was a blaming game regarding the issue of finance resource for higher education. From the view of some policymaking specialist and education/policy experts, the schools were sometimes described as *"the children who never want to grow up," "who just live on State fund," "too dependent."* Accordingly, these people perceived State funding for schools as *"a burden for the State."* Meanwhile, schools argued that State funding for schools should be considered *"a necessary investment"* and concerned that the university autonomy is just a reason so that the State can give up their responsibility in sponsoring schools. *"I think that the government had financial difficulties. They do not have money anymore, so now they only want to leave us to self-survive."* (S.SCI2)

There were also **counter-opinions concerning the rise of the tuition fee** when some participants put out the question of whether the higher tuition fee can negatively impact students and potential learners who have disadvantages. However, it worths noticing that these concerns were, usually, not from the participants in the active group but the journalists (M1, M2, M3). These participants in the bridge group also mentioned the **social considerations** over the possible negative influences on social justices. The marketization going along with the financial autonomy can push the tuition fee higher and distort the education system

structure in a way that drives the people with disadvantages further from their opportunity to pursue higher education. The problem, however, was not adequately paid attention.

There were some media posts and participants in media group mentioned this concern (M2). However, the participants from piloting school did not seriously concern this issue. They also assumed that the higher tuition fee is not a serious problem, citing reasons like *“tuition fee rises gradually accordingly to a planned timeline”* (S.SCI2), *“we have not received many negative responses from the students”* (S.SCI3), *“the number of application we received and the admission score last year was still very high”* (S.SCI1).

4.3.5. Arguments around the academic autonomy

Regarding the discussion on academic autonomy, a similar situation happened when there seem to be not many controversies at first glance, but then under a more careful look, differences in people’s viewpoints revealed.

Regarding the importance of this sector of autonomy in comparison with the two other sectors of financial autonomy and staffing and organizing autonomy. Again, different viewpoints were rooted in the participants' **priorities**. There were prevalent comments that *“we are discussing too much of financial autonomy, the most important goal of university autonomy should be academic autonomy”* (S.SCI2) and complaints that more thorough discussion on academic autonomy is needed because academic activities are the most crucial reason for the existence of schools. However, there were also many people believed that university autonomy implementation should begin with other sectors.

There was **disagreement between who focus on the technical contents of academic autonomy and those who are passionate about the ideology of academic freedom.**

The researcher discovered a confusing situation when people sometimes use the same term of “academic autonomy” (“tự chủ học thuật” in Vietnamese) to, indeed, express different ideas. As the researcher briefly mentioned in part 4.2, there were at least two ways that locals perceived academic freedom. There was a first group focus only on the “flesh” of the concept, which relates more to “technical” issues in the practical professional activities of schools, such as curriculum,

program, student recruitment, etc. In observing the university autonomy discussion in Vietnam, the researcher found out that this “technical” side of academic autonomy was more frequently mentioned in the interviews and conferences because they are the issues that relate to all schools. There were not many fierce controversies, and most people seemed to be comfortable in discussing this topic.

However, there was a second group, which included a few education/policy experts, school leaders, and academic staffs, paid more attention to the “spirit”/the “soul” of the concept, which relates to “academic freedom” (“tự do học thuật” in Vietnamese) or the “freedom of thoughts” (“tự do tư tưởng” in Vietnamese). These participants usually prioritized or at least paid considerable attention to the transition of liberation with the hope to find an escape from the authoritarianism central control.

Participants' responses to this second side of academic autonomy were strongly diffused because this line of perception implies expectation toward liberation and freedom and can be connected to touchy political issues. Therefore, while some participants were very enthusiastic and considered academic freedom as “*the final and the highest goal of university autonomy*” (OS1), most others did not mention academic freedom and some interviewees even avoided the topic as being asked.

The group who solely focus on the technical side, in some cases, believed that there had been positive changes in “academic autonomy” and they even felt that there had been certain achievements in this sectors. For example, they said that academic autonomy enabled them to open new programs that better match the requirements of the market, attract learners, help schools to have financial resources.

“Academic autonomy is the sector that we have best achievements until now. I saw that the laws had been much more opened so that we can open new programs and make the necessary adjustment in the curriculum” (C2).

Some even claimed that it is no need to talk about academic autonomy anymore, but it would be more meaningful to discuss other aspects, such as financial autonomy.

Meanwhile, among the participants who care about “academic freedom,” their descriptive assessments were much more pessimistic and different. In general, people in this group said that they did not feel much changes toward academic freedom. However, there were some participants had more hope that the minor changes that “academic autonomy” brings in technical issues can be the early positive signs and they still expect that the reform process will lead to academic freedom in the future. Meanwhile, there were others who saw no link between the academic autonomy, as it is implemented, with academic freedom.

4.3.6. Arguments around the staffing and organizing autonomy

Regarding the aspect of the staffing and organizing autonomy, the issues that witness most controversies were related to **the right in appointment and assignment of the most leading positions in school**, which are the principal and the role of the chairman of the university council in such assignment.

In the interviews and conferences, there were repeated complaints from the participants in the active group arguing that according to the Higher Education Law issued in 2012, the autonomy rights of schools was very limited. The regulations - in which schools did not have the right to decide the highest human positions of principal and the chairman of the university council - went against the principle of staffing and organizing autonomy. In the conferences, there were some speakers cited Article 16 as an example for this point. The article regulated that *“the President of the university council is designated by the Head of the competent State agency”* as well as Article 20, regulated that *“The principals are designated or accredited by competent State agencies.”*

This debate was repeated in all four conferences that the researcher joined in, showing a tough and continuous struggle in this matter. In this issue, the schools, the experts and the civil societies generally consolidated to request at least a fix in law and this attempt led to practical results.

4.3.7. Summary

By turning the focus into descriptive statements, this part of data analysis explained how do people discuss the university autonomy in terms of practical implementation and demystified the superficial consensus of university autonomy in Vietnam.

The analysis results showed that the shared perceptions and expectations of the possible positive changes that university autonomy can bring were only on the general normative principles. Such original normative perceptions were challenged in facing practical issues during the implementation process. In interaction with others and with reality, participants' perceptions were continued to be constructed, evolved and split. The differences in people's priorities and were also revealed.

Controversies/disagreements in different sectors and layers in the perception of university autonomy are displayed in the figure below.

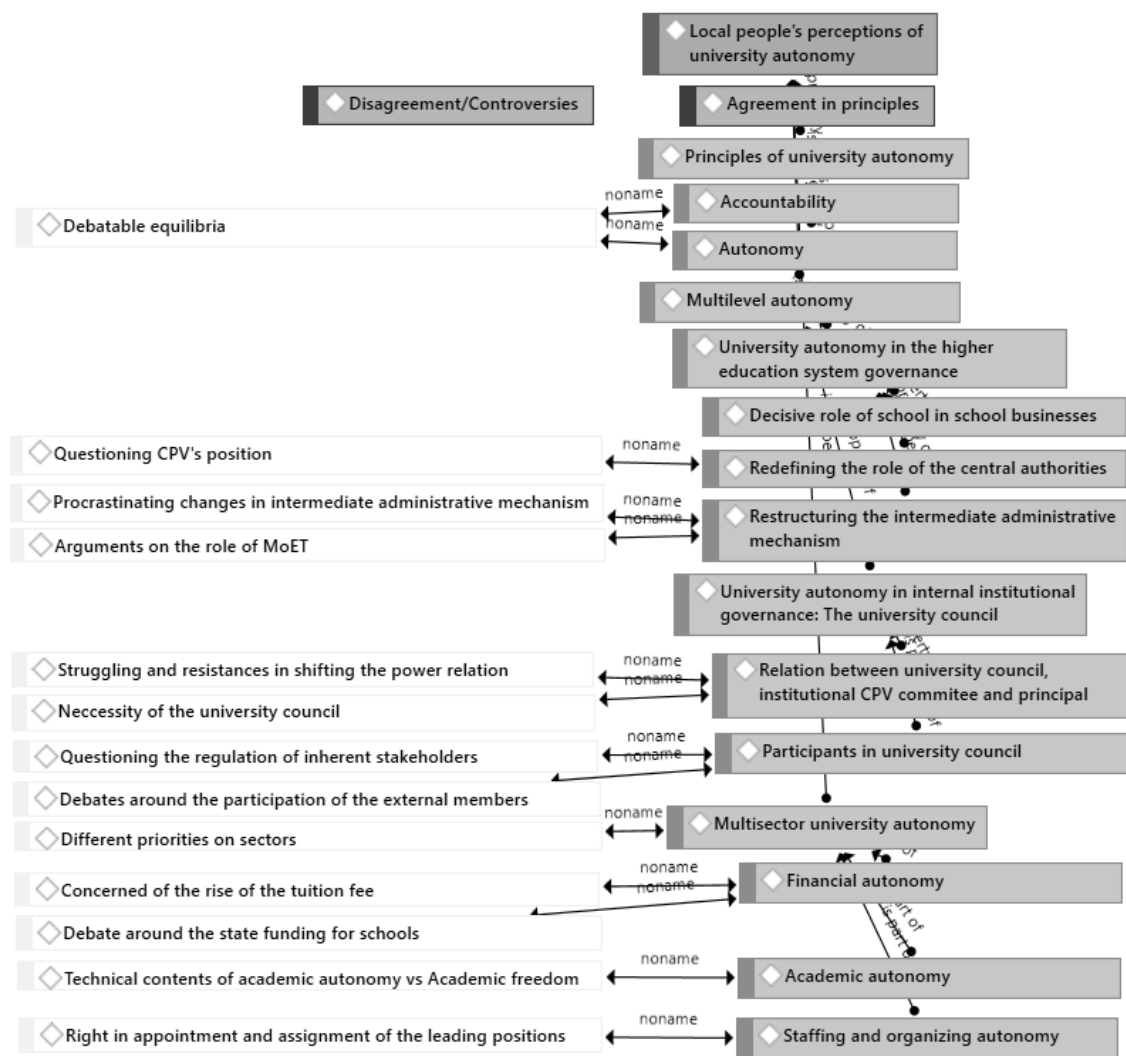


Figure 23: Different interpretations and disagreements in the implementation of university autonomy

4.4. Where's the discourse of university autonomy diverted?

After going through the consensus and disagreement in the discourse of university autonomy, in this part of 4.4, the researcher put together all of the previous analyses and re-examine the four sectors of expectations to see where the local discourse is leading to. Since the reform process is still on-going, the goal of this part is not going to the conclusion or even predictions of the result of the university autonomy in Vietnam. Rather, the researcher only wants to analyze the temporary progress, the point of convergence, problems, and gaps in the current discourse of university autonomy in Vietnam.

4.4.1. Current progress in the discourse of university autonomy in Vietnam

Continuing from the result of part 4.3, this part will re-check the current progress in most controversial aspects of the university autonomy reform. To detect the progress, the researcher will combine the interview and conference data analysis with some general analysis on the remarkable adjustments in the latest Higher Education Law amendments (Law No. 34/2018/QH14) to see how different arguments of university autonomy influence the policies.

4.4.1.1. Regarding *autonomy and accountability*, there has not been a final result in looking for a plausible balance point between rights and responsibilities. The university autonomy reform in Vietnam was still in a very early stage when the first piloting attempt had just been wrapped up in 2017 (with some extension solutions), and therefore, all equilibria are only temporary. However, in comparing the latest Higher Education Law Amendment (Law No. 34/2018/QH14) to the previous version, there was a viable tendency of further expanding the autonomy "rights" for schools. There were more clear regulations on university autonomy. According to this Law, "*Autonomy means the right of a higher education institution to determine its own targets and how to achieve them; to decide and assume accountability for their professional and academic activities, organization, personnel, finance, assets and other activities within the law and the capacity of the higher education institution itself.*" Also, some previously constraints limiting the actual autonomy right of schools were amended. This progressive step was partly due to the participatory voices of piloting schools during recent years.

4.4.1.2. There was very limited progress for most *of the controversial governance issues in the system level*. At the highest level, there was a void in discussing the position of the CPV and the unchallengeable power of the CPV was still something that most participants accepted as granted. In the intermediate level, no matter the popular call for reducing the roles of intermediate administrative ministries during recent years, there was no proper recorded changes in this issue in recent legal documents, including the latest Higher Education Law Amendment. Regarding the different viewpoints toward the role of MoET, most recently, in 08/2018, there were three first schools in Vietnam piloting the new mechanism to be autonomous and escaping from MoET administrative authority¹¹. This would be another remarkable step to enable more autonomy for schools and limit the intermediate administrative power of MoET. However, since the piloting program has just begun, it is still too early to give out any further assessment right now.

4.4.1.3. Progress relating to the university council

For years, the idea of establishing university autonomy was adopted in a very reserved way. However, recently, along with the call from experts, the requirement from lawmakers and especially, the involvement of the participants from university councils in the official discussion avenues, the role of the university council has been affirmed. The attempts to recognize and emphasize the importance of the university council was conducted through legalization.

According to the assessment from participants who are education/policy experts, the new regulations in the Higher Education Law Amendment marked a great attempt to empower the university council and re-arrange the power relation between the chair of the university council and the principal. There is a tendency of enhancing the power of the university council to make it become the leading entity in school while decreasing the power of the principal to make the principal board become the operative/executive entity.

For example, as a result of a long discussion, the short-coming in Article 16 of the Higher Education Law (2012) was fixed in the latest amendment, so that there is a separate point to explain *“The election, standards, responsibilities, and entitlements of the university council president”* (Article 16). Furthermore, there was an attempt

¹¹ <https://thanhvien.vn/giao-duc/roi-bo-gd-dt-3-truong-dh-se-ra-sao-969449.html>

to reverse the power relation between the principal and the president of the university council when the Article 20 regulated that *“the tenure of the principal shall be decided by the university council and must not exceed the tenure of the university council.”*

However, the shift in the power triangle between the university council, the principal and the institutional CPV committee was only conducted to the certain limit that and the power of CPV remained unchallenged. In the other hand, there were additional measures that were designed to guarantee the position of the CPV, such as the unofficial orientation of unifying the two positions of CPV institutional secretary and university council chairman.

MEMO:

In the first conference in 10/2017, there was no one discussing the idea of unifying the two positions of CPV institutional secretary and university council chairman (although there were S.SCI1 mentioned this solution in the interview). However, in the two last conferences in 12/2017, this idea was repeatedly discussed. Some of the participants mentioned this issue as some kind of orientation that was *“discussed in the Party central meeting”* (C4).

There was even a participant introduced in the conference (C4) and requested to give a speech because *“as the chair of the university council, and at the same time, the secretary of the CPV institutional committee, she may have the valuable experience and particular viewpoint on this issues to share.”* In her speech, this participant affirmed that she sees *“no trouble with the issue of power allocation between the university council, the principal and the CPV institutional committee”* and *“it would be an advantage for the school if the CPV institutional committee secretary concurrently holds the position of university council chairman.”*

Although I could not attend the CPV meetings, from this observation, I guess that there were possibly some relevant orientations discussed, so that unifying seemed to become an unofficial *“policy.”*

The voice against the orientation of unifying was feeble. In the conferences, there was no participant directly say *“no”* to such a unifying solution but only tried to remain an escape way. They asked to keep opened options for the school to decide who will be the university council chairman but not ruled by law that it

should be the party committee representative. But then, there were some interviewees reveal their concerns of “the hidden law”:

“It’s likely that there will be no official law enforcing such unifying, but I’m afraid that the tendency of unifying the two positions will be unavoidable in reality. It is just like the tendency to unifying the two positions of principal and CPV institutional committee secretary previously. In reality, there was no official regulation about that orientation in higher education law, but it was discussed and decided in CPV meetings... It was just by words but not officially documented regulation. And then, for years, I knew that in most schools, the principal was also the secretary or at least the CPV institutional committee will have their members in important positions in the principal board.”

With the above analyses, the researcher noticed that firstly, the “official” step to increase the power of the university council went along with other “unofficial” steps to consolidate and guarantee the control power of the Party. Secondly, most solutions only focused on the relation between the university council and the principal but left the position of the CPV institutional committee unchallenged. The question regarding the position of the institutional CPV committee usually went to the dead end. No matter the truth that the question is popularly mentioned both in official conferences and on social media channels, there was no proper and agreed answer. In the interviews, the participants’ opinion was split. There was a group who see “no serious problem” with the current domination power of the party committee and refused to look at the possible power conflict (S.PB1, S.PC1). The second group acknowledge the problem but then accepted the status quo because “it is the specific mechanism in Vietnam that will not change” (CS1, CE2, S.SCI1). Meanwhile, there was a third group expressed a more determined attitude and looked for a change (S.SCI2, OS1, S.AS1).

“The existence of the Party committee within the school and the over-powered of the Party is an abdominal phenomenon, a sign of authoritarianism. To guarantee the university autonomy in its true sense, we should separate the political power of the Party from the school governance and the business of schools.” (S.SCI2)

In brief, all of these analyses showed that there were slow but considerable steps to reverse the power relation between the principal and the chairman of the university council. However, the rising power of the council chairman is not likely

to challenge the power of the institutional CPV committee because of the concealed solutions to secure the interventive power of the committee.

Regarding the participation and membership in the university council, there was no significant progress, and the existence of the CPV cells inside the university council was still *“a reality that we cannot change but should accept.”* In the latest Amendment of the Higher Education Law, the regulation on the inherent participants was unchanged: *“Internal members include inherent members and members elected by the general assembly or delegate assembly of the university... Inherent members include the secretary of internal communist party organization, the principal, union president and representative of the steering board of Communist Youth Union of Ho Chi Minh.”*

Moreover, some education/policy experts pointed out that in Vietnam, there had not been an appropriate mechanism to encourage the involvement of new stakeholders in higher education and school governance. Such tradition has not been dramatically changing even after the autonomy reform. At least in short-term, the influences of education/policy experts and those who want to promote social participation in school governance temporarily could not win the voices from schools, which favor solutions that are more convenient and efficient for their school administration. According to the latest amendment of the Higher Education Law, the regulation on the required proportion of the external members remained unchanged at 30%.

4.4.1.4. Progress relating to the financial autonomy

In the debate around the State funding for higher education institutions, the long discussion with the active participation of the public schools, the policymakers, and the education/policy experts led to some considerable change. In recent discourses, most people agreed, at least in principles, that *“university autonomy does not mean that State stops sponsoring and supporting schools... it just means that the way of sponsoring should be changed”* (S.SCI2). This viewpoint was also accepted by the central authorities, at least according to their official speeches in the conferences or on the media posts^{12, 13}. Also, different from Resolution 77/NQ-CP,

¹² <https://petrotimes.vn/tu-chu-dai-hoc-khong-co-nghia-la-bi-nha-nuoc-cat-dau-tu-487181.html>

¹³ <https://vov.vn/xa-hoi/giao-duc/tu-chu-dai-hoc-khong-co-nghia-la-de-cac-truong-tu-lo-tu-boi-774018.vov>

according to Article 32.2 of the new Higher Education Amendment, the conditions in which schools have autonomy right do not relate to self-covering expenses but more relate to requirements of quality accreditation, internal organization, accountability, and transparency.

But then how should the State funding mechanism be changed? It is still unclear. Except for some experts, most participants stop at very general orientation like *“in the direction that enables more autonomy for schools,” “the government invests according to the standard of efficiency”* (S.SCI2).

While there was important progress in State funding issue (which relevant to the interests of the State and the school), the issue of the tuition fee (which relates to the interests of students, parents) was not adequately concerned.

To verify the information and crosscheck participants' viewpoints and the information they supplied in this issue, the researcher looked for some alternative secondary data. In a MoET report to assess the implementation of Resolution No.77/NQ-CP of university autonomy piloting, the statistics showed that among the ten autonomous schools that have more than two years of piloting university autonomy, their total expenditure in the year of 2015-2016 increased by 11.5% compared to the previous year of 2013-2014. Meanwhile, their total revenue increased by 16,6%. In the school's revenue, revenues from State funding decreased by 16,51% (which was expected at the beginning of the reform). The revenue from service activities (international cooperation training links, short-term training, re-training, consulting, training support services, etc.) decreased slightly by 0.17% (Le et al., 2017). Then how did schools cover their rising expenses and how did they increase their revenue? The statistics showed that the only increased revenue source was from tuition fees and “other operations revenue” (with the only example of “revenue from bank interest”). This means most of the increased revenue was from the tuition fee. According to the report, the average growth rate of the tuition fee in the schools piloting university autonomy (includes the schools that have just piloted university autonomy recently was 40%).

These statistics showed that it is not the State, not the schools but the learners and their families are carrying the financial burden after this university autonomy reform. However, most participants in the active group seemed to agree on the

prescription for financial autonomy, which means tuition fee must raise but then the advert influences on the students, their families, and the wider society have not been thoroughly considered. Among the interviews and even in the conferences, there was only one expert discussed this issue in-depth. The only solution mentioned was that the learners should be supported by student loans, but it is still too unclear whether there will be effective solutions to be implemented in reality and how effective they are.

Meanwhile, the participants who are students and parents did not have clear viewpoints regarding the rising tuition fee because of some reasons. Firstly, they did not have adequate information to evaluate and judge the reason behind the rising tuition fee. Secondly, because of the limited available position in the university, the “customers” like students or parents can be put in the weak side without any choice but accept. Thirdly, because they do not have adequate information and do not have the power to change the situation so that as long as the situation is still bearable, they tended to ignore and do not pay attention anymore. A participant who is the student in a piloting school answered, *“Yes, it seems to be that the tuition in my school is higher than other schools, but I do not know why. Maybe because there is a new library that has just built”* (S1). Meanwhile, the mother of this student said, *“I don’t know... I certainly don’t want the tuition fee to rise but what can I do? At least my child has a place to study. We’re in Vietnam so just accept it!”* (P1). Both S1 and P1 did not have any idea of university autonomy and therefore, they could not give out any clear judgment of the reasoning beneath autonomy, rising tuition fee as well as their relevant stakes in the reform. Usually, social issues like tuition fee only attract public attention when the media intervene and stir up the problem. But then, the community can be provoked and react in anger.

4.4.1.5. Progress relating to academic autonomy

According to the policy-making specialist, some experts, and some participants from schools, the technical academic autonomy has been considerably improved, especially for the school piloting autonomy. However, the researcher concerns that, at least in the short term, the ones who are looking for “academic freedom” and think that “academic autonomy” can lead to “academic freedom” will be disappointed.

It is possibly a remarkable notice from a participant who works as a journalist that in many cases, academic freedom is not the priority toward even schools. *“In*

my observation, academic freedom is not the thing that schools care about most. Only big schools or schools that have strengths in researching activities especially care about academic autonomy" (M2). The reason is that the majority of Vietnamese universities is currently are teaching-oriented but not research-oriented.

"Academic freedom can be a crucial condition for the development of science researching, especially in social sciences. However, we have a poor tradition for research-oriented universities. Most schools focus only on teaching. These schools, therefore, do not have a strong motivation to fight for academic freedom." (OS1)

In such a context, the discussion of "academic autonomy" in the official channels are over-dominated by technical issues. In the official documents, including the latest amendment of the Higher Education Law, the term "autonomic freedom" does not even exist. There was no regulation to recognize the principle of academic freedom. Article 32 in this law still explained the content of academic autonomy technically, so that *"academic autonomy and professional autonomy include promulgating and organizing the implementation of quality policies and standards, offering new programs, enrolment, training, scientific activities, domestic and international cooperation by law."*

Besides interviewees mentioned that the "academic freedom" is still a "touchy" issue in Vietnam, there was a participant from a school gave out a noticeable answer when he refused the sensitivity of the topic and said that *"I see no problem with academic freedom. The government does not ban it at all... I have not seen any sign of censorship."* (S.PB1). This answer required more attention because it can be considered a counter-argument against the previous data in which the sensitivity of "academic freedom" was sometimes considered a certainty or a fact that *"we all knew..."* (PM1, CE2, OS1). This answer challenged the researcher because the truth is there was no official law or regulation to ban academic freedom, but then the issue was still generally considered *"a touchy topic that can lead to sensitive political controversies"* (PM1). To check people's evaluation of the progress of expanding academic freedom in the country, the above answer from S.PB1 was used as an anonymous statement, and then the researcher rechecked the attitude of other interviewees toward such statements to further developed the topic.

There was another answer revealed meaningful themes of "censorship" and "self-censorship," in which an interviewee from school gave me the metaphor of

*“the five monkey test”*¹⁴ [7] to explained the situation and the censorship mechanism in Vietnam:

“I’m not sure whether there was such a test for real, but I find the message is relevant in this case. When a system of fear has been established for long, most of the cases, the authorities do not even need to use real censorship by their own, but indeed people in the society censor each other and censor themselves.” (OS1)

Some people may argue that the technical changes, such as autonomy in deciding curriculum, programs, and teaching methods can gradually lead to more dynamic changes and sooner or later will lead to academic freedom – which is possibly true. However, according to the interviewees who have a more pessimistic view, it is not likely to be a direct and short way. The censorship and self-censorship mechanisms are still existing in Vietnam so that the renovation in the curriculum, programs, and teaching methods will only be implemented in the “safe zone” - accordingly to what the central administrators allow and where the innovators feel that it can still be accepted and still safe for them. It requires times before modest changes can be resonant to bring more daring changes in academic freedom.

4.4.1.6. Progress relating to staffing and organizing autonomy

As mentioned above, the schools, the experts and the civil societies generally consolidated to request at least a fix in law to return the decision-making power in deciding key personnel positions and organizing issues to schools.

This attempt led to some practical results, as being reflected in the latest amendment. Article 16 of the Higher Education Law Amendment regulates that *“A member of the university council shall be elected by the university council as president by holding a ballot under the majority rule. The elected president will receive a recognition decision issued by a competent authority;”*. Meanwhile, Article 20 regulates that *“The designation of the principal of a public higher education institution shall be decided by the university council and recognized by a competent authority.”* With such amendment, both positions of president of the university council and the principal will be decided by the school. The State agencies only have a role in approving and recognizing the school’s decision.

¹⁴ <https://workingoutloud.com/blog/the-five-monkeys-experiment-with-a-new-lesson>

General principles/aspects	Disagreement/Controversies	Progress
Principles: Autonomy & Accountability	Debatable equilibria	Temporary: More rights for schools
University autonomy in the higher education system governance - The decisive role of school in school businesses - Redefining the role of the central authorities - Restructuring the intermediate administrative mechanism	- Questioning CPV's position - Procrastinating changes in intermediate administrative mechanism - Arguments on the role of MoET	- CPV is unchallenged - No proper change - Initial piloting >>> Unclear
University autonomy in internal institutional governance: The university council - The relation between university council, institutional CPV committee, and principal - Participants in the university council	The argument around the necessity of the university council - Struggling and resistances in shifting the power relation - Questioning the regulation of inherent stakeholders - Debates around the participation of the external members	Positive changes in laws - Mixed signals: More power for the university council >< Inofficial steps to strengthen the power of the institutional CPV committee - No proper change - No proper change
Multisector university autonomy - Financial autonomy - Academic autonomy - Staffing and organizing autonomy	Different priorities on sectors - Concerns about the rise of the tuition fee - The debates around the state funding for schools - Technical contents of academic autonomy vs. Academic freedom - Debate on the right in appointing of the leading positions	Analyze later in part 4.4.3 - Tuition fee raised, inadequately discussed of social impacts - Positive changes - Positive progress on technical contents >< No proper progress on academic freedom - Positive changes in laws

Table 3: Current arrangements on the most controversial issues of university autonomy

4.4.2. “Holistic” reform demystification: Between the economic, administrative, political or social concerns

In previous parts, the researcher analyses the relevant stakeholders, the points of agreement and disagreement in the local perception of university autonomy as well as common expectations and different priorities toward university reform (parts 4.2 and 4.3). Part 4.4.1 also tracked some current arrangements in the most controversial issues. This last data analysis part will put together all the puzzle pieces to see the big picture. The aim is checking whether different groups of expectation toward the school autonomy reform are adequately concerned and identifying the current focus and the bottleneck in the university autonomy discourse in Vietnam.

4.4.2.1. Economic and administrative concerns: The focus of the discourse

According to the data from the interviews and the conference, the economic-relevant matters (including the themes of “Marketization,” “Resource for higher education,”) and the “System administrative efficiency” matter were attracting the most attention of participants in the current discourse of university autonomy. While their priorities were different, all interviewee in the active group commonly agreed that solving the limitation in resources for higher education and improving the efficiency in the system is necessary for the current context of Vietnam.

In analyzing interviews and conference data of economic-related issues in the university autonomy reform, the researcher realized two problems that need further analysis. The first problem was pointed out by some experts and media posts in Vietnam at the time of data collecting, is that the discussion on university autonomy is over-focused on economic issues and economic-relevant goals while inadequately concerns other aspects. The second problem is the risk of overlooking the possible negative impacts of the market-orientation.

MEMO:

During the preliminary reading process before official data collecting, and even in the JustED conference (in Finland) that I participated in after the period of data collecting, I realized that in the international discussions of university autonomy, marketization is also a popular topic. However, compared to Vietnam, the theme of marketization in education ignites much more controversies when

many international authors more concerned about the negative sides of marketizations. Why was the discussion on this topic in Vietnam so mono-toned? Why do people in Vietnam have such a favorable attitude toward marketization? Should I probably look for some counter-examples?

According to the data from the interviews and conference, participants' attitudes regarding the tendency of marketization were generally positive, and they believed that the turn to the market mechanism is sufficient and essential for the final goal of education improvement. Participant from the piloting schools tended to mention only the positive aspects and marketization was described – most usually - as an achievement of the university autonomy reform. For example, on interviewee said: *“In a market mechanism, there's no need for the rigid planning and controlling. The market can flexibly adjust to the equilibrium between demand and supply. The students and their families are the customer and the final voice to assess school performance. Schools with high education quality can attract more learners and vice versa. The customer will know, and they will have their own decision.”* (S.SCI2)

The belief that the market can be an effective inspecting mechanism basing on the assumption that the market is transparent and people have all the necessary information to assess. However, education is a particular market where it is difficult for "customers" to know exactly and immediately which "*product*"/"*service*" is better. Therefore, their "purchasing behavior" can only be adjusted in the long-term future and the assumption that "*the customer will know*" is only a myth.

There were experts warned of the negative impacts of the market-orientation, for examples, the risks of unbalanced development, running after profit, breaking the overall orientation of the nation in education development. However, in the discussion of solutions, these experts only briefly said that *“the State should still have a role in system orientation”* (CE1), *“There should still the monitoring from the State or the higher education system can go to the wrong ways”* (CS1). With the tendency to find the solution solely by re-connect to State controlling, these counter-voices can be classified as *“conservative”* or *“go against the progressive tendency.”*

To explain for the (over)emphasizing on the economic and administrative aspect, it's worth reviewing the context analysis in part 4.2, in which the matter of limited resources for higher education and system administrative inefficiency were

popularly identified among the most serious challenges toward the development of the higher education system in Vietnam. Facing difficulty in sponsoring higher education system, the State started the university autonomy reform by attaching autonomy right for schools with the condition that schools should self-cover their expense. With such an approach at the beginning of the reform, a part of the financial resource burden was passed back to schools – which already struggle for years to live on the limited funding from the State. As a result, the school should face tremendous difficulties in term of financial resource in the years piloting university autonomy. The thirst for resource, therefore, further forced schools to turn their mind into economic-related problems. Also, because of the disappointment with the ineffective State-driven centralized planning mechanism, the expected turn away from the central planning to the market-driven mechanism with more competition become more promising toward most participants. Because the schools and the central authorities are currently the most active actors who have most direct interests in the university autonomy reform, the economic issues also became the hotspot of the whole discussion of university autonomy in Vietnam.

Another reason was the favorable environment for discussing these economic- and administrative related issues. The university autonomy reform can also be put in the context of the bigger reform in the public administration area and the continuation of the Doi Moi reform process from 1986. During over 30 years of Doi Moi, the CPV and the State have gradually accepted and encouraged the changes in the economic sector, and some recent policy documents of CPV and the State defined one of the main orientation for education development in the coming years as “to adapt to the market economy.”¹⁵ The green light from the central authorities created an advantageous context so that people are encouraged to discuss more freely of the economic-related issues.

4.4.2.2. Political goals: Under tension and struggling

As analyzed in part 4.2, political issues such as the higher education governance, the power structure transition, and liberation are another important expectation group. However, different from the economic goal, not all people are enthusiastic with political discussion in university autonomy. This is the sector where there

¹⁵ <http://hdl.vn/vi/nghien-cuu--trao-doi/mot-so-van-de-ve-co-che-tu-chu-cua-cac-truong-dai-hoc.html>

are more controversies, separations, tension, and struggle. There were possible the peace before the storm when, in many cases, the participants did not directly and openly express their ideas but covered their real viewpoints by the silence or by using the language game.

In response to the interview questions regarding the prospect that university autonomy can enable more liberation in the system, there were some experts and participant in the civil society organization noticed that **liberation** requires the attempts from 2 sides. It does not only means the central government loosen their controlling but also means the schools should play their active role and be ready to decide on their own. Following the discussions on social media or sometimes on articles and analytic writings, the researcher saw that there was a fight in the academic community for “academic freedom” in specific and for liberation and freedom in general. However, the motives for proper changes in this aspect were rather weak.

The troubles in reaching the liberation goal are not only because of the oppression of the authorities but also the passive attitude of people in general when they want to play safe. As the notices of some participant, many schools in Vietnam was still waiting for the instructions from the State to implement their autonomy right and did not dare to make proper action on their own.

“The schools in Vietnam were controlled and protected for so long that they already lost their passion for freedom. Even when the government requires them to be autonomous now, they do not know what can they do with such autonomy. They still wait for the regulation and the allowance from the State.” (CS1)

Even among the participants who have strong passions toward the expectation of liberation, most of them chose to keep silence, wait and hope “*At least with this university autonomy reform; the State already accepts that they should change somehow. This change may bring other hopes for further changes in future*” (OS1) or give up “*academic freedom is impossible; there are still the central entities for control and censoring*” (PM1).

There was, however, an interviewee gave out a much more powerful answer that implies that the possibility of liberation and freedom requires the courage of people to fight for it. “*I think that freedom is not something to be allowed; freedom is*

something to be practiced. People cannot just beg the central authorities to allow them to have freedom if they do not dare to practice it at all. If people want liberation, they should have the courage to act with freedom.” (CE3)

There were people who expected that university autonomy could bring a **transition in the power structure** both the system level governance system and institutional governance. However, as being analyzed in part 4.4.1, there were struggling and resistances in shifting the power structure with limited progress, for example in eliminating the intermediate administrative ministries mechanism or in restructuring the triangle power relation between the principal board, the university council, and the CPV institutional committee. No matter all the progress, the reform is likely to be conducted only to the limit that the power of the central authorities, especially the CPV, remained unchallenged. Someone may argue that more power for the university council, no matter where that power is rooted from, can still be a step toward pluralism since the university councils is an entity that has more participation from other stakeholders but not only the principal. This is partially true. However, since the highest power is still in the hand of CPV, there is a high possibility that the pluralism in the university council can only be a superficial pluralism.

The main reason leading to tension and struggling in political issues is power relations and structure in Vietnam society. The central authorities with totalitarian power might allow some power transition turns - mainly because they want to guarantee the reform work. However, they let the changes happen only to a certain acceptable level and resist further transition that might threaten their dominant position and challenge their power. Meanwhile, most people did not dare to directly challenge the current power structure but hope that the central government can *“listen and gradually understand.”* In most of the case, they consider the totalitarian power of CPV as a certainty that unchangeable and most usually, they chose to avoid the real problem of political constraints.

4.4.2.3. Social concerns: Minor attention

This is the sector where there are potentially touchy issues and controversies that have important influences. However, it seems to be that the participants currently do not pay much attention to this aspect.

Regarding the expectation of **socialization**, the transition to socialization was so slow that it nearly just stops as a general orientation. Lacking strategic discussion of how to bring this orientation into practice, the implementation of this goal, in reality, mainly included unsystematic steps by schools. The barriers for this goal, as the participants mentioned, include unfavorable policy, non-systematic approach, which cannot create the motivation for others to participate.

In Vietnam, there has not been a higher education ecology in its true meaning. The idea of a profound connection with a participatory approach to form higher education ecosystem is rather new in Vietnam, or at least, it has not received adequate attention from the participants. *"Everything is only discussed on papers"* (CE1) or implemented with spontaneous steps without a systematic approach.

In spite of the theoretical expectation that university autonomy will enable more actors in society to participate in school governance, most interviewees did not pay much attention to this issue (as analyzed in part 4.3.3), and there was no clear progress in this issues being recorded in the latest law (part 4.4.1)

While interviewees sometimes talked about social inspection, there was no in-depth discussion of how society can inspect the school. As the participants from school explained how they *"listen to students"* and enable social inspection, the participation of the society in inspecting school was indirect and mainly based on the feedback-based and market-driven balancing mechanism.

There were only a few education/policy experts, and interviewees in the media group mentioned the **social considerations** when the process of marketization could create possible negative influences on social justices. Even then, the most mentioned adverse social impact was only tuition fee-related. The marketization going along with the financial autonomy can push the tuition fee higher and distort the education system structure in a way that pushes the disadvantages people further from their opportunity to pursue higher education.

The overlooking of social considerations was, partially, because of the limitation of participation. The actively involved actors in the discussion of the reform policies are only the policymakers, experts, schools and some civil society agencies that are working in the field of education. There was very little participation of

the people in the wider public to discuss university autonomy reform. As a result, many people in society were not well-informed and did not thoroughly understand university autonomy. Or say, the discussion on university autonomy currently lacked the voices of these groups and their interests were not adequately considered.

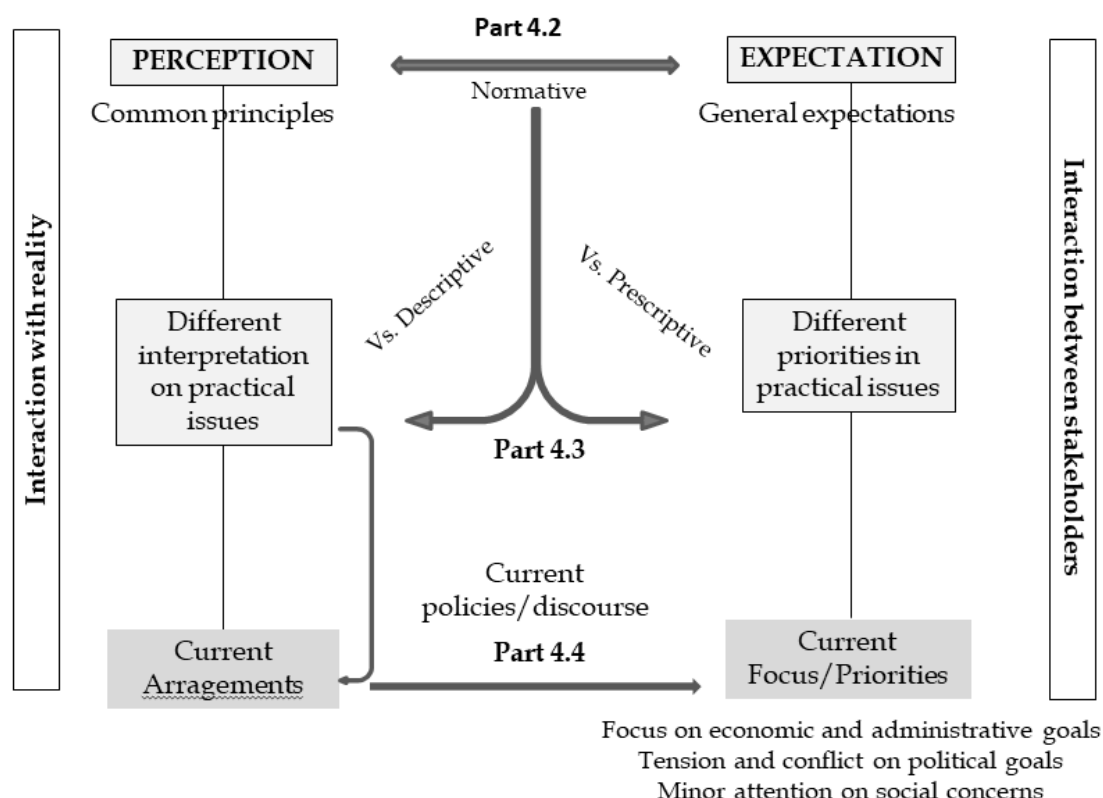


Figure 24: University autonomy in Vietnam: Analytic Diagram

4.4.3. Summary

The long process of interaction between the stakeholders in facing various issues in the university autonomy implementation process led to a considerable shift in the discourse, which partially reflected in the recent policies. Temporarily, there were signs that the new laws enabled more decision-making rights for schools but still acknowledged the role of the State in sponsoring higher education. Laws also recognized the role and empowered the university council in the relationship with the principal board, recognized academic autonomy in technical issues and allowed the school to have more decisive voices in appointing of their leading positions.

However, most of the positive changes were only recorded in economic and administrative issues, and mostly at the institutional level. In the higher level, there

was still procrastination against changes in the intermediate administrative mechanism, partially because of interest conflicts and the prioritization of the short-term administrative efficiency goal. Also, there was tension and struggle regarding touchy political issues resulting in the unabated and unchallengeable power of the CPV both in the highest system level and the institutional level and slow progression in academic freedom. The main reason leading to tension and struggling in political issues is power relations and structure in Vietnam society, with the over-powered CPV and the tradition of acceptance and ignorance among citizen. At last, the social considerations, especially on possible adverse social impacts were not thoroughly discussed adverse social impacts. The overlooking of social considerations was, partially, because of the limitation in participation mechanism in the country, so that the relevant actors in the wider public with have not been involved.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Methodology discussion: Reflection on the Grounded Theory approach

The data analysis and findings from this thesis were well fit and reaffirmed various assumptions in the Grounded Theory approach of (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) – which was influenced by the postmodern constructivism/interpretivism and the interactionism.

Firstly, this thesis's findings revealed different viewpoints no matter the consensus in the core principles of university autonomy. The analyses also illustrated the significance of interaction in defining, generating and altering meanings (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Because university autonomy is a rather new concept that has just imported into Vietnam, people's perception of this idea is still under co-constructed through a process of people-people and people-reality interaction.

Secondly, "actions also carry meanings." Actors' interpretations of the actions are different and can be further changed when the action proceeds (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Even when people adopted the general ideas and principles of university autonomy from "the advanced education systems," these ideas and principles were not completely maintained during the implementation process, but people might have different adaptation in perceptions. The perceptions of the locals in Vietnam, as being analyzed in part 4.2, were further clarified, modified and differentiated in facing reviews and evaluations during various processes of action/interaction.

Thirdly, the researcher also agrees with the viewpoint of (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) on the over-simplicity of means-ends analytic schemes and using instead the scheme that considers the problems and the routines. The university autonomy in Vietnam was indeed a continuous process, in which there were various problems with the higher education system were defined (part 4.2.1). The idea of university autonomy was imported with expectations that it can be a possible solution for these problems. During the process of implementation, various problems still arose when people try to adapt the adopted ideas into the system of Vietnam, leading to further heterogeneity in people's perception of university autonomy. Then, when there are different perspectives and disagreements over issues or solutions, it requires the negotiation between the understandings,

possibly under the form of “discussion” or “debate,” which can lead to the future course of action (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). However, in this specific university autonomy reform in Vietnam, the different viewpoints of the participants (e.g., in some political matter) were not always fully expressed but more likely to stop as thoughts only. At least, in the official participation channels, there were signs of self-censorship when people avoid the touchy political issues. There were just cautious discussions and instead of debating or fighting for substantial changes, people tended to accept the status quo.

For this thesis topic, the researcher combined some analytic techniques of inductive thematic analysis and discourse analysis as the tools within the methodological choice of grounded theory. This methodological choice enables the researcher to fully explore the diverse and in-depth personal perception of people and their expectations toward the university autonomy. At the same time, this approach allows the analysis to cross over the individual perspective view to consider contextual elements in a macro level, the interaction between people and reality as well as the evolvement of people’s perspective throughout the continuous changing process of problems and actions.

5.2. Education discussion

5.1.1. Perception of higher education improvement and higher education quality

The researcher found a notable point in the discussion of the expectation toward the university autonomy, which is the vagueness in the theme of education improvement.

Although the term education development/improvement appeared in most of the interviews, this concept was usually mentioned without clear definition and was not discussed in detail. In most of the cases, when being asked to explain for the statement that the education improvement in the higher education system in Vietnam is unsatisfactory, or to explain in what issues that the reform can help to improve, people cited “*the low ranking*”, “*the low number of publications*”, “*the high number of unemployed graduate students*”. Because this is a data-driven thesis aiming at exploring people’s perception, the researcher respects these understandings of education improvement in the part of data analysis. However, the researcher concerned that these properties and indicators are still inadequate to conceptualize “education improvement,” or even “education quality.” Is it

controversial when the interviewees tended to simplify this concept and overemphasize only some indicators of education quality? Or whether there was something missed out during the data analysis? For these questions remained in mind, the researcher believes that some theoretical discussion to shed more light on this concept is necessary.

The vague perception of higher education quality was, partially, because “quality” itself is a relative concept. In studying different understandings of quality in higher education, the researcher found the reviewing and systemization of (Harvey and Green, 1993) especially useful. These authors explained five main approaches in which higher education quality can be defined - depending on the context and the perspectives of stakeholders and society, which are “exception,” “perfection,” “fitness for purpose,” “value for money” or “transformative.”

In the first line of perceptions, quality is defined by excellence with three versions. The most traditional version perceives quality as an embedded virtue of universities without the necessity to prove or demonstrate. The other two versions require following very higher/idealized standards or exceeding minimum standards. The people who define quality as “exception” affirm the link between quality and 'objective' standards. However, there were counter-argument questioning the practice of defining quality by standards, and this approach is usually criticized for overlooking the fact that standards can be negotiated and changed (Harvey and Green, 1993).

In the second approach, quality is defined as perfection or consistency. Instead of universal benchmarks or standards to assess the output, this approach applies a philosophy of prevention rather than inspection and requires to have processes and sets specifications to follow to guarantee quality (Harvey and Green, 1993).

The third approach defines quality as “fitness for purpose.” In which, there are two main versions in identifying the purpose. In the first version, the purpose of higher education is to meet the requirement of the customer. Meanwhile, the second version requires the institutions to fulfill their stated objectives or mission. The problem with this approach is how to define the purposes of higher education, especially when different actors may focus on different purposes. In many cases, this approach can be simplified into attempts to meet the perceived

requirements of the market. Another issue is the running after quality assurance or external quality assessment process instead of the quality itself (Harvey and Green, 1993).

The fourth approach defines quality as value for money. This approach emphasizes the notions of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and the accountability toward the State and the customers. People who support this view of higher education quality usually appreciate the tools like performance indicators or customer charters. They may also assume that the market will be the most effective coordinating mechanism, which can help to create motives for quality enhancement (Harvey and Green, 1993).

The last approach considers higher education as a process to transform the participant (students or researchers). High-quality education should work to enhance students with added value or empower students and involve them in the decision-making process so that they can influence their transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993).

The categorization of Harvey and Green (1993) with five approaches in defining higher education quality helps to improve the researcher's sensitivity in re-checking the data. By revising theoretical discussion of the "higher education quality," the researcher figured out that there can be different ways to look into the data. While the interviewees did not directly explain the concept of education quality in-depth, their discussion on various issues in the university autonomy reform implied some assumptions and philosophical conceptions of the education quality.

Among the interviewees, there was a tendency to move away from the traditional version of the "excellence" approach, which perceives quality as an embedded virtue of universities. This turn was clear when most people in the active, less active and bridge group mentioned the requirement of accountability with the argument that schools can no longer live on the halo effect from their past "prestige."

Instead, the interviewees from the schools, the policy-making specialists and some education/policy experts paid more attention to "efficiency," "Key

Performance Indicators (KPI),” the public reports to guarantee “accountability” and the turn to the “market-driven” mechanism as a more effective way for education governance, etc. While did not directly discuss the definition of education quality, these issues, which were mentioned in the themes of Accountability, System administration efficiency, and Marketization implied a clear turn to the approach of perceiving education quality as value for money.

Also, there were some signs of the approach of defining quality as “fitness for purpose” when the people from schools sometimes supported a turn to corporate-style view and considered students as their “customers” (S.SCI1, S.AS1, S.NS2, S.NS3) and view their missions as adapting the requirement of the customers. This idea can be expressed when people talked about marketization. However, some limitations of this approach were also revealed, just like the analyses of (Harvey and Green, 1993) when it is unclear who is the “customer” that the school should satisfy - the students, the parents (who usually the ones who pay tuition fee) or the companies (who use labor)? Moreover, the assumption that the “customers” will know what they want and who is the service supplier that better serve what they want is just a myth in the higher education market. Therefore, while schools cited the principle of considering students as their customer and said that they are doing their best to serve the customers, they are indeed only served the assumed needs of the students - which are subjectively decided by themselves.

The approach of “fitness for purpose” and also, the approach of assessing education quality by transformation can be seen, but very rarely, when a few education/policy experts discussed of “*the education philosophy*” (which means the philosophical principles guiding the education system). In the conferences to collecting feedbacks for the draft of Higher Education Law Amendment in Hochiminh City (by the Ministry of Education and Training) on December 2017 (C3), there was an expert raise the question of “*education philosophy.*”

“If we want to evaluate this education law amendment, we should first discuss what the goal of our higher education, what are our guiding principle? How do we want to train students? We want to train people to become workers or the owners of society? If we want to educate people to become the owner of the society and the owner of their own lives, then we should change our ways” (C3)

However, these discussions of “education philosophy” still went to dead-end since people cannot work together effectively to go to an agreement. While some people are very enthusiastic and consider education philosophy a vital topic (OS1, C4), they also acknowledged that the topic “*requires academic freedom and can be touchy.*” Many others even think that this topic is too abstract, “*going nowhere*” or impractical. Since the local discussions on educational philosophy have still been ignored or failed, people were confused in defining the purpose of higher education, which led to the impression that the whole higher education system in Vietnam is in a crisis of lacking development orientation. Meanwhile, there are still various barriers in implementing the idea of transforming students and empowering them. Because of the hierarchical system as well as the cultural and traditional elements, students are still considered passive beneficiaries without much voices to decide their own “transformative” process.

In the concrete situation of Vietnam, the focus on the economic and administrative issues (as explained in part 4.3) was also partially reflexed in the perception of education quality leading to more remarkable imprints of the “*value for money*” and the “*fitness for purpose*” (serving the customer) approach. Meanwhile, the tendencies of avoiding touchy political issues, censoring academic freedom, and limiting the participation of new stakeholders (including students) in school governance may create a disadvantaged environment for the developing of the “transformation” approach.

5.1.2. Global integration, comparative education approach, and education policy adoption

The globalization with the massive flows of trade, information and people around the world has created immense impacts on education. Along with the enhanced international student mobility, the global education market developed with more intense competition internationally and the formation of the international standards for competitors. In such a context, the neoliberalism’s ideology of usefulness which consider performativity and cultivation of human capital for global market competition as the main purposes of education set out the base for the comparative education approach and explain for the development of international education datasets to compare different education systems and the practice of policy borrowing around the world (Auld & Morris, 2014).

The similar process is also happening in Vietnam. While globalization can come with both negative and positive impacts, many interviewees in Vietnam felt more vulnerability in the so-called flat world. Vietnam is currently a typical education import country. According to the statistics of the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training, there are around 20.000 international students in Vietnam, compare with 130.000 Vietnamese students abroad. Each year, Vietnamese people spend approximately 3 billion USD on sending students overseas, and this number is still raising while the inflowing money from international students is much lesser¹⁶. Looking at the economic aspect, this is a sign warning that Vietnam education system is losing in the international competition and the country is facing brain drain risks.

"It is tough for us to compete on the global market. There are very little chances for Vietnam to export our education. Meanwhile, in recent years, there are more and more international schools operate in Vietnam, and as I see, they have more advantages than Vietnamese schools in attracting students. Without change, we will lose even in the domestic market." (S.SCI1)

According to the interviewees, among the reasons to explain for the failures in the global education market is the mismatching between the Vietnamese higher education system and the world system as the consequence of the specific economic-political-social mechanism and a long time being isolated from the world. A proper reform is, therefore, considered necessary for Vietnam to "come closer" to the world, integrate better and survive in the global university education market.

"Our system is too confusing, which like no one else. We do not fit with the world standards, and therefore, it is difficult for us to work with other countries. To integrate, we should follow the common criteria." (PM1)

"We should come closer to the common standard of the world and stop using "specific Vietnamese identities" as an excuse to avoid adapting to universal values as before." (OS1).

¹⁶ <http://anninhthudo.vn/chinh-tri-xa-hoi/sinh-vien-nuoc-ngoai-hoc-tai-viet-nam-chi-bang-1-6-sinh-vien-viet-nam-du-hoc/683887.antd>

Such a context partially explained for the influence of comparative education approach, which can be seen in the discourse of university autonomy in Vietnam. In the conferences to discuss on university autonomy and in different interviews with persons who are involved in the reform – such as policymaking specialists, educational experts, and participants from schools, it is generally accepted that the university autonomy is not something original but an idea inspired from the West. People repeatedly used the arguments that “*university autonomy is an inevitable common trend for higher education all over the world*” and “*Vietnam should learn from the advanced education systems*” to validate this policy adoption. While there has not been a commonly agreeable solution, in discussions on the technical requirements and how university autonomy should be implemented in reality, examples from America or European countries were also usually used to guild the reform in Vietnam.

No matter the popularity of the education comparative approach and the policy adopting practices all over the world, many authors argued against the idea of “the top”, “the world class” or “the advanced education system” and concern that such approach of comparative education may lead to limiting the diversity of the international education system. In such a sense, the whole world usually just run after some monotype education reform movements and copy the “world class” school systems (Auld & Morris, 2014). All of these concerns are relevant in the context of the current university autonomy reform in Vietnam, when people may use the comparative approach to validate the reform too often but, likely, not adequately considering the side effects of this approach.

5.1.3. School autonomy: Perception and models

The participants in this study usually applied the argument that school autonomy is an inevitable trend in the world and the higher education system in Vietnam should adapt accordingly to fit with the world standard as if there is a unified standard or a single understanding of autonomy. However, according to Wermke and Salokangas, (2015), autonomy is a debatable multidimensional concept, which can be differently perceived depending on the political and social context as well as the actors involved. Therefore, the concept and practice of school autonomy should be tested by further comparative researches in different nations.

Enders et al. (2013) also argued that autonomy is a concept with the meaning changed through times and contexts. In the West history, the traditional Humboldtian model, autonomy has always been discussed closely to the issue of academic freedom and the emphasis on professional autonomy of academics and the role of the state in funding and supporting schools as well as in guaranteeing academic freedom while the autonomy of the school as an organization is limited (Enders et al., 2012).

According to the data, the “university autonomy,” as it was being perceived and implemented in Vietnam, was very far from this model. It was discussed, firstly, at the system level, which emphasized expanding autonomy role of the institutions and mainly focused on the administrative and economic goal. Meanwhile, the professional autonomy of academics has not been in the center of the discussion, the academic staffs in schools were not adequately involved and empowered, and academic freedom was still under-censored. The reform in Vietnam was top-down approached, and the starting point of this reform was not from the vision of liberating the academic sector.

With the current progress and arrangement, university autonomy in Vietnam is closer to the new neo-liberal model of school autonomy, which is influenced by the New Public Management approach (Enders et al., 2013). This new model, which is becoming more and more popular around the world, encourages a market approach emphasizing competition, efficiency, and effectiveness in performance. With this kind of autonomy, the schools become more similar to self-managed enterprises, and there is a shift in the role of the state from controlling based on the process to supervision basing on output. (Enders et al., 2013). All of these features are very close to the main themes of university autonomy in Vietnam.

Enders et al. (2013) also introduced a valuable framework to analyze autonomy, in which autonomy is a perception that refers to both sides of (1) the self-capacity of the actor to act independently and (2) the freedom of that actor in the relationship to external control. While the participants already briefly mention both sides of “right”-“responsibility” and the “capacity,” the actors in the current discussion was still more focus on finding a balance point between “right” and “responsibility” in the external relation of the school toward the central authority.

Participants, especially the schools, also paid more attention to the shortcomings in current regulations and fought to loosen the external binding that limiting their autonomy rights. However, some participants also pointed out that, in addition to the outer barrier, one of the difficulties for autonomy in Vietnam rooted in the schools themselves. According to the participant from MoET, *“the problem is not only because the Government does not want to loosen their control, but the schools are not ready, they do not want to be independent”* (PM1). With the expectation that *“when the fishes are released to the ocean, they should learn to survive”* (PM1), some actors believed in the laissez-faire policy, in which school’s self ability will be challenged and improved when they have more independence.

It is worth noticing that even with the neoliberalism model of autonomy, the social foundation and the political system in Vietnam are still significantly different from western countries. Therefore, it is predictable that there would be tremendous conflicts in adapting the “imported” idea of autonomy on the based of the previous system in the country, which requires further observation and study.

5.1.4. Neoliberalism in education reform

Although global-national interaction in education reform is not the focus of this thesis, such questions are still relevant for analyses of macro context elements that can influence the university autonomy reform in Vietnam. A discussion on education reform trend on the global scale can shine a light also on the logic beneath the reform in Vietnam.

According to (Olsen & Peter, 2005), neoliberalism inherits some central concepts of classical liberalism with the beliefs in the self-interested individual and free market economics. Neoliberalism, however, also realizes the positive administrative role of the State. For the private sector, neoliberalism emphasizes that more freedom should also go with more accountability.

Applying neoliberalism principles, New Public Management (NPM) is a reform tendency that was introduced in the early 1980s. This tendency of reform has been strongly expanded and strongly affected various reforms around the world, contributing to redefining the universities and changing the higher education governance mechanism across the globe.

In dealing with three crucial problems of efficiency, participation, and legitimacy, NPM call for restructuring the public sector with a greater focus on markets (Christensen, 2010), enhancing participation of the private sector and, also very important, the new strategies in governing higher education (Mok, 2010). NPM reform highly-prizes the economic importance of higher education, requires to increase education competitive capacity and encourage measuring output, performance indicators and quality assurance to enhance performativity (Olsen & Peter, 2005).

NPM, however, should also face opposing critiques, which is one of the reasons for the emerging of Post-New Public Management Reform (Post-NPM) reform trend. Emphasizing central control of the State and cross-sectoral collaboration, post-NPM is indeed unable to put an end to NPM but just points out shortcomings of NPM and suggests another way to adjust NPM. According to (Christensen, 2010), the principles of NPM and post-NPM can be selected and combined to create a multi-layered system of reform.

By studying the education governance reform trend around the world, the researcher realized that many arguments which are usually mentioned in discussions of university autonomy in Vietnam are not new but have been repeated everywhere in neo-liberalism reform discourse. The current reform in the country shares similar concerns with the NPM (and post-NPM) reform framework, especially in the discussion regarding marketization, higher education system governance efficiency and the power structure transition to balance the central control of the State and institutional autonomy.

However, the neoliberal type of higher education reforms is usually criticized also for its unmet promises to improve learning or to close the achievement gaps between different education systems around the world. Worse, this approach may push people away from the previous social democratic, and the turn to marketization may undermine democracy (Hush, 2007).

It worths noticing that according to the data, the locals in Vietnam tended to overlook such possible side effects of the reform. The absence of counter-arguments regarding possible negative impacts of the university autonomy reform can be explained in several ways. Firstly, the idea of schools autonomy reform is

newly imported from “the advanced education systems,” and therefore, the locals are more focusing on the positive side to “learn from” and to argue for the necessity of the reform. Secondly, as once mentioned, in the context of Vietnam, when the whole education system (or indeed, the whole society) should work under the close control from the CPV and the State for too long, many people favor solutions of decentralization and therefore, they prefer the “invisible hand” of the market. Thirdly, because the reform is still in its early stage of “piloting,” various impacts of the reform that have not become obvious. Moreover, in this early stage, when the university autonomy become an official policy, people may focus more on how to make the reform works rather than more substantial or theoretical discussion related to its validity and possible negative impacts in long-term.

No matter what the reason is, the partial view toward neoliberal transition may cost bitterly in the long term. As the thesis analyzed in part 4.3, there is a risk that the introducing of the marketization and the over-emphasizing economic aspects of the reform may push the higher education system to run after short-term profit and enable the State to withdraw from their role of sponsoring the schools. Meanwhile, the central authorities may still have addition step to consolidate their power and “the deregulation can be paired with reregulation” using reporting system and standardizing measures, which results in low actual autonomy and no proper improvement in political aspects of decentralization or democratization (Christensen, 2011).

5.3. Social and public policy discussion

5.3.1. The transformational approach

In analyzing university autonomy reform, especially the roles of the State and other actors as well as the dynamic relationships between the contexts toward reform, the researcher finds the transformational approach (Christensen, 2011) helpful. According to this approach, the reform processes are shaped by (1) structural-instrumental, (2) cultural-institutional and (3) environmental context factors.

(1) The first perspective of structural-instrumental emphasized the role of the structural design of public organizations and their connection with collective public goals. There are two versions of this perspective. The hierarchical version

emphasizes the dominating influences of leaders with a top-down approach. The negotiation version, on the other hand, highly-prizes the role of negotiation between different stakeholders on the reform processes. This kind of reform process negotiations can take more time and less obvious but often enhance the legitimacy of the reforms (Christensen, 2011). In the real context of Vietnam, the researcher finds both versions are applicable to a certain level. Since the social structure in Vietnam is traditionally hierarchical, the university autonomy reform in general still requires the “green light” from the central authorities. In cases when the people in lower positions have the feeling that certain ideas may go against the will of the CPV or the State, they will be very cautious in raising their voices. While the first official steps for reform are from the leaders, the bottom-up motives are also very important. Sometimes it is the actors from below (some experts/some schools) that initially propose the ideas for the university autonomy reform. While these ideas are unsystematic and they still need the support from the top to be put in practices, such voices from below contributed to putting some things new into the agenda through a process of discussion. Indeed, when everything is new to even the policymakers, and there are new ideas introduced into the previous education system, the university autonomy reform in Vietnam is also a process of mutual learning and negotiation/bargaining when people with different vision and interests should work together to look for an acceptable arrangement. The bottom-up and top-down motives go together to enable the reform.

(2) The cultural-institutional perspective emphasizes the role of administrative-cultural traditions in influencing the later development of a system. This perspective supply a way to understand how reforms are handled (Christensen, 2011). Hallinger and Truong (2016) noticed cultural obstacles in applying imported management model. The two authors confirmed that the ‘hierarchy-infused mindset’ and the culture of acceptance of unequal power distribution among the locals might hinder the attempts of institutional autonomy and school decentralization. As a result, although people consider decentralization as a mean to promote self-governance, the implementation process was still influenced by the traditional norm of hierarchy. These cultural barriers were also reflected in this study when people were cautious with the new ideas of the university council or the student participation in school governance because they go against the traditional hierarchical power perception.

(3) The environmental perspective explains that public organizations should respond to the technical and institutional environment. In align with this perspective, part 4.2 introduced a context analysis to study factors in the environment (including general economic, social or political pressure) that can create pressure on the universities to reform.

5.3.2. The 4Is of school reforms

This study only focuses on exploration the consensus and heterogeneity in people perception and expectation toward the university autonomy reform. However, for the future studies, it would be meaningful to analyze more thoroughly the reason leading to different viewpoints of the local stakeholders. For that purpose, the 4Is framework of (Weiss, 1995) may be a useful approach to explain why people have different voices regarding a certain issue.

Weiss, (1995) introduced an analysis framework of four factors (4-I: Interest, ideology, information, institution) and explained how these factors affect the agent's responses. The 4-I analysis approach helped to explain the differences between actors when they make decisions and their roles in reforming at schools.

According to (Weiss, 1995), there are three elements that have interaction with each other and affect individual decision making, which are:

- Interest: (Weiss, 1995) analyzed interest mostly as "self-interest" and consider it "the core of politics."
- Ideology: Which means "philosophy, principles, values, political orientation"... "Something that normative, ethical, moral" or "an emotionally charged orientation" that "provides a basis for taking a position."
- Information: Knowledge, ideas, experiences... that help people to understand the situation, identify the problem and find solutions.

In addition to these three elements, there is another element that influences decision making at the organizational level, which is "Institution." The institutional factor is defined as "Structure, culture, standard operating procedure and decision rules of the organization (in schools and the whole system) within which decisions are made." Weiss, (1995) emphasized the significance of "Institution"

since this element can influence the three other “I” and affect the decision process itself.

In the discussion of university autonomy in Vietnam, many interviewees mentioned the element of “interest” and “interest groups” as the hidden motives beneath the reaction of people. However, “interest” is not the only reason behind their position taking. For example, when an interviewee talks about “the mission of the school and education is enlightenment,” “liberal thinking” or “academic freedom,” he seems to think very little about “interest” but more about “ideology.”

The researcher also found this analysis framework useful since it emphasizes the role of institution element. To deeper analyze the roles of agents, the dynamic relationship between contexts and its influence toward reform, we can combine this analysis with the transformational approach (which was discussed above). Since Vietnam is a single-party authoritarian country with the tradition of power centralization, the whole system has also been structured to increase uniformity and central control. Even though there is a tendency of decentralization which is expressed in laws, it is nearly impossible that the system and its culture can change in the short term. The diversity of voices and the influence of participatory voices will be constrained and shaped by the institutional condition. In analyses of the current context in Vietnam, this study mentioned several signs that support this view. For examples, in the personnel structure of the university council, the presence of cells from the Communist Party is still very strong, and in many cases, the Party has the dominant voice that still be unchallenged. Also, there is a mark of “censorship” and “self-censorship” tradition in the whole system, so that agents are not willing to raise their voices.

Weiss, (1995) pointed out that one of the limits of SDM reform is that it is implemented alongside the traditional structure when the traditional culture is still strong. In such a condition, some agents (the teachers) are cautious and skeptical and does not fully support the reform. This was also the situation in the university autonomy piloting in Vietnam when the pilot program was just conducted at 23 schools, (until 2017) and therefore the impact of the university autonomy on the higher education system was still limited.

5.4. Limitations and some recommendations for further studies

As mentioned in part 3.5.2.1, the stakeholder analysis approach in this study faced crucial challenges when the researcher could not interview the representative of each stakeholder group, and it was tough to identify the viewpoint of each stakeholder's group when the division between their viewpoints in most of the issues was unclear. The unsuccess of the stakeholder analysis approach was, possibly, because the reform was still in early ages. In this period, the perception of university autonomy has not been properly developed, and the implementation process was also newly conducted. Therefore, the involvement of stakeholders was very limited, and their viewpoints could be still unclear. Through time, along with the longer implementation and interaction process, there will be more uncovered issues, clearer perceptions and more clearly separated standpoints of relevant stakeholder. Therefore, future studies may achieve more fruitful results. Another option is focusing only on some active stakeholders who, according to this study, have rather clear viewpoints, such as the schools or MoET.

In thinking of how to study the viewpoint of a certain stakeholder in such condition, (for example, the central government and the CPV), the researcher also paid attention to the way the participants interacted accordingly to their assumptions of the other's viewpoint (the phenomenon that has been affirmed by the symbolic interactionist (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)). A possible further study orientation is, therefore, looking more thoroughly into the viewpoints of the central authorities in the assumptions of people and then compare with their officially announced standpoints in public speeches or policy documents. This approach may help to understand the interpretations and interaction of people, or, how they negotiate or struggling in the policymaking process.

Another notice is that the reason people support university autonomy may be more than just their expectations. In the data set, there were cases (most popular in the "inactive" groups) when the participants could not explain any clear expectations and even did not know much of the concept but still said that they support the university autonomy reform. The more in-depth look into these cases can supply more adequate understandings of the nature of the "consensus" and the policy-making process.

Also, even in the active group, there can be a further research question of why some actors still strongly supported the reform no matter the disappointing gap between their expectations and real implementation impact? There is a possible hypothesis of the temporary nature of the consensus. In this period, under pressure of implementing a new idea of reform, relevant stakeholders could prioritize some short-term technical issues only to guarantee that the newly adopted education governance model could work. Therefore, even when the current results were not satisfactory, some actors still accepted with the hope that the reform would bring positive changes accordingly to their expectations in the future. If this hypothesis is valid, the temporarily overlooked issues will return sooner or later and there will come a time when the local discourse of university autonomy should work with more substantial problems in political and social sectors. The problem, at that time, will not only be “How to implement this idea of school autonomy and make it work” but also “Whether this idea of school autonomy work at all?”

The researcher also acknowledges some limits in sampling, which can be more carefully considered in further researches. Firstly, one of the dangers with snow-ball sampling is that respondents often suggest others who share similar characteristics, which means there can be biases in this data set. Secondly, all participants in this study supported the ideas of school autonomy, and therefore there was no counter-evidence. The reason for this shortcoming was the fact that the researcher could not find anyone who opposed the reform for interviewing. At the time of data collecting, the university autonomy already became a “mainstream,” an official policy which was supported by the government. Therefore, in official discussion channels, it was nearly impossible to find a counter voice. People could mention some shortcomings of the reform but could not say against the overall ideas anymore. To overcome this shortcoming, a possible solution is looking into the unofficial discussion channel. Although this thesis focused only on the official participation channels, such as conferences or official documents, the researcher acknowledges that it was only half of the picture. The discussions regarding unofficial channels, such as social media can be much more different and diverse, which can be a promising orientation for future studies in this topic.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. The normative perceptions of school autonomy and the consensus

Analyses in this thesis revealed the general local perception of university autonomy. In general, actors considered “autonomy” and “accountability” as the two undetachable principles for university autonomy. The local discussions also began to acknowledge the complexity with multi-layers (including autonomy in system, institutional and individual level) and multi-sector (including autonomy in financial, academic, staffing and organizing areas) of the concept.

After various education reform that usually ends in dissatisfaction, this university autonomy reform, is expected to be a different kind of education reform, in term of the scale and the influence, that enables more substantial changes in the whole education system. With initial agreements on the normative principles of university autonomy, relevant stakeholders supported the reform of university in Vietnam with the expectation that it can be a massive-scale reform with multi-purposes. The reform was expected to create the intermediate transitions of marketization, liberation, socialization and power structure transition. These intermediate transitions, in their turns, may help to solve or at least improve various issues, in social (social considerations), economic (resource for higher education) and political (higher education governance) matters to serve higher education improvement.

The support of local actors toward the idea of university autonomy was a result of the common acknowledging of different shortcomings of the higher education system in the specific context of Vietnam. However, it was also a result of the comparative education approach, in which the locals, firstly the experts, compared the national higher system with “*the advanced education systems*” in the West and required the changes in Vietnam to fit with “the world standards.” The university autonomy in Vietnam, therefore, was sharing some common themes inspired by the neo-liberal school governance reform around the world.

Because the university autonomy is a newly imported idea under piloting, the practical issues have not been fully disclosed and the understanding of the concept is still at the beginning of construction under the strong influenced of the imported normative perceptions – the general ideas of how the school autonomy

should be, according to “the world standards”. This can be a reason explains for the relatively homogeneous views among the participants in this early stage, when all participants supported the idea of the university autonomy with little evidence for the particular standpoints of each stakeholder group.

6.2. Interaction with reality and the construction of local perceptions

The applied university autonomy in Vietnam was, however, an adapted/compromised version under development to fit with the specific political, social, cultural and economic context of the country. The university autonomy implementation created various changes and challenges, requiring the actors to change their practices to adapt.

According to more in-depth analysis results, there was not a fixed common understanding for university among the locals in Vietnam. The shared perceptions and expectations toward university autonomy were only on the general normative principles. Significant differences in how the actors interpret those principles were revealed in facing practical issues during the implementation process. In interaction with others and with reality, participants’ perceptions were continued to be constructed, evolved and split. The differences in people’s priorities and were also uncovered.

6.3. Interaction between stakeholders and recent arrangements

There has been a process of co-constructing the understanding of university autonomy with the signs of both negotiation and competition, in which some perceptions have gradually reached common acceptance and created their influences on legal documents. The long process of interaction between the stakeholders in facing various issues in the university autonomy implementation process created adequate motivation and led to a considerable shift in the discourse, which partially reflected in the recent policies.

However, most of the positive changes were only recorded in economic and administrative issues. In the current situation in Vietnam, there is a possibility that the discourse of university autonomy will be mainly diverted to economic and administrative matters as well as technical fixes to support schools in implementation process instead of the substantial transition to reform the system.

Regarding political matters, dramatic changes were still hindered for facing tensions, struggles, and oppression. As a result, expectations of liberation and power structure transition would only be allowed under the condition that the power of the central authorities remains unchallenged and the current political system stability is guaranteed.

Regarding the social matter, the partial participatory approach seemed to prevent an inclusive co-constructive understanding of university autonomy and leading to the overlooking of social considerations. The participation of stakeholders in Vietnam was limited when there were only a few “active” actors that have thorough understandings and important voices in the public discussion of the university autonomy reform. The data analysis revealed that in addition to the leading role of the central authorities and MoET, there were crucial influences of the experts (with expertise power) and the piloting schools (with practical experienced) in shaping the agenda and co-constructing the mutual understandings of the university autonomy in Vietnam. However, at least in the official avenues to publicly discuss the university autonomy, there were not adequate participation of the people in less active and inactive stakeholder groups. The result was a disconnection of the university autonomy discourse with the wider public, especially when the media were not always successful with their bridging mission. Since there were various actors in the community uninvolved, there was a risk that the autonomy discourse may become one-sided and fail in carefully considering the social impacts and interests of stakeholders.

At the last sentences, the researcher concerns that the beautiful promise of a “holistic” autonomy reform is only a myth. Various actor supported university autonomy because they saw at least some of their interests/expectations in such ideas. However, the consensus, at first sight, could be fragmented in the long term of implementation. There can be a risk of distorted agenda when people are lost between various promises while the agenda can be manipulated to serve only the prioritized goals of some dominant actors, especially when there exist unbalanced power structure and restricted participation.

Notes:

[1] According to the statistics, there are around 215.300 people who have bachelor's degrees or above are unemployed in the 4th quarter of 2017. The unemployment rate among this group is 4,12%¹⁷, significantly higher than among the unskilled group¹⁸. 70% of the graduate student should work in areas that are different from their educated major¹⁹; many students should accept jobs for unskilled workers. Also, data in 2018 affirm that 94% of graduate students should be re-trained to matched with the requirements of the enterprises²⁰.

[2] In 15 years from 1996 to 2011, Vietnam had only 13.172 scientific publications published on international peer-reviewed journals. This number is just equal to 1/5 of Thailand's (69.637 publications), 1/6 of Malaysia's (75.530 publications) and 1/10 of Singapore's (126.881 publications)²¹.

[3] According to (Hayden & Thiep, 2007), because of the limited available places in universities, only 10% of the relevant age group in Vietnam can pursue higher education. People from rural areas and poor people should face disadvantage and have little opportunity to be enrolled.

[4] The state budget for education has continuously increased since 1998 from 13% to 20% of the total budget expenditure. State investment per student also rose from 1.051.000 VND in 2001 to around 7.000.000 VND. However, budget expenditure for education in general and higher education in specific can hardly be expanded more since public debt rose continuously and state budget revenue is unstable²².

¹⁷ <http://www.molisa.gov.vn/Images/FileAnPham/fileanpham20183151635839.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://dantri.com.vn/viec-lam/tot-nghiep-dai-hoc-khong-co-viec-cu-nhan-di-lam-cong-nhan-20190325082002833.htm>

¹⁹ <http://dantri.com.vn/giao-duc-khuyen-hoc/225000-cu-nhan-thac-si-that-nghiep-he-qua-cua-mo-truong-dai-hoc-o-at-20160531074206426.htm>

²⁰ <https://dantri.com.vn/giao-duc-khuyen-hoc/doanh-nghiep-dau-dau-vi-cu-nhan-thieu-du-thu-20181213155835748.htm>

²¹ https://www.academia.edu/11334845/Y%E1%BA%BEU_K%C3%89M_C%E1%BB%A6A_NGHI%C3%8AN_C%E1%BB%A8U_KHOA_H%E1%BB%8CC_GI%C3%81O_D%E1%BB%A4C_VI%E1%BB%86T_NA_M_NGUY%C3%8AN_NH%C3%82N_V%C3%80_GI%E1%BA%A2I_PH%C3%81P

²² <http://tuoitre.vn/tin/tuoi-tre-cuoi-tuan/van-de-su-kien/20150707/tai-chinh-dai-hoc-dau-la-loi-thoat/771273.html>

[5] The statistics from the Ministry of Finance showed that Vietnam's public debt by the end of 2016 was equal to 63.7% of GDP, closely reaching the control threshold of 65% set by the National Assembly. The public debt to GDP growth rate was 12.2%/year for the period of 2010-2015 and Vietnam is now among the countries that have the highest public debt growth. According to the assessment of the IMF and the World Bank, this state of public debt is still in the acceptable range in the short and medium term but more cautious public debt management is necessary to avoid adverse impacts on the economy in the long term²³.

²³ <http://tapchicongthuong.vn/bai-viet/no-cong-tai-viet-nam-thuc-trang-va-giai-phap-58299.htm>

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APPENDIX

1. LIST AND BASIC STRUCTURE OF INTERVIEW QUESTION

CONCEPT UNDERSTANDING
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Would you please share your overall understandings of “university autonomy”? How do you define the concept?• In your opinion, what are the main issues/components in the university autonomy? What is the most important component? <p>Possible further questions regarding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Financial autonomy, academic autonomy, staff and organizing autonomy• Different understandings (from other participants/social discussion)
GOALS/EXPECTATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why do you think that university is necessary? What are the problems that you expect university autonomy to help?• What are the reasons encouraging (your) school to piloting university autonomy?• In your opinion, what are the possible challenges that university autonomy create? <p>Possible further questions regarding each expectation/problem/challenge</p>
IMPLEMENTATION AND PRACTICAL ISSUES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you assess the university autonomy as being implemented in Vietnam?• Currently, what are the most important results from the reform that you notice?• In your opinion, what are the difficult issues hindering the implementation of university autonomy? What are the difficulties that you (your organization) should encounter during the university autonomy implementation? <p>Possible further questions regarding each practical issue mentioned:</p>

- The relation between the school with Party/State/the market/ society under the influence of university autonomy
- The role/position of the Party/State/Intermediate administrative ministries under the influence of university autonomy
- University council: Efficiency, the relation between the university council with the principal board and the institutional CPV Committee, the participation of external members in school governance
- The adaptation process during piloting inside schools
- Tuition-fee, social impacts
- Academic freedom

RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS

- In your opinion, who are the relevant stakeholder in this university autonomy reform? Who are the stakeholders that have important voices in the reform process?
- Do you feel that the current university autonomy reform has fully concerned the interests/stance of relevant stakeholders?

Possible further questions regarding:

- The reaction of some relevant stakeholders (internal school stakeholders, students, parents, the Intermediate administrative ministries, etc.)
- Assessment of the roles of possibly relevant stakeholders (media, civil society organization, experts, students, etc.)

INTERACTION AND PARTICIPATION

- Do you (your organization) participate, contribute ideas to improve policies related to autonomy reform? Usually, you proactively give opinions, or you are asked to contribute ideas?
- Do you think that your (organization) voices have influences on others and the reform policies?
- In the process of developing and implementing policies related to university autonomy, do you feel that the participation of various stakeholders in society is encouraged? How can stakeholders participate?

Possible further questions regarding:

- Voices of school internal stakeholders
- Top-down and bottom-up motives
- Inspiration/Impacts from international practices, standards

2. LIST OF RELEVANT LEGAL DOCUMENTS OF SCHOOL AUTONOMY

1. Decision No. 153/2003/QĐ-TTĐ dated September 22, 2003, of the Ministry of Finance, promulgating the system of supervisory indicators for insurers:
<https://vanbanphapluat.co/decision-no-153-2003-qd-btc-of-september-22-2003-promulgating-the-system-of-supervisory-indicators-for-insurers>
2. Decree No. 101/2002/ND-CP dated December 10, 2002, of the Government on the organization and operation of the Educational Inspectorate:
<https://luatminhkhue.vn/en/decree/decree-no-101-2002-nd-cp-dated-december-10--2002-of-the-government-on-the-organization-and-operation-of-the-educational-inspectorate.aspx>
3. Law No. 38/2005/QĐ11 dated June 2005. Education Law:
https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/vnm_e/WTACCVNM43_LEG_14.pdf
4. Resolution 14/2005/NĐ-CP on Substantial and comprehensive renewal of Vietnam's tertiary education in the 2006-2020 period:
<https://vanbanphapluat.co/resolution-no-14-2005-nq-cp-of-november-02-2005-on-substantial-and-comprehensive-renewal-of-vietnam-s-tertiary-education-in-the-2006-2020-period>
5. Resolution 130/2005/NĐ-CP dated December 2005 Providing for the regime on autonomy and self-responsibility for the use of administrative management payrolls and funds by state agencies:
<http://vbpl.vn/tw/Pages/vbpqen-toan-van.aspx?dvid=13&ItemID=6508&Keyword=>
6. Decree no. 43/2006/ND-CP dated April 25, 2006, providing for the right to autonomy and self-responsibility for task performance, organizational apparatus, payroll and finance of public non-business units:
<https://vanbanphapluat.co/43-2006-nd-cp>
7. Joint Circular of the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Home Affairs 07/2009/TTLT BGĐĐT-BNV on Autonomy, self-responsibility on mission implementation, organization and staff structure for public education and training units:
<https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Thong-tu-lien-tich-07-2009-TTLT-BGDDT-BNV-huong-dan-thuc-hien-quyen-tu-chu-tu-chiu-trach-nhiem-thuc-hien-nhiem-vu-to-chuc-bo-may-bien-che-GDDT-87326.aspx>

8. Resolution 05-NQ/BCSD dated January 2010 on “Higher education innovation in the period 2010-2012” of the Ministry of Education and Training:
<https://thukyluat.vn/vb/ngghi-quyet-05-nq-bcsd-doi-moi-quan-ly-giao-duc-dai-hoc-giai-doan-2010-2012-20e7c.html>
9. Directive No. 296/CT-TTG of February 27, 2010, on renewal of tertiary education administration during 2010-2012:
<https://vanbanphapluat.co/directive-no-296-ct-ttg-of-february-27-2010-on-renewal-of-tertiary-education-administration-during-2010-2012>
10. Law No. 08/2012/QH13 dated June 18, 2012, of the Government on higher education:
<https://luatminhkhue.vn/en/law/law-no-08-2012-qh13-dated-june-18--2012-of-the-government-on-higher-education.aspx>
11. Resolution No. 77/NQ-CP dated October 2014 on the Pilot renovation of the operation mechanism of public tertiary education institutions during 2014-2017:
<http://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/resolution-no-77-nq-cp-of-ocotber-24-2014-4798.html>
12. Law No. 34/2018/QH14 dated November 2018 on amendments to the Higher Education Law:
<https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Giao-duc/Law-34-2018-QH14-amendments-to-the-Law-on-Higher-Education-403100.aspx>